ADVERTISEMENTS FOR THEMSELVES: THE 1950s AMERICAN NOVEL AND THE PRODUCTION OF BELIEF

by

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Abstract

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My dissertation analyzes the ways in which American novels of the 1950s, along with the institutions that produced, marketed, and received those novels, were affected by and responded to the emergence of postwar mass culture. Throughout the decade culture critics lamented mass culture's emergence in essays and symposia, depicting it as a threat to American democracy and/or to the high culture created by the pre-war modernists. But at the very moment this fear was articulated most powerfully, the book business was quietly expanding, capitalizing on both an economic boom and the growth in the population of college-educated Americans, forming a new institutional alliance with educators and Cold Warriors to promote reading as both a cultural and political good.

As I argue, the book trade grew in part by advertising its distance from what was represented as an increasingly crass mass culture; this was one of the primary strategies by which literary institutions "produced belief" in the value of the novel. Paradoxically, the result of this growth was closer ties between the literary world and mass culture institutions. This paradox is embedded in a wide range of 1950s novels: literary fare by Paul Bowles, a science fiction paperback by Ray Bradbury, and critically disrespected bestsellers by Sloan Wilson and Grace Metalious. All feature

attacks on mass culture; all of them are also, in concrete, material ways that have yet to be discussed, products of the developing relationship between the book trade and mass culture institutions.

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Introduction

The emergence of what postwar critics labeled "mass culture"— a new set of choices, notably television, for a rapidly growing population of culture consumers— exerted itself powerfully on the American novel of the 1950s. This effect is most easily seen in the stories told in the novels themselves; as the works I discuss in this study exemplify, novelists from across the cultural spectrum now had a new topic to depict and critique, bemoan and satirize. But the effect was both more far-reaching and less obvious than the novels' representations of mass culture indicate. Between 1948, when television began its commercial ascendancy, and 1957, the year Random House, an American publishing house founded in the commercial heyday of literary modernism, became a publicly owned corporation, the way American novels were written, published, distributed, and marketed changed considerably and in ways rarely visible to the reading public.

The emergence of mass culture itself has received ample attention from literary scholars, but the relationship between mass culture's emergence and the making of American novels in the 1950s has not been appreciated. Literary critics and cultural historians that have discussed the effects of mass culture in recent years have focused primarily on the famous highbrow assault on it in the 1950s, the "negative classicism" of intellectuals as different as Adorno, T.S. Eliot and Dwight Macdonald, whose essays and polemics depicted mass culture as a threat to American democracy and/or to the brand of high culture that the pre-war modernists had created.[1] This

[1] The phrase "negative classicism" is Patrick Brantlinger's, from his study *Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture and Social Decay* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983). For the classic attacks on mass culture, see Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of*

ideology, the discourse of what Andreas Huyssen labels the "great divide" that purportedly separates high culture from mass culture, has been subjected to a sometimes withering critique over the past two decades, by historians and cultural studies scholars, critics of the negative classicists' elitism and/or celebrants of popular culture's subversive potential.[2] Rarely, however, have these critiques focused on the institutions of literary and cultural production that stood in between "mass" and "high" culture, which are all too often depicted as static entities in binary opposition to each other.[3]

The relationship between mass culture and literary culture never was a binary one because books were, of course, always a form of commercial if not mass culture; the book trade, that set of institutions that produced, marketed and sold books, occupied crucial but neglected intermediate space between the much-discussed twin extremes of mass culture and highbrow critics, and in a literal sense negotiated with both of them. The specifics of these types of institutional negotiations have gained the attention of literary scholars in recent years. Influenced by Jurgen Habermas's study of the transformation of the public sphere, Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of culture, and the sociological idea of the institution as that which mediates between the individual

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Enlightenment (New York: Continuum, 2001), Macdonald's *Against the American Grain* (New York: Random House, 1962), and for a differently styled but related critique, Eliot's *Notes Toward a Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949).

[2] See Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986). See also Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

[3] For a recent account of the "great debate" over mass culture, see Chapter 3, "Art as Antidote: The Mass Culture Debates," in Joli Jensen, *Is Art Good For Us? Beliefs About High Culture in American Life* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 2002).

and society, institutional accounts of the twentieth-century literary field, and of the novel as the product not just of an author but of assorted institutions including publishers, literary agents, critics, booksellers and readers have gained in prominence.[4] These accounts have focused primarily on either "lowbrow" genre fiction or on the production of literary texts in the first half of the twentieth century: Lawrence Rainey on high modernists Eliot, Joyce, Pound and H.D., Janice Radway on romance novels and on the Book-of-the-Month Club as a quintessentially modern, middlebrow institution, and Catherine Turner on the successful marketing of modernist texts in America during the 1920s and 1930s.[5]

My dissertation extends this institutional focus into the postwar era, and uses it as a means to explain a significant if little-noted paradox. The 1950s is likely the moment at which alarm over the fate of both reading in general and high literature in particular was at its apex. These were, in fact, two separate and distinct forms of alarm, as those concerned with the fate of culture for the few tended to have little interest in if not outright hostility towards more humanistic assertions of the importance of mass literacy. But the two issues were easily conflated in the face of the common enemy that mass culture represented. "Who is to blame," *Saturday*

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[4] Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991); Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993); on literature as the product of institutions see the introduction to Lawrence Rainey's *Institutions of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1998) and the introduction to Theodore Ziolkowski's *German Romanticism and Its Institutions* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990).

[5] Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism*; Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: UNC P, 1991); Radway, *A Feeling for Books*; Catherine Turner, *Marketing Modernism Between the Wars* (Amherst: U of Massacusetts P, 2003).

Review asked in 1956, "for the plight of contemporary reading?" ("The Battle," 5), and the premise of the question, the idea that there was a plight, was taken as self-evident, the point of departure for much of the discussion of the future of reading and literature in the 1950s. At the same time, as contemporary issues of *Publishers' Weekly* and Carl Kaestle's recent study *Literacy In the United States* suggest, in the 1950s more books than ever before were sold to a growing population of educated consumers. "The increase in trade book sales during 1956," *Publishers' Weekly* reported happily in January 1957, "will top the 7 per cent increase which 1955 registered over 1954" ("Highlights of 1956," 47). Kaestle's impressive study confirms *Publishers' Weekly*'s conclusions. He cites the "widespread popularity of book reading by the 1950s" (150) and notes that reading expenditures, controlled for both inflation and population growth, rose throughout the decade (153-4), despite the fact that, for much of the 1950s, spending on magazines and newspapers was in decline. In short, throughout this decade of alarm over the plight of reading, the book trade was profiting from the public's growing taste for books.

We might explain this paradox, the apparent disconnect between the rhetoric of crisis and the reality, by most any measure, of commercial success, as the result of a certain blindness on the part of culture critics, whereby fears of illiteracy, fed perhaps by Cold War paranoia, overwhelm empirical evidence that suggests those fears are baseless if not, at least, premature.[6] But to explain it this way is to ignore how interlocked were the articulations of alarm and the book trade's commercial success. Institutions of the book trade, the ones that were benefiting most from the

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[6] According to Kaestle's study, total reading expenditures did ultimately begin to decline—but not until 1974. The data suggests, Kaestle writes, that "at least in its earliest decades, the electronic age did not adversely affect the public's purchase of reading materials" (154).

increase in reading expenditures, did much to disseminate the idea that the literary sky was falling, a fact that suggests that what seems to be a disconnect between perception and reality might be better understood as a successful, and quite shrewd, marketing strategy. Throughout the 1950s, institutions of the book trade engaged in the paradoxical project of using the genuinely felt alarm over the emergence of mass culture as a means to carve and define a space for the novel within a newly crowded commercial field, not just articulating a rationale for novels in the age mass culture but also disseminating that rationale more widely and effectively than had ever been done before. That project—how it came about, how and why novelists, critics, and the book trade participated in it and how they were affected by it, and how it has affected the critical conversation about postwar novels—is the subject of this study.

I. Institutions

An institutional account of the book trade at mid-century might include some of the following developments. In 1939, Robert De Graff and Simon and Schuster together formed Pocket Books, resulting, after World War II's paper rations ended, in the unprecedented ubiquity of books in America, both lowbrow genre fiction and literary classics, which were now sold not just in bookstores but also in train stations, pharmacies and elsewhere. In 1943, the William Morris Agency, the most powerful show business agency in the United States, established a separate department for representing authors of books, signifying both the growth of the literary agent's profession and, just as important, a mass culture institution's belief in the future economic success of the book trade. That William Morris represented not just blockbuster writers like James Michener but also literary stars like Paul Bowles,

Ralph Ellison, and Robert Penn Warren hints at an untold story of 1950s literary culture: the continued growth of the audience for fiction marketed as literary. In 1944, Pocket Books and Simon and Schuster were merged into a small multimedia conglomerate called Field Enterprises, which included four radio stations, a newspaper, and a textbook publishing company. The merger was less an immediate trendsetter than it was a harbinger of the widespread consolidation of the book trade into mass media corporations that would occur in the 1960s and beyond.

Running roughly parallel to this set of developments, the influence of which was felt throughout the 1950s, was another set of institutional changes. In 1946, American publishers joined forces to form the American Book Publisher's Council (ABPC). The ABPC's explicit aim was twofold: first, to unite competing publishers in pursuit of their common commercial interests and second, and more important, to unite publishers with other institutions that had an interest in getting people to read. These included, of course, other commercial institutions of the book trade like book stores and book manufacturers. But the more important alliances were with institutions outside the commercial field, such as English teachers, who perceived a strong interest in promoting the value of literature, and Cold Warriors, who saw an educated, literate populace as a key element in the struggle to contain communism. These new alliances reflected the dual status of the book as commodity and work of art with both civic and aesthetic value beyond its value as commerce. The ABPC was instrumental in forming of organizations with names like the Committee on Reading Development and the National Book Committee (made up with concerned citizens, corporate and individual, and government figures), establishing symposia and conferences on the value of reading and the need to promote it in both urban and rural

areas, and publishing volumes on the social and political importance of reading with titles like *Wonderful World of Books*. It was also instrumental in creating, in conjunction with other institutions of the book trade, the National Book Award, the book trade's version of the Academy Awards, which was first awarded in 1950.

There are, in these two lists of generally neglected institutional developments (only the story of Pocket Books has received a lot of attention, and the rest have received either little or none at all), two overlapping stories being told.[7] The first is the story of the book trade's emerging relationship with mass culture institutions. In the decade or so in between the emergence of postwar mass culture in 1948 and the publishing industry's consolidation into mass media corporations, which began in earnest in the 1960s, both sets of institutions recognized common commercial interests, or ways in which they could achieve their separate commercial interests through collaboration. The creation of William Morris's literary department, which was headed by Helen Strauss, a former executive of Paramount studios, and the merger of Simon and Schuster into Field Enterprises, a product of Field's belief, after seeing the sales of paperbacks, that the book trade would be increasingly profitable in the second half of the twentieth century, exemplify this collaboration.

But the story of collaboration between literary and mass culture institutions in the 1950s—the story of the institutional absence of a great cultural divide—has been obscured in large part by the second story, that of the book trade's unified public response to mass culture, a response that, in light of the first story, needs to be understood as largely rhetorical rather than substantive and thus as deeply ironic. At

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[7] On the story of Pocket Books, see Kenneth C. Davis, *Two-Bit Culture: The Paperbacking of America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984).

the historical moment in which the book trade's ties to the institutions that produced mass culture were strengthening, it had both a commercial and an ideological interest in positioning itself as separate from and opposed to mass culture, in language not dissimilar from the language of the harshest and most uncompromising high culture critics. This was a delicate rhetorical strategy, for to advertise novels as works of art the book trade had to speak loudly about them without being noticed, without drawing attention to the fact that the production of books, whatever their artistic and/or civic value, was always also a commercial enterprise. This was, in a sense, the true charge of the ABPC. Pierre Bourdieu explains that in the cultural world, "the less visible the investment, the more productive it is symbolically." Thus promotions within that world, "which in the business world take the overt form of publicity, must here be euphemized" ("Production," 77). The book trade's challenge was to minimize the visibility of its investment in books as a form of commerce. Mass culture may have been, as Huyssen famously put it, "the hidden subtext of the modernist project" (47), but by the 1950s it was out in the open, an "enemy" uncovered, which is to say a rhetorical foil; the book trade, by its own design, was what was hidden.

Thus one of many inevitable ironies of the book trade's promotional "responses" to mass culture is that they also exploit mass culture; in the 1950s, books were advertised as never before on the radio and of course on television, though this too, the selling of the novel in the 1950s, remains a little-told story. The first National Book Award ceremony was broadcast on the radio, and television coverage was sought, and it featured musical numbers in between award presentations to enhance the ceremony's entertainment value. In book promotion, the line between mere advertising and what Bourdieu calls the "production of belief" in the value of the

novel beyond its value as commerce was particularly blurry, because the idea of the book as something beyond commerce became its chief selling point in the age of mass culture.[8] To the extent that the audience for fiction marketed as serious had grown, producing belief in the artistic value of the book, in its distance from commerce and especially mass culture, could have immediate commercial dividends.

II. Defining Terms and Methods

Promotional events like the National Book Awards suggest the slipperiness of any supposed opposition between mass culture and the literary culture, the slipperiness, that is, of the very distinction that the book trade hoped to draw, and this is one of several reasons that the term "mass culture," particularly as it was used in the 1950s when anxiety about it was at its height, is problematic.[9] But there is at least one respect in which it is useful to distinguish the book trade of that era from Hollywood or television, and we should not ignore the ways in which the concrete differences between the institutions of the book trade and those of mass culture affected what they produced. By Michael Kammen's useful definition, mass culture is that which is "nonregional, highly standardized, and completely commercial" (18). For a variety of reasons, the book trade could never be thus. For one, barriers to entry into the trade have always been low: it is far less expensive to publish a book than it is to produce a movie or television show, so the possibility of "mass control" over

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[8] See Bourdieu's "The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods," in his *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993).

[9] See Chapter 1, "Coming to Terms with Defining Terms," of Michael Kammen's *American Culture American Tastes: Social Change and the 20th Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

output by a small number of institutions (like Hollywood studios or three television networks) is diminished. Thus, as sociologist Paul M. Hirsch puts it, "conglomerate middlemen do not have the capacity to transform diverse readers of books into a controllable market with an oligopolistic or monopolistic structure" (114).[10] Books are therefore inevitably a more "producer-oriented" than "consumer-oriented" trade, a distinction Hirsch borrows from sociologist Herbert Gans, and this is a sociological insight with consequences for both literary output and institutional studies of it.[11]

In particular, this insight has significant implications for my study of the institutions of the postwar American novel. Institutional studies of the arts have sometimes disdained close readings of texts themselves, on the grounds that the answers the studies seek are better found elsewhere (in the structures that distribute and legitimize those texts, for example).[12] But one of the primary aims of my study is to show the degree to which novelists of the 1950s, as producers in a producer-

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[10] Hirsch's study is particularly significant because it was an attempt to address mounting concern that increasing concentration in the publishing industry would result in a limited prevent creative works from finding publishers. One expression of this concern is Thomas Whiteside's *The Blockbuster Complex* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1981), which was originally published as an extended essay in *The New Yorker* in 1980. Hirsch's conclusion was that the trade's low barriers to entry would prevent concentration from having the negative effect that Whiteside and others feared.

