

**A Concise
Companion to
Postwar American
Literature and
Culture**

Edited by Josephine G. Hendin

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Literature and Culture**

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Notebook: The Erik Satie Cabaret, a collaboration with pianist Margaret Leng Tan which premiered at La MaMa Theater in New York in 2001.

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Chapter 1

Introducing American Literature and Culture in the Postwar Years

Josephine G. Hendin

The brilliance and diversity of American writing since World War II are at once testimony to the ideals of inclusiveness that inform our civil culture and an intense exposure of our limitations. At once celebratory and feisty, argumentative and lyrical, our writers identify and express the living contradictions of our culture. Through all the chapters that follow there emerges a collective portrait of a period and place marked by every conceivable fault and virtue, split by differences of wealth and position, by habits of outrage or praise, by ethnicity and race, by agendas of the left and right, by narrative realism and innovation, but nevertheless united, if by nothing else, by a sheer intensity of creative drive. The purpose of this companion is to provide a guide through that creative ferment, describe its shaping ideas and the writers who represent the variety of its energies and achievements.

Emily Dickinson's praise of that certain "Slant of light" that sharply exposes "internal difference, / Where the Meanings, are" underscores the power of "difference" to inspire. Out of the argument between the artist and business culture, between those on the margin and those in the mainstream, postwar United States culture has forged dynamic new fusions and combinations. The United States that emerges through our fiction, drama, music, and film is a rhetorical figure for modernity in all its disruption and progress. A nation whose cohesiveness relies on consent to and interpretation of the ideals of its founding documents has nourished an art animated by the power of those ideals to

accommodate change and dissent, to provide strategies for the recognition and reconciliation of differences.

The growth of American writing in the postwar period has been affected not only by sharply depicted polarizations, but also by the ability to sustain variety and dialogue in the constructions of art. That power animated Walt Whitman's quest for "the fusing explanation and tie – what the relation between the (radical, democratic) Me . . . and the (conservative) Not Me . . ." might be. Taken together, those competing urges are reflected in the power of American cultural ideals to legitimize dissent, to recognize and embrace both the innovative artist and the traditions art disrupts. Postwar art illustrates the prominence of an ever-greater diversity of voices and perspectives. The construction of this book pays homage to that diversity in formulating the categories and dialogues shaping the consideration of postwar writing.

An ever-increasing incorporation of diverse voices, an ability to absorb, sustain, and respond to the inevitable argument between art and experience, imaginative writing and commercial concerns, and a frequent reconciliation of the claims of each, easily defy notions of a static opposition between insurgent art and stable, pragmatic traditions. The innovative music, drama, film, and literature of the time all negotiate with the very times and habits they seek to change. However strenuous the interplay of argument, backlash and comeback, of embrace or rejection of experiments in form, the result is neither silence, nor the long-predicted "death" of the novel, nor chaotic instability, but only a greater acceptance and refinement of that negotiation. Yesterday's avant-garde poet can be tomorrow's éminence grise. All this suggests that the enduring American gift may be precisely that constant process of exchange and incorporation that brings about a repositioning of the center.

The culture, literature, film, and drama of the United States in the postwar period are subjects each of the contributors to this volume has approached from his or her own perspective. Yet all constitute a revelation of art forms that defy simple characterization as either purely traditional or experimental and reflect a feisty engagement with American life. The ensuing new fusions have produced cross-disciplinary critical approaches to art, recast even the conception of archiving books and manuscripts, and enriched discussions across the borders of forms and genres. The result is an opening up of how literature, film, drama, music, and culture interact. As Perry Meisel makes clear, jazz does not simply constitute a negotiation with the

very jazz history it transforms; it engages in close interaction in its origins, influence on American pop music, and cultural interaction with fiction. As Meisel writes: "hard bop is a superb metaphor for the many tensions that American music and culture hold in suspension in the years that follow World War II. . . . The reception of jazz and its musical heirs, rhythm and blues and rock and roll, has always been the product of a deep ambivalence in the American grain."

The argument of art with mainstream culture, the pull of creativity and the claims of commercial success, have produced writing, film, and music rich in ambivalence, celebrations, and attacks, but even richer in the subtlety with which such poles are negotiated. Much of our art calls into question American myths of innocence, conquest, tolerance, and optimism while sometimes invoking or holding onto them as ideals not yet realized, and always laying claim to openness and the right to be heard. In doing so, art carves a two-way street between newness and traditional American culture.

Frederick R. Karl explores both the unifying myths of the 1950s and the hidden currents that surged at home beneath the growing tolerance and prosperity of the United States in the immediate post-war years. His magisterial command of the sweep of postwar culture includes the cultural waves that crested after the fifties and rocked the turbulent decades to come. Regina Weinreich's essay, "The Beat Generation is Now About Everything," explores the innovative forms and shock art of the Beats and shows how they turned lifestyles that were wildly outrageous, exhilarating, or even dangerous into a force in mainstream art. Even in the suburban pastoral of mainstream writing, ideals of stability and security were pressured by the pull of rebellion and despair.

Writers committed even to traditions of American realism revealed problems that transcended ideologies of conformity or revolt. The suburban realism of John Cheever and John Updike with its mixtures of plenty and malaise was to register a dialectic between American optimism and uneasiness. The painterly short fiction of Flannery O'Connor, with its blend of violence, mystery, and moral obsession; the sharply imagined realities of the Detroit riot of 1967, etched by Joyce Carol Oates in *them*; the expansive psychological realism of William Styron, exposing the burdens of history in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and *Sophie's Choice*; and the complex creations of E. L. Doctorow, who, in *The Book of Daniel* and *Ragtime*, mixed narrative forms in his innovative confrontations with the political past as personal as well as public legacy – all extended traditions of the realistic

novel in depicting vital social issues as well as manners and morals. They envisioned the past through the lens of a turbulent present.

