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Representing the Rosenberg case: Coover, Doctorow, and the consequences of postmodernism

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University of Hawaii, 1991
REPRESENTING THE ROSENBERG CASE:  
COOVER, DOCTOROW, AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF POSTMODERNISM

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Abstract

As a distinctive discourse and practice of major aspects of contemporary American culture, postmodernism is characterized above all by skepticism about our ability to represent the true state of affairs in the world. This study examines the epistemological and ontological assumptions of postmodernism, and its ethical and political implications, by investigating two modes of representing a specific historical event—i.e. factual and fictional representations of the Rosenberg case, involving the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg as Soviet spies in 1953. I analyze the narrativizing process whereby journalists and historians make sense of a series of past occurrences, and juxtapose and compare factual representations with two major fictional ones, Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* and E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*.

I discuss Coover and Doctorow's narrative strategies and thematic concerns, and look into several controversies surrounding the boundary between fact and fiction. Drawing upon Hayden White's narrative theory and Richard Rorty's new pragmatism, this study argues that postmodernists are substantially correct when they claim that history and fiction are not as strictly separable as is commonly believed. It also maintains that from this claim it does not necessarily follow that postmodernism is radically relativistic or solipsistic and therefore morally chaotic and politically reactionary.
It further contends that the recognition of fictionality and advocation of plurality in postmodernism are not inherently emancipatory or morally and politically progressive. The postmodernist interrogation of representation has a potential to be understood either way; yet ultimately it is our practice in a particular context, along with communal judgment, that makes a concept moral, immoral or amoral. This affirmation of plurality and context seems to suggest a strong moral and political potential for postmodernism, but the lack of an agent to bring about actual changes in the postmodernist outlook undermines its ethical stance. Despite its problematics, however, postmodernism seems valid in its claim that provisionality and plurality is part of the very nature of representing the past, and that we should learn to tolerate the anxiety arising out of uncertainty and indeterminacy in our knowledge of historical reality.
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Chapter 1. Introduction:
Representing the Postmodern

One of the clichés of our time is that we are living in the "postmodern world." We are part of it, critics claim, whether we like it or not. Phenomenal changes have occurred in major sectors of American life since World War II. Americans have had to experience and absorb such things as the atomic bomb, the 1960 presidential debate on television, the counterculture, the computer, Watergate, and the emergence of the new Right. They have also witnessed Auschwitz, the Gulag, the Prague Spring, May 1968, Solidarity, and the rise of third-world nationalism. In the maelstrom of these events many writers and artists have begun to experience a profound shift in sensibility leading to a fundamentally different conception of the world and their place in it. "Postmodernism" has gained wide currency as a term which represents a broad range of cultural objects, practices, experiences, and intellectual discourses brought about by this new sensibility. The term, as Ihab Hassan notes, has become "a shibboleth for tendencies in film, theater, dance, music, art, and architecture; in literature and criticism; in philosophy, theology, psychoanalysis, and historiography; in new sciences, cybernetic technologies, and various cultural life styles."¹

Although postmodernism is widely verbalized, its meaning is disturbingly elusive. One is struck by the diversities and contradictions among practices and theories often lumped together as postmodern. For some, postmodernism represents a radical rupture

¹
with modernism, while for others it is merely a continuation and intensification of certain features of its predecessor. It is seen both as following and as preceding high modernism. It is even considered a metahistorical category; that is, "postmodern" is seen not as a quality unique to our own age, but one that every age shares in its skeptical moments. The politics of postmodernism are also complicated and ambiguous. Some see it as a reflection of the wave of political reaction sweeping the Western world since the late 1970s. Others welcome postmodernism as a mode of resistance to the status quo. Its meaning, temporal location, and politics all appear to shift according to one's focus, ideology, and context.

Even Brian McHale's claim that every critic constructs his or her own postmodernism seems substantially correct on the evidence. There are virtually as many versions of postmodernism as there are critics. As McHale enumerates them, we have "John Barth's postmodernism, the literature of replenishment; Charles Newman's postmodernism, the literature of an inflationary economy; Jean-Francois Lyotard's postmodernism, a general condition of knowledge in the contemporary informational regime; [and] Ihab Hassan's postmodernism, a stage on the road to the spiritual unification of humankind." McHale's list might be extended to include Jameson's postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism, Jean Baudrillard's postmodernism of simulacrum and hyperreality, Andrea Huyssen's postmodernism as the swan song of the international avant-garde, Umberto Eco's postmodernism as an ironic
revisit to the past, and Linda Hutcheon's paradoxical postmodernism of complicity and critique, of reflexivity and historicity--and so on.9

Despairing of the contradictory versions of postmodernism, one writer has suggested that "This word has no meaning. Use it as often as possible."10 The lack of consensus, however, is not necessarily a matter for despair. For postmodernism is a concept still in the process of being made, and it is possible that some greater agreement on the meaning of the term might eventually emerge as critics in each specialized field capture and explicate the multifaceted history and the variety of usages of the term. Already substantial progress has been made in the interpretation of postmodernism. Although there is assuredly no consensus yet on exactly what postmodernism is, there does seem to be a growing accord on what it is not.

Perhaps the most common confusion surrounding the usage of postmodernism is the tendency to equate it with postmodernity or postmodernization, concepts fashionable among many postmodern social theorists. Put in the most general terms, postmodernism is a culture, a constellation of related visions, ideas, and values that came into being in the second half of the twentieth century. In a more restricted sense, it refers to a new tendency and practice in the artistic and academic fields, the culture of a fraction of writers, artists, intellectuals, and "new cultural intermediaries"11 in opposition to institutionalized high modernism. Initially a word associated with works and criticisms as diverse as those of Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, William Burroughs, Ihab Hassan, Leslie
Fiedler, and others, postmodernism has come to encompass Philip Johnson's AT & T building, Nam June Paik's video installations, Julian Schnabel's neo-abstract expressionist paintings, fictions by John Barth and Robert Coover, Richard Rorty's new pragmatism, and Stanley Fish's affective stylistics, to list only a few. Although their evaluations differ, most critics agree about certain features of postmodernism: e.g., self-reflexivity; the effacement of boundaries between art and everyday life, and between high and popular art; a stylistic eclecticism; love of parody and irony; and a playfulness, exuberance, and plasticity, as opposed to the solemnity and seriousness of high modernism.

Postmodernity, by contrast, denotes a new social order, involving the dialectics between cultural postmodernism and the socioeconomic process of postmodernization which accompanied the post-industrial society. The postmodern society is thus for many theorists of postmodernity the society of new forms of information and technology. For Lyotard it is above all "the computerization of society," and for Baudrillard a society of genetics, cybernetics, and TV. According to Baudrillard, whereas modernity is characterized by production and industrial capitalism, postmodernity is constituted by "simulations." The transition from modernity to postmodernity is the shift from a productive to a reproductive social order. In the emergent postmodern world, where sexual manuals, exercise video cassettes, Dr. Spock's child care books, and other simulation models dominate, the distinction between real and unreal is no longer apparent. The real is "not only what can be reproduced, but that
which is always already reproduced, the hyperreal." This "prodigious expansion of the cultural into the social realm," as Jameson sees it, has reached to the point "at which everything in our social life . . . can be said to have become 'cultural.'" For Baudrillard it means the end of the social in the postmodern world.

The relationship between postmodernism and postmodernity is exceedingly complex, with postmodernism arising in part as a reflection of and in part as a counterresponse to the emergence of postmodernity. The postmodernist stance toward postmodernity has been typically marked by ambivalence, with postmodernists simultaneously upholding the plurality and plasticity of postmodernity while decrying its implosion of all boundaries and the concomitant confusion. In this light the tendency to switch the terms is intellectually confusing, because it helps to diminish the oppositional impulse of postmodernism towards postmodernity and to blame postmodernism for the bleak scene of postmodernity. Despite the etymological similarity, then, postmodernism and postmodernity must be sharply differentiated.

Another misconception of postmodernism is the conflation of the term with antimodernism. This view has led many advocates of modernism, both on the right and on the left, to the emphatic denunciation of postmodernism. In this promodernist and antipostmodernist stance, modernism is usually upheld for its high quality and critical potential, whereas postmodernism is denigrated for its paucity of creativity and complicity with the status quo. Hilton Kramer, for example, claims that modernism remains "a
touchstone of quality." It has served as "the moral conscience" as well as "the aesthetic and spiritual conscience," of middle-class life. Modernism is anything but dead. It is now "the culture of democratic society." Kramer sees postmodernism as a "betrayal" of modernism. Its standards are loose, hedonistic, and opportunistic, and its spiritual bankruptcy is marked by cynicism, narcissism, pessimism, and sheer nihilism. "Democracy," Kramer contends, is at stake in the postmodernist attack on modernism.

What is striking in Kramer's call for the restoration of high standards of modernist quality is his complete obliviousness to the genuinely adversary relationship of modernism to bourgeois society and its worldview, and to the modernist-elitist rejection of popular culture on behalf of the autonomous aesthetic realm. Modernism is anything but the culture of the middle class, assuming that Kramer does not mean to blur the distinction between modernism proper and its absorption and exploitation by the culture industries.

Habermas presents a very different version of the critique of postmodernism. He identifies postmodernism with various forms of political and cultural conservatism which share the antimodernist temper and ideology. Against the theory and practice of postmodernism, Habermas affirms the essentially negative, critical and emancipating power of modernity. Once modernity is purged of its politically reactionary features of aesthetic modernism, Habermas claims, the project of modernity is the project of the Enlightenment. Its mission is to develop the spheres of "objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art, according to their inner
Habermas lumps together George Bataille, Foucault, and Derrida with the neoconservatives--Daniel Bell among others--as postmodernist, and calls for a critical reappropriation of the modern project.

Habermas's identification of postmodernism and its political consequences is representative of the practice among many Marxist critics of repudiating postmodernism for its complicity with the existing system. Martin Jay, for example, sides with Habermas in this dispute. Jay links postmodernism with poststructuralism and finds the essence of the postmodernist temper in Foucault's conflation of power and knowledge, in Lyotard's rejection of meta-narratives, and above all in Derrida's now famous notion of *différance*. Jay opts for Habermas's attempt to salvage the existing differentiation of the modernization process by the notion of communicative rationality, over the postmodernists' indiscriminate attack on rationality and abandonment of any hope for new totalizations. He claims that the postmodernist attempt to collapse boundaries, and its aesthetic colonization of life, cannot represent a solution to the problem caused by instrumental rationalization. As Jay sees it, the postmodernist attempt would only lead to "a night of endless *différance* in which all cows were piebald," and to a quietistic politics.

While many Marxist critics repudiate postmodernism because of its antimodernism, the same tendency has led others to praise it. For Leslie Fiedler the modernist distinction between high and mass art is the last form of class structure in American society. He
celebrates the new qualities of anti-art and the anti-serious literary works emerging after the war because these postmodernist works attempt to dissolve the differences between the two cultures by parody, grotesque imitation, and the adoption of pop genres such as the Western, science fiction, and pornography, which are supposed to be farthest removed from the traditional artistic novel.\textsuperscript{23}

Both those who criticize and those who approve postmodernism for its antimodernist temper tend to see it as a radical break with its predecessor. Another problematic view of postmodernism, however, dismisses it as a mere intensification of certain characteristics of modernism. For C. Barry Chabot there is nothing radically new in postmodernist exuberance, self-reflexivity, and the transformative power of imagination and irony. He argues that many of these features derive from modernism and thus that postmodernism is "actually a late development or mutation within modernism itself."\textsuperscript{24} According to Chabot, the lack of consensus concerning the definition of postmodernism is due to the impoverished account of modernism; he suggests that the postmodernism debate is specious and dismisses it as cultural fashion and mass delusion.

Bell in turn sees postmodernism as a logical extension of modernism. For him modernism is dead. It is "safely in the museums, and on the corporate walls."\textsuperscript{25} The worldview of modernism was principally revolutionary, aiming at the subversion of traditional bourgeois values and the Puritan ethic, with its preoccupation with aesthetic pleasure, intense experience, and immediate gratification. Postmodernism is a heightening of the
hedonistic and anarchic tendencies of modernism. Bell rejects both modernism and postmodernism, because both contribute to the exacerbation of the structural tensions of society and the erosion of the traditional social bonds.

Neither the "antipostmodernist" nor the "propostmodernist" version, however, adequately represents postmodernism in its totality. Both tend to highlight certain aspects which they celebrate or repudiate according to their own frame of reference, while repressing the contradictory tendencies simultaneously existing in postmodernism. For, as John Barth has noted, there is no lack of actual texts and artifacts illustrative of both the critics' and celebrants' versions of postmodernism. In the light of several incisive recent works, however, it is no longer possible to repeat facile characterizations of postmodernism and modernism without sounding dated or naive. Postmodernism, it now appears, is neither merely a symptom of the decadent capitalist system nor a new emancipatory force. It is not just a wholesale repudiation of modernism, nor is it simply an extension or intensification of the modernist program. Such a dichotomous thought pattern would be inadequate for understanding the complex phenomenon of postmodernism.

The call for totality in representing postmodernism would certainly seem paradoxical to many, because postmodernism is marked among other things by its problematizing of the concept of totality as embodied in Truth, History, and Reason. Nevertheless, the concept is indispensable for a comprehensive understanding of
postmodernism and therefore has been appropriated. In fact, the variety, contradiction, and confusion surrounding the representation of the postmodern testifies to the validity of the postmodernist outlook. We cannot represent postmodernism, and by extension the true state of affairs in the world, in its totality. In disciplines as different as philosophy, art, physics, history, and sociology, one can find a radical skepticism concerning the possibility of representation. This "so-called critique of representation," Jameson suggests, is the major theme in postmodernism. Lyotard concurs. Postmodernism has discovered a "lack of reality of reality," together with the invention of other realities. It "puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself." In Eco's words, "nothing guarantees that the order of our ideas corresponds to the order of things." We play the game of conjecture in labyrinths, and "conjecture is exposed to 'fallibilism.'" And in the postmodern world it is impossible to tell one story above others. For "there is no reason, only reasons." A master narrative is seen as repressive and even terroristic, and thus an object for deconstruction.

This postmodernist problematization of representation is manifested in its deliberate effacement of the conventional boundaries between genres, between disciplines, between high and low art, once considered firm and discrete. In much of performance art, for example, the distinction is blurred between "public and private events, between real and aesthetic emotions, between art and self." The same tendency can be detected in the visual arts, in which we can witness "the gradual dissolution of once fundamental..."
distinctions--original/copy, authentic/inauthentic, function/ornament." In architecture time-honored distinctions between different styles are violated in favor of an historical pastiche as embodied in the celebration of Las Vegas architecture. New terms such as *nonfiction novel* and *docudrama* are coined to capture the new entity in literature and journalism. This postmodernist "de-differentiation" questions the traditional way of dividing and representing the world as constitutive rather than reflective. But this attempt does not require us to abandon representation. Rather it points to the inescapability of representation in our understanding of the world. Through irony and parody postmodernists bring into question the notion of transparency of representation, yet remain within the enterprise of representation, even as they explore its limits. Thus their attempt does not necessarily lead to the abyss of "anything-goes" relativism, as various critics of postmodernism contend, although there is assuredly such a danger.

One of the fields in which the crisis of representation is intensely explored is that which Hutcheon calls "historiographical metafictions." During recent decades, a number of American fiction writers have made use of historical actuality as their subject matter. We think of John Barth's late seventeenth century Maryland, of Ishmael Reed's Harding years, of E.L. Doctorow's early twentieth century New York, of Thomas Pynchon's Second World War, of Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s bombing of Dresden, and of Robert Coover's presentation of the Rosenberg case during the Eisenhower administration. These works are not the same as either pure
metafiction or the traditional historical novel. They are, as Hutcheon claims, "intensely self-reflexive" of history and fiction as human constructs and yet "paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages."35

The ways in which these fiction writers exploit historical events and historical characters are not identical, but their conception of history seems to be virtually the same—the view of history as a fiction constructed out of our needs. "We all invent our pasts, more or less, as we go along, at the dictates of Whim and Interests," Barth says, "the happenings of former times are a clay in the present moment that will-we, nill-we, the lot of us must sculpt."36 As Doctorow conceives it, history has "composed and recomposed itself constantly in an endless process of dissatisfaction."37 "There's no more fiction or nonfiction now," he declares, "there's only narrative."38 According to Coover, history is "nothing but words. Accidental accretions for the most part, leaving most of the story out."39 He further asserts that all conceptualization of the world can be seen as "a kind of fiction-making."40 When Norman Mailer presents his report on the October 1967 anti-Vietnam march to the Pentagon as "History as a Novel, the Novel as History," he is aptly expressing the view of history held by many contemporary American writers.

The attempt by these nonprofessionals of historiography to collapse the borderline between history and fiction must seem quite radical to those who are accustomed to the distinction between history as a story about what actually happened and fiction as a
story about what might happen. The attempt is not, however, something entirely new to professional historians. In Carl Becker's opinion, the historian "cannot deal with this event itself, since the event itself has disappeared. What he can deal with directly is a statement about the event." To Becker, history as depiction of the objective past is an illusion. Charles A. Beard also rejected the view that the past can be grasped as an objective entity and that historians can face it with impartiality. Beard suggested the affinity between historian and fiction writer as early as 1934: "Any selection and arrangement of facts pertaining to any large area of history, either local or world, race or class, is controlled inexorably by the frame of reference in the mind of the selector and arranger." In Beard's view, then, history has a subjective and fictive element as a result of a selection and rearrangement of innumerable events by a historian, who is governed by his ideology, gender, class, and ethnicity--to use currently fashionable terms.

Despite their similarities, traditional historians and postmodernist fiction writers differ on one crucial point. Although Beard acknowledges the fictive nature of history, he is not so radical as to think of his own work as a fiction, and tries to avoid possible chaos by firmly declaring that history has a definite direction. For him history is the onward and upward movement towards the realization of a just and democratic society. However, it is arguable that his belief is itself untenable, because it has no solid ground and is just one of many human choices. When Coover asserts that all representations of reality can be seen as essentially convenient
fictions, he emphasizes that this awareness itself may be a fiction. It is this radicalized and self-reflexive view of "the universal fiction-making process"\textsuperscript{43} that poses a serious question concerning the role of postmodernist writers and their fiction. For, in a world where all representation is a kind of fiction, it seems hardly conceivable to avoid nihilism in the realm of values—especially moral values, the enhancement of which was traditionally considered a primary goal of literature. The harsh criticism leveled against Coover’s \textit{The Public Burning} is thus applicable to other postmodernist historiographical metafictions. However, Coover claims that he has not tampered with the primary data of history any more than do the histories themselves and that his position is not simply relativistic. He further claims that the function of the novelist is to provide "better fictions with which we can reform our notions of things,"\textsuperscript{44} and that the writing of fiction is a moral act. Coover does not elaborate on this issue of relativism except to suggest that community is a constraint against absolute relativism.

Much of the debate surrounding postmodernism has been conducted at a highly abstract level, dealing in vague generalities and lacking in specific and concrete examples. This study thus seeks to delve into the ethical and political consequences of postmodernism by investigating two modes of representing an actual historical event—i.e., factual and fictional representations of the Rosenberg case, involving the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg as alleged Soviet spies in 1953. The selection of the Rosenberg case is certainly arbitrary, but not entirely so. The case lies at the heart of American
history. It has been seen in the context of the Salem witchcraft and the Sacco and Vanzetti cases, thus constituting a continuum which represents a dark side of the American psyche, which constantly requires a scapegoat to restore stability in American society in times of crisis. The case was an international event in the 1950s and still remains a living issue, provoking heated debates. It has also provided raw material for various representations--historical, documentary, legal, visual, poetic, fictional, and so on--more than any other case in American history. Significantly, two prominent postmodernist novelists have written fictions about the case, thus offering a valuable opportunity to examine the postmodernist claim of the resemblance between fact and fiction. Lastly, but not least importantly, it involves the confrontation with death, the ultimate fact for every human being. It may to some appear vacuous and morally reprehensible to suggest that their guilt or innocence is unknowable and that there is only a story. To take the case seriously, then, is to take morality seriously.

My argument is built around Doctorow's and Coover's assertion that the domains of fact and fiction are not strictly separable. The second chapter locates their claim in the broader intellectual matrix of postmodernism, and Chapter Three examines it in the context of literary postmodernism. The next three chapters juxtapose and contrast factual representations of the Rosenberg case with fictional ones. Chapter Four deals with the case's journalistic and historical renderings: the coverage of the case by The New York Times; Walter and Miriam Schneir's Invitation to an Inquest; and Ronald Radosh
and Joyce Milton's *The Rosenberg File*. Chapter Five examines Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*, and Chapter Six Coover's *The Public Burning*. Chapter Seven goes on to consider several scandals and controversies in journalism and historical fiction concerning the accurate representation of realities, in order to highlight the fictionality of conventions dividing the boundary between fact and fiction: namely, the scandal involving Janet Cooke's story about a drug-addicted child in the *Washington Post*; the controversy surrounding Alastair Reid's stories in the *New Yorker*; and the reception of William Styron's novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and Doctorow's *Ragtime*. Chapter Eight broadens the inquiry somewhat by considering various theories usually called "new pragmatism" or "anti-foundationalism" as shown in Hayden White's theory of historical representations, Richard Rorty's liberal ironism, and John Mackie's anti-realism. Finally, Chapter Nine looks at the consequences of the postmodernist conception of history and morality.

Despite their claim to objectivity, journalistic and historical representations of the Rosenberg case reveal a high level of fictionality in their processing of "facts" and imposition of plot structures on a series of events. Certain documents or portions of them have been excluded and marginalized according to the writer's position in the controversy surrounding the case, and the case is presented as romance, tragedy, or satire depending upon the writer's vision. Radically different representations of the case in journalism and historiography, long considered to be models of objectivity in
their dealings with reality, evidently prepare the way for skepticism concerning our ability to perceive reality and lead to the notion of the indeterminate reality itself among fiction writers. The present debate on anti-foundationalism in philosophy, historiography, and literary theory helps to open up the problematics of the postmodernist conception of history and morality. The arguments by White, Rorty, Mackie, and others, all point to the possibility that history and morality are human inventions. Both fact-finders and fiction-makers are to a significant extent affected by their own subjective moral and aesthetic systems in their attempt at making sense out of a welter of historical materials. Their stories are "made up." Likewise, anti-foundationalists see morality as "something to be made" rather than "something to be discovered." They discredit attempts to ground incompatible systems of belief and desire in an ahistorical and asocial essence, and advocate working them out from communities with which one is identified.

In this light, the claim of Coover and Doctorow appears to be valid. On the other hand, it appears self-defeating literally to insist that there is no distinction between fact and fiction, for that seems too wild to be believable. The crux of the matter for the postmodernist, then, is how to avoid the potential chaos--moral and conceptual--caused by the disruption of the boundary between fact and fiction. In confronting this problem the postmodernist self-reflexive idea of history and morality is challenging but limited. Although the conception of history and morality as a fiction does not necessarily lead to escapism, nihilism, defeatism, and solipsism, as
some critics seem to suggest, the recognition of fictionality is also not inherently liberating or moral. The notion per se has a potential either way. Ultimately it is our practice in a particular context, along with communal judgment, that makes a concept moral, immoral or amoral. While the affirmation of particularity and context seems to suggest a strong moral potential for postmodernism, the lack of an agent to bring about actual changes in the postmodernist outlook undermines its ethical stance.
Notes


7. Leslie Fiedler, "Cross the Border--Close the Gap," in his The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler, vol. 2 (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), pp. 61-85. It is difficult, however, to find a wholesale celebration, as Fiedler does, of the resistance potential of postmodernism.


rapidly circulate information between formerly sealed-off areas of culture.

12. Here I am adapting Berman's conceptualization of the relationship between modernism, modernity, and modernization, although he calls postmodernism pop modernism and repudiates it because of its moral nihilism. See All That Is Solid Melts into Air, pp. 13-36. The term postmodernization is not widely used, and specific institutional changes and social processes of postmodernization have yet to be theorized. Tentatively I take the post-industrial theories associated with Bell among others as tantamount to the postmodernization process.


15. Jameson, "Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," p. 87.

16 Baudrillard claims that in the world of simulations information and media render the masses an indifferent and silent entity which like a black hole engulfs all meanings, thus making them meaningless. The masses are incapable of social actions, and their only concern is with spectacles. When they have to demonstrate against social injustice, they watch an important soccer game on television [Baudrillard, In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities: or, the End of the Social and Other Essays. trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), pp. 8-19, 66]. Even before the postmodern became ubiquitous in American cultural life, writers and intellectuals noted the new quality of postwar America. In their 1950 study, sociologist David Riesman and his associates depicted postwar Americans as "other-directed persons," who moved through life as if guided by radar, picking up cues from friends and associates for survival and learning from the creatures of Hollywood how to increase their own competence as consumers. Historian Daniel Boorstin claimed in 1961 that American experience is dominated by the "pseudo-event," an artificial happening arranged by public relations men or politicians to be reported in the mass media. The pseudo-event is "neither true nor false in the old familiar senses," but when it is packaged and disseminated to the
public as an image, it is "more vivid, more attractive, more impressive, and more persuasive than reality itself." And novelist Philip Roth's now famous 1960 statement: "The American writer in the middle of the 20th century has his hands full in trying to understand and then describe, and then make credible much of the American reality. . . . the actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist." Roth wishes that he had invented the presidential debate with "all the machinations over make-up and rebuttal time, all the business over whether Mr. Nixon should look at Mr. Kennedy when he replied, or should look away." See David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study in the Changing American Character* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1950), Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1982), p. 36, and Philip Roth, "Writing American Fiction," in *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961), p. 120.


For them postmodernism is more human than modernism, which they associate with the upper class, closure, and coldness.


27. The works that I have in mind are those by Barth, Huyssen, Hutcheon, Hassan, Mike Featherstone, and Jameson. These writers tend to reject a facile dichotomous view of postmodernism and attend to its complex and paradoxical nature.


30. Umberto Eco, in Rosso, "Correspondence with Umberto Eco," pp. 11-12.


34. Scott Lash, "Discourse or Figure? Postmodernism as a 'Regime of Signification," Theory Culture & Society 5 (June 1988), p. 312.


44. Coover, *The Radical Imagination*, p. 82.

Chapter 2. The Postmodern Sensibility

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Richard Rorty suggests that "metaphors" rather than "propositions" have determined most philosophical convictions. According to him, it is the picture of the mind as "a great mirror" (12) of the world that has dominated the tradition of Western philosophy. Since true knowledge supposedly comes from accurately representing the reality out there, the central concern of philosophers has been with a "general theory of representation" (3). This tradition of epistemology is marked by various attempts to find "foundations" (1) for knowledge in science, morality, and art. Rorty derides those efforts as self-deceptions, historically untenable and leading to the intellectual dead end of a choice between foundation and chaos. He attempts to liberate philosophers from this dichotomy with the alternative metaphor of philosophy as conversation. In this picture, philosophy is deprived of its privileged status of providing eternal standards for other areas of culture, and is rendered as simply one of the many voices in the conversation of mankind. Accordingly philosophers are understood as "conversational partners" (372) along with poets, scientists, ethnographers, journalists, and literary critics rather than as those having "an overriding claim on the attention of the other participants in the conversation" (392). Truths claimed by philosophers are not accurate representations of realities but "useful kibitzing," (393) or the adoption of "those beliefs which are successful in helping us do
what we want to do" (10). Rorty urges us to abandon the notion of philosophers as "knowing something about knowing which nobody else knows so well" (392) and makes a plea for continuing open conversation.

However innovative Rorty's claim may seem to be, what might be called the postmodernist liberation through the active embrace of plurality and plasticity has eminently respectable roots in American thought. It is pragmatism, the first distinctive American philosophy --notably William James' version with his theory of truth, radical empiricism and the pluralistic universe--that could be called a precursor of the postmodernist sensibility. Although almost a century apart, pragmatism and postmodernism show a shared sensibility in their notions of reality, truth, and knowledge. The rise of the new pragmatism since the 1970s may suggest that the pragmatist view of the world fits contemporary America better than it did at the turn of the century. This is especially true of the staunchly proclaimed "return of William James" and the debate about "anti-foundationalism" and "against theory." The discussion of certain key concepts of the pragmatist philosophy, above all those of James, should then help to illuminate the interesting phenomenon of the converging views of reality and truth in a diversity of disciplines. This chapter will therefore trace the change in sensibility in the contemporary intellectual matrix by briefly investigating in turn the American pragmatic philosophy, quantum physics, and some new developments in ethnography, sociology, economics, history, journalism, and aesthetic and literary theory.
This may provide a context which, it is hoped, will enable us to approach postmodernist fiction in a unified fashion.

When Charles Sanders Peirce first formulated the philosophy of pragmatism, it was basically a theory of meaning, a method for making our ideas clear. In order to attain the clear meaning of an idea, Peirce says, "one should consider what practical consequences might conceivably result by necessity from the truth of that [idea]; and the sum of these consequences will constitute the entire meaning of the [idea]."\(^3\) In other words, if under certain conditions, certain conceivable actions are performed, then a particular set of results would be observed. The sum of these practical effects is, for Peirce, the whole meaning of an idea. For example, to say a thing is \textit{hard} means that if under certain conditions one attempts to scratch it with other things, then one will observe no scratch marks. According to the pragmatic maxim, the whole conception of hardness lies in the sum of such conceived effects.\(^4\)

In applying the theory of meaning to the idea of reality, Peirce introduces the role of the community of investigators in determining what truth and reality are. As he conceives it, the idea of reality "essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY."\(^5\) This is connected with his "doctrine of fallibilism."\(^6\) According to Peirce, our knowledge is not absolute but rather functions along a continuum of uncertainty and indeterminacy. We can never know that we know the real object, i.e., we can never have absolute certainty of our knowledge. Peirce further suggests that error and inaccuracy are elements of truth, and the only infallible statement is that all
statements are fallible. An individual cannot attain any certainty of the knowledge of reality by himself. Here the notion of community takes on an important meaning for Peirce. Through an endless investigation of a community of inquirers, we can at least hope that we will have knowledge of the true object, even though without absolute certitude. Peirce resorts to a theory of probability. What does it mean to say that a man with a disease has a sixty percent chance to survive after an operation? It obviously does not mean that if he has the operation ten times he will survive six times and will die four times. What it means is that if the operation is performed indefinitely in a community, six out of ten will survive. Thus, the prediction has meaning only when it is applied to a whole community. We can have knowledge, therefore, only as we see ourselves as a member of a community. Since the community will confirm or reject the results of each member's investigation, knowledge attained in this way is self-corrective, even though not infallible, so that errors will be corrected by further investigation. Thus for Peirce the real is "the object represented in truth" which is "fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate."8

For James pragmatism is more than achieving clarity of meaning. It is also a theory of truth. The main difference between James' pragmatism and Peirce's lies in the interpretation of the term "practical." By the term "practical," which Peirce uses as a relational concept, James means "the distinctively concrete, the individual, particular, and effective, as opposed to the abstract, general, and inert."10 Hence, whereas Peirce seeks the meaning of ideas in a
general formula of conceivable effects, James focuses upon the "functional possibilities" of ideas in specific human actions. "The whole function of philosophy," James says, "ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one." Therefore, James' pragmatism is a device enabling an individual in specific instances of life to discover and attain true beliefs.

James' theory of truth does not presuppose the complete denial of the traditional copy theory of truth. With him truth is a property of certain of our ideas, not of realities. In other words, realities are not true or false, but simply are. The truth of ideas means their agreement with realities while falsity means their disagreement with realities. However, in determining the meaning of "agreement with reality," James' theory stands in sharp contrast with the correspondence view. He defines agreement to mean "certain ways of 'working,'" and for him "working" means the mediation between a stock of old opinions that an individual has and a new experience that he meets with "a minimum of jolt [and] a maximum of continuity." "We hold a theory true," James says, "just in proportion to its success in solving this 'problem of maxima and minima.' But success in solving this problem is eminently a matter of approximation. We say this theory solves it on the whole more satisfactorily than that theory . . . That new idea is truest which performs most felicitously its function of satisfying our double urgency. It makes itself true, gets itself classed as true, by the way
it works." 15 Hence, with James, truth is a comparative notion. When he says an idea is true, it means that that idea is truer than another in a specific context. 16 In other words, that idea works better than another. Thus, truth means a process of growth, as an idea becomes truer.

The truth of an idea is verified in a process of inquiry within which ideas are examined in regard to their fitness for working in a concrete situation. Consequently, truth is not a stagnant property inherent in an idea as the copy view claims. "Truth," James says, "happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its verification. Its validity is the process of its validation." 17 The problem here is that the verification of our contradicting ideas is not experienced in actual fact. What we can experience is one of them in the process of being verified up to now. We can never be absolutely certain that one idea is truer than another in fact. 18

In James' framework, therefore, the truth of an idea is limited to time and situation. When he says we know a belief is true, he means that we experience the verifying of the belief in a specific instance relative to our other contrary beliefs, and in a given moment it is truer than others. Thus, truth is no longer something permanent or static. It is relative and dynamic. James says:

how plastic even the oldest truths . . . really are has been vividly shown in our day by the transformation of logical and mathematical ideas, a transformation which seems even to be invading physics. The ancient formulas are
reinterpreted as special expressions of much wider principles, principles that our ancestors never got a glimpse of in their present shape and formulation.  

Therefore, truth turns its face towards the future, hoping for "a potential better truth to be established later."  

To James, the agreement of an idea with reality means the process of its verification. When an idea is verified, it agrees with reality. When it agrees, it works and is true. The assumption here, for James, as for Peirce, is that we cannot be certain about our true beliefs. So, the only possible way is to introduce an idea or belief into the realm of experience and observe the results which it produces. In this process, James is primarily concerned with the definite difference a true belief can make to an individual in a definite context of life. However, while he stresses the particular difference a true belief effects, James does not disregard socially shared conventions and practices regarding truth and falsity. For him a working truth "must derange common sense and previous belief as little as possible," and is subject to the socially established procedure of verification, and should be acceptable whether socially or otherwise.  

James describes his philosophical attitude as that of radical empiricism. He is an empiricist. He admits nothing into his philosophy that is not directly experienced and excludes nothing from it that is directly experienced. However, James' empiricism is distinguished from traditional empiricism, by being radical. It is radical in the sense that the relations between things are held to be
as real and as much a part of experience as are the things themselves. British empiricism, especially that of David Hume, was atomistic. According to Hume, everything is a bundle of distinct impressions and ideas. That is, all of our perceptions are distinct and separate. Thus, the mind never perceives any real connection among distinct existences. Everything is disassociated from everything else. One way to solve the problem of relating disjunctive things is to introduce a transcendent principle of explanation, such as the Absolute Mind of Berkeley's idealism or a priori as in Kant. James rejects this type of non-empiricist solution and contends that the cause of Hume's failure was that he was not radical enough in his empiricism. "Radical empiricism," James says, "takes conjunctive relations at their face value, holding them to be as real as the terms united by them. The world it represents as a collection, some parts of which are conjunctively and others disjunctively related."