[11] See Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

[12] This argument has been made most forcefully in the pages of two special issues of *Poetics*. See, especially, Peter Burger, "Literary Institution and Modernization," *Poetics* (12): 419-433; Peter H. Mann, "The Novel in British Society," *Poetics* 12 (1983): 435-448; Richard A. Peterson, "Six Constraints on the Production of Literary Works," *Poetics* 14 (1985): 45-67; C.J. Van Rees, "Advances in the Empirical Sociology of Literature and the Arts: The Institutional Approach," *Poetics* 12 (1983): 285-310; and C.J. Van Rees, "Empirical Sociology of Cultural Productions," *Poetics* 14 (1985): 5-11.

oriented trade, *participated* within their texts in the promotion of the novel in general, often in terms that echoed the industry's promotional campaign. In this unlikely sense, institutional studies of the 1950s literary novel take us back, perhaps as close as we can get, to the old-fashioned idea of the novelist as solitary figure expressing him or herself, the very idea that institutional studies have aimed to discredit. But they do not take us all the way back: that Doubleday rejected Paul Bowles's first novel, *The Sheltering Sky* (1949), which was written in solitary fashion and which depicts an uncompromising, would-be solitary writer, on the grounds that it was "not...a novel" suggests in miniature the role publishers must play not just in deciding what is published but more broadly in creating and defining the limits of the novel itself. Thus even Bowles, that most detached of novelists, could not make *The Sheltering Sky* on his own, and it is more precise to say that an institutional study of 1950s American novel reveals less the solitary status of the author than the growing degree to which literary institutions recognized and exploited the commercial opportunity presented by the idea of the solitary writer. Throughout the 1950s, the machinery of literary production—the number of institutions that stood in between the novelist and reader—was growing. Writers had likely never been less alone in the making of books than they were in the 1950s, but the economic and symbolic importance of their perceived aloneness was never greater.

III. Advertisements for Themselves

The novelist's role as promoter—his or her participation in the project of articulating the specific cultural value of the novel in the age of mass culture, typically by announcing his or her aloneness—was always paradoxical in ways that

rarely found expression. One novelist who did come to express this irony, belatedly and ruefully, was Norman Mailer. When Mailer writes in *Advertisements for Myself* that it is "not easy for an advertising man to admit that advertising is a dishonest occupation," Mailer himself is the advertising man in question, and he is referring to his own disillusioning experience with the publishing industry as he struggled to get his third novel, *The Deer Park*, published in 1953 (233). The remark reveals Mailer to be conscious of the peculiar postwar irony in which his own promotions are embedded. His previous novel had been the disastrous *Barbary Shore* (1951), and after its combined critical and commercial failure he found publishers, in a culture of censorship, unwilling to take a chance on a difficult, sexually charged novel. Even when the novel was finally published (only after Mailer consented to revise a sexually suggestive passage), it was not because of its merit. As Mailer recounts, Walter Minton, the head of Viking Press, told him that he "'was ready to take *The Deer Park* without even reading it'" because he knew that Mailer's name alone would justify the investment and generate sales (231).

The ironies—first of Mailer's struggle to find someone to publish the novel and then of the fact that it was published not for its merit but for the economic value of Mailer's name—are rich, because *The Deer Park*, for all of Mailer's attempts to shock, now seems an almost naïve advertisement for the cultural importance of the novel, one that echoes the promotional campaigns of contemporary literary institutions like the American Book Publishers Council. *The Deer Park* is a novel about an aspiring novelist, Sergius, who befriends a corrupt movie director working on a screenplay about a television star. Mailer makes his case for the novelist in the same way that the ABPC did, by juxtaposing him against a decadent and hopelessly

compromised mass culture. Sergius's shining moment is his refusal, despite his own financial troubles, to sell his fascinating life story to Hollywood. To do so, the novel suggests, would be contrary to the artistry of novel-writing; in the world of *The Deer Park*, the novelist is a "lone-wolf," a "figure in the landscape," a solitary figure free of the taint of Hollywood and of commerce.

The quoted phrases above are Mailer's, from his advertisement for *The Deer Park* in *Advertisement*. But little effort is needed today to show that the idealized version of the novelist and the novel that Mailer portrays in *The Deer Park* was a fiction, less reality than ideology, because Mailer does that work himself in his account of the literary world's unwillingness to publish his novel the way he wanted it. Mailer's "Advertisement" shows that, contrary to *The Deer Park*'s representation of the novelist as uncompromising Sergius, novel-making requires authorial compromise; it is controlled by institutions with commercial interests; it is, in short, akin to (though not the same as) corrupt Hollywood, and novelists may be much more like Eitel, *The Deer Park*'s fallen movie director, than literary institutions would care to admit. There are no publishers in *The Deer Park*'s fantasy world, but in his advertisement for it publishers assume the role played in the novel by corrupt Hollywood executives. The upshot is that Mailer's advertisement deconstructs itself and the novel it is designed to sell: in telling story of its struggle to get published, of his dealings with publishers who are, in his view, philistines or cowards, Mailer debunks *The Deer Park*'s very claims for the novel's (*any* novel's) cultural importance. Thus this ostensible advertisement for *The Deer Park* is at the same time, implicitly, a brief against it.

This kind of authorial blindness—the blindness implicit in the relationship

between the institutional, collaborative effort needed to produce a novel (from sign-on to reception) and the novelist's portrayal of the novelist as a "lone-wolf"—is characteristic of a strain of 1950s fiction. Paul Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky*, the subject of Chapter One, illustrates this. The novel was commissioned by publishing powerhouse Doubleday; the deal with Doubleday was brokered by the aforementioned William Morris Agency. But Doubleday rejected the novel, and it was ultimately published by avant-garde New Directions, which cleverly used the idea of Bowles's detachment, his distance from commercial culture, as a marketing tool and thereby helped turned this art novel into a bestseller. As I argue, the story of Bowles's success illuminates a historical moment when cultural institutions began to realize the salability of the *idea* of the avant-garde or "art" novel—the growth, that is, of a market large enough to support a novel marketed as such.

Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, the subject of Chapter Two, is a kind of complementary opposite of Bowles's novel, one of the first paperback science fiction novels and as such an example of the possibilities and the paradoxes of the book in the new age of mass culture. Paperbacks, which emerged in full force in America after World War II, transformed bookselling; because they were sold at such low prices, they had to be produced in mass quantities in order to make a profit. They are, indeed, the book trade's version of mass culture, the clearest sign of the growing audience for books in America at mid-century and the technological wherewithal to produce them cheaply. In this context, in light of the critical reaction against mass culture, the critical acclaim heaped on Bradbury's first novel as surprising and as telling as *The Sheltering Sky's* commercial success: the paperback, which promised culture for the millions, had already aroused the wrath of high culture critics by the

time *Fahrenheit 451* was published. And *Fahrenheit 451* was not just any paperback novel; it was a product of the relatively new, critically disrespected science fiction genre.

But even in light of these facts, the reasons for *Fahrenheit 451*'s positive reception are not hard to discern: it is difficult to conceive of a better advertisement for the book than this one, which links the realization of everyone's worst Cold War fears to the predicted decline of the book at the hands of a vapid mass culture. *Fahrenheit 451* predicts the book's imminent decline while its existence is, at the same time, a sign of the book's continuing and growing strength as a form of commerce. That Bradbury's novel offers a critique of mass culture has been much discussed; the novel's uneasy institutional relation to that critique—the way it manages to exempt itself (and all other books) from that critique even though it is a clear product of mass culture, and what it gains from this exemption—has not been addressed. My chapter addresses the paradoxes of *Fahrenheit 451*'s critical and commercial success by shifting the critical conversation away from its relationship with other science fiction texts, with which it has little in common. Instead, I link *Fahrenheit 451* to the postwar advertising campaigns for the book sponsored by the ABPC, with which it has a great deal in common.

The final two chapters focus on two other bestselling novels of the 1950s, Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and Grace Metalious's *Peyton Place*. These novels, unlike *The Sheltering Sky* and *Fahrenheit 451*, have been perceived in different ways and for different reasons as affronts to the high culture with which the book trade rhetorically aligned itself. Wilson's novel has been seen as the quintessence of "middlebrow," the true bane of the high culture critic, whereas

Metalious's was a lowbrow scandal. In Bourdieu's terms, both Bowles and Bradbury's novels participate in the work of "producing belief" in the cultural value of the novel, whereas Wilson's and Metalious's do not.

At the heart of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*'s perceived failure to produce belief is the novel's largely positive representation of the television network that employs Wilson's protagonist, Tom Rath. In this sense, the novel reverses the stories of mass culture's horrors told explicitly in *Fahrenheit 451* and implicitly in *The Sheltering Sky*. The standard critique of Wilson's novel has been that it fails as literature because it fails to sustain its intended critique of 1950s corporate culture. An irony of this criticism, I argue, is that it has been shaped in part by an impressive and to this point neglected Simon and Schuster marketing campaign, which, quite apart from Wilson's intentions for the novel, framed it as a quasi-sociological study of middle-class life. The story of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*'s existence and reputation—including its reputation as a failed middlebrow novel—is inseparable from the story of the growth and increasing sophistication of the book trade. My chapter recovers the idiosyncratic story Wilson tells in his novel and analyzes the institutional machinations that transformed it into a "typical" text.

For decades after its publication in 1956, *Peyton Place* was dismissed as trashy reading, but it has recently acquired (or reacquired—its initial reviews were more positive than is sometimes acknowledged) a literary reputation, as a transgressive, proto-feminist text, notable not just for its overt sexuality but also for its almost defiant representation of independent women. While the novel's literary reputation has fluctuated, its purported place in book history has not: *Peyton Place*, often called America's first "blockbuster" book, has a storied place in the history of

the book trade as the novel that transformed the publishing world after World War II, a symbol of developing links between publishing and mass media industries, and consequently either a cause or an effect of a genuine and irreversible cultural rupture and decline. My chapter challenges this view by focusing on the unlikely genealogy of the novel's publisher. *Peyton Place*'s brilliant promotional campaign was orchestrated not by new mass culture institutions but by veterans of the pre-war book trade, marketers who had earlier promoted some of high modernism's most celebrated literary texts. The success of *Peyton Place* does not indicate any kind of sea change in the book trade. On the contrary, it is not altogether different from the success of the more obviously literary works described earlier in this dissertation. Far from an institutional great divide between, for example, the blockbuster *Peyton Place* and the art novel *The Sheltering Sky*, there is a hidden continuity.

Chapter One

Narratives of Attachment and Detachment: The Publication and Promotion of *The Sheltering Sky*

"I'm sorry about my agent—both for your sake and mine."

--Paul Bowles, in a letter to his publisher, James Laughlin, April 7, 1949[1]

"Do not become a cheap writer. Keep up your standards. It is better to be read by 800 readers and be a good writer than be read by all the world and be Somerset Maugham."

--James Laughlin, in a letter to Delmore Schwartz[2]

"He was one of the least troublesome, most gentlemanly clients I had, really a nice man. Despite our friendship, he always addressed me as 'Miss Strauss.'"

--Helen Strauss, Bowles's agent, on Paul Bowles[3]

Apologies for his agent, Helen Strauss, are a recurring feature of Paul Bowles's letters to James Laughlin in the months leading up to the publication of *The Sheltering Sky*, Bowles's first novel, by New Directions, Laughlin's company, in December 1949. The apology above, like most of the others, is given for no apparent reason. There is no sign, that is, that Strauss did anything that warranted being apologized for; if Bowles complained to her about her conduct with Laughlin there is

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[1] *In Touch: The Letters of Paul Bowles*, 201.

[2] *Delmore Schwartz and James Laughlin: Selected Letters*, 84.

[3] *A Talent for Luck*, 152.

no record of it. As it turned out, Bowles's association with Strauss far outlasted both his friendship and his business relationship with Laughlin,[4] suggesting that the apologies are better understood not as genuine expressions of regret (or not solely as such expressions) but as Bowles's attempts to affirm his detachment from business matters—the agent's purview—and thereby ingratiate himself to his publisher, who, as his advice above to Delmore Schwartz indicates, counted himself not as a businessman but as a patron of avant-garde artists. In light of the fact that at the time of these letters Bowles had not established himself as a novelist, and that prior to Laughlin's agreeing to publish it *The Sheltering Sky* had been rejected by numerous publishing houses, his desire to stay on Laughlin's good side is understandable. Long before the publisher markets a novel to the public, the novelist—particularly the yet-to-be-published novelist—must market him or herself to the publisher.

In his letter, Bowles goes on to say that "I should have known better than to sign up with Eddie Cantor's and Jack Benny's agent. Except that I was ignorant at the time of the entire species" (201). In fact, Strauss did not represent either star, but her employer, the William Morris Agency, did. The significance of Bowles's inaccurate assertion will be discussed later, but first I want briefly to draw attention to the logic of the rationale. Bowles defends his decision to hire Strauss on the grounds that his lack of interest in such things left him incapable of making the "right" decision; paradoxically, according to this logic, only someone interested in such mundane matters (only someone of a commercial bent) would know enough to not hire an agent so invested in the commercial. Bowles's next letter, dated April 30, 1949,

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[4] As I discuss, Bowles and Laughlin's relationship ended shortly after *The Sheltering Sky* was published in December 1949. Bowles and Strauss worked together until Strauss left the profession in 1967. In her autobiography, Strauss does not mention Laughlin.

continues in this vein: "I'm sorry the agent business has been so harassing for you...I do need some sort of link with New York, naturally" (203). The agent is here cast as the necessary consequence of his expatriation to Tangier. Again, Bowles justifies his attachment to the world of commerce by presenting it as the necessary consequence of his actual self-imposed *de*tachment from that world.

If Bowles's apologies for his ties to commerce are in this sense paradoxical, they are not idiosyncratic and surely not surprising. Rather they exemplify what remains a common strategy for talking about art in the commercial marketplace. As Pierre Bourdieu writes, "the literary and artistic world is so ordered that those who enter it have an interest in disinterestedness" ("Field," 40). That is, perceptions of the writer's artistry depend in part on the perceived distance he or she maintains from the "economic world"[5]; it is thus in the writer's interest to *disavow*[6] this world, to announce his or her lack of interest in the commercial. More specifically, Bowles's apologies reflect something of the changing cultural and economic status of the novel in the 1950s as mass culture emerged. On the one hand, much was made of the fact that the novel and books in general were threatened by the emergence of mass culture,[7] by easier, more passive forms of entertainment like television.[8] At the same

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[5] For Bourdieu, the field of cultural production is "the Economic World Reversed" in the sense that artists succeed in the cultural field by distancing themselves from precisely what is sought after in the "economic world": success in the commercial marketplace.

[6] Bourdieu's term is "*denegation*," translated as "disavowal," "negation," or "denial" in "The Production of Belief." See Translator's note in "The Production of Belief," 74.

[7] "Mass culture" is a contested term, and when I use it I refer specifically to the post-World War II era. Following the lead of Michael Kammen, when I speak of postwar mass culture I refer not just to the technological advancements that made it possible to bring "culture to the millions" (this technology of course existed before World War

time, notwithstanding predictions of the book's demise that accompanied television's ascendancy, the combination of the postwar economic boom with a sharp increase in college attendance—and even, as I'll show, the growth of the mass media industries themselves—presented the book business with an unprecedented opportunity to expand, to sell more books to more people than ever before.[9] The book business responded to this opportunity in part by marketing the book as something other than, something more special than, a mere commodity.[10] In this regard, the book business's response to the emergence of mass culture throughout the 1950s mirrors the gesture of Bowles's apologies to Laughlin in 1949, strategically—if somewhat disingenuously—advertising to a growing, increasingly literate audience of consumers the book's separateness from the world of commerce. The curious status of the book business in the 1950s is captured by this fact: even in the face of competition from television, its revenues increased. Other forms of information and entertainment—movies, magazines, and newspapers—saw declines during the same

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II), but also to the postwar economic growth that multiplied the population of culture consumers.