The culture and canon wars of the 1980s polarized radicalisms on the right and left. A polemical intensity distorted discussions in American universities over the very definition of what should be taught. Discussions of the role of emerging voices in the study of contemporary writing twisted the legitimate claims of serious current literature into a false either/or. It was never necessary to argue that reading a contemporary African American or Hispanic writer meant the elimination of every preceding author. Reading Dante has not replaced studying Virgil any more than reading Shakespeare has required burning the works of Sophocles. The controversy over "multiculturalism" and the western canon had literature as its primary focus, but was about far more. The sheer intensity of its polarizations registered the pent-up anxiety caused by many social disruptions. Arguments over multiculturalism and "identity politics" expressed the ethnic pressures caused by the growing participation in the American mainstream of those who came after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 had abolished quotas that favored immigrants from northern European countries. But the culture and canon wars also circulated around the Vietnam War, the youth revolution, the explosion of feminist outrage, the gay liberation movement, the sudden visibility of art based on long-taboo subjects, and an increasing attention to nontraditional literary forms.

Writing from today's perspective on precisely the mixture that so aroused controversy, Marvin J. Taylor describes the collision between art and society as it comes alive when the "Downtown" art movement in New York collides with the library, that "establishment" organ for defining value and categorizing forms. Curator of a unique collection of Downtown works, Taylor explains how "Downtown works . . . question the structures of society – the available discourses by which we describe things – question the library as a similar available discourse, one that does violence through categorization of materials that are not beholden to the same philosophical, political, cultural outlook as those discourses that inform the libraries' structures." He describes an art whose impulses were shared by a large number of writers:

musicians, filmmakers, and video artists who . . . began to push the limits of traditional categories of art. Artists were also writers, writers were developing performance pieces, performers were incorporating videos into their work, and everyone was in a band. Along with the

profound disruption of artistic specialization, Downtown works themselves undermined the traditions of art, music, performance, and writing at the most basic structural levels. Rather than overthrow traditional forms and establish a new movement, Downtown work sought to undermine from within the traditional structures of artistic media and the culture that had grown up around them.

Writing on the Hollywood film, Leonard Quart and Albert Auster take on the reverse effect. Even as insurgent artists sought to transform establishment expectations, the establishment itself was incorporating insurgency as essential to reaching its audience. From within the commercial calculations of the filmmaking industry, and in the familiar genres of the western, the thriller, or the gangster film, Hollywood carried on its own interrogation of value by making the “murder mystery” and “moral mystery” mirror each other. Across genres there emerged, along with technical mastery and visual quotation, a questioning and darkening of populist optimism. Political and crime films interrogated American dreams and optimism, and exposed the fault-lines in precisely the mainstream culture they could both fascinate and provoke. From the *Godfather* trilogy, through the twisty manipulations of fact in *JFK* or *Nixon*, to *Wag the Dog*, Quart and Auster make clear that Hollywood watched us, even as we watched its films.

American theater provided a more intimate site for the dramatic interplay between postwar life and dynamic art. John Bell explores a layering of attitudes toward theater as high art and commercial entertainment that guided the evolution of drama, shaping its forms and sharpening the conflicts between the claims of imagination and commerce, of idealism and necessity, tragedy and escapism, that were incorporated in the variety of dramatic forms. From dramas of intimacy to musicals, from Broadway to off-Broadway, Bell explores how theater captured America’s self-consciousness about its place in the world and its changing views.

Nowhere are myths of an easy American triumphalism challenged more explicitly than in the literature of the Vietnam War, with its stark and powerful renderings of the soldier’s effort to persevere with courage and even to maintain a measure of past hope and idealism when confronted with the actualities of an ill-conceived war. Belief confounded by disillusion emerges as a core experience in fiction that rendered the struggle for survival in a universe of doubt and death. Pat C. Hoy II enables an understanding of that literature as the crucible in which established certainties were challenged and often transformed.

Hoy brings an encompassing perspective to a rich and haunting literature shaped by the collision between “our destructiveness [and] our political failures . . . and signs of grandeur: willing sacrifice for the welfare of others, deep love for comrades, redemptive acts of mourning, the revelation of character, the knowledge of what it means to be responsible, the acknowledged ache of loneliness.”

Vietnam writing continues the democratic tradition of American war writing – in play since Walt Whitman’s poetry of the Civil War or John Dos Passos’s *Three Soldiers* in World War I – of focusing on the common soldier. It exploits the use of the platoon of men from different races or ethnic backgrounds – reinforced in such World War II novels as Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead* – as a microcosm for American differences reconciled in the interdependent wholeness of the platoon or squadron. But it would go further, subjecting each soldier to self-shattering, traumatic encounters, mixtures of violence and futility, of captured ground immediately evacuated, of bodycounts as success measurements, of the jungle itself as enemy, of the names of the soldiers often replaced by nicknames stripped of all associations with their past lives. This literature moved deeper into realms of consciousness where the soldier’s American life disappeared and his heroic, pop icons, his John Waynes, became ironic figures as the challenge to certitudes of any kind grew deeper.

The Vietnam War made the world safe for postmodernism. The split between establishment hopes and actual experience, underscored by the harsh criticism of the war and its conduct by many who had committed themselves to a military career and whose patriotism and valor could not be faulted, itself demonstrated the pressure on once stable traditions. Cynicism over the possibility of unqualified belief in anything provoked fractures of faith in government that reverberated throughout the culture. Culture itself registered the blows to the system at large by accepting innovative forms that seemed perfectly suited to a time bent on interrogating its own myths and tearing up conventional wisdom. That very process provoked an extraordinarily rich literary response, one that constituted an assertion of the primacy of imaginative forms. David Mikics sees postmodernism itself as a re-affirmation of the importance of fiction – in its encyclopedic breadth, its search for the meanings hidden in the detritus of broken myths, and its “overcoming of, rather than a surrender to, skepticism about the powers of literature.” Mikics finds in postmodern fiction new constellations and interactions between the private and public, the real and the fake, assent and repudiation.

Just as postmodern art reflects new aesthetic arrangements of social attitudes, so new social arrangements provoked a new aesthetic openness. Since the early 1980s, the crises once encoded in the "culture wars" has led to mainstream recognition of writing by groups once relegated to literature's undergrounds. Mary Jo Bona explores the evolution of gay and lesbian writing from social protest to personal report, from experiments on the margin to mainstream acceptance and, in some cases, commercial success, from a focus on the AIDS crisis to a larger sense of human fragility in the face of incurable disease. Encompassing fiction, drama, and poetry, gay and lesbian literature also includes a variety of ethnic, political, and racial concerns. Bona's meticulous treatment of its development enables an understanding of its depth and diversity. Spanning many genres and political goals, this literature underscores the extent to which postwar literature is an adventure in inclusiveness.