James' contention is that we actually do experience relations. For example, when we hear two bell strokes consecutively, we experience the second stroke as related to the first. If this were not the case, we would not experience the second stroke. Likewise, when we see two things at a given moment, for example, a desk and a chair, we see them as related to each other in space. Thus, James' argument for the reality of relations eliminates the necessity for a trans-empirical explanation and provides continuity within the flow of experience. He stresses that his view enables us to explain our experience on its own terms.
When James introduces the doctrine of "pure experience," the distinction between our experience or consciousness on the one hand and the reality to be experienced on the other collapses. According to James, pure experience is the "one primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed." It is the embryo out of which our ordinary experience of distinct things and different relations develops. It can be thus called a state of manyness in oneness or of multiplicity in unity. Only new-born infants and persons in a state of semi-coma can experience such a state in its purity. The upshot of this doctrine, when it is combined with the theory of radical empiricism, is that our experience of the world is as real as the world itself. That is, our multiple experiences are given an equal reality status as multiple realities. We, as experiencing agents, become entities who can create a change in reality. As James says, "what really exists is not things made but things in the making." Thus, reality is not a closed system; it is ontologically open and is changing. If reality is in the making, our knowledge of it is made too. This means that absolute knowledge is only theoretically possible; we would have absolute knowledge when we reach a point where all possible experiences have been had. Actually, however, we cannot know whether no further new experiences are possible or not. So, for James all knowledge is "provisional." If there exists an external reality, our knowledge of it is only an approximation. We can only approach the "brink" and "fringes" of reality.
James rejects the presupposition that the world is already determined and constructed. The evolution of the universe has not been completed. The universe is "unfinished, growing in all sorts of places, especially in the places where thinking beings are at work." If what the universe is to become has not been determined, then man has room for making it decide its conclusion. This view is sharply contrasted with the pessimistic assumption that the fate of man and the universe is determined and thus the salvation of the universe is impossible. James labels this attitude "tough-minded." At the other extreme is the optimistic conviction that the salvation of the world is inevitable; this view is called "tender-minded." James' own attitude is in-between; he calls it the doctrine of meliorism. "Meliorism," he says, "treats salvation as neither inevitable nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility, which becomes more and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become." In this vision, the outcome of the evolution of the universe will be decided, at least in part, by human elements. It is possible to make a world in which man is saved and human values are preserved. However, there is no guarantee of that. It is only possible if human beings work together. James writes:

Suppose that the world's author put the case to you before creation, saying: "I am going to make a world not certain to be saved, a world the perfection of which shall be conditional merely, the condition being that each several agent does its own 'level best.' I offer you the chance of taking part in such a world. Its safety, you see, is unwarranted. It is a real adventure, with real danger, yet it may win through. It is a social scheme of co-operative
work genuinely to be done. Will you join the procession? Will you trust yourself and trust the other agents enough to face the risk?"36

To James such a world is the world human beings actually live in. He believes a healthy-minded person would accept the offer to participate in making such a world good. His philosophy is thus an attempt to "make some positive connexion with this actual world of finite lives."37

John Dewey in turn, in his own epistemology, follows James in breaking down the dichotomy between the knowing consciousness and the reality to be known, between subject and object. The traditional theory of knowledge, which Dewey calls "a spectator theory of knowledge,"38 presupposed two separate entities—the subject on the one hand, the object on the other. According to this theory, the knowing process takes place wholly within the subject, whereas the object is entirely unaffected by the process of knowing. This generates the problem of finding a bridge between the spectator-subject and the independent object. Against this view, Dewey claims that knowing is a transaction between a knower and the object to be known, or between an organism and its environment. Knowing is not a process that goes on in the knower alone, and the object is not an entity that exists independent of the knowing process. Knowing takes place in a situation of which the organism and the environment are both part. In other words, knowing is what goes on when the knower and the object interact. The knower and the known are inseparable in the knowing situation. A knower
without an object to be known or an object without a knower is inconceivable. It is knowing that makes the knower a knower, and the object to be known a known.

In Dewey's framework, then, the subject is not a passive spectator merely copying the fixed and unchangeable object. It is an active agent producing existential change in the object. Dewey rejects the assumption that the thing to be known is something which exists prior to and wholly apart from the act of knowing. Known objects exist not because of correspondence of thought with the object, but as "the consequences of operations purposely undertaken."\(^{39}\) Likewise, the perceiving subject is transformed in the knowing process. When the operation of knowing is completed, both subject and object are changed. The whole situation is changed. Through the process of knowing, things are known. We attain knowledge of the objects. At the same time, it becomes the point of departure of attaining new knowledge in the new knowing process. This means that with Dewey, as with Peirce and James, the search for attaining knowledge is a never-ending process. Thus, knowledge is not retrospective, but prospective. It is oriented toward the future.

The pragmatist notion of reality, truth, and knowledge favors probability over certainty, process over substance, particularity over generality, and plurality over unity. It is ontologically antirealist, and epistemologically antifoundationalist. It also emphasizes the importance of the perceiver in the process of perception and acknowledges the role of community in determining the best possible
truths. In physical science quantum theory presents a view of ontology and epistemology that parallels the pragmatist's conception.

Although quantum theory dissolves the mechanistic view of the world in which complete law and order exist, the mechanistic view is still prevalent because many scientists and most of the general public still accept it. The profusion of books on quantum theory in recent years is significant in this respect. There may be several reasons that many scientists have decided to explicate quantum physics to the general readership more than half a century after it was solidified as a branch of physics. As physicist John Gribbin suggests, scientists usually take a generation or two to feel comfortable with new ideas in their fields. Besides, a recent experiment has refuted many counter-arguments by those scientists, prominent among them Einstein, who persistently resisted the logic of quantum theory. Finally, but most importantly, the appearance of an unusual number of books for the layman on the subject suggests that the concepts of quantum physics provide a framework with which to understand the amorphous cultural conditions of the contemporary world. In other words, scientists are publishing their books on quantum physics in response to something in the air.

Quantum theory as developed by Werner Heisenberg, Niels Bohr, and others has drastically altered the idea of a fixed and stable substance as the fundamental unit of matter. In his principle of complementarity, Bohr offered an embarrassing challenge to the believers in objective reality. Physicists had been puzzled by the supposedly incompatible phenomenon of the wave-particle duality of
light, because depending upon an observer's measuring device, light can appear either as waves or as particles. Bohr developed the concept of complementarity heuristically to explain a logically contradictory phenomenon. Light in itself is neither wave nor particle, yet both wave and particle. "Although one of them always excludes the other," as Gary Zukav says, "both of them are necessary to understand light."42 In other words, both are "different representations of the same underlying reality."43

Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty maintained that one cannot measure the position and the speed of a particle at the same time, because knowing the location of a particle precludes knowing its trajectory and vice versa. The act of empirically observing a particle alters the nature of the particle. As an observer maximizes his knowledge of the location, he minimizes his knowledge of the momentum. What is striking in quantum uncertainty is that it is not merely caused by "experimental clumsiness, or lack of instrumental resolution." As British physicist Paul Davies thinks, "it is inherent in the nature of things. The very notion of an electron-at-a-place is itself quite meaningless should we choose to know knowledge of its momentum."44

Davies' remark points to the active role of the observer in the creation of reality. By choosing to study matter as a wave or a particle—and it cannot be both simultaneously—scientists can cause matter to behave as a wave or a particle. When physicists choose to observe particles associated with waves, they produce the looked-for particles, which could not be said to exist independently of the
observation. "When we try to look at the spread-out electron wave," physicist John Gribbin writes, "it collapses into a definite particle, but when we are not looking it keeps its options open. . . . The electron is being forced by our measurement to choose one course of action out of an array of possibilities."\textsuperscript{45} Thus the observer is as essential to the creation of a particle as the particle is to the creation of the act of observation. This ineluctable interaction or complicity of the observer and the observed, as Dewey claimed in his theory of knowledge, suggests that things observed do not exist antecedent to the act of observation but as consequences of it.

Quantum theory has highlighted the elusive nature of reality itself and the human inability to perceive it directly on a micro level. Together with Einstein's earlier challenge to the notion of objective reality on the macro level, the theory has dealt a crippling blow to the concept of a reality out there that exists independently of our limited perceptions of it. One way in which scientists have dealt with the loss of certainty about fundamental reality is to adopt the concept of probability. That is, although individual particles are scattered randomly, entire groups of particles are distributed according to statistically predictable probabilities. The wave portion of the wave-particle duality of matter is a probability wave.

Scientists have increasingly begun to conceptualize the constructional nature of physical reality. Henry Margenau, anticipating Thomas Kuhn's paradigm theory, claims that the physical reality represented in scientific theories is constructed.\textsuperscript{46} He argues that scientific theories cannot be generated by observations alor.
but must be created by the intellect. In his view of science, the constructs of scientific theories are correlated with the selected data of experience by "rules of correspondence" postulated by the scientific community. Margenau lists several criteria which function as requirements for the transformation of data into constructs—logical fertility, causality, simplicity, and others. These rules are not dictated by the observed phenomena but are conferred by the theories. The same phenomena can be correlated with different constructs in different theories. Thus, the physical reality defined by science is not of a fixed, but of a dynamic nature, which "grows and changes as our understanding grows and changes." After Einstein and Heisenberg, it is no longer possible to entertain the confidence in science to provide "a true picture of the world." In the quantum world, Heisenberg says, "physicists have gradually become accustomed to considering the electronic orbits, etc., not as reality but rather as a kind of 'potentia,'" a fictional construct posited to explain the invisible subatomic particles. He further suggests that "the real problem . . . was the fact that no language existed in which one could speak consistently about the new situation."

Heisenberg's recognition that lack of language precludes the perception of reality reverberates in the claim of linguistic relativism. The traditional view of language holds that linguistic distinctions are derived from ontological distinctions. Objects exist before they can be named by language. The linguistic relativist rejects this view of linguistic function as naming. According to
Benjamin Whorf, our experience is dependent upon language, and each language organizes experience in a different fashion. For example, if one has grown up in a linguistic system which sees a rainbow as having seven colors, he experiences rainbows with seven colors, whereas one who has grown up in a linguistic system which divides the rainbow into three colors experiences rainbows with three colors. Likewise, Whorf holds, our concepts of space, time, matter, number, and the like are at least in part conditioned by the structure of particular languages; these concepts are not experienced as the same by all humans. In other words, the notion of reality presupposes a system of language.

W.V. Quine calls this "ontological relativity." He says that every language has a different way of distinguishing objects from one another and of establishing their identities. It is this function of individuation, together with that of reference and predication, that establishes the domain of facts. There may be facts that have not yet been caught in any language. These facts are unknown and unknowable until they are caught in the meshes of a language. There is no domain of facts or realities independent of language.

Like Whorf and Quine, Ludwig Wittgenstein claims that our world is constituted by our language. But in his earlier philosophy of logical atomism he shares with logical positivists the belief in the atomic facts which comprise the obvious domain of ontological objectivity. In *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein conceives the meaning of every simple sign as a name, which refers to an object. A combination of names constitutes an elementary
proposition which mirrors and corresponds to an atomic fact. Facts are made up of the relationships of simple objects, and the world divides into facts. Our minds do not actively produce meanings because facts are reproduced as a picture in our thought. In other words, thought is "a logical picture of facts" and is represented by language. The ultimate function of language is naming, a representation of objects whose relations are given in atomic facts, the totality of which makes up the world.

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein repudiates his earlier representational theory of language. He rejects the vision proposed in the *Tractatus*, with its world composed of atomic facts mirrored by language and relocates the central linguistic function in the context of human life by using the notion of language games. A language game is any institutionalized activity that involves the use of language. Many language games constitute precognitive structure in the sense that many propositions of our language are presupposed by the very activity of knowing something. To understand the meaning of a word is to understand its use in language games, just as to know the meaning of a chess piece is to know its use in the game of chess. "For a large class of cases," he says, "the meaning of a word is its use in the language." The words "simple" and "complex," for example, do not have absolute meanings. Their meanings are relative to a particular language game. The notion of simplicity and complexity that is absolute, and upon which all language is based, is a philosophical construct. We have an image of it but we do not know what would be an example.
of that which is absolutely simple. Thus Wittgenstein rejects his earlier belief that the ultimate elements of language are names which refer to simple objects. In his later philosophy language is primary: it provides the space and context in which language games are organized and mastered, and it articulates what we call the world. Language no longer merely represents the state of affairs in the world. The world exists as a function of the language games by which it is articulated.

A problem arises if our perception of reality is bound by language and we do not have language to grasp certain realities, partially due to our limitations and partially due to the nature of the world. One way to deal with this problem would be, following pragmatic philosophers and scientists, to stress the role of the perceiver or the community of perceivers in the process of perception. Another way is, as Heisenberg implies, to highlight the constructed and thus fictional nature of our conceptions. The reflection of postmodernist ethnographers on cultural accounts provides a good example of this latter strategy. Informed by the notion of culture as a fragmentary and historically contingent construct, the new ethnography advocated by James Clifford, George Marcus, Stephen Tyler, and others, claims to be acutely sensitive to cultural differences and within cultures to the multiplicity of individual experience. Although anthropological accounts have been the "inventions" of the Western mind, they have been taken as the transparent representations of other cultures. The new ethnography makes no claim to objectivity and seeks to demystify the
anthropologist's unitary authority by locating him in the center of the research and by including the "many voices clamoring for expression." In order to achieve this goal, new ethnographers explore experimental forms of writing that reflect the problematized relationships among writer, reader, and subject matter in anthropology. They experiment with such forms as intertextuality, dialogue, and self-referentiality to represent other cultures adequately. In short, postmodernist ethnographers emphasize the fact that anthropological writings, as Clifford Geertz says, are "fictions; fictions, in the sense that they are 'something made,' 'something fashioned' . . . not that they are false, unfactual, or merely 'as if' thought experiments." Geertz's claim is also true of other areas of social science, such as sociology and economics, although this recognition is elsewhere not as acutely made as in ethnography. In both sociology and economics, an emphasis on fictionality takes the form of making suspect any search for totality and unity. Norman Denzin points out that American sociology is still committed to an attempt to develop "grand theories . . . about societies as totalities." This modernist impulse to theorize about totality has led sociologists to work within the traditional paradigms of conflict theory, neo-functionalism, world-systems theory, etc, all of which fail to grasp the empirical situations of the postmodern computerized information age. Denzin urges social theorists to appropriate Lyotard and Baudrillard, and to probe into the problematics of language and the human subject, the relationship between power and knowledge, and the process by
which knowledge is constituted as knowledge. Economists have yet to recognize the coming of the postmodernist valorization of difference. The discipline is still dominated by modernist scientism in the justification of testable hypotheses and in the discovery and deductive formulation of hypotheses and laws. But there is a nascent dissenting voice which claims that "there is no essence to the economics discipline." Jack Amariglio, Stephen Resnick, and others view its seeming unity in methods, concepts, and objects of discourse as the consequence of the hegemonic strategy for "totalizing" the field. They urge that the pursuit of the essence of economic theory be abandoned and that the "nonessentialist" tradition be developed through recognizing the diversity and controversy among different and incommensurable schools. In a sense social scientists are all involved in creating "composite characters." For "anyone who represents a class or a kind of ethnic or economic group is dealing in characterization," as a novelist does. Social scientists' compositions of facts are less individualistic and thus more dependable than novelists', yet what they do is to a significant extent "storytelling."

Narrativity in history has always been recognized by historians and non-historians. But the dominant ideology of objectivity holds that "proper" history is a precise and accurate reconstruction of past events as recorded in the documents. It reduces narrativity to a marginal status, conceiving of it as a plausible way of filling in gaps in the historical record. Opposed to this, theoretically informed historians such as Hayden White and Dominick Lacapra seek to place narrativity at the heart of historiography. They attempt to make
interpretative strategies explicit, self-conscious, and subject to criticism. In their techniques of composition, as White claims, "history is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation."66

Similarly, in journalism the official ideology of objectivity has come under severe criticism. It is claimed that the content of news stories conceals political assumptions, the format of news stories incorporates its own bias toward observable facts, conflicts, and events, and the news gathering process reinforces official viewpoints of realities. More attention is drawn to the process of making news, the relationship between reporter and source, and between reporter and organization. Facts are conceived as "consensually validated statements about [the world]" rather than "aspects of the world itself." Objectivity is understood not as a simple faith in facts but as an "allegiance to rules and procedures" deemed legitimate by the journalistic community.67

This postmodernist tendency towards uncovering of naturalized constructs is also apparent in the institutional theory of art.68 Institutionalists such as Arthur Danto, George Dickie, Howard Becker, and Pierre Bourdieu do not see artistic values as independent of social conventions and practices. For them art is not a special kind of object associated with genius and timeless beauty. Rather it is an institutionalized activity that some people do. Danto argues that what makes a certain object an artwork is an artworld, which he defines as "an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art."69 Danto defends his claim using Andy Warhol's Brillo
Carton as an illustration. If one accepts that art is imitation, Warhol’s box is not an artwork. But if one has a different theory of art, say, that art is the creation of forms which are not imitation, then a Brillo box has conferred upon it the status of a work of art. Thus Danto claims that what in the end makes the difference between Warhol’s carton and the ordinary carton is a theory of art. Similarly, Dickie argues that a urinal manufactured in the factory and installed in an ordinary bathroom is not a work of art. But the same urinal is made art, as in the case of Duchamp’s Fountain, when it is submitted to an art show by an artist or put in a museum by a curator. Art status is determined in the artworld, a loose but established social institution involving a complex web of personnel, tradition, practice, and convention.\textsuperscript{70}

For institutionalists the art world is not only the site of artistic production but also the arena of cultural struggle. It sets standards, creates and reproduces aesthetic values, organizes production, distribution, and consumption. It situates the artist and the work in society. From the institutionalist perspective, it is not transcendent beauty or an expression of universal truth that makes an artwork last. Rather it is the maximization of class or group interests that preserves and protects the lasting reputation of certain artworks.\textsuperscript{71} Institutionalists try to demystify the image of an isolated genius in the garret and correct the innocent view of artistic qualities. They also unveil the complex interplay of networks, politics, and economics in which agents in the cultural field are enmeshed.
Institutionalists shift their attention from a work of art to the context in which the art-work is received. In literary theory this shift of attention is best illustrated in the emergence of reader-response criticism. The old belief of the New Critics in the text itself has been under mounting attack from the advocates of reader-oriented criticism. The New Criticism was based upon faith in the notion of textual objectivity, that is, faith that a text is an objective entity on its own. It was assumed that this objectivity could be distorted through consideration of matters outside the text itself, for example the life of the writer, historical and social conditions of his time, and the like. The New Critics tried to exclude everything subjective from the text and its interpretation. They exorcised not only the author's intentions but also the reader's responses. What was needed was to see the text in its objectivity and to investigate what it says. When I. A. Richards distributed some sample poems to his students for their analysis, he omitted the titles and authorship of the poems. The purpose was to help the students perceive the poems nakedly, "objectively." It was assumed that the bare text would fully reveal its meanings to objective analysis.

While some descendants of the New Critics have felt interpretive anxiety in their recognition of an abyss between the text and the reader, others have rejoiced in it. If the text is unknowable in its objectivity, reader-response critics argue, then the reader can take the effects of the text as textual meaning. In "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics," Stanley Fish rejects the New Critics' premise that the meaning of a text is objectively inherent in the text.
and argues that textual meaning is a production of interpretation on the part of the reader. Inverting the New Critics' Affective Fallacy, Fish claims that what is important in the reader's experience of a text is not what the text means but what it does. For, a text is not "an object, a thing-in-itself, but an event, something that happens to, and with the participation of, the reader." Fish further claims that the author's intention is not in the text but is made by an interpretive act of the reader. The meaning of a text is determined by interpretive strategies that a reader decides to adopt in the reading process. Since the reader has a free choice in adopting his interpretive strategies, he can give every text any meaning or no meaning at all.

In Fish's model, then, every text has a potential for an infinite number of equally valid readings. At the same time, all texts, however different, can be made to yield the same meaning. For example, Fish claims, Lycidas and The Waste Land can produce exactly the same meaning, if they are read with suitable interpretive strategies.

If I read Lycidas and The Waste Land differently (in fact I do not), it will not be because the formal structures of the two poems (to term them such is also an interpretive decision) call forth different interpretive strategies but because my predisposition to execute different interpretive strategies will produce different formal structures. That is, the two poems are different because I have decided that they will be.

Thus, in Fish's theory, all texts can be rendered to yield any meaning a reader desires. The identity of texts is determined by the identity of their meanings, and the identity of their meanings is
decided by the identity of the reader's interpretive strategies. Two texts are regarded as identical if they are made to produce the same meaning. Since the texts have no meaning apart from their interpretations, they cannot be identified by themselves. Prior to an act of interpretation, every text is amorphous. Hence, Fish claims, "the notions of the 'same' or 'different' texts are 'fictions.'"77

Though Fish's theory provides the reader with an unlimited freedom of operation, it appears too chaotic a model to be manageable. In order to avoid total anarchy of interpretation, Fish, like Peirce, introduces the notion of "interpretive communities." When different readers share the same interpretive strategies, he says, they constitute one interpretive community. To say that the same text exists for all of them means that the same meaning can be produced by the members of an interpretive community who share interpretive strategies. Since the interpretation of an interpretive community assigns meaning to an amorphous text, the act of interpretation can be considered as an act of writing rather than that of reading:

[Interpretive] strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around. If it is an article of faith in a particular community that there are a variety of texts, its members will boast a repertoire of strategies for making them. And if a community believes in the existence of only one text, then the single strategy its members employ will be forever writing it. . . . the truth will be that each [of the two communities] perceives the text (texts) its interpretive strategies demand and call into being.78

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Fish thus appeals to the identity of interpretive strategies shared by the different members of a community. In suggesting his model, he does not claim that his view is an objective analysis of our textual interpretation. As he conceives it, "the choice [of the man-made model] is never between objectivity and interpretation but between an interpretation that is unacknowledged as such and an interpretation that is at least aware of itself. It is this awareness that I am claiming for myself." Thus, by admitting that his interpretation is "just one more interpretation," Fish emphasizes that it is provisional and subject to change depending upon context and time.

Fish's shift of attention from the text to our responses to the text is representative of many postmodernists. Like Fish, they too are less concerned with objective reality than with our subjective responses to reality, and they underline the importance of context in our knowing about the external world in order to avoid the possible trap of extreme relativity. Since they believe there is no way for us to evade our own context of social practices and conventions, they are suspicious of such concepts as the total, absolute, foundational, rational, and transcendental. Instead they rejoice in the particular, relative, anti-foundational, reasonable, and contextual. This recognition that our knowledge is inextricably embedded in a context leads postmodernists to seek to uncover the fictionality of what is accepted and upheld as a given. They compel us radically to reshape the very nature of philosophy, science, art, and history, and, above all, of truth and reality itself.

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This postmodernist temper, which pervades every significant sector of intellectual and cultural life, purports to subvert the entire basis of Western civilization in the tradition of the Enlightenment. The postmodernist derides the quest for order and origin, tolerates indeterminacy and uncertainty, and embraces a random and contingent universe. At its most critical moment this impulse helps to expose the prevailing epistemological conventions and dominant ideologies and thus to illuminate the contest for power in the domain of culture. Simultaneously, however, the postmodernist sensibility is likely to end by accepting the very culture that it appears to challenge. For the postmodernist operates within a culture and lacks critical distance from it because he does not believe he can escape the implications in the system to which he is opposed. He tends to emphasize that things in life are not simple and then shrugs his shoulders rather than attempting to bring about an actual change in the world. He tends to deny unity in vision and purpose that sustains social action.

The postmodernist temper, however, is not without constructive virtue. The highlighting of the indeterminacy and contingency of the world in postmodernism represents the paradoxical and precarious nature of our existence in the late twentieth century. Although the postmodernist does not suggest a neat and facile formulation of the problems we face in postindustrial society, his identification of their complexity seems an important first step towards dealing with them. Complexity does not go away just because it is dismissed. There is good reason for sympathizing
with the postmodernist penchant for cognitive complexity insofar as it does not carry over into extremity.
Notes


9. James' theory of truth constitutes the most controversial part of his philosophy. As a master of style, James gives various
formulations of the theory. To his sympathizers the theory is rich, original and infinitely suggestive. To unsympathetic critics, however, it is full of inconsistencies and contradictions. In order to understand James' conception of truth, it is important to remember that temperamentally he is a man who takes larger views. He is not much interested in arriving at a formal definition of truth. Thus, it is essential to see the spirit of his writings instead of technical details. James once complained that his critics "have boggled at every word they could boggle at, and refused to take the spirit rather than the letter." [William James, The Meaning of Truth (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 99.]


11. Ibid., p. 118.


13. Ibid., p. 96, 108.


15. James, Pragmatism, pp. 35-36 [Italics are mine.]


17. James, Pragmatism, p. 97.


22. Thayer lists three qualifications for James' will to believe, which is an earlier version of James' pragmatic theory of truth: 1) the choice of one belief rather than another is "live," "forced," and
"momentous"; 2) the evidence for or against the chosen belief is equal, or admits of no rational adjudication of one over the other; 3) the effect of the chosen belief is a "vital benefit." [Thayer, "Pragmatism," The Encyclopedia of Philosophy Vol. 5 (New York: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 433-34.] Thus, it is evident that with James true belief does not mean a matter of private desires or willing.


25. James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, p. 52


28. Ibid., p. 46.


31. Ibid., p. 69.


33. Here, James does not use the word 'salvation' in a religious sense. He tells his audience to interpret it in any way they like. (James, *Pragmatism*, p. 137.)

34. Ibid., pp. 13-14, p. 137.

35. Ibid., p. 137.

36. Ibid., p. 139.

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37. Ibid., p. 17. In this call for a positive connection with the actual world and the belief in the future the pragmatist is distinguished from the postmodernist. Compare James' meliorism with the following remark made by Baudrillard in an interview: "Postmodernity is neither optimistic nor pessimistic. It is a game with the vestiges of what has been destroyed. This is why we are 'post'--history has stopped, one is in a kind of post-history which is without meaning. One would not be able to find any meaning in it. So, we must move in it, as though it were a kind of circular gravity. We can no longer be said to progress. So it is a 'moving' situation. But it is not at all unfortunate. I have the impression with post-modernism that there is an attempt to rediscover a certain pleasure in the irony of things, in the game of things. Right now one can tumble into total hopelessness--all the definitions, everything, it's all been done. What can one do? What can one become? And post-modernity is the attempt--perhaps it's desperate, I don't know--to reach a point where one can live with what is left. It is more a survival among the remnants than anything else [Laughter!]." [Baudrillard, "Game with Vestiges," On the Beach 5 (Winter 1984), p. 25.]


39. Ibid., p. 196.

40. Physicist John Gribbin wrote in 1984: "if all the books and articles written for the layman about quantum theory were laid end to end, they'd just about cover my desk," while those about relativity would reach the moon. [John Gribbin, In Search of Schrodinger's Cat: Quantum Physics and Reality (New York: Bantam, 1984), p. xv.] Since Gribbin made the remark, the general public has witnessed a surge of popular books on quantum theory. Quantum books and articles would not stretch to the moon, but certainly cover the floor of Gribbin's office by now.

41. Gribbin, In Search of Schrodinger's Cat, p. 12.


48. Ibid., p. 288.


51. Ibid., p. 174.


55. Ibid., 3.

56. At the beginning of *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein offers the following example: There are a builder and his assistant. They have building materials such as blocks, pillars, slabs, and beams. They have a language consisting of the words "block," "pillar," and so on. When the builder calls out one of the words the helper brings the building material that he has learned to bring at the call. Wittgenstein calls the words and the actions with which they are connected a language game. See his *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd ed., trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), sec. 8.

57. Ibid., sec. 43.

58. Wittgenstein offers the following argument: "But isn't a chess board, for instance, obviously, and absolutely composite?--You are probably thinking of the composition out of thirty-two white and thirty-two black squares. But could we not also say, for instance, that it was composed of the colours black and white and the schema of squares? And if there are quite different ways of looking at it, do you still want to say that the chessboard is absolutely 'composite'? . . . Is the colour of a square on a chessboard simple, or does it consist of pure white and pure yellow? And is white simple, or does it consist of the colours of the rainbow?--Is this length of 2cm. simple, or does it consist of two parts, each 1cm. long? But why not of one bit 3cm. long, and one bit 1cm. long measured in the opposite direction?" [*Philosophical Investigations*, sec. 47].


70. For Becker the artworld includes not only a network of interacting people and a set of conventions, but a number of material resources and a distribution system. Becker argues that works of art
conform to the materials available and the norms of the distribution network.

71. The recent interest in gender, race, and class in canon-formation provides an insight into why a certain work of art is selected instead of others. Feminist critics, black critics, and Marxist critics do not accept the view that the canon reflects the value-neutral artistic worth of art-works. They see the canon as a political construct bound by a culture dominated by the white male middle class, functioning to affirm the existing values even in the moment of dissent in some of the canonical works. There is certainly more to the canonical work than the critics of the canon talk about. But I do not think this element is more essential to art than the institutional aspects of art. There are good reasons for favoring the institutional approach as providing access to the way art is, as long as such favor does not carry over into the exclusion of the non-institutional aspects of art.


76. Ibid., p. 482.

77. Ibid..

78. Ibid., pp. 483-84.

79. Ibid., p. 480. David Bleich and Norman Holland have also sought to advocate the role of readers in textual interpretation. Bleich argues for his "subjective paradigm." He claims that Thomas Kuhn
has demonstrated the inevitable subjectivity and relativity of scientific paradigms. If even natural science cannot avoid subjectivity, he says, there is no reason that literary criticism has to try to do so. Consequently, he accepts the traditional dichotomy between subject and object and chooses the subject, while trying to reach consensus by "extended negotiation" [Italics mine.] among the subjects. [David Bleich, "The Subjective Paradigm in Science, Psychology, and Criticism," New Literary History 7 (1976), pp. 313-34.] Holland rejects Bleich's program, since it will result in "the dead-end of solipsism or extreme idealism." At the same time, he also rejects the old objective paradigm as an illusion and presents a "transactive paradigm." [Italics mine.] He argues that a transaction takes place between the reader and the text in interpretation, just as it does between the subject and the object in perception. He also claims that since the transactive paradigm involves both subject and object, the reality that his paradigm presupposes is neither objective nor subjective. [Norman Holland, "The New Paradigm: Subjective or Transactive?" New Literary History 7 (1976), pp. 335-46].
Chapter 3. From Modernism to Postmodernism: Postmodernist Fiction and the Rewriting of History

In *Art Since 1945*, Marcel Brion observed that parallel developments almost always occur in science and philosophy along with literature. According to him, this happens especially when the traditional forms of perceiving the world do not accommodate new findings in a variety of fields. "In most cases," Brion said, writers have "no personal acquaintance with the [scientific] books or philosophical theories that [have] changed the direction of thought." Nevertheless, they respond to changes in a fashion similar to scientists and philosophers, "because, by virtue of their sensibility, they are interpreters to their epoch."¹

Brion's remark has special relevance to the notion of reality and its representation that has undergone drastic change since the turn of this century. As discussed in the previous chapter, new developments in science and philosophy, among others, have caused the old idea of objective reality to come under massive attack. It has been recognized in almost all areas of study that our idea of the world is not a given merely to be discovered by an observer, but a construct actively to be invented by a perceiver. When Robert Coover asserts that all of our conceptualizations of the world can be seen as "a kind of fiction-making," he presents the view that lies at the center of many American postmodernist fictions which share an awareness of science and philosophy. Coover claims that in disciplines as different as physics, philosophy, sociology, and the arts

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there has been "a basic shift to a less conveniently ordered view of
the world in which everything seem[s] random and relative," and
that "all the old isolated disciplines [have] found their old ways of
organizing the world being recognized as essentially convenient
fictions." Coover adds that the old fictions are not necessarily
"false." Rather they are just not as "efficacious" as they were, and
thus should be replaced with the new ones.

This self-reflexive view of the universal fiction-making process
is more apparent in postmodernist fiction than in any other area of
postmodernist writing. For as E.L. Doctorow suggests, fiction writing
is the only profession "forced to admit that it lies." In this chapter I
shall first examine various narrative strategies employed in
postmodernist fiction to emphasize its own fiction-making process.
While both modernist and postmodernist writers conceive of the
world as fragmented and disconnected, I shall compare the ways in
which their responses differ. Since the difference is grounded in a
different conception of the self, which in turn implies a different
conception of history, I shall finally deal with the postmodernists'
view of history and their strategies to undermine the distinct line
presumed to exist between history and fiction.

What is striking in postmodernist fiction is its thorough-going
self-consciousness concerning its own doings. Postmodernist writers
do not believe that they can provide a true picture of the world
because the very existence of stable reality and its accurate
representation have become more and more questionable. They are
ready to concur with Malcolm Bradbury's observation that "the gift
for creating the fictional illusion of reality is shifting from the writer . . . to the culture in which he practices."5 "Real fiction happens," Raymond Federman says, "everyday, in the streets of our cities, in the spectacular hijacking of planes, on the Moon, in Vietnam, in China (when Nixon stands on the Great Wall of China), and . . . on television (during the news broadcasts)."6 Thus writers feel that "the actuality is continually outdoing [their] talents." "Much of American reality," as Philip Roth writes, "stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meagre imagination" as a writer.7 The actual world has become much more dramatic and fictional than fiction itself. This recognition has led some writers and critics to declare the death of the novel, because there is little point in creating fiction that gives an illusion of life when life itself seems illusory.8 The same realization, however, has provided others with the opportunity to reflect upon the very nature of writing a fiction; for the fictional does not seem "that remote and alien, but bears uncanny resemblance to daily experiences," whereas the real does not seem "secure or unequivocal" but "preternaturally strange and eerie."9 No longer able to feel that they can represent "the true state of affairs in the world," many postmodernist fiction writers focus their attention not so much on reality itself as on our "imagination's response to reality"--a response they consider as "the only aspect of reality which could ever be known."10 They pose questions concerning the nature of fictionality and the relationship between fiction and reality, drawing attention to the status of their work as an artifact.
One of the strategies most often adopted by the postmodernist writer to highlight the fiction-making process itself is the intrusion of the narrator into the story. The intrusion is intended to break up the logic of the situation in the text and to disrupt the process of illusion and identification conventionally expected from the reader. Thus in John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse" a technical observation is inserted into the narration of the story without reference to it and without transition. "The function of the beginning of a story," Barth confesses abruptly, "is to introduce the principal characters, establish their initial relationships, set the scene for the main action . . . and initiate the first complication or whatever of the 'rising action.'" The narrator may make a self-reflexive statement: "Is there really such a person as Ambrose, or is he a fragment of the author's imagination? . . . Are there other errors of fact in this fiction?" Or a comment is made on other writers: "The Irish author James Joyce, in his unusual novel entitled *Ulysses*, now available in this country, uses the adjectives *snot-green* and *scrotum-tightening* to describe the sea." The reader is constantly reminded that his text is a fiction, and his willing suspension of disbelief is constantly reversed. There is no longer a clear-cut difference between story and discourse, narration and reflection on narration, a fictional character and the narrator. "None can tell teller from told."

Frequently not only the narrator's but the author's situation is incorporated into the text. Characters know that they are fictive constructs and authors comment on the difficulties they have in constructing the text at hand. In *Breakfast of Champions* Kurt
Vonnegut himself appears in his work and sits in the Holiday Inn together with his characters and thinks about how to develop his story: "It was high time, I thought, for Trout to meet Dwayne Hoover, for Dwayne to run amok. I knew how this book would end. Dwayne would hurt a lot of people. He would bite off a joint of the right index finger of Kilgore Trout. And then Trout . . . would meet his Creator, who would explain everything." And so it happens. Vonnegut meets Trout and identifies himself as his creator: "I am a novelist, and I created you for use in my books." Vonnegut informs Trout that he is close to the end of the book and reminds the character of his power as a creator: "to control you, Mr Trout[,] all I have to do is write down something about you, and that's it." Trout thinks Vonnegut is "crazy." To prove his power over his character and to eliminate his character's doubt, Vonnegut transports Trout "to the Taj Mahal and then to Venice and then to Dar es Salaam and then to the surface of the Sun, . . . and then back to Midland City again." Trout crashes to his knees and eventually appeals to his creator: "Make me young, make me young, make me young!" Vonnegut also appears in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Billy Pilgrim and other American POWs are crammed into a latrine, where Billy sees an American saying that he had excreted everything but his brains. Vonnegut interjects himself here and declares: "That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book." In "The Magic Poker," Coover also persistently underlines his presence in the text creating things: "Bedded deep in the grass . . . lies a wrought-iron poker. It is long and slender with an intricately worked handle . . ."
the grass that has grown up wildly around it. I put it there." 20 This reference to the authorial presence constantly reminds the reader that he is reading a story, a constructed artifice.

Sometimes an author's fictional material from other novels is recycled. In Barth's *Letters* characters and events are drawn from his previous works. A novelist named John Barth decides to write a novel, and in it he corresponds with "actual" persons who bear "coincidental" resemblances to his previous fictional characters, and he asks permission to include them in his new novel. Ensuing correspondences between the author and his characters, and among characters themselves, form *Letters*. Barth as Author receives advice about the composition of the novel from his characters. From Jake Horner of *The End of the Road*, for example, the Author borrows "certain alphabetical preoccupations," 21 and from A.B. Cook VI of *The Sot-Weed Factor*, information about the historical Burlingames. This recycling of fictional characters makes them doubly fictional and leads the reader to feel uneasy about "the fictive life of real people and the factual life of 'fictional' characters." 22

These various narrative strategies frustrate and negate the reader's conventional expectations by problematizing a narrative situation usually taken for granted as natural. The postmodernist simultaneously creates a fiction and makes a statement about the creation of that fiction. The two processes are blended, thereby breaking down any formal distinction between story and discourse. "In providing a critique of their own methods of construction," as Patricia Waugh argues, postmodernist fiction writers not only

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examine "the fundamental structures of narrative fiction," but also provide possible "models for understanding the contemporary experience of the world as a construction, an artifice, a web of interdependent semiotic systems."23

Modernists were also well aware of the aesthetic construction of their text. Their work, however, did not "systematically flaunt its own condition of artifact,"24 since their concern was to contain and transcend a world of fragmentation and uncertainty through the aesthetic whole they constructed. They believed that there are possibilities for human fulfillment in the modern world. One of the strategies that modernist writers evolved to give meaning and form to a meaningless world was to appropriate myth, which was used as a means of structuring the story. By using myth, by "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity,"25 modernists sought to rise above the present which seemed to have no center. The juxtaposition of the mythic past and the present reduced both to a timeless pattern and released the modernists from the fragmented and chaotic present. As T.S. Eliot said in his famous review of *Ulysses*, mythic allusions provided modernists with "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."26

Another method the modernist writers adopted to establish forms of coherence was the representation of a heightened state of consciousness. Joyce called this moment of illumination *epiphany*, Virginia Woolf *the moment of vision*, and Marcel Proust *the
privileged moment. Stephen, in Joyce's *Stephen Hero*, describes this state as "a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself." The instant of intense awakening is "the most delicate and evanescent of moments," paradoxically triggered by trivial things, whether they are objects, scenes, or events. In Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, for example, Mrs. Ramsay suddenly perceives a higher order in things as she peers into the depth of a pot. The moment partakes of "eternity," and she feels "there is a coherence in things, a stability: something is immune from change." She has her vision.