[8] "Between 1948 and 1955, television was installed in nearly two-thirds of the nation's homes" (Spigel 1).

[9] Between 1938 and 1948, the number of college students in America doubled; this was just the start of what has been deemed the "golden age" of the American university. See Thomas Bender, "Politics, Intellect, and the American University, 1945-1995" in *American Academic Culture in Transformation*. See Diggins 181 for a succinct summary of the decade's economic growth.

[10] The formation of the American Book Publisher's Council, the publication of *Wonderful World of Books*, and the instituting of the National Book Award are all examples of this. All are discussed in Chapter 3.

period.[11] In short, even as the book became, in relation to the unprecedented ubiquity of newer forms, a more rarefied form of culture, its readership grew.

With this as a backdrop, I will argue that there is something paradigmatic about not just Bowles's apologies but also the story of the writing, publication and reception of *The Sheltering Sky*. After falling out of print in the 1970s, Bowles's first novel has been of interest to scholars over the past decade as a recovered masterpiece of postwar alienation, conducive to revisionist studies of the 1950s as an anxious rather than a placid decade; Bowles's entire oeuvre, now back in print, has garnered renewed attention as texts well suited to queer and especially postcolonial readings.[12] My interest, however, is in what the novel was in its own time: a bestselling "art novel"[13] produced by a collusion between mass and high cultural institutions. While *The Sheltering Sky* was hardly the first art novel in American literary history to achieve immediate commercial success, the story of Bowles's success illuminates a generally overlooked aspect of its moment in literary history, a moment when cultural institutions began to realize the salability of the *idea* of the avant-garde or "art" novel—the growth, that is, of a market large enough to support a novel marketed as

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[11] See Chapter Five, "Literacy as a Consumer Activity" in Carl Kaestle et al.'s *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading Since 1880*. For more on the struggles of newspaper, magazine and movie industries in the 1950s, see Baughman, *The Republic of Mass Culture* and also Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America*.

[12] Bowles scholarship was scarce until the 1980s, when interest grew rapidly. See the special edition of *Twentieth Century Literature* 32 (Fall-Winter 1986), devoted exclusively to Bowles. See also *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 2 (Fall 1982), also devoted exclusively to Bowles.

[13] I borrow this term from Mark McGurl's recent study, *The Novel Art*, to designate novels of serious, literary intention.

such. It is, in this sense, a representative of a new formula[14] for postwar literary success, the emergence of which can be traced as much to demographic and technological shifts as to artistic ones, according to which novelists who disavowed the commercial audience could prove commercially viable in part by virtue of that disavowal. It is not surprising that the emergence of this type coincides with the emergence of the "art house" cinema; in the era immediately after World War II, both the book and movie businesses found relatively small but reliable audiences for products marketed as "art" rather than entertainment.[15]

This chapter has two aims. The first is to locate the famously detached but also unusually well-connected Bowles within a network of literary institutions that would prove increasingly prominent and increasingly profitable as the decade progressed. The second aim is to reexamine the novel itself in the light of his place in this institutional field, to show the way it participated in the promotion of an idea of art that had considerable appeal for the growing population of educated readers. *The Sheltering Sky* has long been understood as a narrative of the desire to break away from the American "mass society, " common both to novels of the 1950s and to American literary history. Viewed in its institutional context, that is, in the context of what Theodore Ziolkowski calls "the totality of agents performing specific tasks in the production, distribution, or promotion of literary works" (10) it becomes, in addition, a different narrative: that of the growing attachment of the art novel to the

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[14] This word might seem a little strong. It seems like a formula in retrospect, but I mean to suggest not that the novel's success resulted from a planned strategy but rather emerges in retrospect from a confluence of artistic and economic developments.

[15] See Barbara Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters: The Emergence of Art House Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

institutions of commercial/mass culture and the growing interest of those institutions in the art novel in the era after World War II. The mutual dependence of these two narratives, one of all-out detachment from what was represented as an increasingly materialistic and other-directed America and the other of increasing attachment to institutions of commercial culture, is a significant, often-overlooked context for the postwar novel.

Bowles is an ideal figure with which to make this case because the trope of detachment (what Bourdieu calls "disinterestedness") was a hallmark of his life and literature and a key aspect of his early critical and commercial success. It was the fact that he was, in addition, a well-known figure in avant-garde artistic circles long before he had published a novel that positioned him to make that detachment work for him. By the time he first left the United States in 1929, after a single semester at the University of Virginia (chosen because Poe went there), he was already a published poet, having had his work, which was influenced by Surrealist notions of automatic writing, included in the March 1928 issue of *transition*; also featured in that issue were Joyce, Breton, and Stein. He was 17 years old at the time. Bowles idolized Stein, and when he visited her in France in 1931 he did so as a fledgling poet in search of a mentor. Stein, happy to oblige, exerted her influence in two important ways: first, she effectively shattered his poetic ambitions by telling him his poetry showed no promise.[16] More constructively, it was on Stein's advice that Bowles visited Tangier for the first time, in 1931.

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[16] After reading a sampling of Bowles's poems, Stein remarked, "Well, the only trouble with this is that it's not poetry." When Bowles asked what it was, if not poetry, Stein replied, "How should I know what it is? You wrote it." (Sawyer-Laucanno 99).

Bowles made that trip with his other mentor, Aaron Copland (who hated it there). With Copland showing interest in his music, and Stein showing no interest in his poetry, Bowles abandoned poetry and became a full-time composer on his return to New York in the 1930s, dividing his time between work for the Broadway stage that paid the bills and "serious" composing—working in the same artistic and sometimes the same social circles as Copland, Virgil Thompson and Benjamin Britten (with whom he briefly shared an artist's residence in New York, along with, among others, W.H. Auden). Bowles was inspired to write again by his wife, Jane Bowles, whose novel *Two Serious Ladies* was published in 1941. He wrote short stories in which, as in his novels to come, his own detachment was inscribed. This is true not just in the sense that they portray alienated Americans searching for a more authentic existence in northern Africa and Central America, but also in the sense that the narrative voice always stands far apart from the sometimes grotesque violence it describes. Before he became a novelist, Bowles's distance from conventional American culture was already a pronounced aspect of both his biography and his writing.

I. The Agent

One way of considering the postwar relationship between mass culture and the novel is to ask how and why an avatar of detachment like Bowles became associated with Helen Strauss and the William Morris Agency, and, equally important, why Strauss and William Morris showed interest in Bowles. The answers to these questions can be found in the simultaneous growth of the book business and the mass media industries over the first half of the twentieth century. Prior to writing his novel,

Bowles wanted to publish a volume of short stories. He was informed by Dial Press, however, that to publish such a volume an author needed two things: an agent and a published novel.[17] The reason for the latter requirement is clear enough. Short story collections by unknown authors rarely sell well. Collections by established novelists, however, at least have a chance to justify the publisher's investment.[18]

The need for an agent is similar if more complicated, and it merits some elaboration; the significant and shifting role of the agent is a largely untold story of twentieth-century literary history. The original purpose of agents was protection, to make sure that the publisher treated the author fairly. The advent of the literary agent is in this sense a consequence of the modernization of the book business: as the business grew more profitable and more complicated, the relationship between publishers and authors became more impersonal. Authors, according to the agents' pitch, as artists and not businessmen, needed representatives to ensure that publishers did not exploit them. It is not surprising, therefore, that when literary agents first appeared on the scene in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, publishers

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[17] As Bowles tells the story, Dial Press did more than merely tell him that he needed an agent: "according to them, an agent was essential; they offered to telephone then and there to make an appointment with one for me" (274). Bowles's passivity in this account is notable, particularly for someone so noted for following his will; as, in his letters to Laughlin, he attempted to distance himself from whatever it was his agent was doing, here he distances himself from the very act of hiring her. Dial Press tells him he needs an agent; Dial Press even makes the phone call that introduces him to one.

[18] There is a discrepancy between Bowles's account of this in his autobiography and Sawyer-Laucanno's later account. Bowles does not say—and Sawyer-Laucanno does say—that Dial Press told him he would need to publish a novel before he could publish a collection of his short stories. Given that Bowles did in fact write a novel before publishing *A Delicate Prey*, his collection of stories, Sawyer-Laucanno's version seems more plausible, especially since there is no evidence that Strauss ever tried to sell a short story collection to publishers before the publication of *The Sheltering Sky*. See Sawyer-Laucanno, 275 and *Without Stopping*, 164.

denounced them as the scourge of the book business, in terms that mirrored anti-union rhetoric from factory owners of the same era. The agent's interest, so the publishers' rhetoric went, was neither in the well-being of the book business (without which there could be no books) nor in the quality of the individual finished product, the book. From the beginning, by publishers and sometimes by authors, agents were identified negatively with the commodification of culture, cast as the serpent in the book business's fall narrative, corrupting the previously "pure" process of book production by interfering in the gentlemanly and nurturing publisher-author relationship.

By mid-century, however, as Dial Press implicitly told Bowles, the publisher-agent relationship had changed: the agent, while still charged with protecting the business interests of the authors they represented, had come to serve a necessary function for publishers as well, because agents did much of the work of finding commercial writers and weeding out supposedly un-publishable ones. As the publishing industry expanded after World War II, and as the number of prospective authors and manuscripts increased exponentially, agents came to be useful as "screens" for publishers, "winnowing good books from bad" (Coser 287).[19] By mid-century, in short, as Bowles's experience suggests, the agent served a double role, was explicitly a sort of "double" agent. Now that the agent no longer served just as a protector of the writer, the hiring of the agent became an important aspect of the

[19] It is difficult to fix a date to this shift, which happened gradually rather than all at once.

process of novel-production and an added hurdle in the construction of a literary career, necessary to legitimize the writer in the eyes of the publisher.[20]

This consideration of literary agents from the publisher's and author's perspectives should not obscure the basic truth about them: their trade is opportunistic, and their existence is a sign of the belief that there is money to be made. That agents became increasingly prominent in the literary field is a sign of that field's commercial potential, and that potential was tied not just to the growing reading public but also to the growing connection between the book and mass media forms. In this regard, a telling and little-noted sign of the growth of the book business is the fact that, in 1944, the William Morris Agency formed a literary department. At the time William Morris was the largest theatrical agency in the United States,[21] noted not just for its sizable stable of talent but also for its ability to adapt to shifts in the cultural market; not only was it able to make the transition from vaudeville to movies, leaving its competitors behind, it was also the first agency to recognize television's potential.[22] The agency's decision to establish a literary department signifies both the increasing popularity of the novel and its developing relationship with mass media forms. Their decision to hire Helen Strauss to head the department reflects these two developments: in her previous job as a story editor for Paramount, her job was to find

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[20] This perspective on literary agents relies heavily on Lewis Coser et al., *Books: The Culture and Commerce of Publishing*, 285-307. See also James Hepburn, *The Author's Empty Purse* and West, *The American Literary Marketplace After 1900.*

[21] As Raymond Chandler described it, this is the "fall" for literary agents: the moment when the agent went "Hollywood" and left the independent New York literary scene. See Chandler's "Ten Percent of Your Life," *Atlantic Monthly* 189 (Feb. 1952): 48-50.

[22] See Frank Rose, *The Agency: William Morris and the Hidden History of Show Business* (New York: HarperBusiness, 1995). Rose's chronicle makes no mention of the literary department's formation. For that, see Strauss.

and buy from authors stories that were suitable for filming, and to convince writers to write stories that were suitable for filming.[23]

Strauss's decision to leave Paramount for William Morris testifies to both the growing commercial opportunities afforded by the literary field and the opportunism of the agent. She characterizes the relation between Hollywood and the book business at the time of this decision as follows:

> Each of the big film companies was buying approximately fifty pieces of material annually—novels, plays, magazine serials and short stories…They bought more than they needed, more than they could produce, not knowing what they would or could do with it. They bought everything. They gobbled up the best-seller lists and the bulk of magazine fiction. (39)

Strauss left Paramount for William Morris because she felt it would be more lucrative to represent authors than to work for the studio, because of the studios' seemingly unending willingness to spend on movie material. Her choice to become an agent was a winning bet on the economic future of the book business.

That her motives were explicitly financial puts her decision to represent Bowles in its proper context: she evidently saw in his literary endeavors a chance to make money. In the light of Bowles's unconventionality and relative anonymity—he had at the time no commercial credentials, but he did have what might be called highbrow credentials—that is in itself a fairly striking notion. When an agent takes on a client, that agent is gambling that the client will succeed commercially. Business

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[23] William Morris was apparently so sure that it wanted Strauss to head its department that it waited a full year for her to decide to take the job. Until she accepted, they did not even try to set up their literary department (Strauss 41).

capital comes with the ability to make salable recommendations to publishers, who then make the financial investment in printing the book. If the book fails commercially, the agent's ability to secure advances for other authors—and thus the agent's bottom line—will be damaged. Bowles, moreover, was not the exception among Strauss's clientele; her list of authors would come to include numerous literary stars, including Archibald Macleish, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Robert Penn Warren, Edith Sitwell, Dylan Thomas, and Leon Edel. Fears of mass culture in the 1950s were often based on the notion that the masses would (if they hadn't already) coarsen or debase literary culture. But just as the emergence of the art cinema signified the emergence of an audience for serious film that Hollywood studios would soon try to capitalize on, Strauss's decision to take Bowles and other literary stars on as clients suggests that institutions of mass culture perceived (rightly, as it turned out) a growing audience for the literary, a readymade niche market waiting to be tapped.[24]

It was, apparently, not only the agent who saw commercial potential in Bowles: within 10 days of her hiring, Strauss secured for him an advance for a novel from Doubleday, "one of the authentic colossi of the industry," in the words of publishing historian John Tebbel (112). Bowles's position in the field of literary production at this point deserves note: not only was he represented by the biggest Hollywood agency, he was to be published by one of the biggest houses. It is important to realize that he had not yet written a word nor even come up with the idea for his novel. That did not come until *after* receiving word of the advance, which Bowles used to fund the trip to Tangier and the Sahara that inspired the writing of the novel. The chain of events—first the hiring of the agent, who secures the advance,

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[24] Strauss, however, did not count herself a highbrow. Her favorite and most commercially successful client was James Michener.

which pays for the trip, which leads to the inspiration, idea, and writing of the novel—suggests again how integral the disavowed aspects of novel production—agents, advances, commercial publishers—are to the construction of the novel, even for, if not especially for, the novels and novelists that are most vigorously engaged in effort to suppress their ties to them. The kind of detachment embodied by Bowles's sojourn to the Sahara is not cheap; it can only occur in the context of either independent wealth or some form of attachment with the business world. Thus the novel's existence depended on the advance, which depended on Helen Strauss, whose place in the literary field was a function of the growing commercial possibilities for the book in the age of mass culture. At the moment in literary history when the novel was receiving from both New Critics and New York intellectuals its closest critical attention as a distinctive form of artistic production,[25] its institutions were becoming more and more intertwined with other, more consumer-oriented forms of culture.