The interaction and even symbiosis between margin and mainstream nourished acceptance of new voices. That is nowhere better illustrated than in the postwar growth of African American and ethnic literatures as immense sources of creative energy. In Ralph Ellison's prescient novel *Invisible Man*, winner of the 1952 National Book Award and now canonical, the unnamed African American protagonist tells of his odyssey from South to North, rural to urban life, through experiences of dehumanization by ideologies of the right and left. He reaches a newfound faith in his own, individual voice as speaker of hidden truths: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?," he asks.

Yet not everyone could accept minority, marginalized man as the voice for modern experience. Writing in 1966 in *Time to Murder and Create*, John W. Aldrich expressed a view, not unique to him, that too great an emphasis on the margins of society was causing the novel to lose its "educative" function, as the focus on "middle-class culture" was giving way to "the experience of the Jew and the Negro . . . not simply as social fact but as an experience symbolic of the universal modern sense of isolation and estrangement" (14). This could not resurrect the novel's universal appeal because, "regardless of how skillful these writers may be in dramatizing the full symbolic implications of that experience, there is always a point beyond which the most sympathetic non-Jewish and non-Negro reader cannot go, where the necessary suspension of disbelief can no longer be willed, and he is forced to say, 'That is not and cannot be myself'" (15).

However, in the insurgent 1960s and 1970s and even in eruptions from the 1980s underground, middle-class “insiders” didn’t have to stretch their talent for a suspension of disbelief too far to feel like outsiders themselves, estranged from a once-familiar country whose stabilities of belief and mores once seemed secure. Middle-class certitudes were challenged by the series of assassinations – of President John F. Kennedy, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King – and widespread unrest from a growing anti-Vietnam-War movement, an expressive youth culture, often violent racial protest, cynicism after Watergate, and the feminist revolution.

Spurred by Betty Friedan’s groundbreaking *The Feminine Mystique*, feminist perspectives would be captured in inventive satires of old ideals of American womanhood: in the landmark novel, *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen* by Alix Kates Shulman; in Cynthia Buchanan’s modernist satire on the Miss America contest, *Maiden*; and in that lively, picaresque sexual adventure, Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying*. Revolution was in the air, the office, and the pharmacy that filled prescriptions for the birth control pills that “always” worked. It was in the suburbs and coming ever closer in personal encounters from the boardroom to the bedroom. John Updike’s *Couples* would document suburbia in “the post-pill paradise.” All this eroded the confident sense of family and social stability and moderation at the core of traditional “middle-class culture.” And Jewish and African American writers were to become important voices for many aspects of cultural dislocation that extended far beyond the bedroom.

Daniel Fuchs explores the collision between traditional values stressing moderation and responsibility and the appeal of an ever more unruly mainstream culture. Writing about Jewish American fiction, he provides an absorbing meditation that links the effects of the post-war temper on personal identity and on the narrative voice. His concerns include the intellectual and family crises caused by the challenge to American expressions of traditional liberalism – with its emphasis on stability, tolerance, and rationalism – and the argument launched against it by extremisms on all sides. Fuchs explores the variety of resources and responses Jewish American writers brought to the issue. Writing as both Jews and Americans, they redefined what each of those terms meant over time as they addressed issues of self-definition in relation to the larger culture. Fuchs’s essay persuasively demonstrates that Jewish American literature constitutes a powerful meditation on both assimilation and difference that extends from the philosophic and political to the intimate and tragicomic, as it explores

the pull of a culture of hedonism and gratification against the life of responsibility.

Openness to new and different voices after World War II intensified earlier interest in African American literature. Sterling Lecater Bland, Jr, enables an understanding of the evolution of that literature through the profound changes occurring between the Depression era and today. He notes:

For African American literature, examinations of this change have traditionally been reflected in discussions about the relationship between black writing and politics, culture, and the unyielding influence of memory and the past. Those alterations, however, have been informed by a series of adjustments that acknowledged traditional influences and relationships while simultaneously calling into question the assumptions situated at the very basis of change. Basic perceptions of African American subjectivity shifted, the composition and boundaries of the African American literary canon were renegotiated, and the influences of gender, class, and sexual orientation acknowledged. The symbiotic relationship between the world's changes and black literature is felt nowhere more profoundly than in the constantly increasing audience for black writing in the decades following World War II.

Bland's essay demonstrates the power of African American literature to engage a tormenting heritage of slavery as well as changing cultural concerns and, through that active exchange, to establish its relevance to every aspect of our culture. African American writing has emerged as a diverse art, fluent over a variety of literary forms. Updating lyric, realist, and modernist practice, its writers have claimed through mastery of narrative forms a place and voice in world literature, a role underscored by the awarding of the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature to Toni Morrison. The dimensions of its success as a field of academic inquiry, and the high quality of the work of its scholars, have made African American studies a model that has inspired the growth of ethnic studies in general.

The growth and prominence of ethnic literatures are one of the remarkable features of postwar American writing. The many literatures that comprise ethnic studies incorporate, but redefine, traditions of American realism, aligning over time diverse narratives of diaspora, collisions with mainstream expectations, and even postmodern renderings of the current urban scene. These literatures unite the historical and the mythic. They explore the disruption and reconstitution of ethnic and American identity, and approach the problem of modernity

through the experience of cultural collision and change. Ethnic writing sometimes defies formal categories, as writers employing ethnic heritage contribute to a variety of literary genres and forms.

The centrality of immigration to American experience defines it as a major transformative event for both the individual and the culture, encoding the pain of marginality and alienation in a larger American episteme – unity emerging from difference. The centrality of that episteme to postwar American experience has contributed to the incorporation of ethnic studies into university curricula. As a personal and national experience, immigration can generate a physics of high-speed collisions between cultures, an abrasive calculus of interactions with an often resistant mainstream, or even an ecstatic sense of liberation from old constraints in new American lives. Its literatures may incorporate a sociology of ethnic identity as fixed, but also include its potential as a source of adaptability and responsiveness to new challenges, as ethnic practices are not abandoned so much as reconfigured to meet the demands of a new environment. Although critical responses to ethnic literatures are varied, a central question concerns how the relationship between ethnic group and mainstream should be conceptualized or formulated. Formulations stressing opposition contend with an emerging body of criticism stressing mediations between ethnic margins and the American mainstream.