Modernist writers sought to postulate lost order and unity, however illusory and transitory, in the depth of the self or in self-contained aesthetic orders. They believed their function as artists was to "record epiphanies with extreme care," to "fix the most elusive of [their] moods," and to contain "a whole vision, an entire conception" in moments of instantaneous subjective illumination when the self is more powerfully alive than at any other time while being detached from the everyday lifeworld. They insisted on an artistic detachment and distance which enabled them to reveal form and meaning at a profound level. They tried to gain through the work of art, which they thought had a unique structure and role of its own, the objective correlative for the subjective experience and ultimately for the image of true reality. To Richard Wasson, in modernism "the outer world becomes the hero's inner world," and "the work becomes a projection of the artist's subjectivity."
This well-known approach to the aesthetic work as objective correlative is grounded in the modernist notion of an individual self as a kind of autonomous and self-contained whole. Modernists saw the self as "some essential core of an organically whole human being." Postmodernists have a different view of the self, although, like modernists, they also affirm the constitutive role of the artist in dealing with the world. The postmodern self has lost its unifying effect and therefore its meaning as a singular concept. It has been divided and so has fallen into fragments, into selves, which are defined by their situational contexts. The identity of the postmodern self comes into being in its transactions with others. As anticipated by George Herbert Mead more than half a century ago, the self emerges, when an individual "become[s] an object to himself," or "take[s] the role of the other." Thus "the most personal, central thing I have, my identity," writes Norman Holland, "is not in me but in your interaction with me or in a divided me. We are always in relation. We are among." Accordingly the postmodern self is decentered by the multiplicity of identities.

The idea of multiple selves is the natural extension of the postmodernist rejection of the belief in unchanging substance. Since postmodernists conceive of everything as being in the process of change, it is almost a logical necessity for them to reject the possibility of a unifying self. The thought of an individual as possessing a kind of a permanent identity through time seems no longer self-evident to postmodernists. They accept that the principles of culture may be in opposition to those of society and
politics. For, as Daniel Bell, no partizan of postmodernism, nevertheless, suggests, the relatively stable social and cultural unity of "an ethos (individualism), a political philosophy (liberalism), a culture (a bourgeois conception of utility and realism) and a character structure (respectability, delayed gratification, and the like)" of earlier capitalism has been dissolved with the advent of a post-industrial society. Since the postmodern self simultaneously takes part in the various areas of society, each of which requires a different role and value-system, it is divided into roles.

The fragmentation of the self is further complicated by the realization, especially after Auschwitz, that the increase in human rationality through education does not correlate with moral action. George Steiner points out that "culture and humane action, literacy and political impulse, are in no necessary or sufficient correlation." The concept of the integrated wholeness of the self becomes a fiction, if that integrity can be maintained in its moral authority only through practice. Thinking, acting, feeling, no longer form a whole personal identity. If our knowledge of the world is uncertain and indeterminate and our self is fragmented and divided, the modernist attempt to impose order on futility and anarchy through the notion of a self-contained and autonomous work of art also becomes a fiction. For this notion presupposes the unity of an artist's subjectivity, which has become more and more problematic. In postmodernist fiction both our experience of the world and its artistic representation become fictive. As Gerhard Hoffmann has made clear, if the episteme of the 19th and early 20th century was
the persistent attempt to explore the invisible deep structure beneath the visible surface of things and that of modernism was the reduction of that substance to subjectivity, the episteme of postmodernism is a loss of that subjectivity and the substitution for it of a multiplicity of possibilities through the exercising of imagination.37

If it is correct to assume that nowadays the various areas of the sociocultural system operate under different principles, and that the self itself has become divided into segments and roles through the loss of a center, postmodernist writers are right to be skeptical of the heroic attempt of their predecessors to overcome and transcend fragmentation and discontinuity. Confronted with a world and a universe more chaotic to them than any imagined by the modernists, they question both the authority of consciousness and the notion of aesthetic autonomy. Epiphany is deprived of its quality of intense, spontaneous, spiritual revelation. In Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, for instance, Oedipa Mass experiences an "unexpected astonishing clarity" in her street visions of San Narcico. But this clarity is only a "hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning," a "revelation . . . just past the threshold of her understanding" rather than a moment connected with the universal rhythm of life.38 The moment of revelation dissolves into emptiness and hallucination, and her search for clues leads her to nothing except insanity. Postmodernists also parody epiphanic moments by tying them to situations inconceivable in the modernist vision, as in *V* where such moments are triggered by the perpetration of a mass murder. 73
Sometimes it is flatly declared that "there are no epiphanies... no moments of truth." 39

Myth no longer provides postmodernists with a way to shape the contemporary world and endow it with meaning. In V, for example, Herbert Stencil's pursuit of V, a mysterious woman, is linked to "the tradition of The Golden Bough or The White Goddess," 40 the modernist tradition of the quest for mythic order. But Stencil's quest does not lead to a vision of a higher order but to a state of disintegration. V is presented as Stencil's extravagant projection of inner fantasies or as a series of coincidences. Likewise Oedipa's quest for the mysterious Tristero postal countersystem in The Crying of Lot 49 does not lead towards the resolution of the mystery but towards the further entanglement of a pattern. As Pynchon suggests at the end of the novel, there is no dialectical reconciliation: "Another mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none. Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of true paranoia, or a real Tristero. For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia." 41 It is a movement toward a state of acceptance, a willingness to accept indeterminacy and uncertainty as a valid result of cognition. Postmodernists embrace randomness, multiplicity, and contingency in the world, and tolerate the anxiety arising out of an uncertain and arbitrary state of affairs rather than trying to transcend it. One of Donald Barthelme's characters in The Dead
Father remarks, "Things are not simple. . . . There are cases which are not clear. You must be able to tolerate the anxiety. To do otherwise is to jump ship, ethicwise."

This attitude of tolerating the anxiety is also consistent with the postmodernist conception of time and history. Both modernists and postmodernists abandon the idea of time as a linear sequence with aspects of past, present, and future. For Victorians, time as succession constituted the foundation for the belief in the progress of history toward a perfect state. Thus in nineteenth century fiction most conflicts, internal and external, are resolved, with the future of an individual represented as a static condition containing a kind of human eternity in the happy ending. But the Victorian belief in progress and the future was abruptly shattered by the experience of World War I. For both modernists and postmodernists the belief in the teleology of history has been broken. However, there is a difference in their response.

For modernists, history is a burden from which one has to escape. The plight of William Faulkner's characters is that they are captives of the past. Quentin Compson, for instance, never escapes his heritage. He cannot forget that his ancestors included a general and a governor, and he is oppressed by the feeling that the physical and moral courage of the Compsons has deteriorated. In Joyce's *Dubliners*, the oppressive effects of the meaningless past also come to the fore. The Dubliners, as worshipers of tradition, allow the ghosts of the dead to deprive them of vitality. They are paralyzed by their uncritical allegiance to the past. In *Ulysses*, history is rendered, in
Stephen's famous phrase, as "a nightmare from which I [Stephen] am trying to awake." Stephen often fails to realize the extent to which he is enmeshed in history; but he is certain that in order to escape paralysis he must ignore or suppress history altogether. The escape from the weight of history usually takes the form of experiencing the simultaneity of past, present, and future. Thus Faulkner deliberately breaks up the chronology of his narrative to highlight his recognition that the mind does not function within clock-measured time, although the human body must exist in it. The mind fuses past, present, and future. Because we think beyond physical time, a character in *Intruder in the Dust* declares that "Yesterday today and tomorrow are Is: Indivisible: One." In a timeless stream of consciousness that constantly shifts present to past and future and back, the corrosive and suffocating effects of history are evaded.

Postmodernists do not believe that history can be avoided through timelessness in the mythic form or in enraptured moments. For them history is an inescapable condition in which we are enmeshed whether we like it or not. They are, therefore, less concerned with evading or transcending history than with uncovering its nature. As history is a form of fiction, postmodernist writers underline the process by which historical raw materials are transformed into historical facts, while stories and plots are constructed out of chronicles and isolated events. They place this process of fictionalization at the front, imbuing the historical with their own brand of iconoclasm. The historical is played with and fantasized, so that the "verifiable" real blends with the fictive and
the irreal into a fictional construct. They challenge and violate the
strict boundary conventionally assumed by professional historians
and ordinary persons to exist between the realms of history and
fiction.

For postmodernists, historical facts exist only as textual traces.
What happened in the past did really happen, to be sure, but we can
know about it only through the reading of historical documents,
which are in turn the products of interpretive acts, the acts of
selecting and arranging raw historical materials on the part of
recorders according to their own aesthetic and ideological necessities
and predilections. Even the facts selected to be recorded in annals
and chronicles are no exception to this. As Hayden White cogently
argues, annals and chronicles are not naive or inchoate forms of
proper history but representations of different conceptions of
historical reality itself.46 Thus Saleem Sinai, the narrator in Salman
Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, finds it difficult to "concentrate on
good hard facts," although he tries "hard to stop being mystifying." It
is simply unknowable from "accurate" documents whether or not
Pakistani troops really entered Kashmir. When it comes to
accounting for the motivation for their entrance, "a rash of possible
explanations" produces more confusion than clarity. In a parodic
moment, Saleem says: "This reason or that or the other? To simplify
matters, I present two of my own: the war happened because I
dreamed Kashmir into the fantasies of our rulers; furthermore, I
remained impure, and the war was to separate me from my sins."47
Later, exhausted from his search for historical causality and meaning,
Saleem concludes that "It happened that way because that's how it happened."  

Skepticism about the truth-value of facts in historical documents and the meaning constructed out of them has led postmodernists to the invention of raw historical materials which cannot be proved, and the purposeful contradiction of official historical documents. The most notable examples of this liberal treatment of historical fact might be the famous episodes from Doctorow's _Ragtime_: Emma Goldmann's massage of Evelyn Nesbit and the meeting between J.P. Morgan and Henry Ford. To the dismay of many factual-minded historians, Doctorow has claimed that "I don't make any distinction any more--and can't even remember--what of the events and circumstances in _Ragtime_ are historically verifiable and what are not." Doctorow's undertaking is significant because he does not merely fill in the grey areas of history by, for example, the portrayal of the inner states of historical figures in the manner of the traditional historical novel. He actually creates the brute data of history and sets out to violate the sacred conventions of the historical novel in order to highlight both its arbitrariness and the fictionality of history. Similarly, in Coover's _The Public Burning_, Richard Nixon meets Ethel Rosenberg in Sing Sing Prison minutes before her scheduled execution and attempts to seduce her. Rushdie also poses a perplexing question about the construction of historical meaning in _Midnight's Children_. His character Saleem notices an error in the date of Gandhi's death in his narrative, but then decides, "in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time." He asks: "Does
one error invalidate the entire fabric? . . . Today, in my confusion, I can't judge. I'll have to leave it to others."50

Postmodernist writers generally would not attempt to judge such questions, yet they would still question the validity of the official version of history which is provided and accepted as a true representation of what actually happened. As they see it, the dominant version of history is the history of the winners, in which losers are written out of existence. It accordingly needs to be challenged, subverted, and displaced. Thus postmodernist writers provide alternative versions of what happened.51 Barth in The Sot-Weed Factor parodies the mythologized colonial Maryland "peopled with brave men and virtuous women, healthy, handsome, and refined" who battled "barb'rous nature and fearsome salvage [sic] to wrest a territory from the wild and transform it to an earthly paradise."52 In Barth's Maryland, settlers were greedy, rough, morally decadent, and conspiratorial. They followed their selfish motives to fulfill their political, religious, and economic ambitions without any propriety and civilization. This is not strange, Barth tells us, because "the plain fact is, the greatest part [of those people] are castaways from Europe, or the sons of castaways: rebels, failures, jailbirds and adventurers."53 Similarly in Doctorow's Welcome to Hard Times, the Western frontier is not depicted as the birthplace of American democracy and freedom inhabited by rugged individualists, but as a place of disorder, lawlessness, violence, and meaningless destruction with no heroism. To Ishmael Reed, the Depression was a conspiracy to keep Americans from being able to
afford radios, to restrict their access to jazz dancing. Likewise the cherished myth of the American Dream and the pious legend of Capt. John Smith are debunked by postmodernists, and the Civil War, the Rosenberg case, and other historical events are rewritten and deliberately demystified.

Postmodernist writers adopt several techniques to disrupt the ordinary naive view of history as to what actually happened. That which most markedly distinguishes their practice from the traditional one is the "fantasization" of history, the integration of the fantastic and the historical. While the traditional historical novel was realistic in the sense that it tried to resemble as closely as possible the real world, the postmodernist novel seeks to reveal the difference between the fictional world and the real world by violating the latter's logic. Thus in Coover's *The Public Burning* the historical Richard Nixon is sodomized by the fantastic supernatural Uncle Sam. "Beneath or behind all political and cultural warfare," Reed says in *Mumbo Jumbo*, "lies a struggle between secret societies." Western history is presented as the continuing manifestation of the secret battle between the Wallflower Order and the agents of the Osirian-Dionysian mysteries. Rushdie's view of history is no less fantastic. According to him, Indian history since 1947 is linked to the fates of the children born at midnight on August 15, 1947, when the state itself was born. Those children are supernatural beings, possessing the power to change shape, to read minds, to perform magic, and so on. Only through Saleem's telepathy do they become aware of one another's existence. Saleem reads
public history in their private histories and thus they can be seen as symptomatic of the fantastic nature of history. Rushdie suggests that the true motive behind Indira Gandhi's declaration of the State of Emergency in 1976 was not to protect India from a threat to democracy and many Indians from suffering, but to flush out the midnight children and destroy their power.

Postmodernist historical fiction is also characterized by its frequent use of anachronisms. Earlier historical figures perform the acts and voice the concepts clearly belonging to later characters. In *Ragtime*, Doctorow appropriates heroes and events distinctly reminiscent of the sixties to comment on the racial relations in the early years of the twentieth century. Coalhouse Walker and his supporters blow up a fire station, designate themselves as a "Provisional American Government," and occupy the Morgan mansion, threatening to destroy its library unless their terms are met. These details obviously belong to the sixties rather than the ragtime era. Doctorow's characters are also endowed with anachronistic foresight. A little boy fantastically anticipates the assassination of Duke Ferdinand, and tells Harry Houdini to warn the Duke. Similarly, a character in *Mumbo Jumbo* predicts in the 1920s the rise of Malcolm X, who will "even have the red hair of a conjure man." In *Flight to Canada*, a character makes a call to Robert E. Lee in front of Lincoln, and Lincoln's assassination is nationally televised. The flaunting of anachronism by Doctorow, Reed, and others highlights the continuity of the past with the present. They seem to suggest that knowledge about the past is always to a significant
extent intertwined with later events, and therefore the past can be understood only as "parts of temporal wholes."\textsuperscript{56}

Postmodernist writers call into question the factuality of history. Through the juxtaposition of different versions of history, the integration of the historical and the fantastic, and the deliberate use of various forms of anachronism, they underline the fictionality of history including their own construction of the past. This attitude sharply contrasts with the more traditional historical novel which strives to make the oscillation between the fictional world and historical world as invisible as possible. Postmodernists debunk the uncritical conception of historical representation as what actually happened, and undermine the complacent acceptance of the official version of history. As Reed satirically says in an interview, he and other postmodernist writers attempt "to sabotage history. They [White readers] won't know whether we're serious or whether we are writing fiction. . . . they can't tell whether our fictions are the real thing or whither they're merely fictional. Always keep them guessing. That'll bug them, probably drive them up the walls."\textsuperscript{57} "They" here means the whites, but can refer to any perceived oppressor.

The postmodernist flaunting of the fictionality of history has another layer of meaning. The various strategies employed are meant to underscore the fact that history will remain out of our reach at least in its totality. History is presented as provisional, contextual, and relational. Postmodernists demystify the "dream of a 'total history'"\textsuperscript{58} and suspect any attempt at overarching
interpretation which could organize American, or for that matter, non-American, history. But the rejection of totality and the recognition of multiplicity in versions of the past does not lead postmodernists to abandon the attempt to represent what happened. They do not simply rejoice in the "incoherent babble of solitary, uncomprehending voices, each busily creating its own private version" of the past. Rather, what is highlighted in their fiction is the self-conscious inscription of the concealed attitude of historians and writers towards the past that they are constructing. Thus their practice is itself paradoxical. They challenge the "accuracy" in every representation of past reality, yet at the same time they seek to represent it better. Better than what? Better on what grounds? Postmodernists do not have a satisfactory answer to this question. But this is not necessarily a matter for despair. For, as they themselves suggest, plurality and provisionality may be part of the very nature of representing the past, and we should learn to tolerate the anxiety arising out of uncertainty and indeterminacy in our knowledge of historical reality.
Notes


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in the modernist fiction: ostentatious typographic experiment, explicit dramatization of the reader, Chinese-box structure, incantatory and absurd lists, over-systematized or overtly arbitrarily arranged structural devices, total breakdown of temporal and spatial organization of narrative, infinite regress, dehumanization of character, parodic doubles, obtrusive proper names, self-reflexive images, continuous undermining of specific fictional conventions, use of popular genres, and explicit parody of previous texts. (Ibid., pp. 21-22.)


26. Ibid.


29. Joyce, Stephen Hero, p. 211.


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40. Ibid., p. 61.

41. Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, p. 137. [Italics are mine.]


48. Ibid., p. 561.

50. Rushdie, Midnight's Children, p. 166.

51. The demythologizing tendency of postmodernist fiction shares with social history of the sixties and thereafter the commitment to writing history "from the bottom up" and "from the inside out."


53. Ibid., p. 181.


55. Ibid., p. 43.


Chapter 4. The Literature of Fact: 
Factual Representations of the Rosenberg Case

Conventional wisdom, contrary to the sophisticated arguments offered by many thinkers and writers, holds that there is an obvious and distinctive line between fact and fiction. Fiction is something that is made up, while fact is something that merely is. The writer of fiction and the reporter of fact are thus subject to different standards and expectations. The novelist's fiction does not have to be literally true. The journalist or historian's fact, on the other hand, must be objectively verifiable. There are two simple rules: "The writer of fiction must invent. The [writer of fact] must not invent."1

Since the 1960's, however, the line between fact and fiction has become seriously blurred. Historians have begun to underscore the structural similarity between fiction and history in the composition of materials. Journalists have actually borrowed technical devices from fiction, while novelists have adopted research methods and subjects from journalism and history, thus violating the conventions of the traditional historical novel as well as journalism. New terms—for example, the "nonfiction novel," the "true-life novel," the "faction"—were coined to capture the new entity.2 Some writers have rejoiced in this trend. "There's no more fiction or nonfiction now," declares E.L. Doctorow, "there's only narrative."3 Others have been troubled. It is a "serious crime against the public," asserts John Hersey, "to claim that a work is both fiction and journalism."4 The claim, writes C. Vann Woodward, misleads the public, who have less
access to history and thus take "fictional history" as what really happened in the past. Hersey and Woodward contend that there is a sacred rule for the literature of fact: "NONE OF THIS WAS MADE UP," at least not consciously or deliberately.

For such practitioners as Hersey and Woodward there is a single truth to be revealed, because things happened as they did, and not otherwise. Although they are well aware of the inescapable discrepancy between past occurrences and their representations, they are prepared to believe that fair and open-minded journalists and historians can reduce that gap and reveal at least a part of the truth. Doctorow and others, conversely, regard all representations of reality, factual and fictional, as constructed stories. Therefore they are not literally true or false, but rather coherent or incoherent, plausible or implausible. What is at issue in the controversy concerning fact and fiction, then, is not only the interpretation of facts, but also the very nature of factuality in journalism and history, as opposed to fiction.

In what follows I shall investigate various journalistic and historical representations of an actual historical event--the Rosenberg case--to illuminate the extent to which they may be said to be factual. The Rosenberg case, in this usage, not only refers to the execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg as spies but also includes the Fuchs-Gold case, which J. Edgar Hoover called "the crime of the century." Given roughly the same materials, some conclude that the Rosenbergs were the scapegoats of Cold War hysteria, while others claim that they were responsible for the Korean War. Even the
addition of more than 200,000 pages of FBI files to the existing historical material has proved insufficient to resolve the controversy surrounding the case, as evidenced in a town hall debate in New York City in October 1983.\textsuperscript{8} I shall first examine the \textit{New York Times}' coverage of the case. The emphasis will be on the initial phase of the coverage, because it represents the spontaneous editorial reaction of the \textit{Times} and the paper's first attempts to explain the series of important events that occurred. Then I shall look into two historical renderings--Walter and Miriam Schneirs' \textit{Invitation to an Inquest} and Ronald Radosh and Milton Joyce's \textit{The Rosenberg File}. The focus of my analysis will be on the construction of different narrative patterns by journalists and historians to make sense of a given sequence of events. I shall argue that the imposition of a "story" upon the events makes journalistic and historical representations fundamentally fictional.

The basic story of the Rosenberg case is now familiar. On January 25, 1950 British atomic physicist Emil Julius Klaus Fuchs confessed to British security authorities that he had transmitted information to the Soviet Union about the work on the atomic and plutonium bombs in the United Kingdom and the United States, from 1944 until 1949. He said that while in the U.S. he met at least four times with his American courier whom he knew only as Raymond. On May 22, 1950, Harry Gold, a biochemist residing in Philadelphia, said in an interview with FBI agents that "I am the man to whom Klaus Fuchs gave the information on atomic energy," and made his own signed confession.\textsuperscript{9} Gold provided information in his June 2
statement that he had met with a soldier in June 1945 in Albuquerque, New Mexico, although he could not recall his name. Gold stated that he received from the soldier an envelope containing several pages of written information and sketches relative to his work at Los Alamos, New Mexico. In an interview with FBI agents on June 15, 1950 David Greenglass acknowledged Gold's statement, and made a signed statement in which he implicated his wife Ruth and his brother-in-law Julius Rosenberg in an espionage activity. Rosenberg was arrested on July 17, 1950 on a charge of conspiracy to commit espionage, and his wife Ethel was arraigned August 11, 1950 on the same charge.

Greenglass entered a plea of guilty and testified for the government against the Rosenbergs at the trial. The trial judge, Irving Kaufman, sentenced both of the Rosenbergs to death, stating that their crime was "worse than murder." After two years of futile legal efforts, the Rosenbergs appealed for executive clemency. But on February 11, 1953, President Eisenhower declined, observing that their crime "could very well result in the death of many, many thousands of citizens." The execution date was set for June 18, 1953. The Rosenbergs continued to proclaim their innocence throughout this period. On June 17, 1953, Justice Douglas granted a stay of execution on the ground that the Rosenbergs may have been tried under the wrong law. Immediately, a Special Term of the Court was convened on June 18, 1953, as prearranged by Attorney General Brownell and Chief Justice Vinson. The majority voted on
June 19, 1953 to revoke the stay. The Rosenbergs were executed at Sing Sing Prison the same day.

The New York Times' coverage of the Rosenberg affair may be seen as a representative case of a narrativizing process. It fused a sequence of events leading to the execution of the couple into a culturally shared and familiar narrative pattern. But in its initial reportage the Times seemed objective. It produced a verifiable set of facts about the case from government releases, FBI announcements, interviews, and other sources. It also tried to balance the conflicting viewpoints of the case and the matters related to it in the news and editorial columns. In its coverage of the discovery of the first Soviet atomic experiment around August 29, 1949, a large amount of information about the event was presented in the paper's main news section. In the front page story on September 24, 1949, the focus was on how to explain the Soviet possession of the atomic bomb. Under the headline "Atom Blast in Russia Disclosed" the story reported President Truman's announcement that "We have evidence that within recent weeks an atomic explosion occurred in the U.S.S.R.," and Secretary of the State Acheson's admission that the explosion had been caused by a "weapon." To alleviate nationwide alarm the story stressed "calm and reassuring" reactions of high civilian and military officials to the disclosure, and praised the U.S. intelligence operations for the discovery. It also cited General Eisenhower, who said "I see no reason why a development that was anticipated years ago should cause any revolutionary change in our thinking."13  In a similar vein
the *Times* commented in its editorial that "there is no valid reason for surprise" at the Soviet success in the atomic experiment,\textsuperscript{14} but it added that "we were not for the most part emotionally prepared" for the development of events, although "intellectually" so.\textsuperscript{15}

In another story on the same page a smaller heading read: "Soviet Achievement Ahead Of Predictions by 3 Years." It was noted that although it had been generally agreed among scientists that Russia was certain to develop an atomic bomb, its explosion of the bomb came "at least three years sooner than was expected."\textsuperscript{16} The *Times* report did not seriously question this consensus. So, despite the accumulation of verifiable facts, and comments to the contrary, a subtle assumption was made that the Soviet development of the bomb was indeed a surprise in which some unusual factor might have been involved.

For most Americans this assumption seemed validated when it was reported on February 4, 1950 that the British atomic physicist Klaus Fuchs had been arrested for espionage. After the news of the arrest, the *Times* reflected a growing national mood of bewilderment and dissatisfaction with the course of events, thus departing from its earlier efforts to be impartial. The *Times* started to allude to American atomic "secrets" stolen by "spies." It tended to praise the American intelligence system while at the same time seeking a scapegoat for the premature loss of the American atomic monopoly. On February 4, 1950 it reported, under the headline "British Jail Atom Scientist as a Spy After Tip by F.B.I.,” that Fuchs had transmitted details of hydrogen and atomic bombs to the Soviet
Union. The story accepted the official announcement of the FBI that the British started their investigation of Fuchs on "information furnished to them by the FBI." It did not question the content of the information or how it had been acquired by the FBI, but nevertheless applauded Hoover and his FBI for "the excellent work they have done in this case." 17

In a story on February 5, 1950 headlined "Groves Blames the British In Atomic Secrets Spy Case," the Times repeated remarks by General Groves, who directed the Manhattan Project. Groves stressed that Fuchs' "responsibility, discretion, and loyalty" were warranted by the British government. "If I had had my way," he said, "I would not have permitted British participation. I would have limited the program to American scientists only." 18 The implication was that American scientists would not have betrayed atomic research secrets to the Soviet Union and that American security measures would have prevented the treachery of scientists like Fuchs. While urging the need for the tightening of internal security, the Times praised the FBI and blamed the British for their loose security precautions. The paper was deliberately distancing the deviant action of Fuchs from the behavior expected of American scientists. By blaming a foreign country for the embarrassing breach in the security of the United States, the Times portrayed the American intelligence system as sound, although threatened by alien elements.

On May 24, 1950 the Times reported the capture of an American accomplice who was the "intermediary" between Fuchs
and the Soviet intelligence service. In a story headlined "Philadelphian Seized as Spy On Basis of Data From Fuchs," the paper noted that Gold had been arrested based on information supplied by Fuchs. The next day's front page story with the headline "Trick Question Led to Spy Confession" hailed the FBI feat. Possessed of evidence showing Gold had met Fuchs in New Mexico in 1945, the FBI agents casually asked Gold whether he had been west of the Mississippi. When Gold answered in the negative, the agents refuted him with the evidence to the contrary. Gold then confessed the whole thing.

The *Times'* coverage of events leading to the capture of Gold read like a detective story: the FBI provided valuable tips to the British about Fuchs' espionage activities for his arrest; Fuchs in turn provided definite clues to the FBI regarding his American contact; the FBI arrested Gold based upon Fuchs' information; and finally Fuchs identified Gold. In the process the FBI did a magnificent job. The story of the FBI's tracking down of Gold strengthened the public's belief in the efficiency of the American intelligence system. It also suggested to the American public the existence of a wider "international spy ring," thus setting the stage for further arrests and eventually for the Rosenberg case. Quoting Republican Representative James E. Van Zandt, the *Times* predicted that the Gold arrest was just "the first of a series of arrests that may take place." The question was, the Congressman added, that of "the F.B.I. getting them."
For four months following the arrest of Gold eight Americans were presented to the public in *Times* headlines as atom spies or as spies linked to the Klaus Fuchs spy ring. But many of them did not qualify for the characterization.\textsuperscript{22} When Alfred Dean Slack was arrested on June 15, 1950, for example, the *Times* headline read: "Syracuse Chemist Seized in Spy Ring." A smaller head stated: "New Arrest Linked to Fuchs--Suspect Accused of Giving Explosive Data to Gold." The explosive that Slack transmitted to Gold was identified as "RDX," a high explosive which was invented before World War II and used during the war. The *Times* knew that Slack was neither an atom spy nor a member of the Fuchs spy ring. It concluded from the announcement of the FBI that the material and information which Slack passed over to Gold "were not concerned with atomic energy."\textsuperscript{23} Nevertheless, the story, with its misleading headline, sought to give the impression that Slack was a member of the Fuchs spy ring and thus had been involved in the theft of U.S. atomic secrets. Likewise, the *Times* reported the arrest of Abraham Brothman, Miriam Moskowitz, and Oscar John Vago, as if they had been linked with the atomic spy ring.\textsuperscript{24}

Despite their misleading characterization of the accused and their activities, the *Times* reports had the cumulative effect of reinforcing the public belief in the existence of atom secrets and of a spy ring to steal them, and the melodramatic image of heroic FBI agents cracking down on treacherous spies. Since each arrest followed the previous one so rapidly, it seemed that all were linked. While imposing the plot reminiscent of a detective story on the
developing course of events, the *Times* polarized its characters' good and evil in a fictional way. Each suspect was consistently denigrated. For instance, the *Times* again and again stressed the fact that the arrested were not American-born; or, if they were, that they were nevertheless Communists or at least affiliated with Communists. If the suspects were not known Communists, the *Times* tainted them with red by associating them with Gold or Rosenberg. Being castigated as red, the accused were placed on the edge of society and cut off from the mainstream of American life. The paper implied that one could not possibly be Communist and still be American. By delegitimizing the deviant individuals the society was freed from blame for their crimes. The espionage was the act of unpatriotic foreigners or reds acting upon alien ideologies. In writing its news stories, the *Times* performed a verbal ritual designed to protect American society from a perceived threat from outside.

The arrest of Julius Rosenberg dovetailed neatly into the narrative structure to which the *Times* had forced the development of events to conform. As atomic spy No. 4, he was described as "another important link in the Soviet espionage apparatus." He was thus expected to provide a missing connection between Gold and Greenglass and to contribute to the expansion of the Fuchs-Gold-Greenglass spy ring. Rosenberg was born in America, but was a "Communist" who made himself available to Soviet espionage agents, so that he "could do the work he was fated for." He "aggressively sought means to secretly conspire with the Soviet Government to the detriment of his own country." The capture of Rosenberg added
exciting details to the existing detective story that the Times had constructed. After Gold's arrest he instructed Greenglass to flee to the Soviet Union through a complicated route of Mexico, Switzerland and Czechoslovakia. Moreover, Rosenberg gave Greenglass early in 1945 "one half of an irregularly cut jello box top," while the other half of the top was found in the hands of Gold. Gold claimed that he had received it from Anatoli A. Yakovlev, then vice consul of the Soviet consulate in New York, as a means of identification between himself and Greenglass.27

When Ethel Rosenberg was arrested on August 11, 1950 on the charge of "conspiracy to commit espionage," the Times again emphasized that she was born in the United States but that there was ample evidence that she had been "affiliated with Communist activities for a long period of time."28 The paper added to her arrest a very serious charge which would be repeated time and again in its rendering of the case until her execution; it linked her alleged crime to the Korean War and magnified its implication to the level of treason against the United States.29

When the Rosenbergs' trial began on March 6, 1951, the Times echoed the government version of what had actually happened. This found its most simple and powerful expression in the opening statement of United States Attorney Irving Saypol.30 To quote Saypol without editorial comment gave its readers the feeling that the Times was in agreement with him. Saypol reduced the accusation to simplicity. The charge, he said, was that the Rosenbergs and others conspired to deliver to the Soviet Union "the
one weapon that might well hold the key to the survival of this nation and the peace of the world--the atomic bomb." Then he equated conspiracy to commit espionage with treason. The loyalty and allegiance of "these traitorous Americans" was "not to our country, but was to communism--communism in this country and communism throughout the world, under the dictatorship of the Soviet Union." He accused the Rosenbergs of persuading Greenglass "to play the treacherous role of a modern Benedict Arnold." Saypol praised the FBI for breaking the espionage ring and forcing these traitors to flee behind the Iron Curtain. The evidence of the "treasonable acts" of the Rosenbergs, Saypol concluded, would prove not only beyond a reasonable doubt but "beyond any doubt, that [they] have committed the most serious crime which can be committed against the people of this country."31

Saypol's address followed the pattern of the traditional Western film. In the Western there is a community in which order and peace are maintained. But those are violated by a villain, and a calamity results. At this point a rescuer intervenes, punishes the villain and restores peace to the community. The Western stretched out by Saypol was exactly of this type. Americans wanted an atomic monopoly for their security and for world peace. The villain--here, atomic spies--committed a series of acts that led to the loss of U.S. atomic dominance, the resultant internal insecurity, and possible global destruction. The FBI and the prosecutor then intervened as a rescuer to punish the villain and restore order and security.

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In his summation of the case Saypol added to the existing story of the traditional Western a new theme of redemption by confession, the theme which would recur continuously until the execution of the Rosenbergs. By confessing and pleading guilty, commented Saypol, Greenglass sought "to make amends for the hurt which has been done to our nation and to the world," although he exposed himself to the death penalty. On the other hand, Saypol pointed out, the Rosenbergs knew "the identity of some of the other traitors who sold their country down the river" but remained silent asserting their innocence. They "magnified their treachery by lying here." Saypol especially stressed the role of Ethel Rosenberg with vivid imagery: "she . . . sat down at that typewriter and struck blow after blow at her own country in behalf of the Soviet Union." Thus in the *Times* story Greenglass was transformed into a "victim" who was tempted by the "communistic propaganda" of the Rosenbergs but courageously repented his past sin; whereas his sister and brother-in-law became the arch-villains who adamantly refused to confess and be forgiven.32

The *New York Times* took upon itself the role of helping the hero. After the conviction of the Rosenbergs, an editorial on March 30, 1951 raised a question which was disturbing to many Americans: "How it is possible that native-born Americans, educated through college at public expense, could enlist freely and without compensation in the services of a foreign country ruled by a despotism that is a terrible negation of all that this nation stands for."33 The answer to the perplexing question was that they were
Communists, "willing victims of the Big Lie which pictures Soviet Russia as a paradise." The paper offered its opinion that the death penalty was "one proportionate to the crime." The ritual that the Times commenced when Fuchs was arrested now reached its culmination in demanding an exorcism to cast out devils for the well-being and security of society.

In this ritual, not only the prosecution and the press but the courts played the role of the hero. In his sentencing statement, which the Times carried on April 6, 1951, Judge Kaufman reiterated several themes previously suggested by the paper and the prosecution. Above all, Kaufman linked the outbreak of the Korean War to the Soviet possession of the atomic bomb: "your conduct in putting into the hands of the Russians the A-bomb years before our best scientists predicted Russia would perfect the bomb has already caused the Communist aggression in Korea with the resultant casualties exceeding 50,000 Americans and who knows but that millions more of innocent people may pay the price of your treason." "By your betrayal," Kaufman added, "you undoubtedly have altered the course of history to the disadvantage of our country." Kaufman emphasized the heavy responsibility that he had to assume in determining the appropriate degree of punishment for the Rosenbergs. Leniency, he said, would have meant the violation of the "solemn and sacred trust" the nation had placed in him. He claimed that "every nerve, every fiber of my body has been taxed." The same day the paper reported that Kaufman had visited his synagogue several times during the preceding week "seeking
spiritual guidance" in making his final decision. Thus in the Times pages Kaufman's decision was represented as wholly an act of responsibility and conscience to preserve American institutions from the threat of traitors. To rectify the course of history altered by the Rosenbergs, he had to put the villains to death. Once the arch-villains were brought to justice, the lost security would be restored. Then who could doubt the worth of the system?