Bowles's attempt to forge a literary career was set back when Doubleday rejected his manuscript for *The Sheltering Sky*. Doubleday rejected the novel on the grounds that the manuscript Bowles submitted was, simply, not a novel.[26] It is best not to make too much of this assessment; as Bowles himself concluded with evident satisfaction in his autobiography, Doubleday's rejection was likely a (regrettable, as it turned out) assessment of the *The Sheltering Sky*'s commercial prospects, a curious one at that, given that the novel is much like the short stories on the basis of which,

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[25] See Chapter 1 of Thomas Schaub's *American Fiction of the Cold War* for a discussion of the attention lavished on the novel as work of art by both new critics and New York intellectuals after World War II.

[26] See *Without Stopping*, *In Touch*, and "Preface" in *The Sheltering Sky* for three versions of this same story.

presumably, along with Strauss's recommendation, Doubleday gave him the advance. Doubleday's assessment of the book, that is, is likely not an intentional application of genre theory to a specific text. But the language of the rejection, assuming Bowles is reporting it correctly, does suggest, if not the limits of formalist notions of genre, at least the necessary role of publishing houses in the construction of genre, in determining what constitutes a novel and what does not. This role could only increase in the decades after World War II, when the publishing industry consolidated and the power of the largest companies increased.[27] In strictly material terms, if no publisher is willing to deem *The Sheltering Sky* a novel, then it is not one.

II. New Directions

Doubleday's rejection, a footnote in most accounts of Bowles's career, nonetheless triggered a chain of events that altered the reception of his first novel and probably altered perceptions of his entire career. In the short term, it put Bowles in a precarious position, because, as a first novelist with no commercial track record, he would have to return the advance that he was living off.[28] The manuscript then "went

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[27] While the publishing industry's postwar consolidation produced a few books and articles bemoaning the inevitable death of literature, the evidence from sociological studies of the effects of concentration is mixed. See John P. Dessauer, "Pity Poor Pascal: Some Sobering Reflections on the American Book Scene." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (1975): 81-92; Bill Henderson, "Independent Publishing: Today and Yesterday." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (1975): 93-105; Paul M. Hirsch, "U.S. Cultural Productions: The Impact of Ownership." *Journal of Communication* 35 (1985): 110-121; Walter Powell, "Control and Conflict in Publishing." *Society* 17 (1979): 48-53.

[28] The relevant comparison here is to Norman Mailer after Rinehart rejected his manuscript for *The Deer Park*. As an established novelist Mailer's advance was guaranteed ("a common arrangement for writers whose sales are more or less large," writes Mailer, though Rinehart did sue to try to get the advance back). See *Advertisements*, 228.

through a bad year of being turned down by every publisher who saw it." Finally, Bowles reports, he "sent it to James Laughlin, at the other end of the publishing spectrum" (*Without* 292). In his preface to the novel, Bowles emphasizes that "it was I, and not my agent, who finally sent the typescript to New Directions, and fortunately he liked it and agreed to publish it."

Bowles's version of this story is noteworthy. By signaling that his manuscript was accepted only when the agent was bypassed, he somewhat improbably links the story of the novel's publication with the (no doubt mythic) bygone era alluded to earlier, when publishing was gentlemanly and the author's relationship with the publisher was direct, personal, and concerned solely with art. This version of events is dubious but important: the "art novel" and the avant-garde publishing house in the early postwar era would repeatedly exploit its links to a notion of unmediated aesthetic judgment nostalgically associated with "the old days," minus the institutional apparatus and the middlemen (the agents) whose concern might be something other than the aesthetic quality of the text. In this respect, the key phrase of Bowles's account is "he liked it," where the assessment of commercial prospects (if not application of genre theory) that governed Doubleday's decision to reject is replaced by something more ineffable: the taste of a single reader.

That reader is James Laughlin, and to understand the making of *The Sheltering Sky*, one needs to take stock of Laughlin's unusual place in the postwar literary field. As I'll argue, while it is important to understand that New Directions occupied a different place in that field than did Doubleday (it was, as Bowles rightly puts it, "at the other end of the publishing spectrum"), it is equally important to see that the marketing strategies employed by New Directions proved to be not all that

different from those of the larger companies. A useful point of departure is the grammar of Bowles's above account—"I...sent the typescript to New Directions, and...he liked it." Bowles's use of the pronoun "he" to refer to New Directions is understandable; the publishing house was perceived to be a one-man operation. "I don't have any business acumen," Laughlin once said. "I am not good at deals and can't cope with agents" ("History," 222). Just as Bowles, in his letters to Laughlin, disavowed the agent in order to maintain his avant-garde status in the eyes of the publisher, New Directions achieved its cultural status in part by disavowing the trappings of the modernized publishing house. Laughlin, heir to a Pittsburgh steel fortune, had founded the company in 1936 after his mentor Ezra Pound told him he had no future as a poet (in this respect, his experience with Pound is much like Bowles's experience with Stein) and would be more "useful" (Pound's term) as a publisher of Pound and his friends. Starting as Pound's patron, he cultivated a reputation as the publisher who would publish what no one else would, a patron to the avant-garde whose interest was neither in bestsellers nor politics but in art itself.[29]

This reputation suggests in broad strokes what Bowles's account of Laughlin's decision to publish his novel suggests in miniature: that without the aid of financially motivated intermediaries Laughlin "discovered" great, unpublished writers, and that through his discernment and concomitant indifference to financial

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[29] Laughlin did not publish, and would not have published, *Tropic of Cancer*, and despite publishing earlier Nabokov works, he turned down *Lolita*. He also refused to allow New Directions to become a vehicle for Pound's virulent anti-semitism. See Greg Barnhisel, "Ezra Pound, James Laughlin and New Directions: The Publisher as Spin Doctor," *Paideuma* 29:3 (Winter 2000: 165-178).

matters put them into print.[30] This is understandably a version of events that both Laughlin and New Directions writers have an interest in telling, allowing both to accrue maximum symbolic capital[31] from their association with the other, and they have done so frequently over the years.[32] Poet Donald Hall summed up this version of Laughlin best in saying that Laughlin chose which works to publish based on two assumptions: "the assumption of quality and the assumption that these books would not sell in the marketplace" (275).

But there are two, related things left out of this assessment of Laughlin's importance, and both of those things need to be taken stock of if we are to understand the story of *The Sheltering Sky*: first, the network of writers who recommended other writers to Laughlin somewhat muddies the picture of him as the solitary man of taste. Second, New Directions' surprising profitability by the end of the 1950s must in some way alter our view of Laughlin as a non-businessman whose books would not sell. Some New Directions books did sell, and in some respects New Directions' method of (not) advertising the book—and Hall's description of Laughlin, first printed in the *New York Times*, as someone who cared only about aesthetic quality

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[30] That purported indifference is conveyed in small print on the title page of every New Directions book: "New Directions Books are published for James Laughlin."

[31] Bourdieu defines "symbolic capital" as "economic or political capital that is disavowed…a 'credit' which, under certain conditions, and always in the long run, guarantees 'economic' profits" ("Belief" 75). One ensures—under "certain conditions"—long-term economic gain by pointedly not marketing the cultural product as a commodity.

[32] As early as 1952, in *The Book in America*, Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt lauded New Directions for its "sole emphasis on literary and artistic quality" (348) and "uncompromising idealism" (351). For later tributes, see, especially, *Conjunctions* 1 (1981-1982), devoted entirely to tributes to Laughlin. See also Hayden Carruth, *Beside the Shadblow Tree: A Memoir of James Laughlin* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 1999).

and who presumed failure in the marketplace, exemplifies this method—would prove an effective marketing strategy for the book business in general, a way to distinguish the book from the mass culture that intellectuals railed against, even as, as Bowles's example suggests, the emergence of mass culture enabled the composition and publication of serious novels. As a company in 1949, New Directions' situation was analogous to that of Paul Bowles's fledgling career as a novelist: on the verge of finding commercial success by producing works that were, as Leslie Fiedler derisively described Bowles, "intendedly highbrow" (502). *The Sheltering Sky*, published at the end of 1949 as New Directions entered its first profitable decade, was to become a prototype of a kind of literary/commercial success in the 1950s.

Towards the end of his life Laughlin spoke proudly of his willingness to publish writers other than the ones Pound recommended, but for every writer he published, it seems, there is a story of a more established writer who recommended him or her. Most famously, Pound recommended his old friend William Carlos Williams.[33] Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, already out of print and little acclaimed when New Directions reprinted it in 1946, was recommended by T.S. Eliot. Delmore Schwartz brought in John Berryman. Kenneth Rexroth brought in Denise Levertov. Edith Sitwell recommended Dylan Thomas, and Williams recommended Nathanael West. A telling example is the one that did the most to make New Directions a profitable company after twenty-three years of losses: Henry Miller, himself recommended by Pound years before, advised Laughlin to publish Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*, which Laughlin professed to dislike. On Miller's advice, he published the novel in 1951, and it went on to become New Directions' best-selling book.

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[33] Even Pound himself was recommended to Laughlin by his prep school teacher, and it was through that teacher that Laughlin contacted Pound in 1936.

The William Morris Agency's decision to establish a literary department and Helen Strauss's decision to leave Paramount to become an agent together constitute one version of the story of the postwar growth of the book business, one clearly linked to the growth of the mass media industries. The surprising profitability of New Directions in the 1950s—propelled by sales of *Siddhartha*, the popularity of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of the Mind*, and the academic acceptance of Pound (itself triggered, according to Laughlin, not by the inherent greatness of Pound's poetry but by New Directions' publication of Hugh Kenner's *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* in 1951[34])—is another version of the same story, linked to the growth of the educated reading public. And while New Directions might seem far removed from the economic world of William Morris, the role of intermediaries in the company's success somewhat belies the notion of Laughlin as the solitary man of taste. Indeed, few anecdotes better illustrate the role of and the importance of the "agent" in the postwar literary field than that of aesthete James Laughlin's decision to publish *Siddhartha*, a book he did not like, because of someone else's recommendation. Thus Laughlin's assertion that he "can't cope with agents" calls for a bit of qualification. He relied on Ezra Pound, Henry Miller, Kenneth Rexroth, Delmore Schwartz: all of these people, while without the financial opportunism of literary agents, fulfilled the "double" role of agent described earlier that arose as the book business expanded over the course of the century. Like Helen Strauss was for Bowles and Doubleday, they were at once advocates for writers and screens for publishers, helping to get the writer into print and assuring the publisher that the writer was worthy.

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[34] James Laughlin, "Some Irreverent Literary History," 224. Laughlin's explanation of Pound's commercial viability is questionable; the controversy surrounding the poet's Bollingen prize had much to do with his later fame.

This suggests that New Directions's rise to profitability was not just a story of talent, good taste, and indifference to commerce winning an underdog's battle against the forces of homogenization, commercialization and bad taste, though there were elements of all of that, and Laughlin's belief in the aesthetic superiority of the works he published, his dislike of *Siddhartha* notwithstanding, is unquestionable. New Directions's rise is also a story of independent wealth, low barriers to entry, and, most important, a network of poets, playwrights and novelists, functioning as agents/scouts, legitimizing each other's work and then capitalizing on each other's success and on a growing market for serious literature. New Directions did not "find" avant-garde writers; writers who wrote for New Directions *became* avant-garde by virtue of their association with fellow New Directions writers and the New Directions imprint (which stood for non-ideological, non-commercial aestheticism), and they did so at a time when conditions for writers deemed as such were most favorable.[35]

All of which brings us back to Bowles, who neatly links the commercial field of William Morris with the aesthetic field of New Directions. As we've already seen, his account of how New Directions came to publish his novel excludes any mention of intermediaries between him and Laughlin and in fact emphasizes that Strauss was not involved, attributing the company's decision to publish to an old-fashioned notion of aesthetic appreciation: "he liked it." But this account leaves out the formidable role of Tennessee Williams, perhaps the most important player in the story of the publication and reception of *The Sheltering Sky*.

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[35] Denise Levertov sets this into relief as she pays tribute to Kenneth Rexroth: "Most certainly it was he who persistently brought me to James Laughlin's attention and so...to the happiness and honor of becoming in 1959 a New Directions author" (ix).

Williams was a close friend of both Laughlin and Bowles. Laughlin became his publisher after they struck up a conversation at a cocktail party ("his only literary discovery with a social origin," according to Donald Hall (275)) and discovered a common interest in Hart Crane's poetry.[36] Bowles, who had first met Williams in Acapulco in 1940, years before the latter achieved literary success, had done what amounted to an enormous favor for him, composing music for *The Glass Menagerie* for its Broadway production in 1944 on very short notice (one weekend) and perhaps even without a contract.[37] Just after Bowles had submitted the manuscript of *The Sheltering Sky* to Doubleday, he returned to New York to compose music for Williams's *Summer and Smoke*.[38] It was, apparently, Williams who asked Laughlin to read Bowles's manuscript after Doubleday and many others had rejected it.[39] Williams was, in short, Bowles's agent in deed if not name, and if not for his intervention, it is likely that New Directions never would have published Bowles's

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[36] Susan Howe and Charles Ruas, "New Directions: An Interview With James Laughlin," 40-41. About Laughlin, Williams once said, "Among all the multitude of persons I've encountered in the world of letters and theatre...J. Laughlin remains the one I regard with the deepest respect and affection" (45).

[37] Bowles offered two quite different accounts of how the music for *The Glass Menagerie* came to be composed. In *Without Stopping*, he emphasizes that the work was done quickly but that ahe refused to work without a contract. Sawyer-Laucanno ignores this account and instead cites relies the account from Bowles that is quoted in Mike Steen, *A Look at Tennessee Williams* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1969). There Bowles claims that he wrote the music without a contract. See Sawyer-Laucanno, 243-244.

[38] Even after Bowles had mostly given up composing, he continued to compose for Williams's plays. He wrote music for both *Sweet Bird of Youth* and *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* (1962).

[39] Bowles never seems to have mentioned Williams's role in getting Laughlin to read the manuscript, it is included in one of Laughlin's accounts. See Miriam Berkley, "The Way It Was: James Laughlin and New Directions," *Publisher's Weekly* November 22, 1985, 28. Bowles's biographer, Christopher Sawyer-Laucanno, confirms the story's likely veracity in an email.

novel, not because Laughlin did not like it but because he probably never would have read the manuscript.

While it is impossible to know how *The Sheltering Sky* would have been received had it been published by Doubleday,[40] it seems fair to say, at least, that with the New Directions imprint *The Sheltering Sky* became a *different* novel than it would have been had Doubleday published it, the product of a different institutional framework, legitimized by a different set of institutions within the literary field, and thus received differently. This is most clearly seen the week of the publication of *The Sheltering Sky* in December 1949, when none other than Tennessee Williams writes an exceptionally favorable review of it in *The New York Times*, never mentioning his friendship with the author and the publisher or his likely essential role in getting the novel published. In that same issue of the *Times*, New Directions poet William Carlos Williams, with whom Bowles had corresponded as far back as 1931, included *The Sheltering Sky* at the top of his list of the year's best books.