Approaches to ethnic literature have typically displayed road signs written in lexicons of opposition. Conflicts between marginal and mainstream culture, tradition-bound parents and their more assimilated children, and among ethnic groups have made tropes of distance and competitive rage commonplace in ethnic art. Jürgen Habermas has lamented that the claims of each group have seemed “all the more painful the more the tendencies to self-assertion take on a fundamentalist and separatist character” (118). Writing in *Our America*, Walter Benn Michaels explained why this seemed impossible to bypass: “There are no anti-essentialist accounts of identity. The reason for this is that the essentialism inheres not in the description of the identity, but in the attempt to derive the practices from the identity – we do this because we are this” (181).

Essentialist views of ethnic identity have nevertheless been questioned from a variety of directions. Ishmael Reed in *MultiAmerica* pinpointed the need to find ways of mediating between the divisive separatism that has shadowed the large achievements of ethnic studies and a universalism based on the erasure of differences. How best to negotiate that distance? Road maps have been hard to find. K. Anthony

Appiah has noted “that one reasonable ground for suspicion of much contemporary multicultural talk is that it presupposes conceptions of collective identity that are remarkably unsubtle in their understandings of the processes by which identities, both individual and collective, develop” (156). Ross Posnock, writing in *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual*, has discussed the limitations of what he calls the “identity/difference model” (25). David Hollinger has explored the plethora of terms that have emerged to accompany the demand for change: “postethnicity,” “affiliate” and “disaffiliate” relations, and “cosmopolitanism” and a “rooted cosmopolitanism” (6). Such questions reflect the growth of the vision of ethnic writing as a new intellectual movement among scholars, poets, and writers committed to a more inclusive and flexible ethnic discourse.

Conflicts between universalism and ethnic difference, traditionalism and innovation in the interpretation of ethnicity, have themselves been a source of creative energy, contributing to the growth and development of Asian American, Hispanic American, and Native American literatures. Cyrus R. K. Patell’s essay on emergent literatures confronts that discussion. All these literatures reflect a concern with the preservation of cultural identity in opposition to mainstream uniformity, but also a sense of the violence attached to hybridity as an ideal resolution. From that perspective they question American notions of individualism as something apart from community or even as won only by the destruction of community. As Patell writes: “*ontological individualism*, the belief that the individual has an *a priori* and primary reality and that society is a derived, second-order construct,” is a persistent American attitude that, he notes, reverses the intention of the motto *e pluribus unum*, out of the many, one. Patell sees key intellectual architects of American individualism as stressing the reverse, that is, the “paring away [of] differences in order to reach a common denominator that will allow them to make claims about all individuals,” rendering “cultural hybridity . . . a contingent, incidental, and ultimately irrelevant aspect of individual identity.”

What complicates a simple either/or between ethnic heritage and an embrace of American mores is the ongoing conflict among writers of the same ethnic group over rewriting ethnic practices, tropes, myths, and signs. Patell opens up the contrast between traditionalist views of ethnic myths as fixed and immutable and the opposing view that the very value of the myths and practices lies in their applicability to the present and future, a relevance maintained by their ongoing

adaptation. That discussion goes forward in virtually all ethnic literatures, but lends emergent literatures particular critical and cultural interest, even as its artists produce extraordinary writing that has already claimed mainstream recognition.

Ishmael Reed, writing in *MultiAmerica*, identified a "European American ethnic renaissance" (xx). Attention since the early 1980s has been paid to the experiences over time of European ethnic groups whose history in America includes terrible hardships, but who are now considered largely assimilated. Italian American studies is a prime example. Fred L. Gardaphé brings the approach of a sophisticated literary ethnographer and Americanist to his essay on Italian American film and literature. In doing so, he focuses on the work of a group that, between the 1880s and 1920s, constituted the largest proletarian migration in American history, and has produced a powerful body of fiction, poetry, and films.

Gardaphé's essay spans a vivid history in America that includes lynchings in the South, curfews, relocations, and internment, and suppression of the Italian language at the same time as Italian Americans were the single largest ethnic minority in the American army during World War II. The ironies and pitfalls of Italian American assimilation into the American mainstream, the role played by ethnic practices and traits within the group, and the interrogation or exploitation of those traits by its own writers and filmmakers all create a lively and changing negotiation within its own community and with the culture at large. Out of that ferment, Gardaphé shows, Italian American writers, artists, filmmakers, and critics have created varied art rich in perspectives on assimilation.

By exploring the interactions between American and ethnic art, by choreographing the relationship between margin and mainstream and among ethnic groups as a changing dance of mutual influences, and by exploiting the fluidity of ethnic tropes and signs, Gardaphé opens up new evolutionary approaches to ethnic studies. He enables us to see that from the kitchen of heritage, recipes for a flavorful new future can be developed. Italian American studies includes art and theoretic models in which ethnic "identity" is not fixed and immutable, but an open, unfolding social process of exploration and self-fashioning. In being so it provides models for public discourse that correlate with what Jürgen Habermas implies may be the paradox of identity formation itself: "Persons become individualized only through a process of socialization" (113). As part of that process of socialization, ethnic heritage and the American present create new forms of dialogue,

interpretations of ethnic identity, and even conceptions of power within the urban scene.

A focus on urban politics is a particular concern of Irish American studies. "I have always taken comfort from the old Irish proverb, 'Contention is better than loneliness,'" wrote William V. Shannon, in one of the early landmarks in Irish American studies, *The American Irish* (1963). The Irish found plenty to be contentious about in American cities and, as Charles Fanning's *The Irish Voice in America* would underscore, discovered a unique political and literary voice. The largest wave of Irish immigration to the United States began as a result of the devastating famine that drove mostly rural, Catholic poor men and women to the United States, beginning in 1845 and extending beyond the famine's end in 1847. Irish Catholicism would shape and dominate the American Roman Catholic church. But secular power would be sought and eventually found by Irish men who had brought with them both a command of English most other immigrant groups lacked and an awareness of political dynamics honed in their long argument with Britain. Shadowed by mainstream contempt and derision, often conflicted in their relationships with other ethnic and racial groups, Irish Americans, as Noel Ignatiev details in his controversial cultural history *How the Irish Became White*, labored and fought to establish themselves in urban centers.