It was felt that there was an indispensable process that the condemned should go through. They should confess their sins and name other sinners to be forgiven. The motif of redemption by confession introduced in public by Saypol became a major theme of the Times after the Supreme Court denied a writ of certiorari—in refusing to review legal questions raised by the Rosenbergs appeal on October 13, 1952. With the new execution date set for the week beginning January 12, 1953, the "last chance for spies," the Times editorial on January 11, 1953 said, was presidential clemency. On the same day the paper carried an article which reviewed the case. Headlined "Rosenberg Spy Case: Facts and Arguments," it noted that the Rosenbergs were "the only atom spies who have not confessed." If executive clemency were granted, it would be interpreted as an "acknowledgment of the justice of the Communist propaganda charges" which were at their peak. The choice for the Rosenbergs was now clear and simple: repent or die. Fuchs, Greenglass, and Gold had confessed and showed their contrition. The Rosenbergs did not. Their silence and arrogance could not be forgiven. Because they remained silent, they should go to the electric chair. President
Eisenhower denied clemency to the Rosenbergs, reiterating in his statement the theme that the country would be redeemed by the execution of arch-villains who were not repentant.\textsuperscript{39}

When the Supreme Court refused again to review the case on May 25, 1953, the next day's \textit{Times} repeated the theme of "confess or die." The headline proclaimed: "Stay of Execution for Spies Vacated--Mercy for Couple Hinges on Their Talking." The editorial on May 31, 1953 stressed that their only "chance of escaping the electric chair" would be to confess. It grimly noted that "last week the Rosenbergs were still not talking."\textsuperscript{40} Subsequent \textit{Times'} coverage reinforced the image of the Rosenbergs as tight-lipped and adamant traitors allowing themselves to be exploited by Communists all over the world in anti-American rallies.\textsuperscript{41} The image persisted even after their execution. The major theme of the \textit{Times} editorial of June 21, 1953 was the couple's refusal to confess. The Rosenbergs, the was again noted, "were the only atom spies who refused to confess." In short, they "got what they deserved," and the United States showed its strength and courage by executing the spies in the midst of enormous pressure from all over the world.\textsuperscript{42}

In the \textit{Times} story the hero was the government--Hoover and his FBI, the prosecution, and the judge--participating in a great saga in which it was at first surprised and bewildered by the villains, only in turn to master them, prosecute them, and thus purify America. There was no tragic flaw in the hero--he was not a victim of circumstance. He represented the cause of liberty and freedom and acted to preserve it with efficiency, confidence, determination,
and power. The hero was also generous and lenient. He gave the villains an opportunity to repent and be saved which they refused, and they were thus given up as lost. In this narrative the Times played the role of understudy to the hero, helping him to restore justice and security to America by inscribing its plot structure in the mind of the American public.

In covering the Rosenberg case the New York Times constructed a tale by linking a number of essentially separate events and imposing upon them a comprehensible plot. It organized a detective story, or better yet a Western, with the additional themes of redemption by confession and of purification by exorcism, which could hardly fail to elicit the approval of the public. With a plot structure imposed, the news attains the quality of a narrative. This narrativizing process helps to give the reader the impression that the narrative quality belongs to the events themselves, so events seem to tell themselves. This impression is strengthened by the use of the third person in reporting, the use of quotations, and the absence of references to the reporter. But the impression is deceptive. Narrativity is something added to events by the narrator for one reason or another. This addition qualifies the factual representation of the case by the Times as a candidate for fictional status. Factual representation is fashioned like fiction.

Walter and Miriam Schneirs' Invitation to an Inquest totally rejected the narrative structure of the New York Times. The Schneirs constructed a counter-story which changed the roles of the villains and rearranged the pieces. While the Times plot had certain
romantic features especially in the power of action bestowed upon the hero, the Schneirs' narrative employed a tragic plot. Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, who in the tale told by the *Times* were arch villains, became tragic heroes struck down by evil, but courageously asserting their conscience in conflict with the state despite the threat of the electric chair. In contrast, the heroes of the *Times* were cast as villains. For the redeemed sinners, Greenglass and Gold, the Schneirs reserved a place among the villains' helpers.

The Schneirs' story stressed the complete innocence of the Rosenbergs and the conspiracy invented by the FBI. In their account, the entire Rosenberg case was a "fantastic hoax." Everything in it was a tissue of lies. The crime for which the Rosenbergs were accused, tried, and executed never occurred. Not only the Rosenbergs, but also Greenglass and Gold, were not implicated in a conspiracy to transmit atomic secrets to the Soviet Union. The crime that Greenglass had committed was the theft of a small souvenir of uranium from Los Alamos. Gold never visited Greenglass in Albuquerque on June 3, 1945. Moreover Gold was not Klaus Fuchs' American contact. He never met the British atomic physicist. His entire espionage career for the Soviet Union was a fantasy. Both Greenglass and Gold were pathological liars used as tools for the FBI. The conspiracy to frame the Rosenbergs was orchestrated by Hoover and his FBI which was determined to find--or rather invent--atom spies. The prosecution connived at the FBI fabrication, and the courts and the White House accepted it as fact.
The press propagated the FBI hoax to the public, which believed what it was told. In short, the case was the American Dreyfus case.

According to the Schneirs, the government story hinged on Gold's meeting with Greenglass on June 3, 1945 in Albuquerque, including the Rosenbergs' part in the arrangements. The fact of the meeting depended solely on the credibility of dovetailing testimonies by two key witnesses, Greenglass and Gold. Greenglass testified that he gave Rosenberg atomic bomb data in January 1945 when he came home to New York from Los Alamos on furlough. At this time Rosenberg made arrangements with Greenglass for the subsequent pickup of information at Albuquerque. He cut the top of a jello-box in an irregular pattern and gave it to Greenglass, saying that the courier who would come for information would present the matching half.

Gold provided corroborating testimony that on instructions from his Russian superior Yakovlev he had arrived in Albuquerque to pick up information from Greenglass on the evening of June 2, 1945 after a meeting with Fuchs in Santa Fe on the same day. After spending the night in a rooming house, he registered at the Hilton Hotel in his own name. Then he visited the Greenglass apartment. He said that he came from "Julius," and presented the appropriate half of the jello-box top that he had received from Yakovlev. Since the material was not ready, Gold returned that afternoon and received a heavy envelope containing sketches and descriptions of the atom bomb experiments. In turn, Gold gave him the envelope with $500 in it. Greenglass said that he gave the money to his wife,
who testified that she deposited $400 in an Albuquerque bank and used the rest on household expenses. The prosecution entered as trial exhibits photostats of Gold's June 3 Hilton Hotel registration card and Ruth Greenglass' banking records showing the deposit.

Faced with the perfection of the corroboration between Greenglass and Gold, on which the whole case relied, the Schneirs sought to erode and collapse their credibility. They noted the chief prosecution witnesses' remarkable capacity to embroider, amend, and fill out their accounts of what really happened. Greenglass was "a foolish, boastful man" with a propensity to enlarge and elaborate his story.44 The negative remarks made about him by his wife, his lawyer and the Department of Justice attorney showed the unreliability of his account. Gold was "a thoroughly unreliable individual." In his interviews with his attorney, Gold frequently revised his stories about people, places, dates, and conversations. The Schneirs saw this as coming "largely out of the sheer joy of creativity."45 They portrayed Gold as a person "bored with his drab existence after the excitement and sense of importance his prewar dealings with the Russians had imparted, evolving a Walter Mitty fantasy of foreign intrigue."46

They compared Greenglass and Gold's trial testimonies with pretrial statements and presented evidence of their unreliability by emphasizing the inconsistencies between the earlier and later stories. Greenglass' story in his signed statement on June 16, 1950 regarding his meeting with Gold, for example, was not initially corroborated by his wife. She connected his arrest with the earlier
FBI query about the theft of uranium. The corroboration was made only by Gold, who amended his account more often than Greenglass. In his pretrial conversations with his lawyers Gold did not mention his registration at the Hilton Hotel. Moreover there was no mention of a cut-out jello-box top and a password ("I come from Julius") that were to forge the prosecution's "necessary link" between the Rosenbergs and Yakovlev. Gold's pretrial recollection was that "Bob," or "Benny," or "John" sent him. The details presented at the trial, the Schneirs argued, were either "told by FBI agents," or "his own creations," or "the later contributions of Greenglass." These and other inconsistencies led the Schneirs to conclude that Greenglass's meeting with Gold in Albuquerque on June 3, 1945 did not take place and that Gold had never been involved in Soviet espionage at all.

Using "evidence" from various interviews and documents, the Schneirs reconstructed their version of what "actually" happened. Greenglass was under FBI investigation as early as January 1950 as a suspect in the stealing of uranium from Los Alamos. Thus, the FBI was already in possession of much information about him. Over a two-week period after his arrest Gold was provided by FBI agents with the information needed to invent a story about his meeting with the Greenglasses on June 3, 1945. He was informed that Ruth had deposited $400 in an Albuquerque bank, and then created his own figure of $500. Greenglass, fearful of the theft charge, which could be aggravated by his previous perjury about his Communist affiliation, subscribed to the account proposed to him by the FBI.
added some details of his own and signed a false statement. He accused the Rosenbergs to escape his own predicament. Gold had a distorted mind, a need to do great deeds and to suffer for them. He imagined feats of espionage and confessed his fantasies. In fabricating the story of the meeting between Greenglass and Gold, the Schneirs concluded, Gold provided the phrase "Benny sent me," and Greenglass came up with a tale about a cut piece of card carried by the visitor. The FBI manufactured the Hilton Hotel registration card dated June 3, only because Ruth deposited $400 on June 4, and reconciled the discrepancies. It was the FBI, not the Rosenbergs, who masterminded the Albuquerque meeting. The FBI was the arch-villain, and the redeemed sinners were actually its helpers.

In the Schneirs' account the whole hoax was needed to explain to the American public the Soviet possession of the atomic weapon and the end of the American atomic monopoly. Since many of the postwar military and diplomatic policies of the United States had been based on its continued monopoly of the atom bomb, once this was lost, the logical next step was either to develop a super bomb to regain absolute dominance, or to find enemies within who were to blame for the loss of the monopoly. The Rosenberg case was thus a product of its times, claimed the Schneirs, staged against the backdrop of national anxiety over the Korean War and a possible atomic conflict with the Soviet Union.49

According to the Schneirs, the government promoted the myth of atomic secrets, and the existence of a spy ring to steal them, to mislead the public. The myth persisted due to a misunderstanding
of the nature of atomic energy. Atom "secrets" cannot be stolen and transmitted in the form of "information" because of the cost, complexity, and scope of the technology involved in the development of atomic energy. Success or failure depends on "the total industrial fabric of a nation."^50^ It is preposterous to imagine that a high school graduate could convey atomic secrets from memory. It is time, said the Schneirs, to stop "kidding" about atomic "secrets," and to stop believing that Soviet scientists were incompetent.^51^ The apocalyptic rhetoric about the Rosenbergs' crime offered by the prosecution, the judge, the White House, and the press were at best a farce.

The Schneirs inverted the Western presented by the prosecution and the *Times* with the reversal of heroic and villainous roles. In their story the Rosenbergs were portrayed as the innocent victims of Cold War hysteria and elevated to the status of tragic heroes of the left. For the Schneirs the parallel with the Dreyfus case was only too obvious. There were false testimony, forged documents, and so-called confessions. The public and the government were a prey to nationalist fury and wanted to find a scapegoat on which to vent their frustration and anger. In both cases the accused were Jews who courageously asserted their complete innocence in the face of colossal state power. Just as a handful of intellectuals had succeeded after five years of efforts in freeing the innocent victim in France, the Schneirs urged, American intellectuals should rise and restore justice so that the same tragedy would not occur again, even though the couple was already dead.
In *The Rosenberg File* Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton rejected the Schneirs' American Dreyfus case and demoted the Rosenbergs from their martyrdom to the lesser role of "hapless scapegoats of a propaganda war," in which their death was exploited by both parties involved. Central to their story was the legal guilt of the Rosenbergs. Julius Rosenberg played a key role in a Soviet espionage ring and transmitted material that he believed contained important atomic secrets. Ethel Rosenberg knew and approved of her husband's activities, and may even have typed notes, as Greenglass claimed. But Radosh and Milton did not adopt the *Times'* Western interpretation with the government as the hero. Their story was a satirical critique of the miscarriage of justice committed by the government as well as by the American Communist Party.

Radosh and Milton believed that Greenglass basically told the truth, while the Schneirs portrayed him as an inexperienced liar with no conscience at all. In Radosh and Milton's version, Greenglass resisted cooperation with the government for the first twelve days, and under interrogation by FBI agents tried as much as possible to "keep Julius Rosenberg out of the picture." He even tried to send a warning to Julius through his lawyer. Radosh and Milton thus read the discrepancy between Greenglass' pretrial and trial statements in more sympathetic terms. After his arrest Greenglass said that he had given atomic data to Julius on the street during his furlough in September 1945. At the trial he testified that he handed over the handwritten notes and sketches in the Rosenberg living room, and that Julius then gave his wife the notes to type. While for the
Schneirs this difference meant the FBI forgery of the trial testimony, for Radosh and Milton it represented Greenglass' original attempt to protect his sister.

Gold was also rehumanized in *The Rosenberg File*. He was not a pathological liar and masochist as the Schneirs suggested. He was, Radosh and Milton wrote, "always a deferential and sometimes unguardedly candid witness." His psychological need to serve was merely misdirected to espionage activities. He did not play the role of government "stooge." Gold never "contradicted the original series of statements he had given the FBI after his arrest in 1950" in his subsequent testimonies. One exception was the Julius password, which Gold resisted accepting until the day before the trial. Radosh and Milton held that minor discrepancies due to lapse of memory did not justify the claim that his statements were complete fabrications and that he had never met Greenglass.

Although Radosh and Milton claimed that the Rosenbergs were guilty as charged, they did not accept the prosecution's assessment of the importance of the material that the Rosenbergs helped to convey to the Soviets. The information was not so vital as to be a contributing factor to the Korean War and the ensuing tens of thousands of American casualties; yet it was not entirely useless, as the Schneirs claimed. On the contrary, it confirmed the value and accuracy of the data that Fuchs transmitted directly through Gold, and thus could have enabled the Soviet Union to avoid the repetition of the expensive and elaborate efforts undertaken by the United States. According to Radosh and Milton, this explained two
contradictory comments made by Gold's superior Yakovlev on the value of the Greenglass information. He initially told Gold that the material was "extremely valuable." But months later when Gold suggested re-contacting Greenglass, Yakovlev said that the material had not turned out to be very useful at all. Yakovlev's changed response made sense, because at this time Fuchs' information was confirmed to be accurate.

*The Rosenberg File* was filled with villains. The government emerged as an arch-villain. The FBI and the Department of Justice were guilty of many things. Most serious of these was that they let Ethel Rosenberg die, although they were not sure of her involvement in her husband's activities. From the very first, the government's interest in Ethel was not in her complicity with Julius' work. She was used as a "pawn to push Julius into confessing." When the threat of prosecuting his wife failed, the government escalated its "lever" strategy, and demanded the death penalty for Julius.

Regarding the death penalty for Ethel, Radosh and Milton considered that the presiding judge played a crucial role. Before Kaufman sentenced the Rosenbergs, he sought to know the intentions of the FBI and the Department of Justice. When he learned that both were reluctant to impose the death penalty on Ethel, he asked the prosecutor to refrain from making any recommendation for the penalty and then sentenced them both to death. Thereafter he made extraordinary efforts to expedite the execution of the couple. The rapid execution became an obsession to him, and he continuously contacted the FBI to insure that his sentence would be carried out
contacted the FBI to insure that his sentence would be carried out swiftly.

The reasons for Kaufman's preoccupation were several. He, like many other federal judges, had an ambition to ascend to the Supreme Court and wanted to use the case in his hands as a milestone in his career. The public, he felt, was in favor of death for both the Rosenbergs, and agreed with his view of the historical importance of the Rosenbergs' crime, a view that would be vindicated over time. His tying of the crime to the outbreak of the Korean War was not merely a rhetorical device; he really thought that the Rosenbergs' activities had dealt a severe blow to national security. The United States was engaged in a life and death struggle with Russia, and the Rosenbergs had taken sides with the forces of darkness, endangering the great democratic institutions of their country. This idea was reinforced by the official interest that the Atomic Energy Commission showed in the presentation of technical evidence during the trial. Thus, no matter how strange and ill-tuned to reality it appeared in retrospect, the Manichean view of the world which was most vividly revealed in Kaufman's sentencing statement was his serious inner belief.

Finally, there was a psychological dimension in Kaufman's obsession with the elimination of the Rosenbergs. He felt a deep animosity toward them because they had brought into question the patriotism of respectable Jews such as himself. He feared that he might be criticized for showing leniency toward fellow Jews and needed to prove his patriotism to the American public. He therefore
imposed punishments harsher than those Hoover and the Justice Department thought appropriate and involved himself in improper *ex parte* communications with various individuals connected with the prosecution. The government and judge's zeal in prosecuting the Rosenbergs and hunting their accomplices led to a grave miscarriage of justice; but it was not, Radosh and Milton emphasized, engaged in the manufacture of evidence.

Another arch-villain in Radosh and Milton's story was the American Communist Party. The Party ignored the Rosenberg case completely until November 1952. By this time, said the authors, it had become almost certain that the Rosenbergs were willing to die for their cause. The couple was not likely to name names, and there was very a slim possibility of a new trial in which fresh evidence for the Rosenbergs espionage activities would be brought in. From the Party's perspective legal victory would not produce a satisfactory result, because it might vindicate the American judicial system which it had condemned as a tool of an incipient fascism. Thus the Party publicly worked to save the Rosenbergs, but apparently welcomed their death as serving several important functions. It would silence them forever and create international martyrs for the left. It would also deflect world attention from the Rudolf Slansky case in Czechoslovakia--the trial and execution of Slansky and ten other former leaders of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party in which the prosecuting Stalinists were blatantly anti-Semitic, and which threatened a split in the international Communist movement. The Communists in the United States and Europe, in Radosh and Milton's
opinion, sought to minimize the Slansky case by diverting the attention of the media to the Rosenberg case as a new Dreyfus case, and portraying the couple as victims of American anti-Semitism and fascism. Like the Communist Party, the author held that Bloch, the defense attorney, believed the Rosenbergs to be guilty. He needed their martyrdom because he wanted to protect their accomplices and "spare the Communist Party the embarrassment of having the details exposed in the press."\(^{60}\) Bloch's weak defense was a result of these considerations rather than his errors or incompetence.

The death of the Rosenbergs was therefore necessary to the Communist Party and to their defense lawyer, although both were central to the campaign to save the couple. There was a complicity in guilt for the crime of the Rosenbergs' death between the government and the Party. Indeed, the rising tide of opinion in the Rosenbergs' favor was paradoxically detrimental to saving their lives.\(^{61}\) Judge Kaufman, fearful of the current of opinion, became more determined than ever to press for a swift execution of the couple. Supreme Court Justice Frankfurter hesitated to speak out in favor of the review of the case by the Court because he was worried that his position would be used by the Rosenberg propagandists as an affirmation of their innocence. Ironically, the louder the outcry for the Rosenbergs became, the more determined was the government to press for a swift resolution, and the slimmer was the chance for the Rosenbergs' reprieve. To this extent, Radosh and Milton concluded, the Rosenbergs were indeed \"scapegoats, condemned to death less because of the nature and seriousness of their crime than because at
a particular moment in time their deaths served a cathartic function—
for Communists and anti-Communists alike."\textsuperscript{62}

*The Rosenberg File's* narrative was more sensitive than those of
the *Times* and the Schneirs to the contexts in which contradictory
claims were made. Regarding the Rosenbergs' repeated insistence
upon their innocence, the authors said, "it is difficult to discern
exactly what they are claiming to be innocent of."\textsuperscript{63} In the Marxist
context, certainly their activities did not constitute a crime, because
they believed their work would contribute to the final destruction of
the capitalist and fascist system. Their acts were criminal only in the
eyes of Cold War America, and they could therefore with a clear
conscience proclaim their complete innocence. The Rosenbergs,
Radosh and Milton admitted, showed "tremendous courage and
loyalty" in their resistance to enormous pressure from the state.\textsuperscript{64}
For their allies on the left, their execution was truly a "symbol of the
tragic excesses of Cold War red-baiting."\textsuperscript{65} But in the context of
existing American jurisprudence, their claim to innocence did not
make sense. They were guilty of transmitting data on the atomic
bomb to the Soviet Union. The FBI and the Department of Justice had
legitimate reasons to believe that they had committed espionage and
to pursue the extensive spy network in which Rosenberg was
assumed to be a ring-master. The Rosenbergs refused to cooperate
with the government and died to defend the Communist Party. In
this respect they were "rigid, self-righteous ideologues . . . reveling in
the knowledge that they were earning for themselves a place in
history."\textsuperscript{66}
Radosh and Milton rejected and then reappropriated the *Times'* romantic Western and the Schneirs' tragic interpretations. Their tale dismissed both the Left’s conspiracy theory and the Right’s apocalyptic rhetoric about the seriousness of the couple's crime. At the same time, it incorporated the Left's criticism of the trial and the execution, and the Right's belief in the Rosenbergs' role as espionage agents. In their satirical account, the familiar dualism of good and bad--good FBI agents and traitorous spies, or conspiratorial government and innocent individuals--was derided. They attacked the viciousness of the prosecution, the courts, and the FBI, while arguing that the Rosenbergs were not victims of a frame-up. In their narrative the Rosenberg case was stripped of its tragic dimension. The couple failed to comprehend the implications of their activities and how their actions would discredit the Left in the eyes of Americans, their intentions to the contrary notwithstanding. They had no recognition of their fate and endured it in ignorance. They were the hapless victims of ideological battles in which "their deaths would be counted as a victory for both sides."67

The *Times*, the Schneirs, and Radosh and Milton constructed different stories from a given set of events by selecting, arranging, and relating them in different fashions. This process of construction involves the imposition of plot structures on events. The same series of historical events thus takes on the aspects of a romance, a tragedy, and a satire, depending on the point of view from which it is comprehended. Actual events, however, are not inherently romantic, tragic, or satiric. As Hayden White says, they simply are.68 It is an
"emplotment" on the part of the narrator that makes real events exhibit certain aspects of a story. The imposition of stories on the given set of events confers the status of fiction upon the factual representations of journalists and historians, which become fictional at the precise moment when events begin to be shaped and imbued with a particular plot structure. They are also made up like fiction. In this sense, Doctorow is substantially correct when he claims that there is only narrative. Since stories are fictions, they are not true or false in the sense that a factual statement is true or false. They are true in the ways that literary works are true; "in a metaphorical sense and in the sense in which any figure of speech can be true." However, this recognition that factual representations involve the fiction-making process does not mean that there is no distinction between real events and imaginary events or that the distinction is not important. For instance, either Gold and Greenglass met in Albuquerque on June 3, 1945, or they did not. The meeting or non-meeting between the two is a "completed" fact. We cannot have it both ways. It is therefore important to prove that the meeting occurred or did not occur, because the meaning of the Rosenberg case significantly depends on this point. But in the Rosenberg case, there is no conclusive and compelling "evidence" to verify the completed fact. Most evidence is in the form of narratives told by participants in the case, whose credibility is difficult, if not impossible, to establish with certainty. We do not have access to the events themselves. We cannot know if certain events actually occurred or not.
But both the Schneirs and Radosh and Milton adopt the perspective of an omniscient observer in their representations of the case. They follow the traditional convention of historical writing and treat stories as if they were facts. They are not concerned with the process of their own involvement in the historical reconstruction. Thus, they present their tales, constructed out of contradictory stories, as if they corresponded to what really happened. Initially, the Schneirs offer their story as a different "possibility" or a "speculation" based on the official version; but they end up by insisting that the previous version is a fabrication and theirs is what actually happened. Radosh and Milton are more sophisticated in presenting their story, but they also do not appreciate the ambiguity surrounding the evidence for and against the innocence of the Rosenbergs and make definitive judgments. Each of them accuses the other of using distorted and selective quotations, and of the suppression and exclusion of evidence detrimental to their stories. Their works both fill in the gaps left in the fragmentary "evidence," which had already gone through the process of textualization and retexualization, and organize their accounts according to well-established plot structures. Their factual representations are doubly and sometimes triply removed from actual occurrences. Their fictional narratives are to be assessed in terms of being coherent or incoherent, persuasive or unpersuasive, plausible or implausible, and so on rather than true or false, however unsatisfactory that may be to believers in facts.


7. Hoover's article in *Reader's Digest* in May 1951 was exclusively about Klaus Fuchs and Harry Gold. He did not mention the Rosenbergs at all. By the "Crime of the Century," he meant the theft of the atom bomb secrets by Fuchs and Gold, not by the Rosenbergs. Thus the common association of the crime of the century with the Rosenberg case is erroneous, especially when the phrase is used to parody Hoover's exaggeration of the Rosenbergs' crime. See J. Edgar Hoover, "The Crime of the Century: The Case of the A-Bomb Spies," *Reader's Digest*, May 1951, pp. 149-68.


12. Justice Douglas granted the stay of execution, because he believed that there was a substance in the defense argument that the Rosenbergs were tried under the wrong law. The defense counsel argued that the Atomic Energy Act of 1946 should apply to the case instead of the Espionage Act of 1917 according to which the death sentence was imposed on the Rosenbergs. The former requires the recommendation of the jury for the death penalty, whereas the latter does not.


22. The arrest of David Greenglass on June 17, 1950, which was "the third arrest in the Russian spy ring investigation," was headlined as "Ex-G.I. Seized Here on Charge He Gave Bomb Data to Gold" (17 June 1950); Julius Rosenberg: "Fourth American Held As Atom Spy" (18 July 1950); Abraham Brothman and Miriam Moskowitz: "New Spy Round Up Brings 2 Arrests; Others Due Soon" (30 July 1950); Ethel Rosenberg: "Plot to Have G.I. Give Bomb Data To Soviet Is Laid to His Sister Here" (12 August 1950); Anatoli H. Yakovlev: "Ex-Russian Agent Is Indicted As Spy" (18 August 1950); Morton Sobell: "Engineer Is Seized At Laredo As Spy For Russian Ring"; and Oscar John Vago: "Another Suspect Is Held In Spy Case" (29 September 1950)


24. The charge against Brothman and Moskowitz was not "conspiracy" to conduct espionage but "to obstruct justice" (3 August 1950). Vago's arrest had a more flimsy link with the Soviet-spy ring. The *Times* story began: "The Federal grand jury's continuing atom spy investigation resulted yesterday in the indictment and arrest of a 52-year-old foreign-born structural engineer on a charge of perjury." But it was difficult to discern from the story how Vago's perjury was related to the atomic spy investigation. He was alleged
to lie before the grand jury about the duration of his stay in Hungary between 1925 and 1933. The piece stressed the fact that Vago was "formerly a partner of Abraham Brothman." By association Vago was linked with Gold and the espionage ring. Vago's trial was postponed indefinitely (25 January 1951).

25. Vago, like Gold, was "foreign-born engineer," who came to the U.S. in 1925 and was naturalized in 1939. The Greenglass story began with the emphasis on the fact that he was a "former Young Communist League member." Rosenberg was an American-born citizen, but "a member of the Communist Party" who "aggressively sought means to secretly conspire with the Soviet Government to the detriment of his own country." His wife was reported to have been "affiliated with Communist activities for a long period of time." Brothman had been named as a Communist by Elizabeth Bentley, a self-confessed Soviet espionage courier.


27. Thus the story strongly suggested the link between Rosenberg and Yakovlev. Rosenberg was reported to have laughed at the jello-top story, commenting "fantastic--something like kids hear over the television on the Lone Ranger program" (*New York Times*, 20 July 1950).


29. Without her crime, claimed the piece quoting Myles J. Lane, chief Assistant United State Attorney, "perhaps we would not have the present situation in Korea." "By its very nature," the story added, the crime is "one of the worst that could be committed, because it jeopardizes the lives of every man, woman and child in this country."

30. The *Times* story on March 8, 1951 largely conveyed what Saypol actually said, which led its story to look objective because it seemed to present only verifiable facts. But it assigned three full columns to Saypol's address, whereas it allowed just one sentence--"The defense lawyers . . . mainly plead[ed] for open minds from the jurors"--to the defense counsel's opening remark. It was clear that the *Times* sided with the government representation of the case.
31. *New York Times*, 8 March 1951. The way that the *Times* handled the case was exemplified in its report of the arrest of William Perl. On March 15, 1951 the *Times* headline proclaimed that "Columbia Teacher Arrested, Linked to 2 on Trial as Spies." The formal charge against Perl was perjury for having denied to the grand jury that he knew Rosenberg and Sobell. But the *Times* noted that "Perl had been listed by the Government as a potential witness in the current atomic espionage trial." Saypol made a statement, according to the *Times*, that Perl's "intended role" would be to corroborate "certain statements" of the Greenglasses. The piece was placed side by side with an account of Ruth's trial testimony on the same page. Next day the *Times* juxtaposed Perl's story this time with the government star witness Gold's testimony which provided the vital link to tie the Rosenbergs to the presumed espionage network including Yakovlev, Fuchs, the Greenglasses, and Gold himself. Gold made a corroborating statement on the jello box top, and the recognition signal "I came from Julius" which he used when he met Greenglass June 1945 in Albuquerque, New Mexico. And in the story on Gold's testimony the *Times* noted that "the spy conspiracy widened out with the arraignment of William Perl". Thus no one could have failed to see the connection between Perl's indictment and the trial already in progress.

32. *New York Times*, 29 March 1951. Bloch tried to regain the trust of the jurors and the public by providing a different story. As the *Times* pointed out, Bloch sought to sever the Rosenbergs from the activities of the Greenglasses. Indeed in Bloch's story, the arch villain was the Greenglasses. Greenglass's action in testifying against his own sister was "repulsive" and a violation of "any code of civilization that ever existed." Greenglass is, Bloch charged, "lower than the lowest animal I have ever seen." Greenglass loved his wife and "was willing to bury his sister" and his brother-in-law to save her. The Rosenbergs were victimized by the Greenglasses. Bloch's story could have been effective in changing the mind of the *Times* reader, if the *Times* had given more space to it so that the reader could notice its plausibility in a more coherent fashion. But the *Times* report on Bloch's summation was too brief, allowing less than a column. Bloch's substitution of roles was not substantiated with solid arguments in the *Times* piece, and it appeared that his appeal was wholly to emotion rather than to reason of the jurors.
Chapter 5. "Everything Is Elusive":
Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* and Democracy of Perception

In the foreword to *Invitation to an Inquest* the Schneirs claim that there are details in the Rosenberg case that are too crude for serious fiction.¹ Radosh suggests that there is very little that a literary approach can add to the case.² Louis Nizer, a practicing lawyer, also believes that in the Rosenberg case "there is no place for fiction or even imaginative reconstruction. That is the path to a counterfeit presentation. Authenticity is the key."³ Although their conclusions about what really happened are different, the primary purpose of these fact-finders is virtually the same--to provide "an unequivocal and final"⁴ or at least "definitive"⁵ answer to the question as to whether or not the Rosenbergs were guilty.

Fiction writers respond to the enduring ambiguity of the Rosenberg trial differently. As Doctorow says in an interview, their primary concern is not with the legal specifics of the case: "I wrote *The Book of Daniel* from the point of view of someone who doesn't know whether they're guilty or innocent. I didn't know, but thought during the writing I'd decide. It became apparent, however, that I would never know, and there were better questions to ask."⁶ Coover is primarily concerned with the real motive behind the punishment of the Rosenbergs and the apparent disproportion between their punishment and their crime. For Doctorow and Coover the real significance of the Rosenberg case is not so much in what the Rosenbergs did to America as in what America did to them. In their
differing ways, they explore the socio-politico-cultural "ritual" in
which the Rosenbergs function as scapegoats. In what follows, I shall
examine Doctorow's version of the Rosenberg case in The Book of
Daniel. The novel is representative of his fiction in showing his
conception of history and his experimentation to illustrate it. I shall
discuss the strategies and themes of the novel and argue that the
author's conception of history as a kind of fiction has a critical
potential to resist the status quo.

In his famous essay on postmodernist fiction, "The Literature of
Replenishment," John Barth suggests a prescriptive program for
postmodernism. According to Barth, the proper program for
postmodernism is neither a mere extension of the modernist
program, nor a mere intensification of certain aspects of modernism,
nor a wholesale repudiation of either modernism or premodernism--
traditional realism. An "ideal" postmodernist fiction is one that can
synthesize or transcend premodernist and modernist modes of
writing. It should rise above the "quarrel between realism and
irrealism, formalism and 'contentism,' pure and committed literature,
coterie fiction and junk fiction."7 As best exemplified in Gabriel
Garcia Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude, it should be "not
only artistically admirable, but humanly wise, lovable, and literally
marvelous."8

Barth's exemplars of postmodernism include only foreign
writers. But no other contemporary American writer could approach
Barth's ideal more closely than Doctorow. The reasons are several.
He is a serious writer who is also popular. He is both socially
concerned and stylistically experimental. Political passion, social vision, and nonpolitical artistry are so remarkably sustained in his works that one critic calls him "a remarkable phenomenon" among contemporary American novelists. He is aware of the literary tradition and of the limits of representation, but at the same time "tells a highly readable and coherent story" peopled with "memorable characters," and "speaks to us powerfully about real political and historical realities."  

Given Doctorow's social and political concerns, it is perhaps inevitable that all of his fiction is an engagement with a significant theme and moment in the American past. In *Welcome to Hard Times* he explores the validity of the frontier myth in the development of the United States. *The Book of Daniel* deals with the Rosenberg trial and execution during the McCarthy era and the relationship between the Old Left and the New Left. In *Ragtime* his focus is upon the first two decades of this century with racism and radicalism as main issues. In *Loon Lake* he pursues the myth of the American Dream in the setting of the Great Depression—a theme, which is taken up again in *World's Fair*, and yet again in *Billy Bathgate*. Taken together Doctorow's fiction constitutes a montage of American society from the closing of the frontier to the turbulent sixties. Doctorow's reconstruction of America's past is grounded in his belief that all history is "composed." For him history is a kind of fiction, and history as written by historians is insufficient. Thus he strenuously attempts to present alternative versions of what happened. He debunks the cherished myths and images of the past ingrained in the
public mind and highlights the gap in American history between its ideals and realities.

*The Book of Daniel* is a disguised account of the Rosenberg trial and its aftermath. All of the characters in the book are fictional, but nearly all have parallels with actual persons. Doctorow has changed the names and certain details of the actual history: Julius and Ethel Rosenberg are now called Paul and Rochelle Isaacson; their two sons, Michael and Robert, are changed into a brother and sister, Daniel and Susan; the chief government witness against the couple is not Greenglass but the entirely fictional figure Selig Mindish, the couple's dentist friend; the name of the trial judge is changed from Kaufman to Hirsch; the defense attorney Ascher is a conservative lawyer rather than a left-wing lawyer; the name of the adopted parents is changed from Meeropol into Lewin; Daniel confronts Mindish to confirm his parents' innocence or guilt; and Susan becomes insane and dies.

Despite changes in certain historical facts, the story follows actual events so closely that the reader soon begins to identify it with the historical Rosenberg case. The Isaacsons, the prosecution, the presiding judge, the major prosecution witness, and the defense attorney, all are Jewish. The fictional Judge Hirsch, like the real Kaufman, hopes to be appointed to the Supreme Court. Harry Gold enters into the story as "Talking Tom, . . . a convicted spy." William Perl's arrest is described as follows: "During the trial the FBI arrested that fellow as another spy in the ring, and said he would testify in confirmation of Mindish's confession. They never put him on the
stand" (237). When Rochelle sums up the case, the parallel becomes perfect: "Under the charge against us the normal rules of evidence are suspended. For us they don't exist. We are charged not with committing espionage, but with conspiring to commit espionage. Since espionage itself does not have to be proved, no evidence is required that we have done anything. All that is required is evidence that we intended to do something" (206).

Although the story deals with the Isaacsons' trial, the propaganda warfare, and the execution, it is not simply a fictional reconstruction of the Rosenberg case. Doctorow's primary concern is with various perspectives on the case; it is a meditation about the process through which real events are transformed into narrated ones. Thus, in the story the question of whether the accused are innocent or guilty matters less than the "ritual" in which the accused are exploited beyond their comprehension.\textsuperscript{13}

The narrator of the story is Daniel Lewin-Isaacson. The novel begins in the third person and shifts at once to the first, then back to the third person. This shifting of voices between first and third persons reflects the narrator's struggle to review his experience both first-hand and at some distance. From the outset Doctorow's concern is with the problematics of the process of storytelling. It is significant that Doctorow spent six months and one hundred fifty pages on a straightforward narrative rendition of the story--and threw them away in disgust, because they were repugnant to him. He said he recognized that "it had to be done in Daniel's voice."\textsuperscript{14}
Daniel not only changes his voices, he as a narrator also intrudes into the story, adding another layer to the narrative complexity. This takes several forms. From time to time he addresses his reader. Thus, he describes his sadistic treatment of his wife Phyllis, and immediately turns to the reader: "Do you believe it? Shall I continue? Do you want to know the effect of three concentric circles of heating element glowing orange in a black night of rain upon the tender white girlflesh of my wife's ass? Who are you anyway? Who told you you could read this? Is nothing sacred?"

(72) Toward the end of his story Daniel again reminds the reader of the fact that he is narrating the story: "I suppose you think I can't do the electrocution. I know there is a you. . . . YOU: I will show you that I can do the electrocution" (312).