I will return to the Tennessee Williams review, which surely played a significant role in the novel's commercial success, later in this chapter. I want first to emphasize that, in the context of this story, it is not hard to understand why Bowles apologizes to Laughlin for his agent; after all, Strauss was hired specifically to get him published, and in the end, Bowles only secured a publisher when he bypassed her, a publisher, moreover, who disdained the commercial anyway, rendering the Hollywood agent superfluous if not detrimental to Bowles's literary career. So it might have seemed, at least, to Bowles, who had already been rejected by numerous

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[40] While Doubleday had more resources than New Directions with which to market a novel, they also published many more books, and it is possible that the novel would have sunk into obscurity if its reception were not immediate and positive.

publishers and likely saw Laughlin as his last chance to become a novelist (to say nothing of whatever animus he might have had towards more mainstream parts of the book business, of which Helen Strauss was his last remaining tie, after the mainstream rejected him). In the same way that an art film gains status as such by being shown in an art house theater, the book's failure to be accepted by the modern world of book publishing, and the subsequent embrace it received from New Directions, so-called patron of the avant-garde, mark *The Sheltering Sky* as an art novel prior even to its publication and regardless of its form and content. The story of its tortured path to publication, moreover, seems like a pre-war, modernist parable about the marketplace's inability to recognize Art, and the subsequent need for some form of patronage if high art was to survive.

III. Promoting the Novel

But the market did recognize *The Sheltering Sky*, quickly rendering the modernist parable inapt. Its commercial success was immediate, and it ultimately spent ten weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list. Less than two months after the novel arrived in bookstores, *Life Magazine*, that much-maligned bastion of middlebrow culture, featured Bowles, complete with photograph and a factual error (the caption says that he is unmarried) in a two-page spread as one of "Four New Writers." Bowles, according to *Life*, "hit a financial jackpot" with *The Sheltering Sky*. By the time the novel left the bestseller list, it had sold nearly 40,000 copies at a time when the average debut novel of the era sold 2,000. In 1951, Signet published a paperback version that sold 200,000 copies in a year.

This success needs to be contextualized in a few ways. First, accounting for the sales of a novel, particularly a first novel by an unknown author, is tricky. An essential fact of the book business is that publishers cannot reliably predict which of their products will sell. For this reason they tend to overproduce, intentionally publishing more books than the market can support, assuming that out of ten, one or two will sell well. Once the publishing house gets an indication that a book is selling, it can throw its promotional muscle behind it in an attempt to ratchet sales upward, and if the system works right the sales of that book subsidize the nine others that failed to sell.[41] It is a mistake, therefore, to draw firm conclusions about the literary world from the sales of a single novel.

Additionally, in the context of the postwar explosion of mass culture, it is worthwhile to remember just how small 40,000 purchases really is. That *The Sheltering Sky* was a bestseller means simply that it sold a lot of books relative to the sales of others, and it attained enough success to be profitable because the production of books is relatively inexpensive. Bowles's association with the William Morris Agency exemplifies the links between the literary and mass cultural fields, but even as these links grew the readership for a typical bestseller would be dwarfed by the audience for a television show; only in extremely rare cases would a book achieve what might be called "mass" success. The novel's success, however, is of interest as an example of the way that disavowals of the market could be commercially exploited. The relative success of *The Sheltering Sky* suggests that, contrary to some of the hand-wringing over the emergence of mass culture in the 1950s, the conditions

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[41] The classic example of the surprise bestseller transformed into a "blockbuster" is Grace Metalious's *Peyton Place*. See Ardis Cameron's introduction to the novel, "Open Secrets: Rereading *Peyton Place*" (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999). See Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

that produced this emergence were not antithetical to an increase in the number of readers or the survival of serious fiction; that hand-wringing, as we will see a significant aspect of both the promotion of the novel and the novel itself, would prove a good way to reach the book-buying audience.

Some literary-historical accounts understand *The Sheltering Sky* as a forerunner of Beat popularity later in the decade. Bowles did become something of a hero to Beat writers, who visited him in Morocco in the late-1950s and early 1960s. It is more than plausible to suggest that *The Sheltering Sky*, *On the Road* (another novel, written at about the same time, that struggled to get published), and *Catcher in the Rye* are linked by their portrayals of generally apolitical postwar alienation and rejection of American conformity.[42] From here it is a small step to say that Bowles's novel fits easily into a standard American literary history that depicts men rejecting conventional domestic life,[43] like the Thoreau of *Walden*, Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Melville's Captain Ahab—this despite Gore Vidal's oft-quoted but somewhat mystifying remark that Bowles "writes as if *Moby Dick* had never been written" (6)[44]—to say nothing of the novel's more obvious links to lost generation novels like *The Sun Also Rises*, another tale of alienated Americans abroad after a war.

While these links help to explain the novel's place in the literary canon, they shed little light on its immediate reception by the book-buying public. For this we

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[42] See Chapter 4, "On and Off the Road: The Outsider as Young Rebel" in Morris Dickstein's *Leopards in the Temple* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[43] Leslie Fiedler made this point in a negative way: "Paul Bowles, writing highbrow terror-fiction in the middle of the twentieth century, cannot escape the limitations that plagued Charles Brockden Brown at the beginning of the eighteenth" (13).

[44] Port, like Ahab, abandons all notions of job and career in obsessive and ultimately fatal pursuit of his irrational goal.

might usefully turn to efforts to promote it. James Laughlin once remarked that "advertising is useless for highbrow literary books, a waste of money. Word of mouth is what sells books, and it is reviews that get word of mouth started" ("History," 224).[45] But when the reviewer is a friend of both the publisher and the author, and functions as the de facto agent for both publisher and author, the line between advertising and reviewing becomes blurred. (In fact, as I'll soon show, the text of New Directions's paid advertisements for Bowles's novel seems to draw on Williams's review.) Williams trades on his literary fame in order to promote his friend's novel; the degree of shamelessness and marketing savvy of that endeavor should not go unnoted.[46] At the time of the review, *A Streetcar Named Desire* had only recently completed its two-year run on Broadway. An assessment of the success of *The Sheltering Sky*, and of the role that the review played, must begin with the importance of Williams's name, for the fact that he reviews a debut novelist—one likely unknown the *Times*'s readership—confers legitimacy on the novel.

Williams's review serves as an unusually clear window onto the way the art novel could be promoted in a commercial context: advertising the author's disavowal of audience. At the heart of the review is an idea about art in the age of mass culture and corporate capitalism, and the idea in short is that artists and art are becoming

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[45] Laughlin did, however, place advertisements for *The Sheltering Sky*; single ads appeared in three issues of *Saturday Review of Literature* between December 10 and December 31, 1949. On December 17, when no advertisement appeared, *Saturday Review* published Nelson Algren's largely unfavorable review of the novel.

[46] Bowles was aware of the importance of Williams's work on his behalf:

> as soon as I [started writing], Tennessee...went out of his way to write reviews of my first two or three books in *The New York Times* and *Saturday Review* and various other publications. He couldn't have been a better friend. No one I know has so consistently stood behind my writing as Tennessee during all these years. (Steen 36)

increasingly rare. Art is rare because career demands and career possibilities interfere with the aspiring artist's development. Thus Williams begins his review by generalizing about the career of the American writer:

> In America the career almost invariably becomes an obsession. The 'get-ahead' principle, carried to such extremes, inspires our writers to enormous efforts. A new book must come out every year...I think that this stems from a misconception of what it means to be a writer or any kind of creative artist. They feel it is something to adopt *in the place* of actual living, without understanding that art is a by-product of existence. (7)

The implication is that whatever it is that writers produce in an age of intense career pressures and career opportunities, it is not art. Williams's notion that the career precludes the production of genuine art combines the discourse of what Andreas Huyssen would later call the "Great Divide" (the idea of a "categorical distinction between high art and mass culture" (viii)), most famously promulgated by Dwight Macdonald, Clement Greenberg, and Adorno, with ideas later famously articulated in popular sociology texts like David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956), critiques to which the American reading public proved enormously responsive. According to Riesman and Whyte, Americans had lost what had been their defining trait—Tocqueville's "rugged individualism"—as economic changes (particularly the ascendancy of the corporate business structure) conditioned them to be far more responsive to the needs and desires of others than were non-conforming Americans of the nineteenth century. The American writer, in Williams's review, has analogously lost the ability to produce "art" (categorically

distinct from the non-art they do produce) for similar reasons. Artistic expression is rare because the career has erased and replaced the "self."

What makes Bowles special, according to Williams, is his willful avoidance of this self- and thus art-destroying careerism: "Bowles has deliberately rejected that kind of rabid professionalism," enabling "his growth into completeness of personality" (7). Williams draws attention to Bowles's advanced age of 38, and while Williams asserts that his artistry results from the fact that he has waited until the time was right *for him* to produce a work of art, we know that he set out to write a novel at the time that he did as a means to getting his short stories published and only after Helen Strauss secured an advance for him. The point here is not to deny Bowles's artistry on the grounds that he fails to meet Williams's criteria; rather it is to point out that the idea of detachment from career concerns is perhaps less a precondition for artistry, as Williams would have it, than it is both a constitutive aspect of artistry in Williams's time, one that springs from of the actual growing connection between the literary field and other cultural and economic fields, and as such a selling point. The review's existence reflects and depends on Bowles's place in what would prove to be a commercially viable network of literary production, and in it Williams celebrates an ideal of artistic detachment and celebrates Bowles for meeting that ideal. This irony is compounded as the thrust of Williams's praise is repeated in the full-page advertisement for *The Sheltering Sky* that New Directions placed in *Saturday Review* on December 31, 1949. "Bowles is that rare thing," the advertisement declares, "a writer who waited to live life before he began to write it."

If New Directions's advertisements take their cues from Tennessee Williams, Williams might be said to take his cues from the novel he was reviewing. Williams's

attack on the contemporary writer and his notion of the conditions that make art possible—"They feel it is something to adopt *in the place of* actual living, without understanding that art is a by-product of existence"—is nearly identical to Bowles's narrator's account in the novel of why Port does not write:

> As long as he was living his life, he could not write about it. Where one left off, the other began, and the existence of circumstances which demanded even the vaguest participation on his part was sufficient to place writing outside the realm of possibility. (200)

The two passages appear to be expressing opposite ideas. Williams asserts that "actual living" is a prerequisite of writing, while Bowles's narrator suggests that living and writing are mutually exclusive, that as long as one is living one cannot be a writer. The confusion stems from the fact that Williams and Bowles use the word "living" in opposite ways. In Williams's review, "living" signifies detachment, whatever it is one does when not pursuing one's career. The novel suggests, as I will soon show in some detail, that Port could not be a writer because he was not detached enough; here "living" means engagement, the "vaguest participation." The point for Williams and Bowles (or at least for Port[47]) is that engagement of a certain kind is fatal to artistry.

In this sense, the novel itself articulates a version of the "Great Divide" discourse that Williams used to promote it. Indeed, before pursuing the specific nature of the engagement that Bowles writes about, I want to suggest that the significant difference between the novel and the review is that the novel is more

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[47] It might plausibly be argued that the fact that Port does not write does not mean that good writing is impossible. However, as I am about to show, the novel's promotion insisted that Port is Bowles's alter ego and attributed the novel's artistry to Bowles's Port-like detachment.

extreme: whereas Williams finds art to be possible provided one ignores the demands of the career (thus allowing for the possibility of Bowles's achievement), the novel seems to assert that even deep in the Sahara, good writing will be impossible. Port's decision to forgo a necessarily compromised kind of writing signifies at once his artistry and the impossibility of artistry, a contradiction made possible by the equation of artistry with the refusal to engage. If Port, the self-proclaimed traveler who chooses death in the Sahara over life in New York, is not detached enough to write, no one could be. But where does this leave Bowles, and what does this say about the status of *The Sheltering Sky* as a work of art? That somehow the novel's declaration of the impossibility of art becomes a source of the novel's artistic stature, rather than an implicit statement of the novel's inevitable artistic failure, is itself a kind of marketing triumph

That triumph rests on the problematic notion that Port and Bowles are alter egos. Williams was the first of many to make this claim: "were it not for the fact that...[Port] succumbs to an epidemic fever, it would not be hard to identify him with Mr. Bowles himself" (7)). But Port's death is not an accidental difference between author and character. The novel hints that it results from his refusal to be immunized by Western medicine before the trip; to the extent that this refusal constitutes another, supreme rejection of the West, it is an important part of Port's character. The novel's view of art is more extreme than the review's, ultimately, because Port, by virtue of his virtual suicide and his refusal to write, is a more detached version of Bowles. The paradox is that, as the romanticizer of Port's detachment, Bowles gains symbolic capital from it even as he proves himself to be, in the act of writing and publishing a

novel, an example of what Port rejects. Symbolic capital accrues not from detachment but from the representation of and advertisement for detachment.

IV. The Commercial Interruption

This will become clearer if we look closely at the chapter in which Bowles delineates Port's attitude towards writing, paying attention not just to view of art it espouses but also to the way it interrupts the narrative and thereby undermines what is distinctive about its form. At this point, Kit and Port are in a truck on their way to Sba, alone, and Port is sick with the typhoid that will eventually kill him. The chapter opens this way:

> As he lay in the back of the truck, protected somewhat from the cold by Kit, now and then he was aware of the straight road beneath him. The twisting roads of the past weeks became alien, faded from his memory; it had been one strict, undeviating course inland to the desert, and now he was very nearly at the center. (198)

The description of the undeviating course inland captures not just Port's feelings about the trip but also something of the logic of the novel and the process by which it was composed: "It would write itself, I felt certain, once I had established the characters and spilled them out onto the North African scene" (*Without* 275). As Bowles described his own method, he never knew what would happen next in his novel because it always depended on what happened to him that day.[48] A distinctive

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[48] This method links Bowles to the improvisatory aesthetic so prevalent in the postwar era. Bowles, however, does not celebrate nor believe in the liberatory potential of spontaneity. See Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998).

feature of this method, and an important part of Bowles's aesthetic, is that he does not attempt to develop his characters' pasts. In the plot of the novel as in Port's own conception of his journey, memory is faded and the story moves forward only.

In one of the first looks at the novel, John W. Aldridge suggested that Port and Kit's lack of a past was a sign of the author's immaturity; to Aldridge, the novel's nihilism was unmotivated and therefore uninteresting.[49] But there was a rationale behind it. On principle, Bowles disdained the idea of character development. He conceived of the Sahara as the main "character" of the novel; his purpose was to show the ways in which the desert could make any of us, regardless of our history, culture or class, submit, and he appeared to regard the awareness of this fact of human existence as supremely important: "The destruction of the ego has always seemed an important thing. I took it for granted that that was what really one was looking for in order to attain knowledge and the ability to live" (qtd. in Stewart 152-3).[50] The kind of Jamesian character development that Aldridge sought would undermine the point Bowles was trying to make about the ego, because it would draw attention to those aspects of human existence—job, personal relationships, class—that Bowles deemed superfluous and deceptive.[51] The ties between his disinclination

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[49] John W. Aldridge, *After the Lost Generation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1951), 186-7.

[50] See also Wayne Pounds, *Paul Bowles: The Inner Geography* (New York: Peter Lang, 1985).

[51] Bowles said frequently that *The Sheltering Sky* is a novel-length version of his noted short story, "A Distant Episode," in which an American linguistics professor. studying dialects in northern Africa, is kidnapped by a tribe, which cuts his tongue out, tortures him, and drives him to insanity. When asked if Port is a version of the Professor, Bowles replied, "They're all [Port, Kit and Tunner] the professor...the desert is the protagonist" (54). See Oliver Evans, "An Interview With Paul Bowles," reprinted in *Conversations*.

to develop his characters' pasts and the form of the novel are summed up by the Kafka quote that serves as the epigram for the final section of the novel: "From a certain point onward there is no longer any turning back. That is the point that must be reached"; that Bowles identified with this kind of forward movement is apparent in the title of his autobiography: *Without Stopping*. Port's unwillingness to stop traveling functions as a signifier of his (the character's) detachment from conventional American life; the novel's unwillingness to stop—that is, Bowles's refusal to develop his characters—signifies the same for Bowles.