The election of President John F. Kennedy in 1960 seemed full vindication of the toughness of early immigrant struggle. It redeemed the hard journey to eminence even the successful described in terms of its attendant insecurities: the shame at crudeness that F. Scott Fitzgerald had encoded in 1925 in *The Great Gatsby* in Gatsby's determination to remake himself, and that made John O'Hara's beautifully dressed surrogate in *Butterfield 8* in 1935 bitterly declare: "I want to tell you something about myself that will help to explain a lot of things about me. You might as well hear it now. I'm a Mick." Kennedy seemed about to bring the era of too much insecurity to a close.

A man who had performed heroically in World War II, Harvard educated, magnetic, and superbly articulate, Kennedy was an American prince whose grandfathers had excelled in decidedly earthy, ward-boss politics. Although Kennedy's father had amassed a great fortune and served as American ambassador to the Court of St. James, even that could seem the perfect Irish American comeuppance to the memory of British contempt. Beginning his campaign for the Senate in 1946 by seeking and finding strong support in the Irish neighborhoods of Boston where his grandfathers had prevailed,

Kennedy's political path let outward toward American promise. His inauguration as president on January 20, 1961, underscored how far he and his family had traveled. Robert Frost read a commemorative poem heralding a new "Augustan age:" "A golden age of poetry and power / Of which this noonday's the beginning hour."

John F. Kennedy remains an embodiment of that blend of poetry and power in the fiction of ethnic groups other than the Irish. For Philip Roth in *American Pastoral* the highest term of praise for a handsome, larger-than-life Jewish success, nicknamed "Swede," is "He was our Kennedy." President Kennedy's assassination was presented in some fiction as an attack on American idealism. Kennedy emerged as the embodiment not only of the perfected hopes of generations of immigrant strivers, but of an American meritocracy of vigorous, benign, and rational authority. Roth imagines his assassination as enabling or ushering in the chaotic rebelliousness Roth calls the "American berserk." In the fiction of many ethnic groups, Kennedy occupies the haunting role of something more: a dream of ethnic merit achieved, embraced, and lost; of power perfected through its rational and benevolent exercise.

Robert E. Rhodes's essay, "'Polytics Ain't Bean Bag': The Twentieth-Century Irish American Political Novel," explores the advent of the Irish into the American political mainstream, their ability to record that journey in fiction and drama, with all the internal differences and tensions that, as Rhodes indicates, led even Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a former Harvard professor and the Senator most respected for his deep command of social issues, to assert his marginality and his roots by claiming: "I'm semi-assimilated." Rhodes addresses a spectrum of political meanings in fiction dealing with the rise of the ward bosses, from Wilfrid Sheed's portrait in *People Will Always Be Kind* of a "professional idealist," who brings to his idealism a hardcore cynicism, to novelist William Kennedy's assessment of all Irish experience as political. Rhodes's essay indicates how the political novel defines an assertive Irish American masculinity through a search for power in the world.

In "Grandmothers and Rebel Lovers: Archetypes in Irish American Women's Poetry," Patricia Monaghan focuses on the recourses of women encoded in poetry. Her essay on female archetypes in Irish American women's writing explores forms of empowerment outside the male world of politics. Invoking both mythic and ancestral female strength, women in contemporary writing supplement the traditional stereotype of the sorrowful, prayerful Irish mother with complex

renderings of women's self-possession and skepticism. As Monaghan notes, in Tess Gallagher's poem, "Instructions to the Double," a woman finds her double is the androgyne within her, the "little mother of silences, little father of half-belief." Monaghan opens up that female curiosity that stokes subtle rebellions against the female role and the double subordinations experienced as women and poor ethnics.

Much ethnic fiction interacts in imaginative ways with American traditions of realism, using differences in social and economic status as crucial elements in narratives and characterizations. For example, Irish American realism, from novels by Edwin O'Connor and Frank O'Hara to Mary Gordon and Alice McDermott, depicts not only negative stereotyping, class and economic injuries, but also a variety of responses for coping with prejudice. O'Hara achieves control of the WASP world by dint of his knowing command of its manners in *Ten North Frederick* (1955) and his manipulation of his WASP characters. The comic ironies embedded in the title of his collection of stories *Sermons and Soda Water* (1960) suggest a mixture of success in life's serious moments and cocktail hours along with what William V. Shannon described as O'Hara's "rage and resentment of every Irish man and Irish woman who was ever turned down for a job in an old-line Protestant law firm, ever snubbed for the 'sin' of having gone to the wrong college, ever left out of a fashionable party, ever patronized for wearing slightly wrong clothes" (247).

Alice McDermott in *Charming Billy*, winner of the 1998 National Book Award, offered a scrupulous realism about the drabness of working-class life and the pitfalls of alcoholism, but introduced a woman's dream of romance as a possible cure for this grimness. In *Child of My Heart* (2002) art joins romance as antidote. McDermott writes of the virtual abandonment of their children by an alcoholic artist father and a sexually active mother, and the children's struggle for love and meaning, further clouded by intimations that one of the children will die. Yet the hard realities of children who are thrown back on each other, and grim prospects of death, are resolved through the resurrecting power of the artistic imagination. One child imagines her father has shown his love by an attentiveness to her that involves abandoning his devotion to Abstract Expressionist art to paint her in a "realistic" portrait that hangs pristine and lovely in the hallowed halls of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Intimations of perfectibility and immortality through art echo William Butler Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" and invoke an Irish aesthetic heritage as if it were an ideal parent who could father an Irish American child. In the

perfected, eternal forms of art, that ideal parent cherishes and enshrines his daughter in an American sanctuary of beauty. Heritages of high or spiritual culture in countries of ancestry or origin haunt the corridors of realism in much ethnic fiction. Ethnic fiction supplies the memory or current experience of economic and social suffering, but also provides sustaining, often romantic, myths.

Postwar ethnic literatures illuminate the crossroads of historical continuity and historical displacement. From the vantage point of different cultures, one sees a persistence of themes: a focus on heritage and origins that includes, negotiates, or mediates difference; and an aesthetics that reconciles traditional or modernist visions of universalism as derived from the common well of repetitive archetypes with a new sense of a universalism based on shared experiences of urban dislocation and modernity. What is particularly fascinating is the growing emphasis on negotiating continuities rather than identifying oppositions. Instead of depicting the collision of cultures or of archetypal opposites such as insider/outsider as an inevitable train wreck, images of interpenetration and exchange increasingly hold sway. Here the artist's negotiation with the culture he or she struggles to transform positions heritage and newness as interactions, not fixed positions.