Daniel sometimes abruptly inserts a historical essay into his narration of the story: "E. H. Carr suggests that the genius of Stalin was in his recovery of Russian nationalism, dormant under the westernized, internationalist Lenin. 'Socialism in one country' was Stalin's affirmation of his country's fierce, inferiority-hounded pride in the face of the historical, tragic, western hostility to backwoods Russia" (65). Daniel frequently makes self-reflexive comments on the possibility of remembering and reporting what actually happened. He describes in considerable detail his father's heroic behavior in a bus against the right wing mob who attacked it on their way back from Paul Robeson's Peekskill concert. Then, the first person narrator asks: "How do I know this? I was crouched behind a seat, how do I remember this?" (62-63) Reminiscing about his past
with his parents before his father's arrest in search of a clue to confirm their innocence, Daniel writes: "I have put down everything I can remember of their actions and conversations in this period prior to their arrests. Or I think I have. Sifted it through my hands" (145). After recounting one of his visits to his parents in prison, Daniel says: "Probably none of this is true. There's a lot more I can't remember" (266).

Daniel's skepticism reminds us of Blue's speculation in Welcome to Hard Times on the difficulty of writing something down. Blue records what happened in a western town, from its destruction by an outlaw, a Bad Man from Bodie, through the reconstruction of the village by himself, to its re-destruction by the Bad Men from Bodie. For Blue "the terrible arrangement of our lives" is changing its shape like "the sand shifting under our feet". He recognizes that everything he has written does not truly tell how it was. No matter how careful he is to get it all down it still escapes him. He does not believe that what he has put down will show the truth, although he has written "as if [he] knew as [he] lived them which minutes were important and which not; and spoken as if [he] knew the exact words everyone spoke." Blue scorns himself for all the bookkeeping he has done to "fix life" and to "control things" because he recognizes that the act of writing "what happened" is a wishful and futile one. Still, he puts down everything that happened from one end to the other, hoping that it will be "recovered and read." Writing for him is an act of affirming life.
Like Blue, Daniel keeps recording what happened to him and his family. But he is a more complicated bookkeeper than Blue. His voice is multiple, and his story is blended with discourse. He also shifts styles and juxtaposes antithetical tones. After describing a rally in New York to free the Isaacsons, Daniel shifts the tone and diction of his narrative and involves himself emotionally in his story: "Oh, baby, you know it now. We done played enough games for you, ain't we. You a smart lil fucker. You know where it's at now, don' you big daddy. You got the picture. This the story of a fucking, right? You pullin' out yo lit-er-ary map, mutha? You know where we goin', right muthafuck?" (33). His display of his outrage and aggression may be disconcerting to the reader, and he switches once again to a detached tone of analyzing the postwar American mentality which "many historians have noted" (33). Daniel makes this cool objective tone an ironic one by repeating the same sentence--"many historians have noted this phenomenon"--four times in the subsequent paragraphs.

The variety of narrative strategies employed by Daniel is intended to highlight the difficulties of making a coherent story out of a series of events. Daniel is not only representative of Doctorow himself, but of all the narrators in his works from Blue in Welcome to Hard Times through the Little Boy in Ragtime, to the self-conscious story-tellers of his trilogy dealing with 1930s. All these narrators are actually engaged in the transformation of a sequence of events into a story through the process of fiction-making. They are all overwhelmed by the need to sort out a reality so complex as to defy
any attempt at objective analysis. Much of the fragmentary nature in Daniel's story reflects his disturbed pursuit of the truth that seems to elude him. Daniel's narrative strategies are then intertwined with the thematics of the story. The sophisticated fictional strategies are meant to grapple with complex realities rather than distance us from them.

Daniel views the execution of his parents within the context of a long-ranging historical framework. In a historical essay "AN INTERESTING PHENOMENON" Daniel notes the striking parallels between the McCarthy era and the post-World War I "Red Scare" including reprisals to the strikes of 1919, the Palmer raids of 1920, the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti. Reminiscent of Richard Hofstadter's proposition on the "paranoid style in American politics," Daniel claims the sacrifice of his parents was hardly a unique phenomenon in American history: "In the councils of government fierce partisanship replaces the necessary political coalitions of wartime. In the greater arena of social relations--business, labor, the community--violence rises, fear and recrimination dominate public discussion, passion prevails over reason" (33).

Daniel juxtaposes the fictional character's version of the causes of the Cold War and that of the actual historian. In a historical treatise entitled "TRUE HISTORY OF THE COLD WAR: A RAGA," Daniel argues that even before the end of the World War II, the United States never seriously considered a policy of peaceful co-existence with the Soviet Union. The title "true history" is ironic, because Daniel makes it explicit that it is only one version of cold war history.
A raga is a Hindu form of devotional music characterized by an emphasis on sequences. According to Emblidge, each raga has a "fairly definite ethical or emotional significance." Thus "true history" is analogous to one of the many ragas. Appropriately the essay is presented as part of Daniel's consciousness rather than from the omniscient author's perspective. It is only one version of the cold war history--Daniel's version appropriated from the revisionist historian William Appleman Williams.

In this version, after World War II American scientists were ignored when they warned that the atom bomb monopoly could not last more than four or five years. Daniel argues that this ephemeral atomic superiority was exploited "as a means of jamming an American world down Russia's throat" (251). The United States was haunted by a Manichean mindset during the McCarthy era. The Russians were portrayed as "aggressive, devious, untrustworthy, and brutally single-minded" (253), although according to Williams in The Tragedy of American Diplomacy, as late as 1946 Russian postwar policy had not been decided. The piece also includes Daniel's sketch of Henry Stimson's failure to convince the Truman administration of the need for a sane foreign policy toward Russia. Stimson warned that America's attempt to retain its atom bomb monopoly would precipitate an armament race of a desperate character" (249-50).

Daniel's view is shared by his fictional foster father Robert Lewin, who suggests to Daniel that "after the war our whole foreign policy depended on our having the bomb and the Soviets not having it. It was a terrible miscalculation. It militarized the world. And
when they got it the only alternative to admitting our bankruptcy of leadership and national vision was to find conspiracies. It was one or the other" (238). When Daniel evaluates the enormity of the crime alleged to be committed by his parents, he discovers that Secretary of State Acheson testified some years afterward that "never in the counsels of the Truman Cabinet did anyone seriously regard Russia as a military threat--even after they got their bomb" (254). However the Isaacsons were held to account for "the condition of the world today," and "convicted of conspiracy to give to the Soviet Union the secret of the atom bomb" (221) and executed for treason. "The Isaacsons are arrested," Daniel satirically states, "for conspiring to give the secret of television to the Soviet Union. . ." (131; Doctorow's ellipsis and italics). Daniel believes that the FBI, the agents of the political regime, composed one version of the Isaacsons' activities, and "gradually perfected the scenario" with ten overt acts (172). Since his parents were offered a chance to save their lives even after sentencing, Daniel is told by Lewin, "the death sentence itself was used as an investigative procedure" (239).

In his critique of the Cold War and his parents' trial Daniel in general identifies himself with the left. But he frequently views it with self-criticism and irony. Daniel finds his parents' traits characteristic of the left. They are filled with an enormous sense of self-importance. They believe their knowledge about history and society makes them part of a moral, intellectual elite. Daniel comes to realize that their self-esteem involves self-deception. In his father's head "everything was accounted for" except that he failed in
making the "violent connection" between his beliefs and American realities (43). He was "a more or less irresponsible child" (47). His mother was a pragmatist motivated by "the politics of want" and the frustration of her desire (43). If she had not been poor, Daniel believes, she would not have been a Communist. Their political impotence and internal weakness inspired their idealism and hatred. "They rushed after self-esteem," Daniel writes, "if you could recognize a Humphrey Bogart movie for the cheap trash it was, you had culture. If you discovered the working class you found the roots of democracy. In social justice you discovered your own virtue. To desire social justice was a way of living without envy, which is the emotion of a loser. It was a way transforming envy into constructive outgoing hate" (43). Daniel satirically draws the attention of his reader to the scene of his father's arrest by the FBI "so that you may record in clarity one of the Great Moments of the American Left."

The contrast between his parents' sense of their importance as radicals and the political realities becomes too obvious. "The American Left," Daniel says, "is in this great moment artfully reduced to the shabby conspiracies of a couple named Paul and Rochelle Isaacsons" (125).

Daniel knows that his parents were written out of the Community Party within twenty-four hours of Paul's arrest. They were "quickly and quietly erased out of existence" (138). He imagines his mother realized during the trial that they were being used by the Party for its own purposes and that the Party has "no respect for people, only for positions" (222). Then their self-delusion
in part leads them to self-destruction. "They were not innocent,"
Ascher's wife expresses her resentment of the couple to Daniel, "of
permitting themselves to be used. And of using other people in their
fanaticism" (232). As Daniel sees it, "The world was arranging itself
to suit my mother and father, like some mystical alignment of forces
in the air; so that frictionless and in physical harmony, all bodies and
objects were secreting the one sentiment that was their Passion, that
would take them from me" (124). He fully agrees with the
observation that a *New York Times* reporter has made about his
parents. "Shit, between the FBI and the CP," he tells Daniel, as if he
anticipated Radosh and Milton's argument, "your folks never had a
chance" (228).

Daniel believes that his father's belief in America as an ideal
led to his destruction. Daniel remembers his father as continuously
"astonished, insulted, outraged," because American democracy
"wasn't purer, freer, finer, more ideal" (51). In the trial he did not
say "Of course, what else could we expect"; instead he said "You are
making a mockery of American justice!" (51; italics in the text). It
was "screwy," Daniel says, for his father to expect so much of a
system that he knew by definition could never satisfy his standards
of justice. In the prison he clips a copy of the Declaration of
Independence from the *New York Times* and compares the freedoms
denied him as a political prisoner with rights the founding fathers
died for. Until the last moment Paul stuck to his belief in America.
When his children came to visit him to Sing Sing Prison before the
execution, he told them "You cannot put innocent people to death in
[America]. It can't be done" (265). Paul's belief in America was ingrained in his mind and drove him toward the end of his life to confirm the American way.20

Although Daniel thinks his parents were self-destructive and filled with self-righteous hatred, he challenges the assessment of them by "a Jewish literary critic," obviously referring to Leslie Fiedler, who claimed that the couple were "crass and hypocritical" in their calling upon their Jewish faith to sustain sympathy for themselves (134). Daniel says the critic does not understand the idea that "the perfectionist dream of heaven on earth" can be a substitute religion for the Isaacsons who abandoned their Jewish heritage. For them this Jewish yearning was internalized in the form of the Popular Front ideology of communism as "twentieth century Americanism" (134).

Daniel, in his treatment of the trial, does not make any attempt to pursue his parents' defense. Although his research uncovers a great deal of evidence indicating that his parents' trial was something less than a vindication of the ideals of American justice, he is willing to entertain the possibility that they might have been guilty of something. He does not try to deal with the murky area of the trial to demonstrate his parents' innocence. He understands that in reconstructing the story, he can hardly escape his overwhelming familial involvement. He is aware that his personal memories and imaginative reconstruction of life as a child are not much help to prove his parents' innocence or guilt. He knows that he can view the
event only from the position of a person whose psychological life is deeply implicated.

In his search for the truth about his parents Daniel briefly discusses six books written about their trial. Two support the verdict and the sentence, two support the verdict but oppose the harsh sentence, and two reject both sentence and the verdict. Daniel rejects futile oppositions between the cold war rhetoric of the government's charges and Communist propaganda about witch-hunts. He sees "no substantial difference" between the "Hearst philosopher" who totally accepts the government's position and the "liberal bleeder" who cannot imagine that left-wing idealists could be guilty of anything (243). Daniel's position about the case seems best summarized by a Times reporter. "Your folks were framed," Daniel is told, "but that doesn't mean they were innocent babes. I don't believe they were a dangerous conspiracy to pass important defense secret, but I don't believe either that the U.S. Attorney, and the Judge, and the Justice Department and the President of the United States conspired against them" (229; italics in the text). "Your parents," he continues, "had to have been into some goddam thing. They acted guilty. They were little neighborhood commies probably with some kind of third-rate operation that wasn't of use to anyone except maybe it made them feel important. Maybe what they were doing was worth five years" (230; italics in the text).

In dealing with the burden of the past Daniel's ironic skepticism distinguishes him from his sister Susan and a New Left revolutionary Artie Sternlicht. For Susan knowledge of the past
means romanticizing history. The possibility that her parents are less than completely innocent is simply unthinkable to her. Daniel's doubts about their innocence infuriate her. His failure to achieve certainty concerning the truth of their past and thus the significance of the present simply indicates his own selfish weakness and a failure of revolutionary analysis. Susan invests all of her energy in an attempt to clear her parents' names. She establishes a Foundation for Revolution in their names and attempts to transform them into martyrs. She supports the New Left which considers her parents the inventions of J. Edgar Hoover. But she realizes that the New Left is willing to take any money from any donor—even Ronald Reagan. Moreover, she comes to see that "the Isaacsons are nothing to the New Left" (169). Susan says in anger and desperation, "They're still fucking us." By "they" she means everyone else, especially the New Left (169). After this recognition Susan retreats into her self, away from the world which has tortured her. Her passion for the past and resentment of the present drives her to the point of insanity. "Today Susan is a starfish," Daniel says, "There are few silences deeper than the silence of the starfish." She has failed in making the connections between her desires and reality. She is not prepared to accept the complexities and ambiguities of the human condition, and sticks to her own exigencies. Daniel concludes: "She died of a failure of analysis" (317).

Artie Sternlicht is the opposite of Susan. Sternlicht, a Jerry Ruben type late sixties New York radical, repudiates the Old Left. According to him, the American Communist Party played by the
rules of the establishment and achieved nothing. Sternlicht argues that the Isaacsons should have used the trial as their chance to put the system on trial. If the system had found them guilty they should have found it guilty, and if the system had found them innocent they should still have found it guilty. "Your folks didn't know shit," he tells to Daniel, "The way they handled themselves at their trial was pathetic. I mean they played it by their rules. The government's rules. You know what I mean? Instead of standing up and saying fuck you, do what you want, I can't get an honest trial anyway with you fuckers--they made motions, they pleaded innocent, they spoke only when spoken to, they played the game. All right? The whole frame of reference brought them down because they acted like defendants at a trial. . . . They blew the whole goddamn thing!" (166-67; italics in the text) Sternlicht rejects not only the Isaacsons and the Old Left but everything in the past. The past must be repudiated before the future can be redeemed. As the title of a wall-sized "collage of pictures, movie stills, posters, and real objects" in his apartment suggests, for him "EVERYTHING THAT CAME BEFORE IS ALL THE SAME" (151). He says with sarcasm and irony to Daniel: "You think you are a good guy. You believe in making money honestly. You believe in free speech. . . . You think white folks are learning. You think the black folks are lifting themselves up. YOU THINK THERE'S PROGRESS. YOU THINK YOUR CHILDREN HAVE IT BETTER" (153).

But Sternlicht's total rejection of the past is a sign of his weakness. When he says that he is going to overthrow the state with
"images," Daniel knows that Sternlicht underestimates the repressive power of the state (155). He knows from experience that it can electrocute you if it wills. This is confirmed when Daniel is beaten bloody by the police in his confrontation with the state at the Pentagon. He is confronted first-hand with its power, "this many-helmeted beast of our own nation, coming through our flesh with boot and club and gun butt." The revolution with images may "make [the state] show its ass," (155) but Daniel concludes that "it is a lot easier to be a revolutionary nowadays than it used to be" (274).

Sternlicht for all his wit and irony fails to draw the logical conclusion from his antiprogressive proposition. He lumps together everything that preceded his own anarchistic insight as the same. He is satiric but not skeptical and self-reflexive. He fails to apply his own insights to his own ideas and simply assumes that significance starts with him.

Daniel is not imprisoned in the past like Susan, nor does he attempt to bury the past like Sternlicht. As a "criminal of perception" (41) he analyzes the past and makes its connections with the present. But he is aware that "a sequence of analyses" is fiction (296). Thus the story of his search for the truth about his parents, his sister, and himself takes the form of "narrative collage."21 He does not exonerate his parents. He does not offer a definite analysis of the cold war. His narrative is discontinuous, inconclusive, and of multiple voices. But there is one thing of which Daniel is certain: "Everything is elusive. God is elusive. Revolutionary morality is
elusive. Justice is elusive. Human character. Quarters for the cigarette machine" (54).

With this conviction, Daniel hopes to make the final connection in his meeting with Selig Mindish. One obstacle to his attempt at facing the past is Linda Mindish, the dentist's daughter. In trying to convince Linda to allow him to see her father, Daniel is surprised that she has the same sense of the injustice of others as he does. He has assumed that he and his sister are the only justified victims. But he discovers that Linda has her own version of the past, and that she is "as locked into her family truths as we [are] locked in ours" (291).

It is significant that Daniel's quest for historical truth occurs in Disneyland, a place where history is essentially a simulacrum—a copy of something for which there is no original. The self-contained world of Disneyland symbolizes the past, present, and future of the United States. Every aspect of American culture is encapsulated in its five major amusement areas: Frontierland, Tomorrowland, Fantasyland, Adventureland, and Main Street USA. It invites the customer to "participate in the mythic rituals of the culture" (302). But what it provides is the second-hand adaptation of myth, legend, and history, "a sentimental compression of something that is itself already a lie" (304). In this cultural and historical kitsch whose ultimate goal is the "final consumer moment" of purchase, realities mask simulations and history is sanitized. The Grand Canyon is a painted reproduction and one hundred fifty years of commercial harassment are glorified as "Pirates of the Caribbean." The Mississippi Riverboat exhibit, complete with Mark Twain and Huck
Finn aboard, totally ignores the fact of slavery and all the social criticism in Twain's novel. The only true reality existing in the amusement park is its efficiency in handling of crowds. Daniel comments it "would light admiration in the eyes of an SS transport officer" (306).

The political implications of Disneyland are clear to Daniel: "What Disneyland proposes is a technique of abbreviated shorthand culture for masses, a mindless thrill, like an electric shock that insists at the same time on the recipient's psychic relation to his country's history and language and literature" (305). The "aesthetics" of Disneyland is "totalitarian in nature," (304) and its technique is extremely useful "as a substitute for education and, eventually, as a substitute for experience" (305). For Daniel, thus, Disneyland represents a form of the power of the state different from the one he experienced in front of the Pentagon. As a more sophisticated and subtle means of controlling thought and society, it co-opts culture and manipulates people under the guise of fun and entertainment into rejoicing in the oblivion of the self and history.

Disneyland is a fantastic monument to historical mindlessness. It is paradoxical that an attempt to retrieve history takes place where history is already abolished. There could be no better setting for Daniel's final confrontation with his nemesis: the elusiveness of truth. In Tomorrowland, at the toy car ride, Daniel meets Mindish who has become an "ideal Disneyland patron" (305). But Mindish has nothing to give Daniel. His senility has released him from his past into an eternal oblivion. Daniel is unable to ask crucial questions and
to confirm his suspicions about what happened. He evokes only a
tonight's recognition and a kiss on the forehead from the old man.
Despite his best efforts, Daniel realizes, the truth is "beyond
reclamation" (312).

Daniel gives three endings to his book. In the first ending, 
Daniel "for reasons [he] cannot explain" visits his old house in the
Bronx and discovers that a black family lives there now. He realizes
that he is a suspicious outsider to them and he cannot go back. That
part of history is closed because "it's their house now" (315). The
second ending describes both the funeral of the Isaacsons and of
Susan. Susan dies, Daniel tells, of her inability to analyze the past
and to connect it to the present. Daniel draws upon his Jewish
heritage by hiring professional mourners to say kaddish, the Jewish
prayer for the dead, for his parents and sister, making his peace with
the buried past. For his third ending Daniel hoped to discuss "some
of the questions posed by this narrative" (318). But he is evicted
from the library where he is writing the last page by the radical
students who close down Columbia University in a protest against the
Vietnam War. "Close the book, man," Daniel is told, "don't you know
you're liberated?"

Daniel believes that he is liberated. Although he leaves the
ending of his book unresolved, he is able to "smile." "It," he muses,
"has not been unexpected." He closes his book, walks out of the
library, and re-enters the world to "see what's going down" (318).
Although the truth of his parents' verdict eludes him, he has found a
way to reconcile himself with the world, past and present. He can
accept the ambiguity of things human without being paralyzed. The multiplicity of endings is consistent with Daniel's epistemological skepticism. His narrative strategy--including the discontinuous and polyphonic story, deferred resolutions, mixing of discourse and story--accords well with his creator's thematic concern: the idea of history as composed fiction the true nature of which is elusive.

In his seminal essay "False Documents," and a series of interviews, Doctorow consistently claims that writing history is a very creative activity. He reminds us that professional historians are the first to express skepticism over history as a nonfictive discipline. History shares with fiction "a mode of mediating the world for the purpose of introducing meaning," and it is the "cultural authority from which they both derive that illuminates those facts so that they can be perceived." The characteristic device of historical narrative--the objective voice that gives no clues to the personality of the narrator--is closely linked to the fictive conventions of realism. "A visitor from another planet," he says, "could not by study of the techniques of discourse distinguish composed fiction from composed history." Since history and fiction are both the products of the mediating imagination, Doctorow claims, "history is a kind of fiction in which we live and hope to survive, and fiction is a kind of speculative history, perhaps a superhistory, by which the available data for the composition is seen to be greater and more various in its sources than the historian supposes."

Doctorow believes that nonfictive discourse--not only history but journalism, sociology, psychology, and so on--is all storytelling.
It composes facts according to its conventions. Psychologists and sociologists "propose to understand human character or to define it as a function of ethnic background, sexuality, age, economic class, and they produce composite portraits." Journalists decide what to look at and write about. They decide what will exist and what won't, which is a creative decision. American historians had written out of existence the history of blacks, Indians, women, etc. In Doctorow's view they are making bad art. He believes that novelists can "compose false documents more valid, more real, more truthful than the 'true' documents of the politicians or the journalists or the psychologists," and, he would add, the historians. For novelists are the only honest liars—at least they admit that they lie, and they are the "independent witnesses" who are not connected to the defense of any institution. The work of any historian, like the historical novel, is only one of many competing versions of the past.

Doctorow conceives of history as existing for most of us as a set of images. "Facts are the images of history, just as images are the data of fiction." He attempts to subvert the officially endorsed images of the America's past and replace them with counter-images. For this purpose Doctorow uses the "disreputable genres" of popular culture to disrupt certain perceptions and images rigidified and perpetuated by various elements of popular culture. He appropriates themes and characters from the Western, scientific fiction and the gangster movie, and makes variations of them, dismantling the firm grip they have upon us. As Arthur Saltzman argues, Doctorow "exploits the stereotypical conception of the good
old days only to break down our complacency."

His first novel *Welcome to Hard Times*, for example, inverts one of the popular Western formulas. As exemplified in *Shane*, in this formula a stranger rides into a town, contends with evil, destroys it, and rides off into the sunset. The novel also demystifies the romanticized image of the West which historian Frederick Jackson Turner helped to reinforce and perpetuate: an image of the sturdy independent pioneer who scorned social constraint. Doctorow parodies Turner by naming the villain of his story Clay Turner. In this drama of destruction, reconstruction, and re-destruction of a western town, the frontier is presented as an arena for violence, fraud, rape, disorder, and frequent failure, rather than as a site for just retribution, for rugged individualism, and for new beginnings.

The image of the Progressive era that emerges from *Ragtime* is notable for the conspicuous absence of characters with traits of any representative progressive reformer who was active in the period. Teddy Roosevelt is seen as a greedy big-game hunter, whereas Woodrow Wilson appears as a man "who wore rimless glasses and held moral views. When the Great War came he would wage it with the fury of the affronted." In Doctorow's "from the bottom up" rendering, the Progressive era was the period of sexual repression, class exploitation, and violent racial conflict rather than an era of social reform and democratization. Likewise, *Loon Lake* and *Billy Bathgate* provide a perverse version of the Horatio Alger myth: the story of a poor boy of the streets who catches the eye of a prominent and wealthy person and, after much pluck and luck, inherits the
person's fortune. In *Loon Lake* the prominent person is a ruthless robber baron, whereas in *Billy Bathgate* he is a murderous gangster. Joe and Billy want to preserve their older selves, but the more they strive, the further they move into the shadow world of ruthless capitalists and gangsters. Doctorow's fiction violently debunks the romantic view of the wild West, the progressiveness of the "Progressive Era," the cherished myth of Horatio Alger, and the nostalgia for the "Fabulous Fifties," and highlights the gap in American life between its ideals and its reality.

Doctorow's critical revisioning of historical eras has led some critics to label him a "political novelist." A conservative critic declares that "at the bone Doctorow is a writer of the adversary culture" who has developed "an intense distrust of [his] country that borders on hatred." Doctorow's revisioning of history, however, is not occasioned by his intention to use his fiction as a vehicle for dramatizing specific social and political convictions. For him power resides in discourse which has an actual effect on the world. He as a novelist is committed to challenging "the power of regime" with "the power of freedom." The former lays claim to the world of verifiable facts, whereas the latter lays claim to the world of the imagination. This division of language has led to the valorization of discourse that can claim a basis in fact. His goal is to disclose and challenge the hegemony of institutionalized practices of the power of regime: "What we proclaim as the discovered factual world can be challenged as the questionable world we ourselves have painted--the cultural museum of our values, dogmas, assumptions, that prescribes for us
not only what we may like and dislike, believe and disbelieve, but also what we may be permitted to see and not see."\(^{34}\)

One of the principal arenas for that engagement is in history: "History is a battlefield. It's constantly being fought over because the past controls the present. History is the present. That's why every generation writes it anew. But what most people think of as history is its end product, myth. So to be irreverent to myth, to play with it, let in some light and air, to try to combust it back into history, is to risk being seen as someone who distorts truth."\(^{35}\) His fiction resists the tendency to monopolize the composition of history with heterogeneous narratives. For him good fiction, however strong its social commitment, usually ends up "acknowledging, by its very nature, the ambiguities" of its subject matter.\(^{36}\) This attitude characterizes his treatment of the Rosenberg case as well. As Joseph Epstein says, Doctorow never steps forth to declare with certainty whether he thinks the couple innocent or guilty of the crime for which they were executed.\(^{37}\) For him the case shimmers with "the perplexing ambiguity" characteristic of a true novel.\(^{38}\) In a recent interview Doctorow says that, since there is no history except as it is composed, he wishes to "have as many people active in the composition as possible. A kind of democracy of perception. Thousands of eyes, not just one. And since we're not only talking about history, but reality as well, then it seems to me a noble aspiration of a human community to endow itself with a multiplicity of witnesses, all from this ideal of seeing through the phenomena to the truth."\(^{39}\)
This advocation of "a multiplicity of witnesses" does justice to the difficult task of reconstructing historical events. The "democratic" mind is particularly essential in representing such an elusive and complex event as the Rosenberg case, which defies any interpretive constructs we may impose upon it. Despite their contrary intention, believers in "facts" do engage in the fiction-making process to a significant extent. They are involved in the characterization of events and figures by imposing plot structures, constructing meanings, and creating character features. What distinguishes these fact-finders from Doctorow is their lack of concern with what they are doing. The absence of metafictional reflection causes their intolerance of the unresolvable ambiguity surrounding the case. They do not admit that for every explanation of guilt there is an equally plausible one for innocence, and vice versa. They want "either-or" answers to their quest for historical truth: either the trip of Morton Sobell to Mexico is the "flight" of a spy from possible persecution, or it is an innocent trip coincident with the arrest of Julius Rosenberg; either Gold's change of the password from "I come from Ben" to "I come from Julius" is the result of refreshed memory, or it is an FBI fabrication; either Gold and Greenglass are liars, or the Rosenbergs are liars. Although the evidence is inconclusive, these fact-finders adhere to their own version of the story and dismiss all others, accusing each other of selective research and the abuse of materials. Doctorow, on the other hand, consistently reminds his readers of his own involvement in the historical representation. His diverse narrative strategies, thematic
concerns, and constant self-reflection of his own fiction-making process, are intended to expose the fictionality of the official version of history that many of us take as being what actually happened. The vision of "democracy of perception" has a potential for resistance, at least at the individual level, against the existing system, for it frees us from our belief in the public myth imposed by institutionalized practices of the regime of power.
Notes


5. Radosh, letter to author.


20. Doctorow would agree with Sacvan Bercovitch's argument that the radicalism of classic American writers affirmed the existing values of American society rather than subverted them. They adopted the culture's controlling metaphor--America as synonym for human possibility--and made this consensus the ground of their radical dissent. In the very act of denouncing the present America, thus, America is identified with utopia, and utopia with the essence of the American Way. See Bercovitch, "The Problem of Ideology in American Literary History," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1986), pp. 631-54.


23. *Ibid*.


27. Doctorow, interview by Paul Levine, p. 69.


31. Turner argues that the frontier had an important shaping influence upon the American character in developing such qualities as rugged individualism and democracy. The frontier experience for Turner thus created a set of national personality traits: "That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom--these are the traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier" [Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 1893; rpt. in F.J. Turner, Frontier and Section, ed. R.A. Billington (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1961), p. 61].


34. Doctorow, "False Documents," p. 17.


Chapter 6. "Randomness as Design": Coover's Epistemological Exercise in *The Public Burning*

*The Book of Daniel* possesses a dual status as historical fiction. On the one hand it proceeds as if it was a completely fictive work. Susan's response to her past does not comport with what actually happened. But no reader would dismiss the novel on the grounds that the Rosenberg children did not respond in the same way. On the other hand, the novel generates the expectations that are created when a novelist deals directly with recorded history. The reader is constantly asked to relate it to the actual Rosenberg case. Doctorow's self-conscious flaunting of this dual status insists that the novel be accepted as both fiction and history at the same time. This strategy creates a tension in the work and a resistance in the reader because it violates the generic conventions of the traditional historical novel and of written history. The offence prompts the reader, however uncomfortably, to reconsider the apparent difference between the novel and history.

Robert Coover goes one step farther in *The Public Burning* to disrupt the presumed distinction between the historical and the fictional. He does not disguise his characters with fictitious names. Most of his characters are historical figures from the Rosenbergs, Eisenhower, and Senator McCarthy to Cecil B. Demille and Einstein. In addition, the principal narrator identifies himself as Richard Milhous Nixon, the then-Vice President of the United States. The
novel is set in a historical period, the three days preceding the
exection of the Rosenbergs on June 19, 1953. However, Coover's
goal is not the objective reconstruction of the actual history of the
Rosenberg case. Despite his extensive research into public data such
as trial records, newspapers, magazines, memoirs, interviews, and
the like, we cannot know with certainty if the data are accurate. The
mass of information that Coover presents supports contradictory
interpretations of the case depending on one's needs and interests.
It remains unknowable whether the Rosenbergs were really guilty or
innocent.

What Coover is mainly concerned with through the Rosenberg
case is the question of how we can know the truth of our perception
of real events, especially historical ones. For Coover history and
fiction no longer appear to be strictly separable. As he conceives it,
the domain of facts is not a given, but rather a product of selecting
some features of an event, while neglecting others according to
prevailing epistemological conventions. Coover deliberately
contradicts the known historical facts. He places real-world historical
figures in an impossible, unreal world among purely fictional
characters whose mode of existence is fantastic, and thus questions
the apparent ontological distinction between fiction and history.
Coover's attitude, as shown in the caustic reviews of *The Public
Burning*, was criticized for distorting historical reality and rejoicing in
"a mindless relativism."¹ However, his epistemological exercise of
making multiple fictions out of historical reality using imagination
can be seen, as he claims, as "a moral act."² This chapter will argue
for this view by examining Coover's attitudes towards history and morality through his treatment of the Rosenberg case.

*The Public Burning* recasts Coover's major theme that has ruled his writing since *The Origin of the Brunists*: the concept of "man-as-fiction-maker."3 To cope with the world and to give meaning to their life his characters are constantly engaged in constructing systems and patterns which are fictional at their core. The systems they create are diverse: a religious system (*The Origin of the Brunists*); a personal table-top baseball game (*The Universal Baseball Association*); art, myth, the fairy tales, the Bible stories (*Pricksongs and Descants, After Lazarus*); politics (*A Political Fable*); and history (*The Public Burning*). Coover's strategy is to use familiar stories from various well-established sources to undercut the hold which they have upon us by revealing their fictionality. In *The Public Burning* he takes up and challenges Americans' common belief that the Rosenbergs gave the Soviet Union the secret of the atomic bomb.

Structurally the novel consists of a Prologue, twenty eight chapters and an Epilogue. The main chapters are divided into four parts with three "Intermezzos" separating them. Every odd chapter is narrated by Nixon, and the other segments use a variety of styles and voices to depict the global and national events leading up to the execution. The reality of the events that the reader experiences is on the one hand filtered through Nixon's consciousness, which operates in the realm of speculation and the fantastic. On the other hand, in the alternate chapters Coover tries to present "all the sounds of a nation,"4 the voices from primary data of history such as the reports
from the *New York Times*, trial transcripts, and Eisenhower speeches. Paradoxically, Nixon's fantasy appears more real than the arrangement of raw historical materials which gives the impression of total fantasy. "For Coover's reader," as Jackson Cope points out, "history is fantasy; fantasy is history."

In Coover's fiction, the world view of the cold war Eisenhower era is fantasized into a Manichean struggle between Good and Bad, Light and Dark. One of the opponents is Uncle Sam, who is personified as a sort of prairie, boondock Zeus, complete with goatee, corncob pipe, and red, white, and blue costume. He embodies a peculiar mixture of healthy conviction, wild energy, folksiness, meanness, irascibility, and opportunism. He presents the objective voice of the United States, which is usually a motley array of cliches drawn from a host of American heroes of pop culture and history. He sometimes mysteriously incarnates himself as Presidents and frequently as the voice of a newscaster. The historical and the fantastic are blended in Uncle Sam, which complicates the ontological distinction between them. Underneath his apparent plurality Sam represents a dominant American ideology, set forth in the sacramental doctrine of "manifest dust-in-yer-eye" and "Armageddon" meaning America's "Dominion over the Whole World".

The other opponent is the Phantom, which remains unpersonalized and immaterialized. It can be the elusive menace of Communism, or atheism, or whatever opposes the will of Uncle Sam. It is supposed to strive for world power and cause global mischief.
In its vagueness, it is an incarnation of all the subtle vicious demonizing of life and thought. It is a mysterious, fearsome force, which Sam hopes to flush "from his underground cells, force him to materialize, and show himself plainly in the honest electrical glow" of the Rosenbergs' execution (4).

In the middle of the 1940's, Uncle Sam was ahead of the Phantom by 443,000,000 people. By the end of the decade, however, the Phantom scored 800,000,000 and Uncle Sam only 590,000,000, with 600,000,000 neutrals. Despite the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and NATO, the Phantom expelled Chiang Kai-shek to Formosa, caused the United States Secretary of Defense to commit suicide, and exploded its first atom bomb. The conclusion that J. Edgar Hoover, "America's top cop," reached was: "it's a spy ring, has to be, it always is. I mean, there's only one secret, isn't there? We had it, now they've got it, it's that simple. . . . The secret of the atom bomb has been stolen! Mobilize every resource! Find the thieves!" (15)

Coover is uncertain about what the thieves had stolen. He on the one hand offers the prosecution's presentation, the judge's statement, and the President's reason for denying clemency—which all point to the enormity of the crime. As Uncle Sam recapitulates it, the Rosenbergs betrayed "eternal secrets which were preserved in Heaven," and thus they, as thieves of light, should be burned by light. In contrast, Coover's Nixon seriously doubts the Wagnerian scope that Uncle Sam has imposed upon their crime and tries to imagine different versions of the case. It is through Nixon's speculation that
the major issues of the novel emerge regarding history, reality and language. Nixon yearns for certainty and stability. He hates "paradox" more than "psychiatrists and lady journalists." He does not believe in dialectical space, which is "a spooky artificial no-man's land, between logical alternatives" (136). "It's either/or as far as I'm concerned" (48), Nixon contends. He is attracted to Uncle Sam because he sees him as "our Superchief in an age of Flux," (341) and is repelled by the Phantom because he is "the Creator of Ambiguities" (336). In his attempt to make sense of the Rosenberg case, however, Nixon is confronted with the very problem of ambiguities and how to organize contradictory facts of the case through language.

Nixon believes that the Phantom has arranged the random elements of history for his cause and thus "made History a partisan ally" (136). But at first Nixon fails to extend this perception to Uncle Sam. His primary concern is with the guilt or innocence of the Rosenbergs, and for him the case is "cut-and-dry" (81). Being asked what he thinks about the case by Uncle Sam, Nixon submits his belief that they are probably guilty, although "a lot of backstage scene-rigging and testimony-shaping by the prosecution team" (81-82) took place. In a furious refutation of Nixon's speculation, Uncle Sam presents his view of the case and history. "All courtroom testimony about the past," Uncle Sam claims, is "ipso facto and teetotaciously a baldface lie," "moonshine," "chicanery." For Uncle Sam the past is "a bucket of cold ashes: rake through it and all you'll get is dirty!" Fact is fatally futile, and only appearances count. Thus Uncle Sam contends that "practical politics consists in ignorin' facts! Opinion
ultimately governs the world! " Thus, history is "more or less bunk." Whether history is called a set of "bollozeratin' sophistries," "mettyfours," or "approximations," Uncle Sam declares, it is "the same desputt humbuggery" (86).