But at just this point in the novel, two-thirds of the way through and immediately after announcing Port's journey as "strict" and "undeviating," Bowles does what both his aesthetic and his characterization of Port would seem to dictate against: he stops and turns back, offering the novel's only glimpse of Port and Kit's pre-trip past. Much of what one might expect in the first chapter of a more conventional novel, about Port's family and career, for example, is given to us here, and these are just the kinds of details that Bowles would be expected to disdain as irrelevant to his thesis about what we are beneath the dress of Western civilization. There is, finally, something decidedly un-novelistic about this flashback, as it comes without any impetus from the plot. So what is this scene—this uncharacteristic look back—doing here? Coming so late in the novel, Bowles's decision to "stop" cannot be said to serve the conventional character-developing function that he disdained; rather, it serves the strategic function of advertising Port's (and by extension Bowles's) detachment by transforming it into a theory of the (im)possibility of art in the postwar age. The point would hardly be worth making but for the fact that the flashback constitutes a concession to the conventional story-telling methods the novel

otherwise eschews, and the absence of which, throughout the rest of the novel, is meant to signify the novel's artistic integrity. Art requires a kind of detachment made impossible by the demands of contemporary Western culture, the novel suggests, but Bowles can only make that point, and implicitly make his case for his own artistry, by using those conventional, non-artistic methods. The flashback is like a commercial interruption, a built-in advertisement for the novel and its author.

In that advertisement the narrator recounts actions that took place before the start of the novel: first, Port's rejection of career in New York, then the insistence of immigration officials that he identify his profession on his arrival in Africa. Port's refusal to answer brings to mind Williams's assertion that Bowles "has deliberately rejected...rabid professionalism"; the episode as a whole recalls Williams's assertion that Bowles has achieved artistry by forgoing career concerns. Kit tells the immigration officials that he is a writer, and Port is intrigued:

> The idea of his actually writing a book had amused him. A journal, filled in each evening with the day's thoughts, carefully seasoned with local color, in which the absolute truth of the theorem he would set forth from the beginning—namely, that the difference between something and nothing is nothing—should be clearly and calmly demonstrated. (199)

Port's vision of a writer is a solitary teller of unpleasant truths, a notion far removed from the growing network of literary production that enabled Bowles's sojourn. Just how solitary is soon made clear: "he had not even mentioned the idea to Kit; she surely would have killed it with her enthusiasm." Writing is serious work; the remark suggests that Port is rejecting the trappings of literary success, the admiration of a fan,

the kind of fan thrilled not necessarily by the quality or "truth" of the writing but by love of the romantic figure of "the writer." Port elaborates on this notion moments later: "Kit would be too delighted at the prospect; it would have to be done in secret—it was the only way he would be able to carry it off" (199). Port conceives that the fan's admiration precludes good writing.

Tunner presented a greater obstacle than Kit to Port's literary ambitions. We learn here that Port attempted to write at the beginning of the trip but found himself unable to produce anything, because "he could not establish a connection in his mind between the absurd trivialities which filled the day and the serious business of putting words on paper." He attributes his inability to write to Tunner's presence, which "created a situation, however slight, which kept him from entering into the reflective state he considered essential" (199). Tunner, that is, constitutes "the circumstances which demanded even the vaguest participation on his part," the engagement fatal to artistry. In this respect as in many others in the novel, Tunner is crucial. As I'll now argue, the novel's explicit theory of art in "the mechanized age" is a theory of the cultural "problem" that Tunner represents. But to the extent that Tunner is a problem in the novel, the representation of Tunner as such constitutes a profitable *solution* to the problem of how to preserve an idea of high art in the age of mass culture; it is through the depiction of the flight from Tunner that Bowles shows Port and Kit's—and his own—genuine escape from the West.

From the start of the novel, Port and Kit cast themselves as "travelers" (as opposed to "tourists") whose desire it is to find a place as yet untouched by the war and, more generally, by the West. The tourist, we are told, "accepts his own civilization without question; not so the traveler, who compares it with others, and

rejects those elements he finds not to his liking" (14). The distinction matters not so much because it accurately captures Port's essence but because it is so clearly essential to Port's own sense of his identity. Port and Kit are highbrows, members, as Williams notes, of the New York intelligentsia. After Kit laments that "the people of each country get more like the people of every other country. They have no character, no beauty, no ideals, no culture," Port replies, "'You're right...Everything's getting gray, and it'll be grayer. But some places'll withstand the malady longer than you think. You'll see, in the Sahara here'" (16). Port is the expert, the artist, the intellect, and Kit—the fan—submits to his intellectual vision of the world, responds emotionally and intuitively to it, and attempts to live up to his ideals.

Tunner occupies the bottom rung of the hierarchy, and as we will see it is often through their attitudes towards him that Port and Kit define themselves. Tunner has not received close attention from Bowles scholars, but the entire plot of the novel turns on Port and Kit's attraction-repulsion to him.[52] What it is that attracts and repulses Port and Kit is best captured in Kit and Tunner's exchange as the trio arrive in a town even less civilized from the one from which they'd come. Says Tunner, "One thing I can't stand is filth," to which Kit replies, "Yes, you're a real American, I

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[52] The novel's major existential moment comes when Port's stolen passport is found. He literally runs from it, traveling deeper into the Sahara rather than have this lone symbol of his identity brought back to him. But while Bowles's narrator makes clear that the fact of running away from his passport pleases Port, the fact is that, on a plot level, Port is *not* running from his passport. He is running from the man who is bringing him his passport: Tunner. Bowles describes Port's reaction to the news that his passport has been found and that Tunner will bring it to him this way: "the idea horrified him; faced with Tunner's imminent arrival, he was appalled to realize that he had never expected really to see him again" (171). Whatever horror Port felt was what impelled him to bribe his way onto the first bus out to El Ga'a and then to lie to Kit, to tell her that his passport was not and would not be found.

Kit, too, at the end of the novel, runs away only after finding out that Tunner is waiting for her.

know'" (112). This is the role he plays in Port and Kit's lives—the American, the reminder of what they have tried to escape, the reminder of what they are better than. Tunner is, finally, the Tourist (which is just another way of saying he is an American). He has not, as Port and Kit perceive that they have, abandoned the identity his home country has given him. Thus the novel's first description of him:

> He was a few years younger [than Port and Kit]...astonishingly handsome, as the girl [Kit] often told him, in his late Paramount way. Usually there was very little expression of any sort to be found on his smooth face, but the features were formed in such a manner that in repose they suggested a general bland contentment. (15)

Bowles's intention seems to be to paint Tunner as the unworldly American, but if Tunner is so *American*, what is he doing in the Sahara? Why does he want to listen to Port and lust after Kit? The narrator's answer to this question is typically abstract:

> With them as with no one else he felt a definite resistance to his unceasing attempts at moral domination, at which he was forced, when with them, to work much harder; thus unconsciously he was giving his personality the exercise it required. (67)

Far from an intellectual heavyweight, Tunner enjoyed being in the company of those he perceived as such: "Tunner was essentially a simple individual irresistibly attracted by whatever remained just beyond his intellectual grasp." Port and Kit are in Africa to see the Sahara. Tunner is in Africa to see Port and Kit. He is a step removed from their highbrow primitivism; he is their audience, and it is as such that Port both wants him near and ultimately runs from him.

Tunner's character is at least nominally modeled on George Turner, an American whom Bowles had met during an earlier foray into the Sahara. Critics have not done much with this connection, perhaps because there is not much to it beyond the names. A more meaningful, if not consciously chosen, source for Tunner might be the idea of the "middlebrow," a staple of postwar American culture. The great fear of postwar intellectuals was not mass culture itself; for Macdonald and Greenberg, lowbrow fare for those who had no interest in (or ability to appreciate, as they would probably put it) "real" culture was just fine. As Macdonald put it, "if there were a clearly defined cultural *elite*, then the masses could have their *kitsch* and the *elite* could have its High Culture, with everybody happy. But the boundary line is blurred" ("Theory," 61). Middlebrow was what blurred that line. As such it was a threat to the categorical distinction between art and non-art so crucial to the novel, the review, and the idea of highbrow art in the age of mass culture. "[A] tepid, flaccid Middlebrow Culture," Macdonald wrote, "threatens to engulf everything in its spreading ooze" (63-4); the image clearly suggests, as Port's refusal does, that soon "high" art will vanish, in this case consumed by mid- and masscult. The metaphor also suggests that middlebrow was both a demographic fact and an artistic problem, a form of cultural production and an audience that would happily consume it. Macdonald cited Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, the work of Thornton Wilder, and Mortimer Adler's Great Books volumes as examples of middlebrow culture, all commercially successful products for educated people. It was the growth of the market for products such as these—the same growth that led Doubleday to give Bowles an advance and made New Directions a profitable company—that, to Macdonald, threatened high culture.

Port's refusal/inability to write while engaged with Tunner is telling in this context. For if Tunner is attracted to the intellectual challenge of Port and Kit, it is equally clear that for Port, at times, Tunner serves as a surrogate American audience. At the start of their journey, against Kit's wishes, Port offers a detailed account of a dream he has just had. Afterwards, when they are alone, Kit upbraids him for telling "'that dream in front of Tunner.'" Port responds incredulously: "'In *front* of him! I told it *to* him, as much as to you'" (19). And Tunner wants to hear about it. Not long after Port shares his dream with Tunner, Kit is seduced by him on the train. Bowles's narrator notes that "Kit and Port...both resented even the reduced degree to which they responded to his somewhat obvious charm, which was why neither would admit to having encouraged him to come along with them" (67).[53] Both of them wanted him to come along; neither wants to admit it. In Port and Kit's relationship with Tunner we see both the middlebrow audience's desire to consume high culture and the debased desire of the supposed highbrow for an audience. Until Port and Kit flee from Tunner, the novel suggests, they have not truly left bland, contented America.

Port and Kit's solutions to the problem Tunner presents are extreme: not just not writing, but also madness and death. Bowles's narrator seems to endorse this result: "It was all right to speed ahead into the desert leaving no trace" (200). Without stopping, as it were: leaving no trace is preferable to necessarily compromised communication or engagement. But Bowles is attuned to the paradoxes of this view and the economics on which they depend. Ultimately, there is one reason that Port has

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[53] At another point, the novel seems clearly to suggest that it was Port that invited him: "Tunner had been asked to come along, and perhaps that, too, had been subconsciously motivated, but out of fear; for much as he [Port] desired the rapprochement [with Kit], he knew that he dreaded the emotional responsibilities it would entail" (105). This gibes with Bowles's own tendency to invite friends to visit to prevent being intimate with Jane.

the opportunity to not write. That reason is mentioned just once, in the midst of the novel's out-of-place look back, so quickly it might be missed: "Since the death of his father he no longer worked at anything, because it was not necessary; but Kit constantly held the hope that he would begin *again* to write" (199, emphasis mine). This is the only allusion in the novel to Port's having been at least an aspiring *professional* writer at one time. Bowles thus marks the all-too-prosaic point at which it becomes possible to detach oneself from careerism: when one can afford it. Port's inheritance functions as a kind of anti-patronage. Usually, patronage is understood to free the artist from the demands of the commercial marketplace and thus to pursue his or her own artistic vision. Here, Port's inheritance prevents him from the need to write at all in a world where even writing for no one in the Sahara is corrupt. As noted, the promotion of *The Sheltering Sky* depends on the association of Port with Bowles; in that Port's financial situation allows him to detach himself from matters of commerce, he is also, coincidentally, a bit like James Laughlin.

V. Career Moves

Port's flight from the Tunners of the world resonates in the context of the publication and success of *The Sheltering Sky*. As I argued earlier, the growth of middlebrow America, understood as a demographic fact rather than a cultural judgment—that is, as the growth of the educated population of culture consumers—was the condition of possibility for Bowles's career as a novelist and for the writing of his first novel, the reason that Helen Strauss and Doubleday (however briefly) showed interest in and invested in him, the driving force behind New Directions's commercial success. Bowles capitalized on the opportunity afforded him by the

growth of middlebrow by writing a novel depicting the uncompromising flight from it, and in so doing created a blueprint for intendedly highbrow novelistic success in the 1950s—novels that achieve a measure of success in the consumer culture market by depicting the bankruptcy of that market. The irony of the novel's story is that the cultural problem that Tunner represents was more than just subject matter; it what enabled the novel's writing and publication in the first place.

The links between, on the one hand, the novel's meditation on art and audience and, on the other hand, the shifting institutional relation between the field of novel production and the larger economic and cultural fields becomes clear in the story of *The Sheltering Sky*'s rocky path to the bestseller list. *The Sheltering Sky* was an immediate success when it arrived in bookstores on December 6, 1949, but it did not reach the bestseller list until January 1950. This is because Laughlin had only 3,500 copies printed when the book was first released, and when they sold out quickly, he apparently refused to print any more until the year's end. It is at this point that Bowles grew disenchanted with Laughlin's disavowals of the market. As Bowles recounts in the Preface, written fifty years later yet with his ire for Laughlin still evident:[54]

> Because his accountants had already filed income tax returns for 1949, he could not risk showing a profit on an item that he had already

[54] Bowles retold this same story several other times decades after the fact, suggesting that his anger never fully subsided. In a letter to Henry Miller in 1979, he writes, by way of introduction to a brief version of the story: "It's dangerous to have a publisher who has no interest in making money…but it's not interesting, that long saga (Touch 489). Here we see again Bowles's desire to tell his story and his effort to distance himself from it. Bowles repeated this gesture in a letter to Phil Nurenberg five years later: after recounting the story of his relationship with Laughlin, Bowles writes, "forgive this letter" (522).

> written off as a loss (since his interest in publishing was literary and not commercial), and so he restricted the edition to 3,500 copies instead of the 10,000 which Publishers [sic] Weekly had recommended. It came out the second week of December, but holiday sales were limited to what was available.

The story Bowles tells is confusing because it offers two separate reasons for Laughlin's initial refusal to print more copies. First he suggests a curious tax-related reason, that because Laughlin had already written the novel off as a loss, increased profits would mean he would have to redo his tax returns. Parenthetically, however, Bowles hints at a second possible reason: Laughlin did not want to print more copies because his interest was "literary," not "commercial." The rest of Laughlin's career, and of course his subsequent printing of more copies of *The Sheltering Sky*, suggests that this is not the case; Laughlin was not averse to selling a lot of books. He was, however, noted for being a lax businessman, preferring skiing to taking care of business matters. It is likely that Laughlin simply missed the opportunity to sell more books, either out of laxness or because he underestimated the demand for the novel. Whatever the cause, the dispute over the printing of the novel likely accelerated Bowles's departure from New Directions.