Cultural interpenetration has enabled a sense of modernity as the experience of multiversity: a polyglot urban linguistics, a close interaction between premodern cultures of heritage or immigration and the ultra-modern city, and even an imaginative incorporation of mystical, magical mythologies and the commercial, technological culture of the United States. Postmodern writers draw on ethnic materials to underscore such mixtures. For example, Don DeLillo's *Underworld* draws heavily on Italian American experience. An impoverished Bronx neighborhood serves as a site for immigrant waves – poor Italians and then poor Hispanics, to name only two. Yet all who come bring their mythologies of redemption and self-transcendence to those ghetto streets. In one scene a crowd waits expectantly for a miraculous vision to break through an ordinary advertisement. An orange-juice ad on a billboard reveals the hidden hand of God when “that certain Slant of light” cast by a careening elevated train illuminates a miraculous vision to the crowd. Marginality and solitude are defied in this community of rapture as the face of a local, dead Hispanic child emerges in the light as a divine apparition. The crowd's shared epiphany casts its own light, linking categories of meaning, connecting the resurrection of hope and innocence to commercial, secular culture, and reconciling ethnic differences.

The essays in this volume speak to and for the creative ferment in the United States that surged in new directions after World War II. They reflect an engagement with the play of tradition and innovation that transcends the narrowly political. Each essay should be read in the light of the others. Together they reflect our ongoing dialogue across genres and perspectives, a discourse filled with oppositions and inventive mediations between art and the times. Each essay reinforces the relevance of the tensions and excitement revealed in the others. Through the analysis of varieties of literature, of film and music, it is possible to see the vitality of the art produced in a society in transformation, maintaining its stability through its capacity to orchestrate over time the claims of individualism, community, and citizenship in and for the multiethnic, multiracial society America has become.

The terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, were in part an attack on any effort to come to grips with accommodating difference as either an ideal prospect or an inevitable global task. In his meditation on the attack in *Harper's Magazine* in December 2001, called "In The Ruins of the Future," Don DeLillo described the attack partly as an attempt "to turn History on its end," by replacing the future with the past. He adopted a vision of those who died at the World Trade Center on September 11, who came from more than 120 nations and represented a plenitude of ethnic, racial, and religious ties, as "their own nation," stripped of all differences by death. But what was honored in their deaths was not their sameness, but their individuality. In the hundreds of pictures and loving descriptions of the missing that seemed posted everywhere in the city and in mourning them, they were missed for who and what they were. In the *New York Times's* superb project in capsule biographies for each of those who died, what was recorded was what had made each of them loved, admired, and cherished by those who knew them. Asked what it was like to write their stories, one of the reporters on the project said, "I learned that there are no ordinary lives."

The sheer variety of writing in the postwar United States pays tribute to the endless strength of human creativity. It expresses in its multiplicity of forms and voices a full spectrum of experiences. DeLillo recalls walking weeks before the attack near the World Trade Center: "among crowds of people, the panethnic swarm of shoppers, merchants, residents and passersby, with a few tourists as well." Seeing a young woman praying on a mat facing east into a wall, he adds: "and it was clearer to me than ever the daily sweeping taken-for-granted

greatness of New York that will accommodate every language, ritual, belief and opinion" (*Harper's Magazine*: 40). "Accommodating difference," or Whitman's need "to find a fusing explanation and a tie," or Dickinson's "internal difference, / Where the Meanings, are": these are the crossroads where imaginative writing and American cultural ideals meet.

By exploring the reflexive relationship between the forms of art and the concerns of culture, by reconfiguring the relationship between margin and mainstream and among disparate groups as a two-way street, and by exploring the fluidity of experience and persistence of meaning, postwar writing bears witness to the genius and imaginative richness of these troubled times. In the chorale of narratives, no one voice or style holds absolute sway. But together they generate ever more creative ferment. Out of many differences, from the borders to the center of experience, in traditional or insurgent forms, postwar culture is enriched by ideals of openness and the affirmative value of the individual voice. With roots of heritage extending around the world, postwar writing in the United States flourishes as a bountiful art nourished by diversity. It joins in serving and contributing to a global ideal: the power of art to inspire recognitions and dialogues across cultures.

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Chapter 2

The Fifties and After: An Ambiguous Culture

Frederick R. Karl

As reflected in the culture of the decade, the 1950s more than most periods had several split personalities. By culture, we mean serious and pop, the arts and business, lifestyles and political ideologies, the totality of what makes a country into a nation and, by extension, a decade into a decade. As a silhouette of history the fifties have a definite contour: demarcated on one side by the end of the war and on the other by the uproar of the sixties. Unfairly, the fifties have often been narrowly perceived in mainly political and social terms, as the triumph of American prosperity; as the epitome of surging consumerism; as the victory of American culture and values over those of its closest rival, the Soviet Union; as a nation which has proven its uniqueness, in most ways God's chosen; and inevitably, as the time of reward for a generation of strivers who experienced and came through the Great Depression and a world war.

The split personalities of fifties culture are dazzling: Joseph McCarthy and the Beats; Richard Nixon and Elvis Presley; Eisenhower and Allen Ginsberg; warm, fuzzy family sitcoms and fixed, crooked quiz shows; the man in the gray flannel suit and the women of *Peyton Place*; the savagery of the Korean War and the peaceful, forgetful home front; John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King; Joseph Papp and Roy Cohn; William Gaddis and Herman Wouk; Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams; Robert Lowell and Wallace Stevens; Willie Mays and Maria Callas; John Cheever, the country club bard, and the Levittown people; the racism of the movie *The Searchers* and the civil rights

movement; and so on through one cultural incompatible after another. Yet what runs through all such schisms, divisions, and splits – however bizarre – is a sense of the counterfeit, the deceptive, the fraudulent, the artificial, and the imitational; the forger's delight. In several ways, the decade was itself a forgery. It reveled in denial.