At this point Nixon does not understand the larger meaning of the case that Uncle Sam seeks to make. He does not grasp the message when Uncle Sam tells him that "This ain't just another ballgame, johnny, we are gonna have to fight for the reestablishment of our national character, . . . the last best hope of the earth--namely, me" (94). To cope with the anxiety and hysteria of the American public caused by the fear of Communism, Uncle Sam has constructed a myth which simplifies the complicated political and historical realities into the struggle between good and evil. He also needs a ritual to recapture a sense of community by providing a scapegoat for the public. However, Nixon does not understand the ritualistic function of the case presented by Uncle Sam.

Nixon struggles with the problem of what is expected of him by Uncle Sam and tries to make sense of the Rosenberg case and do something about it. He examines briefs, transcripts, evidence, and reports that comprise the government case against the Rosenbergs. Nixon's analysis of the trial is reminiscent of the Schneirs' *Invitation to an Inquest*, although he draws different conclusions. The FBI helped Saypol to produce a "brilliant working script" and to rehearse Gold and Greenglass together in the "singing quarters" of the Tombs prison to perfect their interlocking testimony (121). Saypol made "a series of overlapping fictions cohere into a convincing semblance of
historical continuity and logical truth" (122). For Nixon Kaufman was a star of the case. He maintained tight control of the development of the case. He intervened in the trial only at the right moment to bolster the prosecution case and weaken the Rosenberg defense. He heightened the momentum of the prosecution with a brief recess and remained silent when Bloch made obvious blunders. He gave the Rosenbergs the death penalty because he understood Uncle Sam's intention of applying maximum pressure to make them talk.

Nixon believes Gold was an "incorrigible fantasist" (124). He invented a wife, twin children, and other fantastic things. In his first conversation with his lawyer, there was no mention of his meeting with a soldier in Albuquerque, "I come from Julius" code, and Jell-O box top. Nixon speculates that if Gold actually used Julius's name, it was a strong evidence that Rosenberg was not involved, for spies would not use actual names as recognition signals. Gold suddenly began to remember these things after he had a couple of weeks with the FBI agents. Nixon thinks Greenglass might have been guilty. His testimony seemed real especially since it involved his sister's life. But Nixon points out that it was "too polished" as if rehearsed. He seemed to "remember odd things too readily" (133). Besides he "laughingly" confessed everything at the first night he was interviewed by the FBI (132).

Nixon is suspicious of the "FBI legend" of Fuchs' leading the FBI to Gold and Gold to Greenglass. In fact, the FBI was watching Gold long before Fuchs' confession, and Greenglass's name was on the list of 20 possible names as soon as Gold "remembered" an "unknown
individual in Albuquerque" (132). Fuchs repeatedly denied that Gold was his American courier until he was worn down by the persistent FBI agents who were sent to England to interview him. Nixon believes all that the trial proved was there were spies in America and the Rosenbergs were left-wingers sympathetic to Russia. There was no hard evidence that could link two facts together except the Julius greeting, which he believes is fabricated along with other things Saypol offered in the trial from a "special section [in the FBI] which does nothing but produce fake documents" (123).

Nixon's analysis strongly suggests that the Rosenberg trial was unjust. They were not guilty as charged, and even had they been, the punishment was excessive. But Coover dose not come forth to say whether the Rosenbergs were innocent. Instead Coover's Nixon highlights the theatricality of the trial. Everyone, Nixon notes, was "behaving like actors . . . in a play" (117). Saypol "rehearsed" the witnesses, and Kaufman was like the "director" of his own play with his own "actors" and "script" (119). Gold may have been "the real playwright here" (126). The Rosenbergs are criticized for their poor performances. Nixon suggests that their "phony" roles gave "the lie to their testimony." They cast themselves into the roles of "the ordinary middle-class American couple, romantic and hardworking, loving parents, being framed by a deceitful and unnatural brother, backed by a monstrous State bureaucracy, victimized by some ghastly error." But they acted out their roles "awkwardly." Julius moved like a "whey-faced automaton in his stiff blue suit," while Ethel's composure was "stony" (127). They were victims who,
trapped by the glory of historical precedents, disappeared into roles they did not have to play. Nixon wonders if the whole Rosenberg case might be a fantastic drama: "what if, I wondered, there were no spy ring at all? What if all these characters believed there was and acted out their parts on this assumption, a whole courtroom full of fantasists. . . . the Rosenbergs, thinking everybody was crazy, nevertheless fell for it, moving ineluctably into the martyr roles they'd been waiting for all along, eager to be admired and pitied" (135). The Rosenbergs were seduced by the self-destructive "zeal for pattern" and "story." "If they could say to hell with History," Nixon speculates, "they'd be home free" (305).

In the histrionic and fantastic nature of the trial Nixon discovers the ambiguity of historical interpretation. He asks: "What was fact, what intent, what was framework, what was essence? Strange, the impact of History, the grip it had on us, yet it was nothing but words. Accidental accretions for the most part, leaving most of the story out" (136). At the same time, Nixon is aware that history is never "literal." If it were, "it would have no pattern at all, we'd all be lost" (203). He reasons that history is linguistic artifice which enables us to navigate in the sea of ambiguities and contradictions: "How could one . . . isolate and define the essential debate, keep it clean from diffuseness and mind-numbing paradox? . . . That was what language was for: to transcend the confusions, restore the spirit, recreate the society!" (234)

Nixon believes that the Phantom organizes a sequence of events into fiction useful to his cause through the vehicle of
language. But he fails to extend this recognition to Uncle Sam. When a cabdriver recognizes the essence of the Rosenberg case, Nixon thinks he is the disguised Phantom.

"Look," he [the cabdriver] said, his voice mellowing, losing its hard twang, "can't we get past all these worn-out rituals, these stupid fuckin' reflexes?" It wouldn't do any good to grab him, I knew. The ungraspable Phantom. He was made of nothing solid, your hand would just slip right through, probably turn leprous forever. "They got nothin' to do with life, you know that, life's always new and changing, so why fuck it up with all this shit about scapegoats, sacrifices, initiation, saturnalias--? . . . life's too big, you can't wrap it up like that!" (273)

Nixon, however, eventually follows the cabdriver's advice and tries to free himself from "worn-out rituals." He proclaims that the world is in flux and that the imposition of order is fiction, whether it is the Phantom's or Uncle Sam's. He accepts that there are "no scripts, no necessary patterns, no final scenes," "no author, no director." There is "just action, and then more action" (362). He now believes that "all men contain all views, right and left, theistic and atheistic, legalistic and anarchical, monadic and pluralistic; and only an artificial--call it political--commitment to consistency makes them hold steadfast to singular positions" (363).

After this recognition, the struggle against the Phantom is transformed from "a War between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness" (362) into "a war against the lie of purpose" (363). Nixon decides to work out his own script and to go to Ethel to urge her to reject "the lie of purpose." "We've both been victims of the same lie," he pleads. "There is no purpose, there are no causes, all that's just
stuff we make up to hold the goddamn world together--all we've
really got is what we have right here and now: being alive! *Don't
throw it away, Ethel!*" (436) Nixon tries to persuade her to confess,
to make love, and to change America's destiny. He feels "an
incredible new power, a new freedom. Where did it come from?
Uncle Sam? The Phantom? Both at once? From neither . . . I had
escaped them both" (442).

By the end of the novel, Coover totally demystifies the
benevolence of Uncle Sam. Here all of his folksiness disappears and
the amoral aspect of his nature is exposed. Nixon confesses that
Uncle Sam is not the same as when he was a boy and that Uncle Sam
is "no better than the Phantom" (531). When Nixon accuses Uncle
Sam of killing the Rosenbergs and calls him "a butcher," "a beast,"
Uncle Sam refutes Nixon's accusation by answering that death and
destruction are part of a game: "It ain't easy holdin' a community
together, order ain't what comes natural, you know that, boy, and a
lotta people gotta get killt tryin't to pretend it is, that's how the game
is played" (531). Moments later while preparing to sodomize Nixon
to impregnate him as the incarnation of power, Uncle Sam reveals his
cold power-seeking nature: "they's political axiom that
wheresomever a vacuum exists, it will be filled by the nearest or
strongest power! Well, you're lookin' at it, mister: an example and
fit instrument, big as they come in this world and gittin' bigger by
the minute! Towerin' genius disdains a beaten path--it seeks regions
hitherto unexplored--so clutch aholt on somethin' an say your
prayers, cus I propose to move immejitly upon your works" (532).
The fact that the Phantom never materializes except in the eyes of Uncle Sam suggests that in Coover's conception the real source of evil is the power of Uncle Sam himself and his willingness to use it to dominate others.7

As Coover sees it, the public mind seems unable to produce more than cliches and stereotypes. In his examination of the New York Times and Time magazine, Coover satirizes the simplicity of the public conception of reality and the role of the media in formulating the group notions of reality. He also exposes the limitations of journalistic facts and by extension history. He suggests that the media impose an arbitrary pattern upon reality. The Times provides "a talisman against the terrible flux" (188), and "a tenacious faith in the residual magic of language." It tries to reconstruct each fleeting day with language in the hope of discovering "some pattern, some coherence, some meaningful dialogue with time" (191) for the public who wants to "commune with the latest transactions of the Spirit of History." Since "men fear only surprises" (188), the Times avoids "the sorcery, the terrible center, the edgeless edge" (195). It defines "meaningful actions merely by showing them" (191).

Thus Rosenberg, a believer in "History and Reason," thought that "if he could just find his way onto these tablets (i.e., the record of history) everything would be all right." Coover has Rosenberg realize that this was an illusion. Rosenberg cannot recognize his own image in the Times which has grown "gigantesque, eviscerated, unseeing" like the image on "some weird funhouse mirror." He finds that "nothing living ever appears" in the Times static tableau within
which only "a reasonable and orderly picture of life can unfold. No matter how crazy it is" (192). "Objectivity" in journalism and history is a "willful program for the stacking of perceptions" (191). The Times is a monument to the losing fight for objectivity. Coover parodies this arbitrary imposition of order upon the "terrible abysses" and its perpetuation (196): "The great experience of the twentieth century has been to accept the objective reality of time and thus of process--history does not repeat, the universe is not changeless, masses dissolve and slide through the fingers, there are no precognitions--and out in that flow all such assertions may be true, false, inconsequential, or all at the same time" (195). Instead of the orderly picture of life, Coover poses a paradoxical world view of randomness as design: "Design as a game. Randomness as design. Design ironically revealing randomness. Arbitrariness as a principle, allowing us to laugh at the tragic" (190). Coover suggests that this recognition of the arbitrary ordering of the world can liberate us from the power of the press and the simplicity of public conception and eventually help us wrestle with the world.

America's "Poet Laureate" TIME, Coover maintains, which is the personification of the power of the press, proclaims itself as mythmaker of society. It serves the public's legitimate need for information and analysis of it. That is, it attempts to give form to the permanent flow of overabundant and unstructured information. In addition, TIME turns historical cliches such as the American Dream, the Melting Pot and the American mission into facts. It openly
declares its willingness to manipulate raw data and stresses the need to make fiction out of disorder and randomness:

It is not enough to present facts . . . Raw data is paralyzing, a nightmare, there's too much of it and man's mind is quickly engulfed by it. Poetry is the art of subordinating facts to the imagination, of giving them shape and visibility, keeping them personal. It is, as Mother Luce has said, "fakery in allegiance to the truth," a kind of interpretive reenactment of the overabundant flow of events, "an effective mosaic" assembled from "the fragmentary documents" of life, quickened with audacious imagery and a distinct and original prosody: "Noses for news lie betwixt ears for music." Some would say that such deep personal involvement, such metaphoric compressions and reliance on inner vision and imaginary "sources," must make objectivity impossible, and TIME would agree with them, but he would find simply illiterate anyone who concluded from this that he was not serving Truth. More: he would argue that objectivity is an impossible illusion, a "fantastic claim" ("gnostic" is the word on his tongue these days), and as an ideal perhaps even immoral, that only through the frankly biased and distorting lens of art is any real grasp of the facts--not to mention Ultimate Truth--even remotely possible (320).

This assessment of the "frankly biased and distorting lens of art" and subordination of "facts to the imagination" is also applicable to Coover's own attempts to present a better fiction in *The Public Burning*. Through his awareness of his own fiction making, Coover prevents his fiction from being transformed into "something hard and . . . durable" (195).

Coover's frame of reference for his satire in *The Public Burning* is hardened fiction--fiction rigidified into fact. What he challenges is the way "fictions get pushed into dogmas, invested with a force of reality, a sense of literal truth, that they were never meant to be."8
His fantasization of the Rosenberg execution into a huge circus show is an inversion of this in which facts appear fantastic to highlight the fictionality of history. For him history, like other forms of our conceptual constructions, is a form of fiction. Coover moves the execution from Sing Sing to Times Square, a "luminous navel" (164) of the United States and the "ritual center of the Western World" (166). The ceremony is emceed by Uncle Sam. Among the celebrities invited are Gary Cooper, John D. Rockefeller, William Faulkner, Billy Graham, and European bigwigs including Winston Churchill and Jean-Paul Sartre. An entertainment committee chaired by Cecil B. Demille has organized pre-execution festivities including all manner of entertainment assisted by Betty Crocker, Walt Disney, and Ed Sullivan, among others. Countless bands perform, and there are sing-alongs, prayers, sermons, and the grand entrance parade of the whole cast involved in the Rosenberg trial, climaxing with the Republican elephant. Mini dramas reenact the major chapters of American history. Contests follow skits and readings of the Rosenberg letters. As Coover said in retrospect, "all that has happened that day happens here, in a way; everything is condensed into one big circus event." 9 Here American history and ideas are reduced to entertainments. With all the thrills, tears, and laughter, it is the greatest show of shows.

The execution scene is not only a circus show, a spectacle, a safe entertainment for the public; it is also a ritual of civil religion that serves as a substitute for "true" religion and myth. The event is a consecration, "a new charter of the moral and social order of the
western world" (419). It is a "carnival," potentially dangerous and involving a sexual orgy, a bloodshed, and a birth of a new king.\textsuperscript{10} A sacrificial burning arouses an erotic excitement. Nixon speculates that everyone in the country would admit awakening "this morning from the foment of strange gamey dreams with prodigious erections and enflamed crevices" (163). In Times Square Uncle Sam encourages close body contact, provides free drinks and appropriate entertainment. "Sex'll cause the flame to grow," he says, "You gotta plow up a field before you can grow something in it" (358). At the peak of the pre-execution ceremony Nixon is spirited away from Sing Sing with Ethel to the stage in Times Square with his pants down and "I AM A SCAMP" lipsticked on his butt. Nixon, however, turns the humiliating situation to his advantage and compels Uncle Sam to vanish himself from the scene by demanding that he join others in a ceremony of dropping his "PANTS DOWN FOR GOD AND COUNTRY!"

The disappearance of Uncle Sam provokes an orgy among the assembled mass: "The massa's gone away, and they are really crackin' corn!" (492) But Uncle Sam returns with atomic light in his hand and ends "what might have been some ultimate orgasmic fusion" (493). The light returns "like a mushroom," and Nixon gets a "wacking high-buttoned boot in his henchbone" from Betty Crocker for his naughty behavior (498). The Rosenbergs are burned. The banishment of scapegoats appears to signal the victory of Uncle Sam over the Phantom and guarantee the restoration of light in America.

But Coover inverts this familiar formula of a carnival. The entire ritual that Uncle Sam enacts does not result in the birth of
something new. The only renewal that takes place in the novel is that of a new Nixon coming back once again and overcoming another of his crises. Nixon is not liberated from Uncle Sam's ideology of the American Way. He embodies it. His rebellion against Uncle Sam in Sing Sing and Times Square leads only to his confession that "I . . . I love you, Uncle Sam," when he is sodomized by Uncle Sam, who incarnates himself in Nixon to symbolize his eventual selection for President. As Uncle Sam urges, Nixon loves him as he really is: "Sam Slick the Yankee Peddler, gun-totin' hustler and tooth-'n'-claw tamer of the heathen wilderness, lusty and in everything a screamin' meddler, novus ball-bustin' ordo seclorum, that's me, boy" (531-32). Coover's parody heightens the sense of national guilt that he feels had been forgotten and repressed over the years by the nation as a whole.

The execution of the Rosenbergs thus serves as a ritualistic return to what Coover calls "dream time." Dream time, he says in an interview, is "a ritual return to the mythic roots of a group of people." "If you go back to dream time," he continues, "you must first pretend that the tribe has not yet been civilized, that the rules you live by have not yet come into existence. So everything gets turned upside down . . . and then . . . you re-create the society and discover your place in it." Thus dream time is like an act of artistic creation: "Most of the society's effort goes into forging the construct, the creative form in which everybody can live . . . It is the job of the politicians . . . to organize it. Whatever form they set up is necessarily entropic . . . then something new is built." In Coover's
conception, the fiction writer's role is to help us to return to dream time: "Artists re-create: They make us think about doing all the things we shouldn't do, all the impossible, apocalyptic things; and weaken and tear down structures so that they can be rebuilt, releasing new energies." Thus the fantasization of the execution event is for Coover "a kind of confrontation with History, the liberal dogma of History, [and] also a kind of enhancement of it, a celebration, a deep respect for the moment itself." In this way, as Frank Gado rightly perceives, Coover can be "an anarchist and be constructive at the same time."

When Coover was an undergraduate, he was preoccupied with the problem of Christian belief. He could not solve the problem of the historical truth of Jesus Christ and the Bible. Thus as a way to understand the matter he "imagined a character like Jesus, created him in my own mind, and carried this thing on with him. Rather than try to discuss the historical arguments for his existence or non-existence, or to investigate what had happened to the Gospel texts and how much we could depend on the various parts, I merely took the story itself, and, involving myself in it, considered various variations." He did not attempt to demythologize Christianity by eliminating those things in the Bible that look ridiculous to the modern eyes. Rather he accepted it all as story, "not as literal truth but simply as a story that tells us something, metaphorically, about ourselves and the world." He dealt with myth on its own grounds by using the energy stored within the mythic residues to break up
the bond they have upon us. To do otherwise is "like trying to solve a physics problem by psychoanalysis." 17

This strategy is true also for his investigation of the Rosenberg case. Even though an enormous amount of factual data about the case is provided in The Public Burning, the legitimate historical questions about it, such as the Rosenbergs' guilt or innocence, and the like, are less important to the book than the real motive behind their punishment and the way in which the couple are used by Uncle Sam and other characters. All the major characters are confronted with the same problem of how to deal with the complex and contradictory nature of reality and react to it in the same way. They make fictions out of it that they feel comfortable with. As Coover sees it, the making of fiction is "a useful--even necessary--means of navigating through life," which is of a chaotic and disruptive nature. 18 If our perception of the world requires constructing fictions, Coover claims, "the fiction maker's function is to furnish better fictions with which we can reform our notions of things." 19

What is unique in Coover is his thorough-going self-consciousness toward his own fiction-making. The novelist must understand how much of a role he can play. Although he may write about a historical event, he can have little say in determining its outcome. As Coover's Arthur Miller says with a sigh in the pre-execution ceremony, art is "not as lethal as one might hope" (422). Miller realizes that changing the ending of The Crucible will not change the ending of the Rosenberg trial. Tale-telling may, Coover thinks, "challenge, disrupt, subvert, etc., but as to how much real
power it has"--"not much."20 In an interview, he comments on the writer's experience: it "is paradoxical like life itself. The imposing of order on a disordered reality--That's how cities work, how sciences develop, how diseases are treated. Fiction only reflects that. Only with more irony, since it's also more self-aware about what it's doing, exposing its own activity as it goes along."21

Thus for Coover the premise that all conceptualization is a kind of fiction-making is meant to be reflexive. That is, his notion of the universal fiction-making process is itself a fiction. In general, relativistic claims of a reflexive type like Coover's emerge during the mature stage of relativism.22 In its initial stage, relativistic claims are usually presented as nonreflexive and hence as objective. If Coover's claim that all conceptions are fiction is meant to be true of all conceptions, but not of itself, this special exception would appear to be unjustified and to make his position inconsistent.

Recognizing this situation, Coover presents his position as reflexive. However, in this case, he encounters another embarrassing situation, one that afflicts all reflexive relativistic positions. Suppose that every member of a community comes up with his own fiction and ignores the fictions of others since his fiction is different. There seems to be no way to avoid moral chaos. When asked about this bizarre case, Coover answers:

Communally held moral values come and go--indeed, communities themselves come and go--but the basic thrust toward community . . . is a constant. . . . The fiction-making process itself in part a groping for some communicable truth, a group truth, as it were. The tools are poor and the truth
itself may be metamorphosing on us all the time, such that the process is endless and riven with inevitable dispute, but it's not simply relativistic. We are all . . . a product of our time and place.23

Thus, Coover's willingness to accept alternative versions of truths or events does not mean that everything goes, or that truths are no longer to be distinguished from falsehoods. His concept of fiction essentially involves the notion of community, or of history, and consequently of ideology. The process of fiction-making is bound by the community to which he belongs. His relativism assumes a pre-existent community. At the same time that he recognizes the limitations in making a fiction, Coover warns against the danger of dogmatizing fiction, that is, the danger of taking fictions as facts. For him self-conscious fiction has a double purpose. On the one hand, it "struggles against the falsehoods, dogmas, confusions, all the old debris of the dead fictions." On the other hand, it "draws into itself what seem to be the truths of the world at any given moment."24

Thus Coover does not hold to any "universal or timeless" notion of morality as he challenges the idea of "History": "I think this is purely a human invention; I don't believe it exists in the world as such, there's no 'good' behaviour and 'bad' behaviour in universal terms, just actions and our communal judgements about them."25

For Coover, as for Doctorow, history is a story written by somebody and accepted and propagated by a group or a society. It is a social construct, an epistemological convention, and an institutional force which impinges on us. As such it is powerful, but overridable, as social and human conditions change. Hence, Coover and Doctorow
seek to explore, interrogate and re-envision it by making their characters re-experience an important moment of it. They challenge the sacrosanct and objective power which we have imposed upon history--making it History. Accordingly, Doctorow's disguised and Coover's fantasized stories of the Rosenberg case are intended to uncover the fictive and mythic nature the pattern and order which we construct from random and contingent history. Their fictionalization and fantasization of history does not mean literally to deny the real difference between fiction and history, fantasy and reality. Only insane persons would do that. Rather, their aim is to make the essence of an historical event appear more vivid, more readily experienced, than its factual representations. As the narrator of *The Universal Baseball Association Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.*, says, perfection is not "a thing, a closed moment, a static fact," but "process," a process of never-ending transformation. In this process, the role of the fiction writer is to extend our perception of some of the phenomena of the world by shedding new light upon them with his imagination. His self-conscious fiction can provide a way to wrestle with the universe while it is endlessly changing shape. This effort, as Coover believes, can be a moral act.
In their engagement with the Rosenberg case, Coover and Doctorow highlight the fictive quality of many ostensible facts of the case and the McCarthy era. Their fusion of the fantastic and the factual, however, has enraged those who take their stories literally. Norman Podhoretz's condemnation of Coover's practice is representative:

Here, then, is a novel that... put[s] words into the mouths of real people who never spoke such words, mixing these fictional words so cunningly with passages from their own speeches or writings... Here, too, is a book that accuses real people of the foulest motives and the most hideous behavior imaginable—all without the slightest basis in fact. Should such a book be called a novel? I think not. I think it should be called a lie. And because it hides behind the immunities of artistic freedom to protect itself from being held to the normal standards of truthful discourse, it should not only be called a lie, it should also be called a cowardly lie.¹

Podhoretz's criticism is grounded in the acceptance of the traditional conventions of the historical novel. But his attack loses its critical edge because Coover's novel is intended to challenge the very conventions to which Podhoretz adheres. This chapter will explore the importance of generic conventions and the reader's expectations to illuminate issues in the debate over fact and fiction. I shall first discuss some prominent cases in the annals of scandals and controversies in American journalism--the scandal involving Janet Cooke's story about a drug-addicted child in the Washington Post and
the controversy around Alastair Reid's stories in the New Yorker—because the issues are most dramatically highlighted in these problematic instances. Through the analysis of these cases I shall try to argue that the distinction between fact and fiction is not as real as it appears. Then I shall examine William Styron's The Confessions of Nat Turner and Doctorow's Ragtime together with other more traditional historical novels to illustrate the role of conventions in our response to them. Finally, I shall argue that the recognition of the fictive nature of the differentiation between fact and fiction is not necessarily liberating and that it leads us to realize the need for fiction.

On September 28, 1980, the front page of the Washington Post carried a news story called "Jimmy's World" by a young black reporter Janet Cooke. It was an account of an urban tragedy, the life and views of an 8-year-old heroin addict identified as Jimmy. The story was an intimate profile of "a precocious little boy with sandy hair, velvety brown eyes and needle marks freckling the baby-smooth skin of his thin brown arms" and his family. It said that Jimmy had been on drugs since the age of five and that he lived with his mother and her boy friend, Ron, in a house where "junkies casually buy heroin from Ron." The piece quoted Jimmy as saying he did not usually go to school, but when he did, it was only to learn math, because he believed he had to "know how to do some figuring...to go into business," once he grew up. It ended with a vivid description of a scene in which Ron injected Jimmy with heroin:
The needle slides into the boy's soft skin like a straw pushed into the center of a freshly baked cake. Liquid ebbs out of the syringe, replaced by bright red blood. The blood is then reinjected into the child.

Jimmy has closed his eyes during the whole procedure, but now he opens them, looking quickly around the room. He climbs into a rocking chair and sits, his head dipping and snapping upright again, in what addicts call "the nod."

"Pretty soon, man," Ron says, "you got to learn how to do this for yourself."2

The story was dramatic and powerful. Shocked by Cooke's account, Washington Mayor Marion S. Barry Jr. ordered the police to find Jimmy. An intensive search for the boy began. A special task force of police and social workers was deployed. When the search proved futile, the mayor expressed his doubt about the story: "I've been told the story was part myth and reality." "We don't believe," he said, "that the mother or the pusher would allow a reporter to see them shoot up."3 Some of Cooke's colleagues began to suspect the authenticity of the story too. Cooke refused to reveal Jimmy's whereabouts to her editors and the police. The Post editors maintained their Watergate mode to "protect the source and back the reporter"4 and assured her that they would support her, if she were subpoenaed. Although some doubts still lingered in their mind, they nominated the story for a Pulitzer Prize.

Things began to unravel after Cooke was awarded a Pulitzer prize in the spring of 1981. When the Associated Press reported her biography, it was found that she had invented her degrees and accomplishments in her official resume for the Pulitzer committee. After tough and grilling interrogation by her editors, Cooke admitted
that Jimmy, as well as her credentials, was an invention. The Post informed the Pulitzer board that Cooke's story was "a composite." It returned the prize, saying that "the quotes attributed to a child were in fact fabricated and that certain events described as eyewitnessed did not in fact happen."5

The response to the whole affair was unanimous. It was a gloomy day for American journalism. "When Janet Cooke turned in a fake story," wrote novelist James Michener, "she knocked down the central pillar of her profession--integrity." Michener felt that Cooke would make a fine novelist. She had a talent in depicting the setting, characters, and dialogue. But Michener lamented her inability to distinguish "truth and fiction" and her lack of "a deep commitment to the historical traditions of her profession."6 Ben H. Bagdikian, a professor of journalism, felt that Cooke's invention of facts was the biggest crime a reporter could commit.7 A former newspaper editor Norman E. Isaacs described the scandal as "a punch to the solar plexus of journalism."8 Haynes Johnson of the Post lamented that the episode left "a grievous open wound that [would] be long in healing and never . . . forgotten."9 The New York Times in its editorial castigated the Post for its "critical failure" to demand of Cooke the documentation of the story and declared that "the fabricated event, the made-up quote, the fictitious source . . . debases communication, and democracy."10

Despite the reaction of astonishment and pious anger, however, a Newsweek poll, based on 760 telephone interviews, revealed that at least a third of those who heard about the hoax believed the Cooke
scandal was not an isolated incident. They felt that reporters often make things up on a less spectacular scale. Jane Perlez, media critic of the New York Daily News, also noted that "every day, reporters 'embellish' quotes from an individual to make them 'sound better' or to fit the point of the story." Essayist Naomi Munson, accordingly, urged journalists to "get back to the business of uncovering the facts and leave the rest of us to muddle through to the truth in our own blind, groping way." Cooke, appropriately, addressed her apology to "her newspaper, her profession, the Pulitzer board and all seekers of the truth," and submitted her resignation. The Post also apologized to its readers for its "complete system failure" to maintain "the highest standards of straight and fair reporting," and assured them that all had been thoroughly investigated, that safeguards had been strengthened, and that a falsehood like "Jimmy's World" would never occur again.

Cooke basically wrote a work of fiction using materials she had gathered from social workers and other sources and was caught in trying to pass off fiction as fact. She was motivated primarily by her ambition to be a star as quickly as possible. Although we can never tell whether or not she really felt guilty for her behavior, when she was caught she apologized for her fabrication. And the journalistic community was unanimous in condemning her behavior. No one questioned the assumed distinction between fact and fiction. It was accepted as a given. Thus, it seems self-defeating literally to claim within the format of conventional journalism that there is no distinction between the two. A natural and clear-cut distinction
appears to exist between fact and fiction. The controversy over Alastair Reid's stories for the *New Yorker*, however, shows that the distinction is not so clear-cut as it seems in Cooke's fiasco.

Reid, a long-time staff writer for the *New Yorker*, revealed in the *Wall Street Journal* on June 18, 1984 that he had spent his career "creating composite tales and scenes, fabricating personae, rearranging events and creating conversations in a plethora of pieces presented as nonfiction." He did that, Reid claimed, in search of a "larger truth." Reid told the *Journal* of several examples of his composites, which embarrassed the *New Yorker* editor. In a December 1961 piece, titled "Letter from Barcelona," Reid wrote of an episode at a "small, flyblown bar by the harbor." At the bar a group of bar's patrons watched a televised speech by General Franco and then argued about politics. Actually, Reid said in the *Journal*, the bar had closed by the time he watched Franco on television at the home of a friend. Reid further added that he made "a single conversation out of a number of different conversations." El Cinico, Reid said, was a real character, a friend of his, but the other two men in his story were merely a device, asking "the questions that a lot of people in Spain were asking at the time."

In his February 22, 1982 piece, "Notes from a Spanish Village," Reid wrote about his returning to his stone house in Spain from New York. In the story, a taxi driver offered an opinion about the failed coup by Colonel Antonio Tejero Molina: "it's been good for us, I think, for we were getting too cocky, too pleased with ourselves. . . . It has sobered us up. I don't think there will be another coup. . . . But, I tell
you, I was scared. I stayed up the whole night, and I won't forget it, ever."21 In the Journal article, Reid said, the account was "not factually true, probably."22

Reid's revelation was more startling in journalistic circles than the previous scandals because he was no novice in journalism like Cooke, and he had written for more than a quarter century for a magazine which is considered "a weekly monument to the proposition that journalism consists of the endless accretion of tiny details."23 The New Yorker is famous for its eight-member fact-checking department which "combs every article, perusing reams of evidence--often delivered by the shopping bagful--to verify every fact."24 Marion Baron, the head of the department, asserts, "if we say the paint on the wall of the hospital is yellow, it's yellow," and boasts that every detail is "absolutely correct down to whether or not there were coffee stains and tobacco ashes on the floor of the hospital" in a given article.25 The magazine's editor William Shawn claims that the New Yorker "is as close to being scientific in its objectivity as reporting can be" and that "we believe in letting the facts speak for themselves." He even maintains that "the New Yorker is the most accurate publication not only in this country, but in the entire world."26

Reid's practice came under mounting attack in the journalistic community. "The end of the world seems near," the New York Times declared in a scathing editorial, "now that our colleagues at the New Yorker, that fountainhead of unhurried fact, turn out to tolerate, even to justify fictions masquerading as facts." "Quotes that weren't
ever spoken, scenes that never existed, experiences that no one ever had," it continued, "are all said to be permissible in journalism, provided they're composed by honest reporters to illustrate a deeper truth." "Wrong truths are always correctable, with facts," concluded the Times, "fictional facts are forever counterfeit." Former president of CBS News Fred Friendly called a composite "a euphemism for a lie." "It's disorderly," claimed Friendly, "it's dishonest, and it's not journalism." Ken Auletta, another New Yorker writer, said, "we shouldn't take shortcuts without telling the reader we're taking shortcuts, and by that I mean labeling it as fiction." Shawn called Reid's practice "a journalistic mistake," and affirmed the principle of the magazine: "The New Yorker has devoted itself for 59 years not only to facts and literal accuracy but to truth. And truth begins, journalistically, with the facts."

In contrast to the Cooke episode, however, condemnation was not universal. Andy Rogan, a reporter for the New Yorker said that most people at the magazine were not upset at Reid's practice. "What he's writing about and what he's saying are not untrue," claimed Rogan, "There's always some picking and choosing that goes on." Another New Yorker writer, Paul Brodeur, also defended Reid. If quotes do not "do violence to the intent of what was said," maintained Brodeur, "they are accurate. [Reid] never had complaints for 25 years about his quotes, although he often did not quote exactly what was said." Above all, Reid himself claimed that he did not have a "twinge of guilt," and that his practice was to "make the large truth clear." "Whether the bar existed or not was irrelevant
"I was reporting on the mood of the country. This was not invalidated by the fact that the bar is or isn't there. Had I been writing for a tourist magazine, I could see how the readers could feel insulted. But I was writing for the New Yorker." "If the bar is a setting for a generic conversation," Reid added, "then it's the substance of the conversation that matters." "That I had a conversation with a taxi driver in the village, there was no question," he continued, "Was it the same taxi driver that drove me to my house that day? I don't even remember. That's not the point."

Reid, like Cooke, then took disparate elements from different places and "moved them around and put them in a whole different place and made a poetic whole." But, unlike Cooke, he had no intention of apologizing for what he did. "The real moral question comes," Reid claimed, "over whether there [was] any intention to deceive or falsify." For him, "the intention [was] rather to clarify than to deceive and falsify." "There is a truth," Reid asserted, "that is harder to get at and harder to get down towards than the truth yielded by a fact." In his view, "readers who are factual-minded are the readers who are least important."

As Reid claims, it is true that there may be a truth, which a mere factual account of conventional journalism does not enable us to reach. It is also true that journalism can strive to achieve this deeper and larger truth. As demonstrated by such works as John Hersey's reporting on Hiroshima and Joan Didion's writing on contemporary culture, blending of careful reporting and the techniques historically associated with fiction can enrich journalism,
and the hybrid is identified as journalism, more accurately as literary journalism or New Journalism.

Despite its label of journalism, however, literary journalism follows a set of narrative conventions fundamentally different from that of traditional journalism. As David Eason has noted, traditional journalism, with its commitment to the doctrine of objectivity, dictates "customary linguistic usage, structuring information in a rigid pattern sometimes referred to as the 'inverted pyramid,' supplying brief clear answers to the questions Who?, What?, Where?, When?, and Why?, using quotations as evidence, and presenting conflicting points of view. The conventions ban the discussion of the procedures necessary to transform an event into news such as the relationship between reporter and source, between reporter and organization and between reporter and form of discourse." There is no reference to the subject who does the reporting in the conventions of traditional journalism. The narrative conventions of literary journalism, on the other hand, are those traditionally associated with imaginative story-telling. They include, as Tom Wolfe has outlined, elaborate depiction of scenes, development of characters through dialogue, use of interior monologue, and above all, concern with the subjectivity of perception. These devices, Wolfe claims, help readers to become emotionally involved in the text they read and provide the text with immediate and absorbing qualities.

In the 1960's in its heyday, literary journalism made a healthy contribution to the vitalization of journalism. Whatever they wrote about, literary journalists always, at least implicitly, wrote about
reporting itself. They rejected the prevailing doctrine of objectivity as a way to represent what is actually happening, and problematized the activity of reporting itself. Since the tradition of objectivity in journalism was believed to favor the official views and to make journalists mere transmitters of the official version of social reality, the inclusion of the experience of reporting as part of the subject of the report was itself an act of social criticism. In this way literary journalists helped to train the tastes of journalists and their readers away from objective reporting, and shape the critical sensibility of the 1960's.