As noted earlier, Bowles hired an agent and decided to write a novel only after Dial Press told him he could not publish a volume of his short stories without them. The success of *The Sheltering Sky* put Bowles in an ideal position in which to publish this volume. The details here are sketchy but suggestive: what we know is that Bowles orally agreed to let Laughlin publish the volume, and then reneged and moved on to Random House, prompting Laughlin to threaten a lawsuit (which he

apparently never filed). Bowles's stated reasons for leaving New Directions vary. He tells the early version of the story in an April 1950 letter to Gore Vidal: "it was orally understood that the volume was to be done by ND, until I got a cable from her [Helen Strauss] saying that she had a far better offer from Random House and strongly advised me to take it" (218). Characteristically, Bowles shifts the burden of a financially motivated decision onto his agent. But in another letter, written 34 years later, Bowles offers another explanation for his move: "his [Laughlin's] principal reader, David McDowell, left at the end of December and went to Random House" (521). Bowles here claims he left avant-garde New Directions for powerhouse Random House for aesthetic reasons.

Bowles's two explanations for his move to Random House are not irreconcilable; it seems likely that both are true. That both Bowles and McDowell were hired away from New Directions by Random House—Bowles as an established, now-legitimized novelist and McDowell as a legitimizer of texts, himself now legitimized in and by the mainstream book world—epitomizes just how ripe the postwar book market was believed to be for avowed avant-garde detachment from the market.

Chapter Two

The "Incalculable Value of Reading": *Fahrenheit 451* and the Paperback Assault on Mass Culture

> You're probably tempted, as we were at first, to work up a sputtering head of indignation about this...this...indignity. But hang on a second. Ray Bradbury got the medal in 2000, and while he can now be painted as a man who gave a popular genre a literary flair, were they saying that when "The Martian Chronicles" made its debut in 1950?
>
> -- From "The Shining Moment," a *New York Times* editorial, October 16, 2003, p. A24[1]

In suggesting that a recent decision to honor Ray Bradbury's writing constitutes a revisionist attempt to deem literary what was once considered mere genre fiction, the *Times* has it backwards. The answer to its presumably rhetorical question is yes: as early as 1950, Ray Bradbury was credited with the feat of making literature out of science fiction. But when, in 2000, the National Book Foundation (NBF), the organization that gives out the annual National Book Awards, awarded Bradbury the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, its version of a lifetime achievement award, it was not specifically for accomplishing this feat. As the Foundation's announcement of the award attested, the recent honor is better understood less as a straightforward literary canonization than as a coming together of like-minded institutions and as such as a perhaps surprisingly ambiguous comment on

[1] The occasion for the editorial was the announcement that Stephen King has been awarded the same Distinguished Medal in 2003 that Bradbury received in 2000.

Bradbury's literary achievement: Bradbury's "life work has proclaimed the incalculable value of reading," the announcement said, adding that "these values are the bedrock of the National Book Foundation. Our mission is to promote the reading and appreciation of great American literature among audiences across the country."[2]

Whereas the *Times* treats the decision to honor a popular writer as an occasion for cultural teeth-gnashing and a sign of a vague cultural decline, I want to suggest another significance to it. Regardless of the cultural importance or lack thereof that we attribute to the award, the decision to honor Bradbury and the reason given for that honor resonate in the context of two distinct, parallel and seemingly unrelated institutional shifts in the American book trade in the era immediately after World War II: the emergence of a network of institutions, both commercial and non-profit, designed to promote the value of reading, represented well by the formation of the organization now called the National Book Foundation, and the emergence, led in large part by Bradbury, of science fiction as a commercially viable literary genre in book (as opposed to pulp) form. Established in 1949, the NBF is the kind of literary institution that was new to postwar America, an example of the modernization of the book trade and more specifically of its efforts to capitalize on the postwar economic boom and a growing population of educated consumers. This trend coincided with Bradbury's "crossover" from the world of American science fiction pulps to the more mainstream literary world: *Fahrenheit 451*, Bradbury's first novel, was published in 1953, a consequence of both his own high standing but also of the book trade's new interest in science fiction and the emergence of the paperback.

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[2] The text can be found at Bradbury's official website: http://www.raybradbury.com/awards_NatBk.html.

As an indicator of just how separate these two institutional developments were (and thus, perhaps, as an explanation of the *Times*'s incredulity), it is worth noting that in the more than fifty years since the NBF was founded, it has not awarded a single one of its annual National Book Awards for Fiction to a science fiction novel.[3] Critical acceptance for science fiction as literature has been elusive, and in this context, as an assessment of Bradbury's contribution to American letters the NBF's announcement might be more notable for what it does not say than for what it does. Perhaps cannily, it does not explicitly canonize Bradbury as a writer of the "great American literature" that it is the NBF's stated mission to promote; rather it locates Bradbury's achievement in what amount to his own promotional activities, in the considerable extent, that is, to which Bradbury's work is of a piece with the NBF's. In and of itself, this is unexceptional. As its general explanation of the Distinguished Medal makes clear, specifically literary accomplishment is not the sole or even the first listed criterion, nor is it even necessary: "The recipient is a person who has enriched our literary heritage over a life of service, or a corpus of work."[4] Past winners have included esteemed novelists Toni Morrison (1996), John Updike (1998), and Philip Roth (2002), but they have also included more peripheral literary figures such as James Laughlin (1992), about whom much was said in the previous chapter, and Clifton Fadiman (1993), about whom a bit more will be said later in this chapter. The presence of these latter, disparate figures suggests that the "service"

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[3] In 1984, and only in 1984, separate National Book Awards for Science Fiction were awarded, one for hardcovers and one for paperbacks. The awards went to *Jem* by Frederick Pohl (hardcover) and *The Book of the Dun Cow* by Walter Wangerin (paperback). After this experiment, the separate NBA for science fiction was scrapped.

[4] This text is taken from the National Book Foundation's website: http://www.nationalbook.org/amerletters.html.

criterion encompasses any work that in some way contributes to the dissemination of literature and/or promotion of its importance to the reading audience.

In one sense, Bradbury falls easily into the same broad category that can accommodate the otherwise unlikely pairing of Laughlin and Fadiman. In interviews and essays, he has never shied away from proclaiming the cultural importance of the book.[5] His remark in the statement quoted in the NBF's announcement of the honor that his job is "to help you fall in love" (the unstated object of the verb was neither himself nor his characters but the book itself) is but one example of many such pronouncements over the past half-century. It is in the service of the cause of helping us fall in love that, as Bradbury notes in a recent introduction to *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), he has "spun more stories, novels, essays and poems about other writers than any other writer in history that I can think of" ("Afterword," 168).[6] But undoubtedly Bradbury's most important work in this regard is *Fahrenheit 451* itself, the novel that followed *The Martian Chronicles*, the "seminal book-lover's book," as Steve Martin put it in a suitably absurd moment at the NBF ceremonies honoring Bradbury, a star-making, moneymaking book about what the NBF somewhat elliptically calls the "incalculable value" of books.[7]

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[5] See, in addition to other pieces cited throughout, Bradbury's Foreword to *A Passion for Books: A Book Lover's Treasure of Stories, Essays, Humor, Love and Lists on Collecting, Reading, Borrowing, Lending, Caring for, and Appreciating Books*, edited by Harold Rabinowitz and Rob Kaplan (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001).

[6] Bradbury continues:

> I have written poems about Melville, Melville and Emily Dickinson, Emily Dickinson and Charles Dickens, Hawthorne, Poe, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and along the way I compared Jules Verne and his Mad Captain to Melville and his equally obsessed mariner. (168)

[7] http://www.nationalbook.org/nbaacceptspeech_rbradbury_intro.html

The unusual place in the literary field that Bradbury has occupied since *Fahrenheit 451* was published—as the unlikely genre writer who has made the importance of literature a primary topic—surely helps us to explain the ambiguity surrounding the NBF's reasons for honoring him in 2000, but whether Bradbury is honored as a writer of great literature or for his work in the service of it matters less, for my purposes, than the fact that his service, unlike that of Laughlin and Fadiman, is located in his literary output, his "corpus of work." His work, that is, blurs the line between literature and promotion, and the broad argument of this chapter is that it is this blurring, a heretofore neglected aspect of Bradbury's rise to prominence, that helps to mark Bradbury as an emblematic figure of the rapidly changing book trade of the early 1950s, when that trade was just developing a sophisticated promotional apparatus (one example of which is the NBF), and when television had only just begun its ascendancy, posing a deeply felt, often expressed threat to the book trade but also presenting an equally deeply felt (but almost never articulated) opportunity for the trade's expansion.

Fahrenheit 451, which imagines and/or predicts a future American society dominated by television and largely devoid of books, is thus an emblematic text of this era in two crucially related senses that have yet to be fully appreciated. First and more obviously, it takes as its subject the much-discussed threat to the book posed by the emergence of postwar mass culture, a fact that links it to classic texts of what historian Michael Kammen calls the "great debate" over mass culture—a surprisingly little noted fact in both Bradbury scholarship and scholarship of the mass culture

debate itself.[8] Second, it is enabled by the generally neglected, if not deliberately and necessarily obscured, opportunity that accompanied the threat, an irony that has yet to receive adequate attention but which is crucial to an understanding of the novel and its reception. As a dystopia that links the destruction of western civilization to the predicted decline of the book, *Fahrenheit 451* might be the best advertisement for the book ever devised. But while the novel has received a great deal of scholarly attention since its publication, mostly in the form of close readings of its quasi-allegorical plot, its effectiveness as a promotional piece—and the way that effectiveness situates it in the context of similarly themed book promotion efforts of the time, complicates its relationship to mainstream intellectual culture and the genre out of which it emerged, and sheds light on a developing network of 1950s literary institutions—has yet to be examined.[9] Bradbury's honor in 2000, and the decades of unlikely recognition it embodies (as far back as 1952, he was called the "poet of the pulps" by *Time*), might be explained as a result of his defense of timeless literary values—certainly the NBF would like to explain it this way—but it demands to be understood as well as a time-bound product of the twin institutional shifts in the literary field noted earlier. These shifts, moreover, the emergence of science fiction and that of a sophisticated network of promotional institutions, though seemingly unrelated, are connected at the root,

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[8] Cochran's *American Noir* is an exception in Bradbury scholarship and Patrick Brantlinger's *Bread and Circuses* is an exception among scholarship of the mass culture debates: both note Bradbury's unlikely place in the debate.

[9] *Fahrenheit 451* alone has been the subject of several volumes of collected essays. See, for example, Harold Bloom, ed. *Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451* (New York: Chelsea House, 2001) and Katie de Koster, ed., *Readings on Fahrenheit 451* (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2000).

both products of the growing market for books in the United States in the postwar era and in particular of the triumphant emergence of the paperback after the war.

To draw these connections and to tell this largely untold story, this chapter examines and reconstructs the rapid emergence of the institutional structures that could enable both the writing and then the recognition of *Fahrenheit 451*. It then rereads the novel in the context of those structures, reads it, that is, less as an overtly political or scientific story and more as a cultural one. The story of the writing, publication and reception of *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) is another version of the hidden story of the rapidly shifting, generally neglected institutional nexus that produced, promoted and received books in the 1950s. The story of the novel sheds light on the nexus; in the context of the nexus, we find grounds to rethink the novel.

I. The NBF: How to Sell the Book, and Why

Even if we put aside the marginal place of the science fiction genre in the 1940s, when Bradbury's career as a writer began, it would have been hard to predict then that he or any science fiction writer would in any way be associated with the "great American literature" that the NBF promotes. This is because "great American literature" was itself a fairly new idea after World War II, promulgated, as many scholars have noted, by English departments in American universities and also by new American Studies programs, whose mission it was (at least in part) to create a new consensus notion of American culture and American exceptionalism. But this effort, much-discussed in recent American Studies scholarship, was not merely political, academic or aesthetic, as it is sometimes portrayed; there was a commercial interest as well, and that interest is well represented by institutions like the one that is

now called the NBF. To understand both the writing and reception of Bradbury's famed book about the value of books, one needs to understand how, why, and in response to what the NBF emerged.

In 1949, the Book Manufacturers' Institute (BMI), a trade association of American book manufacturers, awarded what was billed as the first annual Gutenberg Award—it turned out to be the only award so named—to Robert Sherwood for *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, because, according to BMI, the book "most progressively influenced American thought in 1948" (qtd. in "Roosevelt" tk). Covering the event, *Publishers' Weekly* discussed the ways in which BMI sought to publicize the event and the award, which seem almost quaintly modest now:

> The BMI has run full page ads about the award and the ten books named as candidates for it, in the *Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review* and the *Saturday Review of Literature*, and has secured extensive publicity, samples of which were shown mounted on a poster at the dinner...Harper's advertising in connection with the award to Mr. Sherwood will include 150-line, two-column space in the New York *Times Book Review*" ("Roosevelt," tk)

That the Gutenberg Awards are long gone—and that two of the publications they used to publicize their awards, the *Herald Tribune* and the *Saturday Review*, are also long gone—might seem to qualify as yet another version of a familiar postwar narrative: that of the decline of "book" or literary culture, and along with it the decline of Culture itself. But the modest Gutenberg Award of the Book Manufacturer's Institute did not disappear so much as it metamorphosed and expanded. One year later, it was replaced by the bigger, better, and more patriotically

named National Book Awards, now with single, separate awards for non-fiction, fiction and poetry, suggesting that, in a sense, the story of the death of print culture is not distinct from the fact of its growth (a fact that the existence and enduring success of *Fahrenheit 451*, itself a story of the death of print culture made possible by its growth, attest to particularly well). The transformation of the Gutenberg Award was precipitated by an increase in the number of its sponsors and planners. *Publishers' Weekly* reported in 1949 that in addition to BMI, planners would now include the American Booksellers Association and, crucially, the American Book Publishers' Council (ABPC) ("Gutenberg," 1980). This kind of collaboration among the different strands of the book trade was rare before World War II. Indeed, it was one of the goals of the ABPC, founded shortly after the war, not just to unite competing publishers in pursuit of their common interests but also to unite publishers with other institutions that had an interest, whether it be profit or the public good, in getting people to read.

The National Book Award is properly understood as a fruit of these efforts. When the January 21, 1950 *Publishers' Weekly* deemed the NBAs "the first official awards to be made to American authors by the entire book industry" ("First" 245), the unstated emphasis was on the word "entire." The collaboration matters in a broad sense as a sign of a developing strategy on the part of the book trade, and it matters specifically because it triggered a dramatic increase in the scale and ambition of the awards: a sense of the book trade's postwar transition can be found in a comparison between the only Gutenberg Awards ceremony and the first National Book Award ceremonies one year later. The Gutenberg Awards were attended by authors and industry insiders; the "toastmaster" was the general counsel of BMI, and other

speakers included representatives of other institutions of the book trade. The highest-profile speaker was then-New York City mayor William O'Dwyer, who presented the award to Sherwood.

The first National Book Awards banquet was, in a word, bigger, and not merely because more books were honored, though in itself that suggests a belief that the market can accommodate a greater number of heavily promoted books—a belief, that is, that the investment made in those books will be returned. (And in addition to the three winners, five "citations" were awarded to other nonfiction books.) The banquet was described by *Publishers' Weekly* as "probably the largest assemblage of book trade personnel and authors in the industry's history" ("National" 1420); more than 1000 people attended to see Nelson Algren, William Carlos Williams, and Ralph L. Rusk (for *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, an early example of the NBF doing its part to celebrate—and create an idea of—great American literature) honored. At the 1950 event, the master of ceremonies was the aforementioned Clifton Fadiman, at the time host of a popular radio show and book promoter extraordinaire—and, in 1993, recipient of the same Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters that Bradbury won in 2000—and speakers included Eleanor Roosevelt, Senator Paul Douglas of Illinois, and Frederick Lewis Allen, editor of *Harper's*; the event was broadcast on the radio (though not on television, apparently to the chagrin of the organizers). It even featured a musical performance to enhance its entertainment value. It was, in multiple senses, a multimedia event.