The 1950s in America, as a consequence, have a distorted reputation: more part of the myth of recovery than the reality of experience. As part illusionary, the decade has been dreamed up; what doesn't fit has been bundled into a formula. The period has been characterized recently (in lofty books by television anchors Tom Brokaw, Peter Jennings, and Dan Rather) as a time of growth, development, progress, enlightenment, and achievement of goals; as a renaissance of sorts and essential to what helped turn the country into a superpower under a benign, grinning, ex-hero of a president. The general argument is that the men and women who experienced the Depression returned from World War II to rebuild the country. This generation, accordingly, is a treasure, for not only did it revitalize the country domestically, it helped make the United States the beacon of the world, offering financial aid (Marshall Plan), food, and military muscle wherever required.

Yet when we look deeper, we see the jagged edges: tremendous valleys amidst some heights, great disparities between our vision or ideals and what we actually were. It was a decade of much deceit, pervasive counterfeit, not a little paranoia. A difficult, unbending visionary artist, Mark Rothko, was a cultural avatar of subtle and hidden dangers. His representative paintings were his huge rectangles, shaded so that the viewer is drawn in until all reality is submerged in color itself, not reflective of anything, but color shifting by degrees of intensity. Rothko hoped to capture a spiritual moment, and he may have succeeded. More likely, however, he grasped something as evanescent as the very impossibility of seeing because what was to be seen was hidden beneath layers and layers of artifice. Those rectangles are, in reality, disguises, distorted mirrors, dangerous exits and entrances.

Such perilous entrances and exits were everywhere: in the Korean War – all but forgotten, except by the families of the more than 50,000 Americans killed; the disasters of racial relationships – a national problem presented mainly as Southern intransigence; the growing schism between haves and have-nots, Michael Harrington's "other America" – the latter invisible since they had little representation or buying power; the sellout of intellectuals, who were coming aboard with chauvinistic acceptance of American dominion, with all the

yawning chasms ignored. Two symposiums (“Religion and the Intellectuals” and “Our Country and Our Culture”) held by *Partisan Review*, a once Trotskyite publication and a fervent believer in the intellectual life, reconsidered America in postwar garb. The participants were the stars who passed for the intellectual elite, although several had faltered badly: Lionel Trilling, Leslie A. Fiedler, David Riesman, Mark Schorer, Norman Mailer, Hannah Arendt, W. H. Auden, Reinhold Niebuhr, James Burnham, Louise Bogan, Max Lerner, Delmore Schwartz, Sidney Hook, Irving Howe, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr, among others. Nearly all assumed America was becoming more conservative, more reliant on traditional beliefs, even religious; and more narrowly American, nationalistic, even chauvinistic. And with few exceptions – Norman Mailer derided them – they applauded the Americanization of the country. Perhaps because so few women and no minorities appeared on the panels, there were so few warning signals. For the panelists, then, since the fifties were so “sane,” the sixties would seem to materialize from nowhere, and they were, equally, unprepared for the Vietnam War.

We might call into question not only the benign nature of the responses, but the short-sighted assumptions behind the symposiums and what they meant for the culture of the fifties. For their grounding was not too different from assumptions behind what *Partisan* considered its enemies, the editorial positions of *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune*, or much of television, which is that Americans were coming together to reflect a common heritage, the opposite of Soviet villainy. The symposiums implied that Americans were homogeneous, coherent in their aims, bathed in values worth defending and saving (virtue, truth, integrity), and that traditional beliefs – church, community, family – once so maligned by intellectuals, may be sources of considerable strength. Much of this sounds like an echo of the 1930s “I’ll Take My Stand,” the manifesto of twelve Southern Agrarians who, excluding minorities and dismissing women, spoke of a coherent, homogeneous South; and by implication a template for American culture as a whole.

Yet the country was hardly coherent, much less cohesive. Forget for the moment Michael Harrington’s somewhat later formulation of up to one-quarter of the population as “the other America” that was being by-passed and buried. If the Korean War with its more than 50,000 American deaths and hundreds of thousands of Korean casualties did not exactly tear us apart; if McCarthy and McCarthyism (the latter an even more dangerous residue than the original) did not rip us up; if the Cold War did not bring us to the brink of a deadly

nuclear game with the Soviets, with the talk of a nuclear winter; then civil rights, poisonous racial and minority issues, and runaway corporate power would expose all the fault-lines in the country.

Those were the surfaces. Divisions ran far deeper: in matters of segregation and integration, in terms of political and private, states defied the law; government lagged in enforcement, or avoided it, or moved only under severe pressure. Millions were shorn of their right to vote, to obtain decent schooling, and to become equal citizens with whites. The Cold War was itself an enormous engine that drove nearly all considerations of security, national focus, the size of the military, and the reporting of news; corporate America through advertising seized the moment, with television rapidly developing and providing the latest push (Marshall McLuhan's "global village") – so that it was fair to say that programs were developed to provide filler for the commercials. The entertainment industry, most visibly the movies, was purged – far beyond the "Hollywood Ten" – in order to uncover a few subversives. Our Southeast Asia policies turned on who "lost" China; so that experts in the region were discredited or dismissed, and those who knew least – neither the history, languages, nor cultures – dictated policy. Planners considered how we could undermine the Geneva accords intended to settle an emerging, divided Vietnam. Still others, while helping the creation of South Vietnam, divided that country against itself, setting up the inevitable conflict.

Vice President Nixon suggested we help the debilitated French in Indochina with small nuclear weapons. Talk of nuclear winter resulted in a spate of films that featured alien invaders, gigantic bugs that overran the earth, and atomic or nuclear experiments which threatened human existence. The most noticeable were *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, in 1951, and *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, in 1956. The latter was considered so frightening that when it was shown on television, it was altered to include an explanatory prologue and epilogue.

Except for the Marshall Plan, which invigorated the defeated as well as the victorious countries, nearly every phase of foreign policy in the fifties proved short-sighted, a holding action without regard for the future. Repeatedly, we were told the future is now. The Marshall Plan itself was conceived as a means of providing markets for American products in the rest of the world, on the assumption that if we supply the means, other countries would come to market. The ideal of the loans – and there was an idealism and a vision – was rooted, nevertheless, in American expansionism. Those *Partisan Review*

participants caught little of this overall incoherence in social and political policy, although, as we shall note, the arts did.