In this light, Reid's practice appears to be totally legitimate and even commendable. Above all, he was motivated by his desire to capture a deeper truth. His attempt to blur the boundaries between the domains of fact and fiction was not intended to negate the different ontological status of the two. Rather it was to reach the truth inaccessible through the accumulation of verifiable facts. As he claims, there are too many things—for example, mood, image, impression, etc.—that cannot be grasped by checkable facts. In so doing, Reid highlighted the problematical nature of the differentiation between fact and fiction. But there is a difference between Reid's practice and that of literary journalists in the sixties. In the sixties, readers were alerted either by the name of the writer or by the reputation of the publication that what they were reading would not vigorously observe the conventions of traditional journalism. When they read Wolfe's essays in Rolling Stone, for example, they did not expect the same level of accuracy and
verifiability as they did from the front page of the Washington Post or from the articles in the New Yorker. The convention informed readers of what to expect from their texts and prepared them for a different level of truth.

In contrast, Reid presented his stories as if he had followed the conventions of traditional journalism. Readers had no way to imagine that Reid was pursuing a larger truth instead of a smaller one, because he wrote for the New Yorker and gave no hint that his stories were basically composites. What Reid should have done was either to write for a different magazine, like Rolling Stone, or to alert his readers about his practice. The clue is necessary, because the idea that there is no way of knowing which convention a given text is following is, as Hersey notes, "terrifying" to readers, no matter what is the motivation for the fabrication.46

The different response to the fundamentally identical practices of Cooke and Reid suggests that the boundary between fact and fiction in journalism is not as obvious as it seems. To point this out, however, does not mean that there is no difference between the two. What it means is that there is a distinction, but that distinction is something that is constructed. As Michael Schudson argues, journalistic fact does not exist in a completed form. It is a construct that journalists actively create according to the conventions that their community deems legitimate.47 In other words, the fact-fiction boundary is the result of social and symbolic processes that authorize and legitimize the reality of a group. While Reid's stories are acceptable in the convention of literary journalism, they are not so in
the convention of traditional journalism. Then the problem with his practice is not so much the invention of a composite story as his failure to raise a flag which would indicate the appropriate convention to his readers.

To recognize the fictive quality of the distinction between fact and fiction in journalism helps to illuminate similar issues about the overlapping realms of history and fiction which constitute the intriguing border country of the historical novel. In controversy about the fictionalization of history, critics of "fictional history" seem to assume that history and fiction are themselves stable, universally agreed upon, concepts. They hold onto the famous differentiation that Aristotle made between history and poetry: the historian writes of what has already happened, whereas the poet writes of what could happen. Historians, C. Vann Woodward warns, should not make "any concessions to the handful of novelists who would blur or deny any real distinction between history and fiction." I think it's wrong," declares David Shaw, "to appropriate real names, real events and real places and then reshape them to suit their own dramatic (or political) objectives." He condemns the practice of mixing fact and fiction as "an unconscionable perversion of reality." These critics suggest that novelists follow the established conventions of traditional historical fiction which allow them the licence to invent and speculate within the boundary of the historically possible and verifiable.

The controversy surrounding William Styron's novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, however, highlights the instability and
tentativeness of the convention of traditional historical fiction. The novel is a fictional account of the 1831 Virginia slave revolt in which 55 whites were killed, 17 blacks hanged, a dozen or more shipped to the deep South, 131 mobbed to death, and more strict rules and laws enforced thereafter. The title of the novel is taken from an actual account by a white lawyer who recorded the confession, trial, and execution of Turner. Little is known of the historical Turner, his background and early life, and the motivations for the rebellion. In the prefatory note Styron explains that he has "rarely departed from the known facts about Nat Turner and the revolt." But in those areas where little knowledge is available he has allowed himself "the utmost freedom of imagination in reconstructing events," while "remaining within the bounds of . . . history." His purpose is, Styron writes, "to try to re-create a man and his era."52

But the "known facts" of history turned out to be altered by the perceptions of the onlooker. The difference in reception of the novel cut sharply across the color line. White historians and literary critics tended to laud the novel as an accurate depiction of slavery and the rebellion. For Woodward the book is "the most profound fictional treatment of slavery in our literature." It is "faithful in its respect for history, not only in its consideration of events--facts--but in the way it views the time and place in which these events happened."53 John White viewed the novel as a "massively informed . . . and comprehensive synthesis of the Southern slave system." Styron's comments on the relationships between slaves and masters, White said, can be documented from "primary sources."54 Philip Rahv
pronounced that *The Confessions* is realistic not only on "the objective plane," but also that of "the intimate psychology of his characters, the black slaves and the white owners."55

Black writers in contrast accused Styron of falsifying the historical record of black slavery and the life and motivation of Turner. What stirred the black intellectual community was Styron's portrayal of Turner as an irresolute psychotic messianic figure who had sexual fantasies of having intercourse with an adolescent white girl and his easy acceptance of a Sambo stereotype of the slave. For blacks and especially for Black Nationalists, Turner was a resolute freedom fighter with a black wife. Herbert Aptheker argued that Styron's rendition of the Turner rebellion seriously distorts historical realities. He charged that Styron accepted the apologist version of slavery proposed by Ulrich B. Phillips and Stanley Elkins, which is not supported by historical "data."56 Lerone Bennett, Jr. accused Styron of portraying "the boot-licking, head-scratching child-man" Sambo as "the dominant plantation type," and of "emasculating" Turner by showing him as indecisive and impotent, acting out his fantasy of sex with a white girl. As Bennett saw it, Styron did not follow the traditional convention of the historical novel, which "works within the tension of accepted facts." Instead he "forces history to move within the narrow grooves of his preconceived ideas." Styron's Turner is an antithesis of the actual Turner--"a neurasthenic, Hamlet-like white intellectual in blackface."57

Under the mounting attacks by militant black intellectuals and some historians with regard to the historical accuracy of the novel
Styron conceded that he could not prove his psychological portrayal of Turner's irresolution and desire for a white girl. But he believed that his inner portrait of Turner "must have been true" and citing Georg Lukacs argued that the novelist should be allowed "great latitude in structuring his vision of the past" and in dispensing with crude facts of history to fit his artistic needs. He even suggested that "facts per se are preposterous. They are like the fuzz that collects in the top of dirty closets. They don't really mean anything." This stance tipped the balance towards artistic freedom at the risk of historical fidelity and represented departure from his statement in a prefatory note in which he suggested that the novelist is bound by the existing evidence. Thus Ralph Ellison and Robert Penn Warren, who were generally sympathetic with Styron's practice, showed some reservation in their defense of their fellow writer in trouble. Warren noted that although the novelist does not have to document, he does not operate without "the sense of documentation." In other words he is bound by the "historically possible." Ellison acknowledged that there is a problem about recreating historical figures. Whenever a novelist says something explicit about history in a novel, "everybody's going to rise up and knock the Hell out of you." He correctly captured the gist of the Turner controversy: "everybody is saying: Damn it, tell it like I think it is." History is a "poison" for a novelist. A novel can be "very powerful" with it, but Ellison warned against a "move into the historian's arena, because you can only be slaughtered there."
For Ellison, Warren's *All the King's Men* is an example that illustrates the way in which the novelist should confront history. Warren refuses to intrude into the historian's area and disguises a historical figure, Huey Long, as Willie Stark and then does with him what he wants. An "essence" of Long is presented through the heightened sense of the past made possible by Warren's artistic imagination. Presumably if Styron had cunningly disguised Turner and entitled his novel *The Confessions of Samuel Washington* as one of his critics suggests, the Turner controversy would not have occurred.

The more fundamental problem with *The Confessions*, however, lies with the narrative strategies Styron adopted. Although he claimed that the book is "less an 'historical novel' in conventional terms than a meditation on history," it is, in fact, highly conventional. It fits very well the traditional definition of the genre suggested by Avrom Fleishman. It is set in a past with a historical event involving historical figures. But since *The Confessions* is a "documented" historical novel as opposed to an "invented" or "disguised" one, he creates on the part of the reader the expectation that he will follow what actually happened. In this respect he is in a similar position to the historian. At the same time, however, because he is writing fiction, not history, he is governed by a convention different from history. He is free, compared with the historian, to fill in the gaps in recorded history with imagined details which cannot be proved. The problem with Styron's novel is not its ideological content or his licence as a novelist to invent and
speculate. Styron has no obligation to create the leader of a rebellion to suit his critics. He also has a legitimate right to look inside his black revolutionary, however difficult it is, and to present a possible Turner, if not the only possible one. In fact, for Southerners, Styron's portrait of Turner could be seen as the very opposite of the conventional image of a deranged and fanatical fiend. The critical issue is then whether or not his narrative strategy enables him to penetrate the mind of a historical figure and give credibility to his story in the eyes of the reader.

In this respect Styron's fictional device is not sophisticated enough to deal with the thorny issues of reconstructing past events. Compared with Coover, Doctorow, and other postmodernist novelists writing about history, Styron's strategy is too conventional and simple. The story is narrated in the first person in an autobiographical form with little self-conscious reflection upon the process of the author's own involvement in the historical reconstruction. The story is simply Turner's confession without Styron's meditation. Contrary to his prefatory note, there is little meditation on history. Although the ambiguity and mystery surrounding Turner require "a formal correlative" to represent them, Styron does not struggle with them. As Joseph W. Turner pointedly argues, what is missing in the novel is "any formal representation of the limits of historical knowledge, any acknowledgment of his own wrestlings with the recalcitrance of history."70

The Turner controversy was primarily conducted at the ideological and political level although both sides presented their
case in the name of historical accuracy and fidelity. Styron does not "consciously and deliberately" invent characters and events which contradict the historical documents. He exercises of the freedom conventionally allowed to the novelist is within the domain where the records are thin, especially about the motives of the character. He does not challenge the generic conventions of history and historical fiction. He does not play the game of fusing his fictions with history, flaunting the artifice of both history and his creation.

In the debate surrounding Doctorow's *Ragtime* the historiographical issues are brought to the fore. In an interview after publication of the novel, Doctorow declared that he has tested in *Ragtime* the proposition that "there's no more fiction or nonfiction now, there's only narrative." In *Ragtime* Doctorow explores the era of ragtime, and provides his own version of what happened in America between 1902 and 1917, a period of great change and transition. However, the novel is not about the ragtime era, but our ideas about the period, how we write and rewrite it. Doctorow's revisioning of American history earlier in this century bears comparison with that of John Dos Passos. Although several critics have noted parallelisms between *U.S.A.* and *Ragtime*, their treatment of history, as Barbara Foley argues, is fundamentally different. In *U.S.A.* history and fiction are distinct entities. Dos Passos separates them into discrete sections of newsreel, biography, and Camera Eye on the one hand and fictional narrative on the other. In *Ragtime*, in contrast, history and fiction are conflated. The line between the two seems to disappear. Dos Passos "frames his
narrative around facts which are ordinarily held to be 'true,' in the sense that they are externally verifiable." Doctorow "treats with equal aplomb facts that are 'true' and those that are 'created.'" 73

Doctorow works with two groups of characters: historical figures such as J.P. Morgan, Henry Ford, Emma Goldman, Freud, Jung, and others; and fictional characters--Father's family, Tateh and his daughter, and Coalhouse Walker Jr. In the book historical figures often do fictitious things, and fictional characters move among historical characters. Freud and Jung make a trip through the tunnel of love at Coney Island, Henry Ford meets J.P. Morgan, Emma Goldman massages Evelyn Nesbit while fictional Young Brother watches from the closet, and Houdini meets the Archduke Ferdinand. When asked about the meeting between Morgan and Ford, Doctorow answered: "I've never read that J.P. Morgan and Henry Ford met. They may have. But for me it was absolutely essential that they meet. If you ask whether some things in the book 'really' happened, I can only say, 'They have now.'" 74 "Actually if you want a confession," Doctorow stated more boldly in a recent interview, "Morgan never existed. Morgan, Emma Goldman, Henry Ford, Evelyn Nesbit all of them are made up. The historical characters in the book are Mother, Father, Tateh, The Little Boy, The Little Girl." 75

Doctorow makes it clear that his is "a novelist's proposition." 76 But his frequent repetition of a similar argument seems, at least to his critics, to imbue the basically metaphorical and ironical nature of his thesis with a literal force. The "juxtaposition and confusion of the real and the imagined," Woodward said, "gives the historian chills
and fever, whether or not he shares the entertainment enjoyed by the laity. What prompted Woodward's rage is Doctorow's proposition against the commonly accepted distinction between fiction and non-fiction. Woodward admitted that historians themselves sometimes mix fact with fancy, but they rarely do it "consciously and deliberately." On the other hand, the writer of fictional history does it "as a matter of course, and with no compunction whatever."78 Ragtime, literary critic Cushing Strout wrote, "swims in the stream where the fish are fishily skeptical of documents, history, truth, and meaning." Doctorow, in Strout's eyes, does not attempt to tackle the difficult task of reconciling historical responsibility and imaginative freedom as he does in The Book of Daniel and instead takes the easy way of "giving the hungry lion of the imagination a fresh lamb of humble fact every day to devour as he wished." Ragtime "corrupt[s] both sorts of truth," historical and literary.79 For Fredric Jameson, Doctorow's narrative represents evidence of the postmodern loss of the historical referent--a "crisis in historicity."80

It is the very convention of history and the traditional historical novel that Doctorow challenges in Ragtime. In his view the division of fact and fiction is in itself a convention. He thus questions in Ragtime our preconceived notions about what historical truth actually is and how we attain it. He is skeptical about the possibility of representing historical realities with objectivity and certainty. What distinguishes Doctorow's novel from the more traditional U. S. A. and The Confessions of Nat Turner are its constant self-conscious
reflections on the nature and the limits of historical representation. The Little Boy, the primary narrator of the novel, speculates that "the forms of life were volatile and that everything in the world could as easily be something else. The old man's narrative would often drift from English to Latin without his being aware of it, as if he were reading to one of his classes of forty years before, so that it appeared nothing was immune to the principle of volatility, not even language." Doctorow's position is that the division and reconstruction of history are a tentative and slippery business. It is all a human construction. Historical truth remains as elusive as the precise location of the North Pole: "[Admiral Peary] couldn't find the exact place to say this spot, here, is the North Pole. Nevertheless there was no question that they were there." The title of the novel symbolizes the historical process that Doctorow envisions. In ragtime "the syncopated melodies in the right hand are set over a regular repeating bass in the left." In *Ragtime* an endless recurrence underlies "a distracting facade of individualistic variation." The statement with which Doctorow finally summarizes the uniqueness of the era also resounds with impermanence and volatility: "the era of Ragtime had run out, with the heavy breath of the machine, as if history were no more than a tune on a player piano."

Doctorow's narrative strategies comport with the thematics of the novel. Technically *Ragtime* is narrated from the omniscient third person perspective. Although there is abundant evidence that the Little Boy is the narrator of the novel throughout, the identity of the narrator is confirmed only at the end when the narrative voice is
shifted from the third to the first person. This sudden shift of the voice has a significant meaning. The boy is deprived of his privileged status which makes him accessible to something that he cannot know in reality. The apparent omniscient voice is a deception allowed in the convention of a traditional historical novel, and Doctorow problematizes it. As Constance Peirce notes, "the visionary child is obviously a fabrication and therefore a violation of the history the narrator/writer purports to depict in the novel." In other words Doctorow highlights the fact that readers have no access to history other than through the perceptions of various chroniclers, who in many cases assume the perspective of omniscient observers but who in fact "compose" historical documents.

Doctorow appropriates for the plot of the Coalhouse story in the novel the German writer Heinrich von Kleist's 1808 novella Michael Kohlhaas, which is itself derived from a historical incident from late medieval Germany. This borrowing further blurs the line between fiction and history by making the Coalhouse story doubly fictive. Kleist's novella chronicles Kohlhaas, a prosperous medieval horse trader, who decides to take the law into his own hands after he fails to obtain justice through legal means for his beautiful horses unjustly confiscated as a toll by a nobleman. Doctorow transposes the Kohlhaas story to twentieth century New York and replicates detail after detail. The significance of this borrowing, as Foley notes, lies in Doctorow's "subordination of the historical to the fictional." While in U.S.A. Dos Passos extracts a pattern from history and structures his narrative around it, in Ragtime it is fiction that
provides the novel with a plot, climax, and momentum, and history is presented as chaotic and peripheral to the fictional narrative of the book. This indicates that for Doctorow the coherent pattern history is endowed with by historians and traditional novelists is in fact fiction. It is more so because the plot of the Coalhouse story is doubly fictional.

The thematics and narrative strategies of *Ragtime* suggest that the attacks on the novel on the basis of its lack of historical referents are mistaken. For it is to the very convention upon which the critics depend for their attack that Doctorow challenges. In deciding what is fact and what is fiction the convention plays a crucial role. It is hardly new to point out the conventional difference between history and fiction. Although a historian is not permitted to invent characters and motives for his characters, he is not forbidden to "suppress, repeat, subordinate, highlight, and order" events of the past to endow them with a certain meaning. That selecting and connecting is counted as legitimate because it follows the norms and practices of a historical community. Since a historian internalizes the convention through his training and practicing in the community over a long period of time, it appears to him something natural. When a fiction writer attempts to exercise his licence in the arena of historians, he is governed by a different convention. He deals with not only verifiable events but also the events which are imagined or invented. What distinguishes the practice of contemporary historical novelists from the traditional ones is their self-conscious playing with generic conventions of history and the traditional historical
novel. In their attempt to challenge and subvert the existing conventions there is virtually no convention that restricts their freedom of imagination in fusing the factual and fictional.

This trend towards self-reflexive historical fiction does not, however, mean that writers literally obliterate the difference in ontological status between the historical and the fictional. Their challenge is not directed at the denial of the historical referent. Doctorow understands that his position could lead to the pitfalls of Berkeleyan idealism. As he puts it, "we all kick the rock to refute Berkeley." Coover also makes it clear that The Public Burning is not "a record, a document" but "a work of imagination." He does not think that "anyone in his right mind could possibly confuse my version with the so-called real one." From the first page the reader is aware that he is reading a book of fiction rather than a history book or a newspaper. The transposition of the execution site, for example, is not meant to be "literal, but metaphoric to enliven our perception of the case." What Doctorow and Coover question is not history as actuality but history as record and interpretation. Since they believe all history as record is "composed" and thus fictional, they create their own fictions out of the referential but fictional materials to illuminate some of the things that happened.

Their critics' claim to the contrary notwithstanding, Doctorow and Coover do not literally deny the real difference between fact and fiction. Rather they challenge the conventions of differentiating two realms and representing the past "fact" in narrative. In their challenge the boundary is assumed to exist even if it is frequently
crossed and blurred. The crossing and blurring of the border is possible only with the recognition of its existence on the part of their reader. Thus their challenge is paradoxical. As Linda Hutcheon argues, it "at once inscribes and subverts the conventions." In Coover's words "the basic thrust toward community . . . is a constant." "A lot of what art does is to show this dark desire to break away from the oppression of community, to rebel against it," continues Coover, "but even rebellion is a kind of adherence."

In the duplicity of inscription and subversion, rebellion and adherence, Coover and Doctorow problematize and de-naturalize our preconceived notions of factuality and history itself.

With the introduction of community we have come full circle. Initially, we accepted the distinction between fact and fiction as a given, then collapsed it, and finally re-accepted it. In Cooke's scandal I took sides with the differentiation between fact and fiction. Then in Reid's case I indicated the problematical nature of the differentiation, because it leaves out too much of the important part of the possible truth. The Nat Turner controversy attests to the tentative nature of the distinction between fact and fiction in history and the unstable conventions of historical fiction. In Doctorow's *Ragtime* I tried to emphasize that the distinction is a construct rather than a given. This breaking down has turned out to be based on the acceptance of the difference between the two. But the differentiation initially accepted is fundamentally different from the re-acceptable difference. Since the former is seen as a given, it is taken as objective and thus not overridable. On the other hand, the latter is
seen as a construct or a fiction. Hence, it is arbitrary and overridable. When a fiction does not work with the changes in our conditions, we can replace it with another fiction. The awareness of the fictive nature of the distinction between fact and fiction itself may be a fiction. But this self-reflexive view of the fiction-making process can provide for us a way to cope with the world which is constantly in flux. In this process, our role would be to provide a better fiction.
Notes


14. Green, "Janet's World."

15. "The End of the 'Jimmy' Story," editorial, *Washington Post*, 16 April 1981; and Green, "Janet's World." In addition to credibility of journalism and editorial procedure, race was also an important issue. See Munson, "The Case of Janet Cooke."

16. As many skeptics believed, the Cooke hoax turned out to be not an isolated incident. When the *Washington Post* returned the Pulitzer Prize, it was awarded to Teresa Carpenter of the *Village Voice* for her story on Dennis Sweeney, the assassin of former representative Allard Lowenstein. The story implied that Carpenter had interviewed Sweeney, when it described Sweeney's innermost thoughts. Actually, she had interviewed his attorney. In May 1981, Michael Daly, a young columnist in the *New York Daily News* was named to receive Columbia University's Mayer Berger Award for distinguished reporting for his column about British army gunman Christopher Spell, who did not exist. But in the chronology of fabrications, young freelance Christopher Jones accomplished the most daring piece for the *New York Times Magazine* in December, 1981. In his dramatic account of the Khmer Rouge, Jones inserted a passage from Andre Malraux's 1923 novel *The Royal Way* to give his story "a piece of color." See Alexander Cockburn, "Khmer Rouge," *Village Voice*, 13-19 January 1982, p. 10, and James M. Markham, "Writer Admits He Fabricated an Article in *Times Magazine*," *New York Times*, 22 February 1982.


22. Reid in Lipman, "At the New Yorker," p. 1. Reid also revealed that in his piece about the graduation of his friend's grandniece from Yale, he was actually describing his son's graduation. In another piece, Reid wrote as if he had been born in 1911, while he was actually born in 1926.


33. Reid quoted in Dowd, "A Writer for the New Yorker."

34. Reid quoted in Lipman, "At the New Yorker," p. 18.

35. Reid quoted in Dowd, "A Writer for the New Yorker."

37. Reid quoted in Dowd, "A Writer for the New Yorker."


39. Reid quoted in Schwartz, "Facts and Fiction."

40. Reid quoted in Lipman, "At the New Yorker," p. 18.


42. Tom Wolfe and E.W. Johnson, eds., *The New Journalism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), pp. 31-32. Using terms of contemporary literary theory, the text of journalism would be called a closed text, whereas that of fiction an open one. Readers respond to the closed text passively and are more actively engaged in the open one.


44. Even Cooke's hoax has an element of truth. Although Jimmy did not really exist, social workers and policemen agreed that drug addicted children did exist in Washington ("Deep Throat's Children," p. 10). Doctorow agrees with them, and even claims that Cooke's story was "visionary" although it was a composite (interview with author, 8 June 1990). Bob Woodward, who interrogated Cooke, could notice at least "echoes" of the Jimmy's world throughout Cooke's 145 hand-written notes and tape recorded interviews (Green, "Janet's World").


47. Schudson, *Discovering the News*, p. 7.
48. C. Vann Woodward and Richard Current use the term to
distinguish contemporary historical fiction from traditional. The
primary difference between the two, as these historians see it, is that
the latter deals with historical persons and events within the
boundary of verified historical evidence, whereas the former is filled
with insights and guesswork which are not historically documented.
See Woodward's *The Future of the Past* (New York: Oxford University
Press, 1989), chapter 13. "Fictional History and Historical Fiction" and
Current's *Arguing with Historians: Essays on the Historical and the
Unhistorical* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press,

49. Vernon Hall, Jr., *A Short History of Literary Criticism* (New York:


51. David Shaw, "Danger! Please Don't Mix Facts with Fiction," TV
Guide (20 April 1985), p. 6 quoted in Richard Current, *Arguing with

52. William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (New York:

with William Styron*, ed. James L. W. West III (Jackson: University

54. John White, "The Novelist as Historian: William Styron and
245.

55. Philip Rahv, "Through the Mist of Jerusalem," review of *The
Confessions of Nat Turner*, *New York Review of Books*, 26 October

56. Herbert Aptheker, "A Note on the History," review of *The
Confession of Nat Turner*, *The Nation*, 16 October 1967; rpt. in
*William Styron's The Confessions of Nat Turner*, eds. Melvin J.
Friedman and Irving Malin (Belmont, California: Wadsworth
Publishing Co., 1970), pp. 89-92. Phillips argued that slavery was above all a system of education. He rejected stereotyped rebellious and discontented blacks, and viewed blacks as a docile, childlike people who needed the care and guidance of paternalistic whites. He rejected the charge that slavery was an inhumane and cruel system and emphasized the harmonious human relationships between paternal white masters and faithful and childlike black slaves. Thus for him the plantation system was not a system of racial exploitation but a complete social system which was governed by paternalism. In contrast, Elkins stressed the harshness of American slavery and its devastating impact on the black personality. He claimed that the black Sambo stereotype—the shuffling, happy-go-lucky, not very intelligent black—had a basis in fact. Comparing slavery to the Nazi concentration camps, Elkins maintained that the total institution of slavery could reduce blacks to a perpetual childlike dependency. By stressing that blacks were victims of the most awful system in the world, Elkins undermined the racial ideology of the innate inferiority of blacks and repudiated a benign view of slavery. His thesis appeared to provide intellectual support for compensatory social and economic programs for blacks in the 1960's. To those blacks bitter at continued white resistance to their demands for full equality, however, Elkins' thesis was a sophisticated statement of racism, even though black inferiority was claimed to be acquired rather than innate. See Phillips, American Negro Slavery (New York: Appleton and Company, 1918), and Elkins, Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life (1959).


60. Ibid., p. 131.


63. Ibid., p. 144.
64. Ibid., p. 142.
65. Ibid., p. 121.
70. Ibid., p. 353.
74. Doctorow, quoted in Clemons, "Houdini, Meet Ferdinand," p. 76.

78. Ibid., p. 236.


82. Ibid., p. 68.


84. Doctorow, Ragtime, p. 270.


Chapter 8. Beyond an Archimedean Point:
White, Mackie, and Rorty

Postmodernists fictionalize history, and by doing so they suggest that history itself is a form of fiction. The crucial issue in postmodernism is, then, which fiction is "better" and whether there are any criteria which can be used to determine what is a better fiction. The present and following chapters will thus examine the ethical and political consequences of the postmodernist conception of reality and truth, especially historical ones, by discussing more theoretical works on this subject. The assumption here is that as Don H. Bialostosky notes, each discourse is an "actual or potential response to other discourses," whether it is discernible or not in a given text. In other words, there is a "virtual space" in which "what does not appear in the text does . . . impinge upon it." Interestingly, the challenges offered by Doctorow and other postmodernist fiction writers to historical representation coincide and are intertwined with the debates about the nature and status of narrative representation in historical discourse.

In what follows I shall first look into Hayden White, whose ideas on narrative history and the value of narrativity in history have had a considerable appeal among contemporary historical theorists and literary critics. For White, one's view of history is primarily determined by one's moral views rather than the truth value of historical reconstructions. He does not think morality is the issue for historians and relegates to philosophers the problem of
selecting a better--meaning moral or just--fiction concerning past occurrences. Thus I shall turn to two philosophers with a postmodernist bent, John Mackie and Richard Rorty, who seem to start their discussions of morality exactly where White has left off. I shall explicate Mackie's anti-realism and Rorty's new pragmatism as a correlative equivalent to Doctorow and Coover's conception of morality, which has not been as elaborately presented as the philosophers'.

History was traditionally a literary genre, a branch of rhetoric, and the story was the dominant form of telling what happened in the past. It was only in the nineteenth century that historians began to believe they could and should escape the "merely literary." They attempted to establish their discipline on the firm ground of objective method modeled on the social sciences which in turn was modeled on the natural sciences. Consequently they began to view different interpretations of the same set of past events as a result of distortions or inadequate factual data.

Recent developments in critical theory, however, have increased an interest in narrative in many fields, especially in history. "After a hundred-year absence," historian David Harlan declares, "literature has returned to history." This return has called into question the belief of many historians in a determinable past and the possibility of accurate representation of it through the rigorous and open-minded examination of historical documents combined with the exercise of historical imaginations. Theorists of narrativity in history believe that historical writing is interpretive
and that its primary form is narration, which is ineluctably fictional. Historical truth, they argue, is not to be found in the accumulation of historical facts but is presented to the reader through the story historians tell. Thus the work of a historian is more akin to that of an imaginative writer than a scientist, and historical truth should be assessed by criteria that are appropriate to literary works.

Hayden White has most elaborately developed this view of history. He characterizes history as a form of fiction-making. Historical writing is fictional not in the sense that it is false but that it is fashioned and made up. This claim has two dimensions: one is ideological and another linguistic or tropological. According to White, the historical account is inescapably ideological. It involves a "distinction of known events into the categories of significant and insignificant without explicit recognition that significance is itself a category grounded in the practices of specific social groups, hence little more than rationalizations of such practices in the interest of such groups which take them as 'natural' or . . . 'human.'"3 Although terms are new, there is nothing particularly challenging in this idea. Other historians who have either proclaimed themselves or been identified as relativists--Becker and Beard among others--have pointed out the fictive quality of historical writing caused by historians' differing ideological commitments.

What is unique in White are his ideas about emplotment and tropological strategy. By emplotment he means "the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific kinds of plot structures" such as comedy, tragedy, romance, or satire.4
According to White, a historian arranges a series of past events through the employment of myths or story forms which are culturally available to him. He emplots the past events in accordance with a culturally recognizable plot structure which is thus persuasive and convincing to his readers. In a culture which lacks the notion of tragedy, for instance, there could be no tragic interpretation of historical events. Thus it is mistaken to say that certain events are inherently tragic or farcical in nature. Events become tragic or farcical only when viewed from the perspective of specific groups involved in them. Therefore, White argues that "most historical sequences can be emplotted in a number of different ways so as to provide different interpretations of those events and to endow them with different meanings." This is not because there are different kinds of facts but because there are different stories that each historian thinks best fit the facts he knows. "Neither the reality nor the meaning of history," White says, "is 'out there' in the form of a story awaiting only a historian to discern its outline and identify the plot that comprises its meaning." We can tell "equally plausible, alternative, and even contradictory stories" about a historical event without violating "rules of evidence or critical standards commonly held across a wide variety of disciplines."

White's theory of emplotment is closely linked to his theory of tropology. Tropes do not merely serve as rhetorical decoration for the historical account as many historians think, but constitute the field of the facts and meanings themselves. They have a determining authority in the reconstruction of the past. A historian structures his
descriptions by employing the literary tropes of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, or irony. The trope that a historian favors influences the possible preconceptual linguistic protocols that he can employ to constitute the historical field prior to constructing his narrative account. In other words, the tropes "prefigure" the choice of the plot structure of the historian's narrative as a whole. White claims that "this prefigurative act is poetic . . . insofar as it is constitutive of the structure that will subsequently be imaged in the verbal model offered by the historian as a representation and explanation of 'what really happened' in the past."8 This poetic act precedes and contours the historian's strategies for explaining the meaning of his data.

White identifies three different strategies of explanation—formal argument, emplotment, and ideological implication. In the historical narrative, formal argument constitutes its cognitive content, emplotment constitutes its aesthetic content, and ideological implication constitutes its ethical content. White suggests that each trope has an "elective affinity" with one of four modes of emplotment, four modes of argument, and four ideologies. Thus there are limitations in the mode of articulation through which the historian can achieve the effect of explanation. The likely combinations are as follows9:

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The implication of White's theory is clear. It minimizes the distinction between history proper and the philosophy of history. It is erroneous to oppose history proper practiced by "working" historians to metahistory practiced by what Dominick LaCapra calls "historians on welfare." The two realms are distinguishable only in emphasis, not in their respective contents. "Every philosophy of history," argues White, "contains within it the elements of a proper history, just as every proper history contains within it the elements of a full-blown philosophy of history." Interpretation is not a necessary evil to be minimized in the face of a historical record, but is at the heart of historical writing because it relates to the way in which language prefigures and informs the historical field. Consequently historical discourse, if it is genuine, should be as much about its interpretation itself as it is about the subject matter of its elaboration. Since it is "constantly asking if logic is adequate to capture the essence of its subject matter," history tends toward "metadiscursive reflexiveness."

What appears most outrageous to historians is, however, White's attempt to blur the sacred boundary between history and fiction. Historical narratives are above all "verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much inherited as found and the forms of which have more in common in literature than they have with those
in the sciences." History and novel resemble one another not only in aims but in form. Both wish to provide "a verbal image of 'reality," and face the same problem of how to represent the world. But White's concern with the similarities between history and fiction is not meant to assert that certain events never occurred or that we have no reason to believe in their occurrence. There is certainly an obvious difference between a work of history and a novel. History deals with the events which are "in principle observable or perceivable" and which have a specific location in time and space, whereas literature is concerned with both historical events and "imagined, hypothetical, or invented ones." In his view, however, history is less concerned with establishing the occurrence of certain events than with determining "what certain events might mean for a given group, society, or culture's conception of its present tasks and future prospects." Since meanings do not inhere in past events but are imposed upon them in the process of signification, they are something added. This added "something" makes the historical account a candidate for fiction.

Put in different way, past events "should not speak, should not tell themselves." They are fragmentary and incomplete in themselves. They "should simply be" until historians fashion them into a whole whose integrity is of a narrative nature. Hence, historical writing is a construction or fiction with meanings and relations imposed on a set of events insofar as it involves narration. As White sees it, the effort of historians to make stories out of historical events is identical with that of fiction writers. Both are
cognitive in aim and mimetic in means. Thus "history is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation." Then history, as a story, is "not true or false, but rather more or less intelligible, coherent, consistent, persuasive, and so on." This conclusion does not mean that the historical account has no truth value. It does mean that historical writing is true not in a literal sense, but "in a metaphorical sense and in the sense in which any figure of speech can be true." For White the differences between history and fiction are less significant and less interesting than their similarities. The conventional distinction of the two realms underestimates the constraints on the novelist and overestimates those on the historian.

For White history is not something that capable historians discover and relate in a narrative which brings forth their "true" nature. It is rather a text subject to many different readings like a literary work of art. In his view, history, "as a plenum of documents that attest to the occurrence of events, can be put together in a number of different and equally plausible narrative accounts of 'what happened in the past,' accounts from which the reader, or the historian himself, may draw different conclusions about 'what must be done' in the present." Since the historical record is perceivable only in a form "always already" textualized, the notion of an unprocessed document is a fiction.

Once the textual nature of history is recognized, history can no longer be appealed to as a privileged and neutral arbitrator of conflicting claims. Epistemologically White is certainly, as he himself
says, a "pluralist." He is even prepared to accept the label of "radical relativist in matters having to do with *historical knowledge."\(^{22}\) Historical representations by virtue of their plot structures can not be submitted to the tests of verification or falsification because stories are not meant that way. "It is fruitless," White argues, "to try to arbitrate among contending conceptions of the nature of the historical process on cognitive grounds." The matter of which vision of history one accepts is not a matter of truth or falsity, but that of morality. "The Marxist view of history," for example, "is neither confirmable nor disconfirmable by appeal to 'historical evidence,' for what is at issue between a Marxist and a non-Marxist view of history is the question of precisely what counts as evidence and what does not."\(^{23}\) It is on *moral* rather than epistemological grounds that one chooses a particular view of history among alternative ones.\(^{24}\) That is, "the best reasons for being a Marxist are moral ones, just as the best reasons for being a Liberal, Conservative, or Anarchist are moral ones."\(^{25}\) However, White does not address the problems surrounding morality--whether it is universally applicable, or relative to particular cultures and times, and so on--because history does not deal with those issues. In this way White relegates the grave problem of morality to philosophers.

Although White seems to imply that there are firm grounds for choosing a particular vision of history in the realm of morality, the situation is no better in that realm. Traditionally, moral philosophers have sought to justify their theories from "an Archimedean point," defined by Bernard Williams as "something to which even the
amoralist or skeptic is committed but which, properly thought through, will show us that he is irrational, or unreasonable, or at any rate mistaken."^26 Such foundationalist thinking typically seeks to endow morality with an aura of objectivity and universality. The quest for an absolute ground in ethics is increasingly being challenged. Philosophers with a postmodernist bent, Mackie and Rorty among them, are suspicious of any attempt to base morality on trans-historical and cross-cultural essences like God, reason, or human nature. They seek to deprive morality, which Bernard Williams calls a "peculiar institution,"^27 of its universality and its overriding potency. For them moral beliefs change in response to social and human conditions over time. Contradictory moral rules may be equally correct according to the particular community that accepts them. Morality is not a property existing independently of us but a practical device invented to control the world around us.

The notion of morality as a human construction is central to John Mackie's ethical theory. His position is often described as antirealism because he denies the existence of objective moral values. Moral values are not "part of the fabric of the world" but "part of the furniture of the world."^28 However, ordinary users of moral language want to believe or do believe that their moral judgment is something "that is absolute, not contingent upon any desire or preference or policy or choice, his own or anyone else's" (33). They want to claim that their action is right or wrong "in itself" (34). The traditional moral concepts of the main line of western philosophy are objective moral values. As David Wiggins says, we
can see our lives as meaningful only if we attach a value to our ends that transcends the mere fact that we have adopted them. Mackie argues that this claim to objectivity is an error, although it is built into our ordinary moral terms and becomes part of their meaning. Hence, any attempt to define morality by analyzing the meanings of moral terms without considering this false ontological claim to objectivity is incomplete. His antirealism is "an ontological thesis, not a linguistic or conceptual one" (18).

Mackie offers what he calls "an argument from relativity" in support of his theory. He points to the radical difference of moral beliefs from one society to another and from one period to another, and between different groups and classes within complex societies. In the face of such disagreement it is not plausible to believe our moral judgments are representations of true moral facts. Disagreement about moral codes seems to reflect people's participation in different ways of life rather than the other way around. For instance, it is more likely that people approve of monogamy because they live a monogamous way of life rather than that they participate in monogamy because they approve of it. He suggests that the actual variations in moral beliefs are more readily explained "by the hypothesis that they reflect ways of life than by the hypothesis that they express perceptions, most of them seriously inadequate and badly distorted, of objective values."30

The fact that our moral judgments contain an element of error does not mean that they are all false. What is erroneous is their claim to a "fictitious external authority" (34). Although our language
is defective in moralizing, it is the only means with which we can moralize. In other words, since our language is not an individual fact but a social institution, an individual cannot arbitrarily divest it of its ingrained meaning. Mackie thus accepts the fact that there is an element of error in our ordinary moralizing and goes on actively to make moral judgments, but with an awareness of our moralizing practices.

For his critics this awareness of a moralizing process makes no practical difference. Simon Blackburn makes a parallel case between morality and mathematics. According to Blackburn, we do not have to bother about "whether 7 + 5 is really 12," because "arithmetical practice would remain as solid and certain as could be . . . without reference to an independent mathematical reality." He claims that the same holds for moral practice. R.M. Hare also claims that it does not matter whether moral qualities are part of the fabric or furniture of the world. The issue, however, does make a large difference. If we allow the existence of objective values, it permits the belief that one's opponents in a moral disagreement are objectively mistaken. Moral realism tends to underwrite intolerance. In contrast, our recognition of the contingency of moral values not only helps us to abandon the vain dream of finding the foundation of morality but also contributes to the increased tolerance and understanding of others with different moral beliefs. If Mackie's theory were true, we should alter our notion of morality: "morality is not to be discovered but to be made: we have to decide what moral views to adopt, what moral stands to take" (106).
Mackie's conception of morality is pragmatic: "we might start both with some prima facie acceptable general principles, and with the mass of prima facie acceptable detailed moral judgements, and where they do not fully agree adjust either or both until the most satisfactory coherent compromise is reached" (105). In Mackie's world, morality does not mean a body of principles an individual arbitrarily adopts for his conduct. It "must be adopted socially by a group of people in their dealings with one another" for its function (147). It is a functional device to impose "a particular sort of constraint" upon an individual's conduct (106). These constraints are intended to protect vital interests of other individuals and to check the natural inclinations of an individual towards self-interests. Thus an invention of a moral system is not dependent upon an individual will. In Mackie's picture of the world, then, morality is a social construct functioning in the realm of intersubjectivity. It is powerful but overridable and relative to changing purposes of changing communities in changing circumstances.

The upshot of Mackie's view is to deny the ontological basis of morality and to embrace the plurality and relativity of moralities. This may suggest a sort of anything-goes relativism for those who wish to ground morality in the solid foundation of God or some other absolute. But relativism in the sense that "every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps about any topic, is as good as every other" has become something of a straw man for philosophers to attack. As Richard Rorty claims, no one holds that view except for "the occasional cooperative freshman" or "a god, someone who [has] no
need to use (but only to mention) the terms 'rational' or 'moral', because she has no need to inquire or deliberate."³⁴ For Rorty relativists are those who say that "the grounds for choosing between two incompatible opinions on important topics are less algorithmic than had been thought." The real issue is not "between people who think one view as good as another and people who do not. It is between those who think our culture, or purpose, or intuitions cannot be supported except conversationally, and people who still hope for other sorts of support."³⁵

In Rorty's view the quest for "other sorts of support" is a grand illusion. He identifies three themes of the foundational tradition in Western philosophy: the Platonic ideas about truth as correspondence with nature and knowledge as its accurate representations; the Cartesian doctrine of the mind as inner mirror of external realities; and the Kantian view of philosophy as the provider of universal standards of rationality and objectivity for all other disciplines. Rorty wants to drop all foundationalism because it presupposes the existence of a common commensurating ground shared by all scientific theories in all areas of science. With Dewey, Derrida, Foucault, Kuhn, Feyerabend and others, however, such a ground has disappeared. A philosophical paradigm has changed. This does not mean that a new paradigm is better than the prior one in explanatory power or metaphysical perspicacity. Rather it means that a new paradigm is adopted because it offers more interesting ways of speaking about what is perceived as problematic in old ways of speaking. There are no perennial problems of philosophy out
there waiting to be found by philosophers. It is mistaken to think, for example, that Derrida or anyone else found problems about the nature of textuality or writing which had been ignored by previous philosophers. What Derrida did was to invent "ways of speaking which made old ways of speaking optional, and thus more or less dubious."36 Philosophical problems such as truth, objectivity, rationality, etc. are language games which result from a series of historical accidents, opinions, and confusions. They are problems not to be found and solved but to be invented and dissolved.

In Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey Rorty finds a modest way of doing philosophy. These philosophers in their earlier years tried to find out a new way of making philosophy foundational. But eventually they came to see their earlier efforts as self-deceptive. "Each of the three," Rorty says, "in his later work, broke free of the Kantian conception of philosophy as foundational, and spent his time warning us against those very temptations to which he himself had once succumbed. Thus their later work is therapeutic rather than constructive, edifying rather than systematic, designed to make the reader question his own motives for philosophizing rather than to supply him with a new philosophical program."37 Rorty therefore makes a distinction between truth, rationality, goodness and Truth, Rationality, Goodness. Uncapitalized those terms refer to properties of sentences, actions, or situations. They are "artifacts" whose fundamental design we often have to alter. Capitalized they become "goals or standards which can be loved with all one's heart and soul and mind, object of ultimate concern."38 We regard them as "eternal
objects" which we try to locate and reveal. Likewise Philosophy with a capital-P denotes a pretentious inquiry into "the nature of certain normative notions" such as Truth, Rationality, and Goodness in the hope of better obeying such norms. On the other hand, small-p philosophy is unpretentious, inclusive, and accommodating the likes of a William Blake and a Henry Adams. Underlying this distinction is Rorty's belief that "the best hope for philosophy is not to practise Philosophy." He suggests that he can be a philosopher by being "anti-Philosophical" but not anti-philosophical, just as White can be a historian by being "anti-Historical."

The parallel with White becomes more relevant when Rorty seeks to blur the distinction between philosophy as the literal and literature as the metaphorical. Rorty conceptualizes philosophy from the perspective of a "literary genre" and philosophical subjects from the perspective of "themes" and "tropes." Reminiscent of Paul de Man's rhetorical reading, Rorty stresses seeing philosophy as "just one more literary genre" and philosophical terms as metaphors. Philosophy is a kind of "writing" or "narrative." Metaphysics is, for example, "a genre of literature that attempts to create unique, total, closed vocabularies." Philosophy is metaphorical in the sense that it is not literal or representational. Its language is not an unmediated representation of things out there. Philosophical terms like truth, reality, rationality, goodness, etc. are just metaphors in a philosophical narrative which should not be taken literally. But many philosophers do not think philosophy is metaphorical and try to reconstruct it, while literary critics take philosophical metaphors
literally and try to "deconstruct" them. Both think the "textbook problems of philosophy" are important. They are not ready to "take them lightly, to 'de-thematize' them, to view them as just a few extra tropes."\textsuperscript{44} They misread figurative language as literal language.

The conception of philosophy as a literary genre makes Rorty appear to valorize literature over philosophy. For him, however, there is no foundational discipline. Neither philosophy nor history is more privileged than science or literature and vice versa. The foundationalist belief that there must be such a discipline needs to be dissolved. Since Rorty believes that metaphor and narrative constitute the history of philosophy rather than proposition and argumentation, he replaces the foundationalist image of philosophy as mirror with "conversation." Philosophy, understood as one of the many voices in the conversation of mankind, abandons the epistemology of the Cartesian-Lockean-Kantian tradition in favor of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, as Rorty understands it, is a struggle against the assumption that all contributions to culture are "commensurable." By commensurable Rorty means "able to be brought under a set of rules which will tell us how rational agreement can be reached on what would settle the issue on every point where statements seem to conflict. These rules tell us how to construct an ideal situation, in which all residual disagreements will be seen to be 'noncognitive' or merely verbal, or else merely temporary--capable of being resolved by doing something further."\textsuperscript{45}

In hermeneutics "disagreements between disciplines and discourses are compromised or transcended in the course of the conversation."\textsuperscript{46}
It sees the various discourses as voices in a possible conversation which presupposes no disciplinary compartment. The objective of conversation is not the discovery of a pre-existing common ground in the realm of Being or the Forms or language, but the continuance of the conversation with the "hope for agreement, or, at least, exciting and fruitful disagreement." For Rorty conversation is the only essential to preserve, because even if we do not agree, this disagreement implies that there is still an accord over the necessity of talking to each other.

Once the notion of every foundation is abandoned and a subject in philosophy is seen as a trope, the term truth loses its objective and universal force. Following William James, Rorty argues that truth is the property of our ideas or descriptions of the world. Truth is not out there waiting for us to discover. Rather it is a matter of social practice and peer approval. He appropriates Dewey's definition of truth as what is "warranted assertible by us" in our language games. Following Dewey's definition of truth as what is "warranted assertible by us" in our language games. Following Dewey's definition of truth as what is "warranted assertible by us" in our language games. Knowledge is accordingly viewed as the "social justification" of our beliefs rather than the accuracy of representation. This understanding of knowledge leads Rorty to reject a "metapractice which will be the critique of all possible forms of social practice." Since he believes "there is no wholesale, epistemological way to direct, or criticize, or underwrite, the course of inquiry," it is "the vocabulary of practice rather than theory, of action rather than contemplation, in which one can say something useful about truth."
The rejection of Truth requires the redescription of the notion of the self. The idea of an underlying coherent individual essence of particular personhood is a myth. We have no one true self. Our self is an uneasy combination of a number of conflicting "quasi persons" composed of incompatible systems of belief and desire. A person has no essence, and the self is "centerless," the product of "random assemblages of contingent and idiosyncratic needs."\(^5\) It is a "a network of beliefs, desires, and emotions with nothing behind it." Since we all inhabit simultaneously a plurality of roles and a variety of language games, this network constantly reweaves itself "not by reference to general criteria" but "in the hit-or-miss way in which cells readjust themselves to meet the pressures of the environment."\(^5\)

The explosion of a "core self" means that the notion of morality is no longer useful if it is employed in the foundational sense as in the categorical imperative or the utilitarian principle, etc. Moral behavior is not the behavior to "conform to the most promising models of 'moral reflection and sophistication'" but "just adaptive behavior of a sort which roughly parallels the behavior, in similar circumstances, of the other members of some relevant community."\(^5\) Since Rorty sees as a failure all attempts to construct transcultural and ahistorical morality, he seeks to work outward from the common stock of practices, institutions, and vocabularies of the community to which he belongs. He is suspicious of the rhetoric of "humanity as such" and instead embraces the notion of a community which is smaller and more local. When we see a particular community as
"ours rather than nature's, shaped rather than found," Rorty says, our sense of commitment to it is the strongest. The moral force of our loyalties and convictions "wholly" consists in the fact that "living by them is inseparable from understanding ourselves as the particular people we are--as members of this family or community or nation or people, as bearers of this history, as sons and daughters of that revolution, as citizens of this republic." It is more persuasive thus to urge Americans to help hopeless young blacks in American cities because they are "fellow Americans" rather than because they are "fellow human beings."

Morality is, then, a matter of "we-intentions." Rorty treats moral claims as being about the conventions and practices actually in force in the relevant society. The only moral obligation we have is "the 'we-intentions' of the communities with which we identify." Moral principles do not justify our social practices. It is the other way around: our social practices justify our moral principles. What are called moral laws abbreviate and remind us of our moral practices. Morality is not "the voice of the divine part of ourselves" but "the voice of ourselves as a member of a community." Immorality is a matter of behavior that leads us to be stripped of membership in our community. Rorty goes so far as to claim that immoral action is "the sort of thing we don't do" in our community. Accordingly, moral philosophy is less concerned with the question "What rules should dictate our actions?" than the questions "Who are 'we', how did we come to what we are, and what might we become?" Therefore the moral justification of the institutions and
practices of a community takes the form of a "historical narrative" rather than of "philosophical metanarratives." The principal back-up of a historical narration is not philosophy, but the arts.

Rorty's antifoundationalism proposes a utopia whose ideal inhabitants are "liberal ironists." He draws on Judith Shklar's definition of a liberal as a person who thinks that "cruelty is the worst thing we do." He adds to this a corollary liberal belief that solidarity is the best thing we do. Ironists are people who know the contingency of their most central beliefs and desires. They know that their language, self, and community can and will be redescribed in different vocabularies, and that there is no useful way of trying to see which vocabulary is more authentic or more realistic. For liberal ironists there are no reasons to be given for why they should hate cruelty. The question is unanswerable and must be deflected. We can only say that in the development of the West there has been an evolution of our moral consciousness and practice which condemn actions which count as cruel.

Despite his critics' charge, Rorty does not believe a sense of the contingency of one's commitment is necessarily incompatible with the commitment to solidity. His ideal liberal ironists "take with full seriousness the fact that the ideals of procedural justice and human equality are parochial, recent, eccentric, cultural developments." But the recognition of this fact does not lead them to conclude that those ideals "are any the less worth fighting for." Liberal ironists are then situated between the Foucaults who Rorty thinks are too ironic to be liberal and the Habermases who are too liberal to be ironic.
They grant the contingent validity to their convictions yet still "stand for them unflinchingly."65 Thus Rorty's liberal ironism is committed to extending solidarity to those who are presently excluded from it. While he insists that "our sense of solidarity is strongest when those with whom solidarity is expressed are thought of as 'one of us,' where 'us' means something smaller and more local than the human race," he believes his position "is not incompatible with urging that we try to extend the sense of 'we' to people whom we have previously thought of as 'they.'"66 Rorty admits that belief in something out there--God, nature, reality, etc.--has enabled us to create useful tools and institutions. Liberalism itself was a product of Enlightenment rationalism, an effort to make its doctrine conform to nature or reality. Even so, Rorty believes we are now able to throw away the ladders that have been so important to us.67 Doing so will help us have a more tolerant liberalism, a liberalism which recognizes more forms of pain as significant and hence worth combating, as it leaves more room for irony and other private pleasures.

As a postmodernist Rorty rejects all kinds of metanarratives. He distrusts narratives which purport to describe or predict the activities of such entities as the noumenal self or the moral law or the Absolute Spirit or the Proletariat. They are stories which are intended to justify loyalty, or breaks with, certain communities. As a corollary he does not seek to discover the absolute point of departure to anchor his ideas outside the sphere of our experience. As a pragmatist he starts from where he is. He believes that there is no
place to start other than the community with which he presently identifies. He tries to work out "case by case, by hunch or by conversational compromise, rather than by reference to stable criteria." As a liberal he wants to expand human solidarity to include more and more different sorts of people, while at the same time as an ironist he believes that the liberal society with which he identifies could have turned out to be totally different.

Rorty's position becomes more clear when contrasted with Habermas and the new French theorists. He agrees with Habermas in recognizing the need for communication and conversation. Both believe in the traditional democratic institutions and the need for improvements in these institutions. But Rorty rejects Habermas' belief in the role of philosophy as the guardian of "reason" and his attempt at grounding communication in the ahistorical, universal, context-free notion of truth. In this respect he shares Lyotard's distrust of all kinds of metanarratives. Habermas' project of reappropriating Enlightenment rationality is seen as another metanarrative, a nostalgia for unity and totality that has to be overcome.

On the other hand, Rorty criticizes Lyotard for his deficient sense of community, communication, and social reform as reflected in his attempt to aestheticize the lifeworld. In a similar vein Rorty rejects Foucault although he appreciates Foucault's genealogical investigation of Western rationality. Foucault shows what counts as "rational" at a given time is really contingent and invested with multiple forms of power. But his insight, Rorty believes, blinds him
towards the genuine social and political achievements of bourgeois liberalism. Foucault does not think the decrease in pain brought about in liberal societies can compensate for the forms of constraints they have imposed on their members through the acculturation process. In Rorty's view, there is no "we" to be found in Lyotard and Foucault. They seem to be "so afraid of being caught up in one more metanarrative about the fortunes of 'the subject' that they cannot bring themselves to say 'we' long enough to identify with the culture of the generation to which they belong."69

Rorty's position is a hybrid of Habermas and the New French thinkers. Philosophically he agrees with the French thinkers while he rejects their politics. In contrast, he identifies his politics with Habermas' while differing from the German philosopher on philosophical grounds. Rorty, a liberal ironist, is situated between the New French theorists who are too ironic to be liberal and Habermas who is too liberal to be ironic. His position may be summed up thusly: "We know that there must be a better way to do things than this; let us look for it together,"70 even though we do not have universal and objective foundations and there is no guarantee for our success. Let's continue our conversation, which is "our project, the European intellectual's form of life."71

Rorty's liberal ironism comports well with the vision of the world embraced by many contemporary fiction writers. As we have seen, Coover does not believe there is any good or bad behavior in this world in a universal or transcendent sense. "Out there in flux," he says, "our moral values are being generated and regenerated all
the time."72 For him morality is a communal judgment on our action. Doctorow shares this view. He sees the universe as amoral. But this vision of the universe does not lead him to pessimism. On the contrary "it assumes the obligation to engage to construct a just world . . . on the chance that meaning and God can be found that way." Although ethics is "only a human invention," says Doctorow, "our sense of right and wrong is no less strong for that."73

Postmodernist pluralism does not necessarily lead to moral chaos or political paralysis. The willingness to accept countless alternative true or right versions of the world does not mean that everything goes. For we are not born in a vacuum but are the product of our community, with its culture and history. Thus, postmodernism inscribes and affirms the ideology and convention of an existing system at the very moment that it attempts to challenge and subvert them. This paradoxical nature of postmodernism makes it difficult simply to celebrate or denounce it without taking into account the particular context in which ethical and political judgments are made.
Notes


30. Mackie also finds the ontological and epistemological extravagance in accepting objective values. If we believe in ontologically objective moral facts, we should also allow the mysterious form of moral perception which enables us to have epistemic access to them. But if there are really distinctive moral facts and moral intuition, we would have neither conflicts of value nor moral dilemmas. In Mackie's view we do not need moral facts and perceptions to explain our moral judgments. We know that an act of deliberate cruelty is wrong through our having absorbed attitudes from our social environment in which such action is socially condemned rather than the existence of moral facts and our faculty to perceive them.


45. Rorty, *Philosophy as the Mirror of Nature*, p. 316.


58. Ibid., p. 198.
59. Ibid., p. 59.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid., p. 60.
65. Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, p. 46.
67. Ibid., p. 194.
69. Ibid., p. 172.
70. Ibid.
71. Rorty, "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism," p.172. Rorty's rejection of foundationalism and valorization of conversation remind us of the "relationism" advocated by Karl Mannheim, who believed that no perspective could aspire to totality and that a "free-floating intelligentsia" could achieve the harmonious integration of conflicting perspectives of competing positions because intellectuals' disinterested concern for the whole and their self-reflexivity would overcome the partiality of each viewpoint.
72. Robert Coover, interview by Christopher Bigsby, in Heide Ziegler and Christopher Bigsby, The Radical Imagination and the Liberal

When the Little Boy in *Ragtime* was musing over things happening around him, it became evident to him that "the world composed and recomposed itself constantly in an endless process of dissatisfaction."¹ Like his young narrator Doctorow is keenly aware that a similar process of writing and rewriting constitutes history. In the first place, historical facts do not exist in completed form. They are "buried, exhumed, deposed, contradicted, recanted."² They are like "the tracks made by the skaters, traces quickly erased of moments past, journeys taken."³ Historical meaning, which must be derived from the illusory textual traces, is thus more elusive and evanescent than historical facts. In Doctorow's view, history written by historians is clearly insufficient; for they still follow the convention of the archaic nineteenth century realistic novel in their devotion to linear time and acceptance of transparent representation, among other things. In addition, history is a communal affair and is therefore to a significant extent governed by the prevailing ideology. "American historians . . . as an establishment," Doctorow says in an interview, "had written out of existence the history of black people and women and Indians and Chinese people in this country. What could be more apparent than the creativity of that?"⁴

For Doctorow the selection and arrangement of actual events is as creative as the invention of imagined events. His invention of new "facts" such as the meeting between Ford and Morgan is intended to
shock, to seduce, and to provoke out of its "habitual stupor" the public mind which takes for granted the factuality of historical writing. If invention is fictional, he reasons, then selection is fictional, too. There is little difference in the degree of artificiality between adding and deleting. In fact, the exclusion of Indians and others seems to distort the whole picture of what happened in America more graphically than the invention of the meeting between Goldman and Nesbit in the novel. Nevertheless, exclusion is permitted by the conventions of history whereas invention is not. Novelists' "lies" are to be trusted more than others, Doctorow suggests with ironic playfulness, because they are "born liars" and admit that they lie. What must be maintained is "the absolute multiplicity of us all, the numbers of us who color the palette from which the society draws its own portrait."

Doctorow's call for multiplicity and plurality represents the resistant potential of postmodernism, which characterizes much of historiographical metafiction because it purports to challenge and subvert the official version of history. It is the notion of pluralism that advocates of postmodernism often evoke to emphasize its critical quality. In fact, pluralism is frequently identified with the United States. Americans commonly speak of ethnic and religious diversity, pluralist economies, and the virtues of their own pluralist society. In all of these uses, "pluralist" is an honorific term, associated with the rejection of dogmatism, the embracing of differences, and tolerance of others. It is a philosophy for underdogs. At its most optimistic, pluralism represents the capacity of the nation
to become and to grow. It presupposes a universe still evolving and the role of individuals in the process. As William James declares, the pluralist sees the world as "unfinished, growing in all sorts of places," so that conscious minds, both large and small, will decide, at least in part, the outcome of its evolution. In this way, pluralism, and by extension, postmodernism, appears to be one of the most positive and humane aspects of the liberal American society.

The valorization of pluralism, however, has another layer of meaning. The rhetoric of tolerance in pluralism and postmodernism conceals the repression of its dogmatic and ideological elements. Pluralism itself has a dogmatic basis which it tends to deny. It takes the multiplicity of truths as its premise; but when this premise is combined with its tendency to disregard questions of power and real social relations, it produces a very repressive ideology. In actuality, power is not equally distributed among multiple perspectives. With the actual uneven distribution of power in the real world bracketed, to advocate pluralistic discourse in the symbolic realm is to help the pluralist center to exclude and silence its opponents more effectively than the use of actual force. The pluralists' theoretical tolerance for multiple truths can be seen as a way of rationalizing actual intolerance and existing domination. Using Herbert Marcuse's term, pluralism is a strategy of "repressive toleration."

Rorty's liberal ironism well illustrates the problematics of the pluralist strain in postmodernism. His pragmatism has destroyed the "impossible dream" of a foundation for philosophy in the Cartesian-Lockean-Kantian traditions. However, his insistence on contingency
and consequent opposition to ideas like "essence," "nature," and "foundation" has unintended consequences. Since he sees our social practices and institutions as products of historical chances, he tolerates their plurality. He introduces the notion of a community to avoid potential moral chaos brought about by the admission of plural beliefs and practices. But his idea of the public realm is based upon his radical skepticism about the possibility of consensus among communities. If our social practices are as good as theirs, at least to us, then why not take ours? This skepticism, together with his emphatic affirmation of differences among communities, may open the way to power politics in case of conflict over vital interests, his intention to the contrary notwithstanding—as is graphically shown in the American bombing of Libya and Iraq. What is moral is determined by power, whether the institutional power of the state or the more subtle power to assign meaning and significance to various cultural phenomena. Thus his rejection of the master narrative and all kinds of totalizing systems, combined with his commitment to liberal societies, may result in a happy embrace of the existing order of the world.

In fact, for Rorty, liberalism as outlined by John Stuart Mill is "pretty much the last word" in social and political thought. The main function of the government is to optimize "the balance between leaving peoples' private lives alone and preventing suffering."10 He thinks that "the rich North Atlantic democracies" not only have the right ideas and institutions already in place but contain a mechanism for their self-improvement. He even suggests that liberal ideals may
be "the best hope of the species," although they are local and culture bound. What is problematic in Rorty's thought is the apparent ease with which he accepts the present liberal societies in the West and the lack of any serious conflict in his liberal utopia. As Clifford Geertz points out, Rorty's postmodernism is intimately intertwined with ethnocentrism—"a we-are-we and they-are-they approach to things cultural." It is likely to make "the world safe for condescension" and help reinforce the conception of human communities as "semantic monads, nearly windowless." Rorty's position, however, goes beyond ethnocentrism. Although he talks about solidarity, by this he means the extension of "us" to "them," and not vice versa. He affirms the existing social order. There is little possibility in his liberal ironism for a solidarity which challenges and resists the existing one. Lyotard's claim that Rorty's antifoundationalism and his privileging of conversation is an "imperialist" thesis is not merely a familiar French hyperbole.

It is ironical that the discourse which seeks to allow adequate representation of other voices and points of view across boundaries of class, race, sex, ethnicity, etc., contains ethnocentric and imperialistic strains. This flaw is a result of the lack of serious discussion about the public realm in postmodernism. Rorty, for instance, recognizes that others believe differently and just as strongly. All of our justifications involve reference to our existing social practices, and members of other communities refer to their own practices. Since he seeks to destroy any form of foundationalism, his postmodernism puts us in a world of different
and competing stories, and thus of different and competing choices and behaviors. But Rorty's story ends here. He does not address the situation in which incompatible interests conflict and the forced silencing of the competitor occurs.\textsuperscript{15}

This attitude marks a significant contrast with those of his mentors, Dewey and James. For Dewey, the real problems begin rather than end after we are liberated from our obsessions with the sterile problems of philosophy. He tried to deal with present conflicts and confusions, to sort out the better from the worse, to ask which social practices ought to endure and which demand reconstruction, on which types of justification are acceptable and which are not. Rorty agrees these are genuine problems, but he does not confront or struggle with them. What he does is to suggest that there is no philosophical method for dealing with such issues and no ahistorical and transcultural matrix to which we can appeal, and thus to hope that civilized conversation will lead to the resolution of problems. It is certainly correct that all justification cannot escape its context and makes reference to social practices. But this recognition is only the point of departure. For in the life-world which is, as James says, "multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed,"\textsuperscript{16} we are faced with the critical task of determining which social practices are relevant, which ones ought to prevail, be modified, or abandoned. The most important thesis of James and Dewey's pragmatism is that we should change the world, not merely observe or interpret it.
Postmodernism is deficient in a theory about positive action on the social level—which is a crucial agenda of feminism, Marxism, and other schools of thought concerned with the actual alteration of existing systems. Postmodernists offer sophisticated and persuasive criticisms of foundationalism and essentialism, but their conception of social reform and reconstruction tends to be anemic. Rorty believes that we need "no fancier theoretical notions than 'greed,' 'selfishness,' and 'racial prejudice'"\(^{17}\) to explain the world because contemporary liberal society already contains the institutions for its own improvement. His "hunch" is that "Western social and political thought may have had the last conceptual revolution it needs."\(^{18}\) Lyotard's focus is on the critique of metatheory, philosophy and knowledge. As a social theory his postmodernism is underdeveloped and does not really provide a critique of contemporary society. Baudrillard goes a step farther. He is suspicious of previous theories of the social. In a society of simulations these distinctions have no meaning, for the sole concern of the masses is spectacle: "they idolize the play of signs and stereotypes, they idolize any content so long as it resolves itself into a spectacular sequence."\(^{19}\) Traditional notions of politics, class conflict, social change, etc. are useless, if they posit individuals, classes, or masses as capable of social action.

Even a more radical and anti-liberal version of postmodernism like Foucault's does not offer a vision for social and political transformation. Foucault's genealogical investigations uncover how a culture proud of its progress towards rationality, freedom, and tolerance is really a world of increasing domination and repression.
He sees that modern societies have abolished obvious forms of cruelty and domination; but they have also created subtle yet sharp networks of constraint which are more pervasive and more difficult to resist than anything imagined by earlier eras. As a result of his investigations, he resists any attempt to propose solutions to the dilemmas he has observed: "My position is that it is not up to us to propose. As soon as one 'proposes'--one proposes a vocabulary, an ideology, which can only have effects of domination."20 Foucault inhabits a world of critical pessimism where constructive social engagement, freed from its links with power and domination, is impossible.

The lack of critical social theory in postmodernism, however, does not cancel the validity some of its claims, such as the similarity between history and fiction, the plurality of truths and moralities, the deflation of art's overblown political potential, etc. Critics of postmodernism regularly make certain charges against it. They argue that the postmodernist conception of history is dangerous because it contributes to a version of truth and reality which is relativistic. It is not only logically self-refuting but also morally bad and politically reactionary.21 The problem looks greater for those who firmly believe in art's didactic and transformative function for society, and that that function should be grounded in some kind of objective entity like History. But, if my reading of postmodernism is correct, none of these claims withstands closer inspection. Postmodernist writers, first of all, do not deny the existence of objective past occurrences but rather claim that our access to them is
only through textual traces, thus calling into question the factual grounds of historical writing. It is not difficult to see that postmodernists do not have a relativist predicament. It is one thing to say that every interpretation is as good as any other. It is quite another to say that every interpretation operates within our culture and history, there is no way out, and that consequently we have to work out from the communities with which we presently identify. To put it another way, there is a difference between saying that "values are only relative" and saying that "there are relative values."  

As Jacques Derrida claims in his response to the critics' charge of a connection between deconstruction, Nazism, and anti-semitism in Paul de Man's World War II writings, a theory must be judged on its own terms rather than in political and ethical terms. This does not mean that the political and ethical consequences which follow from certain forms of inquiry are not significant. They are. What it means is that the truth value of a theory should be distinguished from its motivations and social consequences. When a theory is criticized in political terms, this should be done in a proper context. The political motivations and effects of a theory are irrelevant to its validity. Take, for example, the New Critics' claim that textual meaning is determinate. This claim is coexistent with the authoritarian social order of the 1950s. But it does not follow from the latter fact that the New Critics' proposition is wrong because of its negative political effects. Their textual objectivism is false primarily because the meaning of a text is not determinate. Likewise, the postmodernist
claim that history is a form of fiction can be taken by some as encouraging an anything-goes relativism and thus moral chaos. But this potential consequence does not discredit the validity of the postmodernist claim about the fictionality of history. The epistemological pluralism which leads to moral pluralism can effect moral acts, as evidenced by Coover's and Doctorow's views. The belief in plural truths and moralities can be not only critical of but also complicitous with the status quo. It is not the inherent logic of a theory which determines its moral and political consequences, for if it were, anything beyond the study of logic would be superfluous. Any theory can be used in a variety of different ways.

Moreover, postmodernist writers no longer entertain any illusions concerning the revolutionary potential of art, which they believe is the "signature of an earlier, modernist age."24 The firm belief of modernists in art as a force of social change or a critical response to undesired change is no longer in tune with the postmodernist sensibility. High literary culture in America has had only a marginal social function, which is not surprising in view of the capacity of the capitalist system to commodify even its most subversive opponents. Also, nobody in the White House or on Wall Street pays any attention to whether historical meaning is determinate or indeterminate. The claim of art's transformative function for society is thus anachronistic. In Doctorow's opinion, historical evidence suggests that art does not change anything. All the anti-Fascist poems of the 1930s, for instance, did nothing to stop Hitler. As his artist figure Houdini says in Ragtime, "There was a
kind of act that used the real world for its stage. He couldn't touch it. For all his achievements he was a trickster, an illusionist, a mere magician. What was the sense of his life if people walked out of the theatre and forgot him? The headlines on the newsstand said Peary had reached the Pole. The real-world act was what got into the history books.  

Coover agrees, although he thinks that fiction-making is not "mere trickery" but rather "a high wire act." He is skeptical about the impact that a novelist's fiction can have on the real world. Considering our short life span, Coover says, it would be "presumptuous" for a novelist to expect someone to spend "three or four hours--and in some cases, many more" in reading a novel. Even if someone changes his view of a certain aspect of the world after reading a novel, there is overwhelming evidence that his new view does not significantly lead to efforts to change the world to approximate his vision. According to Coover, no poet has yet changed the world. Most "coercive fictions" come from the institutions rather than from self-conscious professional fiction writers.

Thus the postmodernists' challenge to the conventions of history and historical fiction is paradoxical. On the one hand its proponents are aware of the powerlessness of literature to change the actual world. On the other hand they believe that writing a novel is a worthwhile business. Clearly there is an existentialist strain in postmodernism, even though existentialism is frequently parodied by postmodernist writers. They try to divest coercive fictions, in Coover's words, of "a force of reality" and "a sense of literal truth" by
re-examining our "ideas and attitudes [which] get implanted in us as we grow up, and then [become] unconscious determinants of our behavior" and bringing about a change in these ideas.29 For Coover, it is a moral act to "stick holes in overinflated world views" that coercive fictions have produced and to "let the hot air out."30

In a similar vein, Doctorow trusts fiction as a source of truth more than any other kind of writing because "it has no borders; everything is open, you have a limitless possibility of knowing the truth." But "there are always people telling you what you can't do, where you mustn't go. Every time you write a book someone says, 'Oh, you shouldn't have done this or you shouldn't have done that.'"31 People cannot accept the language of relativity and ambiguity. They want a world in which good and evil can be clearly distinguished. They require that someone be right: either the Rosenbergs are innocent victims crushed by an unjust government, or the government represents justice and the Rosenbergs are guilty. They cannot "tolerate the essential relativity of things human" and "look squarely at the absence of the Supreme Judge."32 They are "commissars who want to tell you what the rules are."33 Insofar as this desire for "either-or" persists, postmodernism has a critical potential. Although it does not offer any final answers, its "weak thinking"34 can help relax the rigidity of our way of thinking about the world. Despite its problems and problematics, if there is one achievement of postmodernism, it would seem to be the self-conscious questioning of the rules proffered by such commissars.
Notes


14. Lyotard claims that "although it might seem otherwise, [Rorty's] position does not really pose the question of the other as such" [Jean-Francois Lyotard, interview by Willem van Reijen and Dick Veerman, in Theory, Culture & Society 5 (1988), pp. 305-07]. Feminists agree with Lyotard's charge, although there is an important deconstructing impulse common to feminism and postmodernism. In its questioning of the tradition of Western representations, postmodernism seeks to expose the system of power which authorizes certain representations while blocking or invalidating others. Among those invalidated in Western representation are women. The feminist critique of patriarchy coincides with the postmodernist interrogation of Western representation. Both try to contest the power of a dominant ideology. From the feminist perspective, however, postmodernism has failed to address the issue of sexual difference. It has neglected or repressed the feminine voice in its discourse. The fact that few women are engaged in the debate about modernism and postmodernism is an indication of this. On this account postmodernism is another masculine invention engineered to exclude women. See Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in , ed., The Anti-Aesthetics: Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983), pp. 57-77 and Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson, "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism," in Feminism/ Postmodernism, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 19-38.

15. Rorty is certainly aware that physical force, the most primitive form of exercising power, is the common practice of resolving the conflicts in many parts of the world. But this recognition does not appear in his theorizing about solidarity and instead is mentioned in passing only in a footnote. See his Contingency, Irony and Solidarity, p. 63, note 21.


21. Hilary Putnam claims that a relativistic stance is untenable because if every standpoint is relative there is no standpoint from which one can assert that every standpoint is relative [Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 162]. Gerald Graff and John Gardner claim that postmodernist fictions are morally bad art because they are "estranged from the objective reality" and do not project the "illusion of reality." See Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979, p. 208; and John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), p. 91. Terry Eagleton claims that postmodernism wittingly or not reinforces the existing power system by evading "the referent or real historical world" and banishing the humanist subject. See his essay "Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism," *New Left Review* 152 (1985), pp. 60-73.


25. Doctorow, *Ragtime*, p. 82.

26. Robert Coover, interview with Christopher Bigsby, in *The Radical Imagination and the Liberal Tradition: Interviews with English and


29. Ibid. p.90.

30 Ibid., p. 84.


34. Weak thinking is a term used by Gianni Vattimo to refer to the postmodernist way of thinking which has attempted to abandon any strong concept of reason and being as presence. See Stefano Rosso, "Postmodern Italy: Notes on the 'Crisis of Reason,' 'Weak Thought,' and The Name of the Rose," in Exploring Postmodernism, eds. Matei Calinescu and Douwe Fokkema (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1987), pp. 79-92.
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