Everywhere we turn in the decade – and reflected compellingly in the so-called “high arts” – we find paradox and irony. Such were the fault-lines of the fifties that only the sardonic nature of irony or the negative aura of paradox could serve as adequate tools of criticism. What should have led us to greater feelings of confidence, or the ability to confront dominant issues including Soviet expansionism and our own racial conflicts, led instead to uncertainty, to perceived threats, and to disharmony in nearly every segment of American life. Change was becoming so much more rapid that it could no longer be readily assimilated. The sheer pace of change was so disruptive it was soon conflated with loss of values, or associated with conspiracy and subversion.

Reductive solutions gained credence. We observed some that were as simplistic as Frederic Wertham’s citation, in his 1954 *Seduction of the Innocent*, of comic-book violence as the source of youth violence in America. Wertham assured Congress and the American public that the direct linkage existed between comic books and juvenile delinquency. Crime comics, he insisted, tear at community values and lead to antisocial behavior. His evidence is anecdotal, but as a psychiatrist he seemed so convincing he was believed; and although there may be some connection, as he pointed out, there are so many other factors in the creation of delinquency that any single one is inadequate. The public, however, was seeking an easy fix, rejecting larger cultural issues as too problematic: poor family life and status, low levels of education, the attractions of runaway consumerism, the easy access to alcohol and guns (later drugs), the possibilities of bad genes (heredity).

More complicated responses were put on hold, while simplistic ones were geared toward reasserting traditional values and national chauvinism. In a more complex equation, our political emphasis on national survival and American exclusionism became transformed into literary terms of counterfeiting and invisibility, the twinning of William Gaddis and Ralph Ellison, with a bow to Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Flannery O’Connor, John Hawkes, and Philip Roth, among others. In the visual arts, abstract expressionism, as developed in Jackson Pollock’s paintings, made large cultural statements. The Abstract Expressionists introduced a perfect, revelatory form for an ironic comment on a consumer-obsessed society. Into a culture obsessed with things it hurled an art of objectlessness, color as a mirror for receding form, the canvas emptied out of figures, the hallucinatory quality of non-figuration

and geometric forms, and, in some cases, large areas of unfilled canvas. Abstraction forced meaning from the object to the eyes of the beholder; the individual is prioritized.

Not surprisingly, in popular culture, in the now rapidly developing area of television, the paradoxes characteristic of the decade prevailed, especially the capacity for the imitational, the forged, and the artificial. Surface triumphed over substance. Two programs, in particular, reveal how counterfeit and deceit pass as the real, one program a quiz show, the other a quasi-religious one, called *Life Is Worth Living*. That clichéd sentiment was repeated every week, a religious reductionism in the face of intractable political and social tensions. While quiz shows in the fifties were not entirely dominant – Milton Berle and Jackie Gleason among other comics drew in those who owned television sets – they did capture attention because of their giveaways. The money culture of the decade was perfectly mirrored in such shows: *The \$64,000 Question* began in the summer of 1955 and was based on an earlier program made when money was less abundant, *The \$64 Question*. This later program was also cloned into *The \$64,000 Challenge* and into *Twenty-One*, all of which made television into such a misleading purveyor of information.

What came to count on *Twenty-One* as these programs developed were good looks, class standing, family background, and the aroma of elitism. *Twenty-One* would eventually live up to every aspect of the counterfeit by pitting a spotless Charles Van Doren, a Columbia University assistant professor and the scion of a distinguished family, against a grungy type, not a Columbia but a City College of New York man, a working student at a tuition-free school. It further pitted a model Christian young man against a stereotypical Jew: the Christian, son of poet and professor Mark and critic Dorothy Van Doren, was laid back and charming; the Jew, Herbert Stempel, was all push and shove and class resentment.

As it turned out, the large viewing audience had to be protected against the program's deceptions. *Twenty-One* had the brilliant idea of pitting contestants against each other, instead of against themselves and the questions. A winning contestant remained week after week, until the inevitable loss. Contestants, therefore, had to be interesting, or else possess a story that could become part of the show's larger narrative. They, in effect, became performers; and once that became clear, role-playing, not substance, counted. In this way alone, the quiz show became part of the selling of America in the fifties, part of the commodification of information and the reliance on appearances;

it fostered role-playing and rewarded it. In such a situation, counterfeit thrives, and public and private are indistinguishable.

The first big winner was the edgy Herbert Stempel, a man with an omnivorous memory for bits and pieces of information – what passed for “knowledge.” He had his own aura, the working-class stiff hitting the jackpot; but after he had run up almost \$100,000 in winnings, the producers felt he was wearing thin and that ratings needed boosting. (We see this played out in Robert Redford’s 1994 movie *Quiz Show* and in the Kent Anderson book *Television Fraud*.) The plan was to introduce a competitor and run them head to head.

Enter Charles Van Doren, whose name alone elicited style over someone named Stempel (German for “rubber stamp” or “postmark”). Looks and tone mattered, and Van Doren was tall, slender, and handsome, with the special grace of the well born, a stylish American matinee idol as well as a would-be intellectual. In contrast, Stempel gave off immigrant sweat. Class lines, caste lines, and social lines were drawn; inevitably, just below the surface, a political point was established: that somehow Van Doren represented the best of America, whereas Stempel, although bright, was a second-class citizen. It was the Cold War in miniature.

At first, the two came out evenly, but in the second week, Van Doren scored and Stempel failed to answer a question on the writer and editor William Allen White. Van Doren was now the supreme being, and Stempel seethed. Without too much delay, he informed several New York newspapers that the show was rigged: that both he and Van Doren had been fed the answers. Incidentally, when Van Doren glittered on the program – he sweated, he pondered, he sank into deep thought – he received a five-year contract from NBC, including appearances on the *Today* show, not known then or now for its erudition. In many respects a forerunner of the telegenic John F. Kennedy, Van Doren had the ability to fake sincerity, an essential for those selling themselves as an up-scale product. Poor Stempel became, in turn, a forerunner of the bluebeard Nixon, dark, scowling, caught up by internal demons, no class, only ambition.

Van Doren, finally, began to wear a little thin and was eased out in favor of a woman; a lawyer, Vivienne Nearing. By then – just before the rigging revelations – *Twenty-One* and four other quiz shows dominated the top ten ratings. The following year before disaster struck, another six quiz shows were added to the list for eleven in all. This array of spin-offs and clones was itself a cultural phenomenon; for while demonstrating the voraciousness of television, it also showed its