The emergence and rapid evolution of the awards is telling less for its ultimate effect on the book trade, which is surely not momentous, but rather for what it signifies about the business—a generally neglected issue—at what was evidently a

transitional moment. The increasing pomp suggests again that the book business was growing (the awards, as an obvious promotional event, should be understood as both a reflection of that growth and an attempt to further it), but it is important to see that growth meant not just increased production and sales totals but also that the trade was attempting to adopt marketing techniques used to great success by institutions of "mass" consumer culture. The fact that the event was broadcast on radio, and that television coverage was sought, tellingly foreshadows the book business's later alliances with mass media corporations,[10] and in fact it was this aspect of the event that triggered *Publishers' Weekly*'s lone criticism of it:

> There was one flaw in the planning. The book trade did not quite have the faith that a program built of such elements would bring together and hold such a large audience, and it turned to lesser arts than literature for aid...in reaching for a television audience...night-club features were given a half hour of precious time. The book trade will want to carry on this series of annual dinners, but next time needs to have more faith in books. ("1000" 1508)

These remarks, and in particular the snobbish references to "lesser arts" and "night-club features," delineate an ever-present but still elusive sort of tension within the book business, between maintaining its dignity as purveyors of literature on the one hand and, on the other, achieving greater commercial success by trying to please a large audience. But for two related reasons, this was always a kind of false choice: first because, in a business where profit margins were slim even when business was good, the attempted reach for a larger audience was inevitable, and second because as

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[10] On the postwar consolidation of the book trade, see Tebbel and Epstein.

passive entertainment books never could compete with television anyway. In short, both the worst fears and most optimistic hopes of a genuine, sustained mass success within and without the book trade were always unfounded. But while the idea of a choice between mass success and literary dignity was always false, the articulation of the idea of such a choice did serve useful purposes.

This last point deserves some elaboration. It is one that has been made exhaustively with respect to peripheral literary institutions like critics and English professors in the 1950s, but the limited degree to which it holds as well for the book trade has not received as much attention. Janice Radway, among others, has noted that the alarm expressed by 1950s intellectuals over the purported erosion of cultural standards—the assertion, that is, of what Andreas Huyssens calls the "great divide" between art and mass culture—which no doubt reflected their deeply held beliefs, at the same time helped those intellectuals make a case for their own relevance as mass culture emerged.[11] The degree to which the book trade also had an interest in promoting a form of cultural hierarchy has not received much attention, but for a brief moment and to a limited but important extent, the book business and high culture intellectuals had a common rhetorical enemy in postwar mass culture: the argument above that mass culture degrades the book, far from signifying the book trade's possible retreat from mass consumer culture, in fact constitutes what would become its primary marketing pitch. Rather than choose between snobbery on the one hand

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[11] Referring to the Book-of-the-Month Club, Radway makes this point somewhat more negatively than I would:

> Apparently the club was so successful in establishing itself as a key mediator in these years that it warranted renewed and even more vituperative criticism from writers such as [Dwight] MacDonald [sic] and Clement Greenberg and from the increasing numbers of literature professors whose cultural authority it challenged. (310)

and advertising on the other, that is, the book trade inevitably and wisely chose snobbery (that is, the moral, political, and aesthetic superiority of books to other forms of culture) *as* advertising. This was not, in itself, a new development: what was new was the centralized institutional structure for disseminating this message.

At the 1950 American Booksellers Association convention, for example, "speakers adopted the point of view...that while television was another claimant for readers' leisure time, it also offered opportunities for book promotion" ("Summary 1950" 223). But it is not just that television was both a threat and an opportunity. The point was that the threat itself, properly exploited, constituted the opportunity, as can be seen in this anecdote reported in *Publishers' Weekly*:

> A television company's advertisement stating that children who were deprived of television were being abused by their parents was widely condemned; Harper countered with a full-age *Times* ad promoting Harper Juveniles for the 'poor little waifs' without television. ("Summary 1950" 223)

Here an egregious television advertisement was made a symbol for an increasingly crass culture, the very idea that people *need* television an insult to the book and to book culture; through a clever advertisement of its own, the book business was happy to foment and exploit whatever ill will was generated by the television advertisement.

II. *Wonderful World* and the Production of Belief

Some of the paradoxes of this approach to mass culture—paradoxes that are repeated in *Fahrenheit 451*—can be found in a volume called *Wonderful World of Books*, also published in 1953. *Wonderful World*, a collection of essays that grew out

of a 1951 conference on the fate of the book, caused considerable excitement within the book trade. As a measure of the similarities and differences between the book trade and high culture intellectuals, it is appropriate that the book was published so close to the publication in *Partisan Review* of the famous "Our Country and Our Culture" symposium, in which intellectuals cited mass culture as a primary threat facing American life, in part because "its tendency is to exclude everything which does not conform to popular norms; it creates and satisfies artificial appetites in the entire populace; it has grown into a major industry which converts culture into a commodity" (qtd. in Cochran 47).

Wonderful World expressed a similar view of mass culture, but from an institutional perspective it was something different, essentially a commercial for the book (not solely for "high" literature) and for a generalized notion of the importance of reading (not solely the importance of a small list of great texts). This is another way of saying that whereas *Partisan Review*, as champions of modernism, was exclusionary, *Wonderful World*, aiming to spread the book far and wide, was inclusive; the best thing for America, the book suggested, was for *everyone* to read and read more of whatever it was that booksellers were selling. In this respect *Wonderful World* embodied an advertising strategy first articulated in the 1930s that became particularly crucial in the postwar era; rather than try to come up with advertisements for individual books (an expensive proposition), the book trade would seek to promote the value of reading in general. The Cold War and the Communist threat made this advertising pitch ever more appealing.

Backed by what the APBC billed as "'one of the most intensive promotion campaigns in book history'" (qtd. in "Widespread" 112), *Wonderful* was billed as a

non-profit effort on the part of no less than eleven organizations, including, of course, the APBC, ABA, and BMI along with other peripheral literary institutions like the American Library Association and the National Council of Teachers of English; even more than the National Book Awards, it thus stands as the quintessential example of the APBC's efforts to unite literary institutions of all kinds for the common goal of promoting the value of reading.[12] All proceeds were to be "put back into a national campaign for books and reading" (112), but surely, for the book business, *Wonderful World* was designed with the bottom line in mind. That a blatant advertisement—whatever its civic virtues—could masquerade as a non-profit endeavor says something about the sophistication of the book trade's marketing efforts. Whereas a television advertisement that asserted that children needed television was crass and unseemly, no one could suggest that the book trade should feel shame for positing the necessity of the book for children or adults. This is the payoff of previously produced belief in the value of reading.

"Now, more than ever," is the portentous beginning to the introduction of the volume,

> we felt a reminder is needed that books can instruct and help us in a competitive world, in which more and more knowledge is needed to keep up with scientific developments...in a world of television, radio, automobiles, of getting and spending and laying waste our powers, books can give us perspective and depth and fulfillment. (13)

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[12] The other organizations, in addition to the ABPC, BMI and ABA, were as follows: the Adult Education Association of the U.S.A., Association of American University Presses, American Library Association, National Council of Teachers of English, Sears, Roebuck Foundation, and the United States Department of Agriculture Extension Service. ("Widespread" 112)

As I'll soon show, this passage could easily function as an introduction to and advertisement for not just the book in general but the new science fiction book and *Fahrenheit 451* in particular: the terms of the promotion of the science fiction genre are encapsulated in the notion that "more and more knowledge is needed to keep up with scientific developments." Before pursuing that point, it is important to see that the terms of a far more general (that is, non-genre specific) book promotion are here clearly laid out—in a world of emergent mass culture, consumer culture (Wordsworth's "getting and spending"), and the threats of the Cold War ("'In view of the current world situation,'" begins another equally portentous explanation of why reading is so important now), the book is both more endangered than ever before and more important than ever before, a message that Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, published just a few months later, would echo. The fact that the book is itself a commodity, one of those products we can get and spend on and as such, presumably, part of the problem, is of course unmentioned in a volume whose point is to elevate the book as something other than a commodity—not a product with mere exchange value but an object with "incalculable value" for the person who buys it. But the relationship between the book and the financial self-interest of the contributors and publishers of the volume is not exactly unacknowledged: as the introduction notes, "for some of us—publishers, editors, booksellers, writers, teachers, librarians, and Extension workers—books are connected with the way we make our living." In reality, this was probably true for *all* of the contributors.

My point, however, is not that a crass motive underlay the involvement of all contributors to the project. As the introduction continues: "But job and pocketbook were not mentioned during those three days [of the conference]...rather, the word

'missionary' was used often" (13). As with the assertions of the "great divide" between high art and mass culture by academics and high culture critics, this commerce-averse appeal to an Arnoldian notion of literature as a kind of secular religion no doubt reflected deeply held beliefs on the part of the participants in the conference and contributors to the volume; the contributors are more likely blind to their self-interest than they are intentionally denying it, and that blindness again suggests something of the power of a culturally constructed, internalized belief in the importance of the book. In terms of content, *Wonderful World* is at once a testament to the effectiveness of earlier efforts to produce belief in the value of the book and a piece of a new, larger-scale postwar effort to further this goal.

If the profit motive was obscured within the text or suppressed in the minds of the contributors, something of *Wonderful World*'s financial subtext was in evidence in the way the book was published: simultaneously as a hardcover by Houghton Mifflin and a paperback by New American Library (NAL) in February 1953. The logic of this decision is simple: hardcovers supply a book with cachet, or at least the possibility of cachet, a space in finer bookstores, and perhaps media attention from middlebrow or highbrow sources; paperbacks, however, which are much cheaper, are far more likely to actually be bought, and they spread the word about books not just to bookstores but to department stores, train stations, newsstands and even vending machines everywhere. ("Good Reading for the Millions" was NAL's slogan.)[13] In terms of content, *Wonderful World of Books* was one of the book business's answers to the threat of mass culture, the embodiment of a marketing strategy; materially, the

[13] For the complete story of New American Library, see Thomas L. Bonn, *Heavy Traffic and High Culture: New American Library as Literary Gatekeeper in the Paperback Revolution* (New York: Meridian, 1990).

paperback was the book business's version of mass culture, its attempt to exploit the opportunity that mass culture presented. As a version of mass culture used to respond to the threat of "mass culture," the paperback stands as the ultimate symbol of the paradoxes of the 1950s book trade, the sign of its actual growth at the moment it appeared to be most threatened. As I'll now argue, neither the postwar emergence of science fiction in book form in general nor the particular story of *Fahrenheit 451* itself can be fully understood without taking its impact into account.

III. Paperbacks and Science Fiction

The paperback, as Kenneth C. Davis describes in depth in *Two-Bit Culture: The Paperbacking of America*, made its famous entry into the book world in 1939, when Robert de Graff, in partnership with Simon and Schuster, created Pocket Books, selling mass-produced paperbacks for twenty-five cents. But its effect on the book business was not fully felt until after World War II, when paper rations ended and an unprecedented economic boom and increase in college attendance ensued. While much has been written on the paperback as a cause of major change in the book trade, its emergence needs to be understood as an effect as well. Davis perhaps unintentionally underscores the (mass) cultural implications of the twenty-five cent book in noting that "like Hollywood and television, this undertaking was another amalgam of that peculiar American genius for combining culture, commerce, and a little technology" (13). But what the paperback required most of all to succeed was an audience to be tapped. The true American ingenuity regarding the paperback was as much demographic as it was technological: the recognition that there are enough people that will buy them. (It should not have been greatly surprising that high culture

texts appealed to a wide audience; before the paperback revolution, both the Modern Library and the Everyman's Library had demonstrated the popular appeal of relatively low-cost reprints of classic texts).[14] The economic logic of the paperback was that of mass production: producing mass quantities of books created economies of scale that lowered the cost of production per book. It was this fact that enabled books to be sold so cheaply. It was also this fact about the paperback that aroused the ire of high culture critics; the arrival of the paperback marks a moment where the book trade and high culture critics, united in their distaste for mass culture, parted ways. Intellectuals who wrote for little magazine *Partisan Review* might have agreed with the sentiments expressed in the book trade's *Wonderful World of Books*, but they found cause for alarm in the manner of its dissemination.

For this one need look no further than Cecil Hemley's "The Problem of the Paperbacks, " published in *The Commonweal* in 1954. According to this essay, there were in fact two problems with the paperback. First, paperbacks degraded what used to be high culture by placing quality books right next to low-quality fare and thus diluting their standing as high culture. In this sense, paperback-sellers are the book trade's version of *Life Magazine*, famously mocked by Dwight Macdonald in his essays on middlebrow and mass culture. "The same issue," Macdonald complained about *Life*, "will contain a serious exposition of atomic theory alongside a disquisition on Rita Hayworth's love life...an editorial hailing Bertrand Russell on his eightieth

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[14] For a detailed account of the story of the Modern Library, see Jay Satterfield's *"The World's Best Books: Taste Culture and the Modern Library* (Amherst: U. of Mass. Press: 2002). Satterfield's book includes brief discussions of the Everyman's Library. See 25-27, 90-91. For more on the Modern Library, see Bennett Cerf's memoir, *At Random: The Reminisces of Bennett Cerf* (New York: Random House, 1977) and Tom Dardis, *Firebrand: The Life of Horace Liveright* (New York: Random House, 1995).

birthday...across from a full-page photo of a housewife arguing with an umpire at a baseball game" (62). The implication, of course, is that Hayworth diminishes atomic theory and the housewife diminishes Russell. Similarly, in Hemley's view, paperback vendors, by selling Shakespeare alongside Mickey Spillane, degrade Shakespeare. By failing to properly pay tribute to the greatness of high culture texts, paperbacks contribute to the erosion of cultural standards in America, even as they demonstrate the appeal to the masses of what were once considered high-culture texts—if not precisely *because* they demonstrate that appeal. That Hemley's article was later published in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (1957), a collection of some of the decade's most famous attacks on mass culture published (including Macdonald's attack on *Life*, first published in *Diogenes* in 1953, a year replete with attacks on mass culture), a volume that stands as perhaps the primary document of the "great debate" over mass culture, suggests something of the way the paperback was looked at by intellectuals.

For Hemley, the second, more pertinent problem with paperbacks is that they encourage the increased production of lowbrow genre fare. As he notes, the paperback publisher "must fall back on genres, such as the mystery or the western, which have wide, ready-made audiences waiting for them" (141). Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, publishers complained that books could not be advertised the way other products were, because each book, unlike a mass-produced item, was a thing unto itself, and required its own advertising campaign, which made advertising not cost-effective.[15] A different advertising campaign was not needed for

[15] See Satterfield, 38-9. As he notes, the anti-advertising argument is well expressed in "An Advertising Catechism," published in *Publishers' Weekly* (13 January 1934).

each McDonald's hamburger, but each book did require one; indeed, the individual book's uniqueness was a selling point, but it was a point that publishers asserted they could not profitably afford to make. This same set of circumstances, it should be noted, is what makes the book critic so important to the book trade; each book needs individual attention in order to determine its worthiness, and the cost-ineffectiveness of advertising created a cultural space for the critic to fulfill this role. In this sense, the idea of the uniqueness of the individual literary work was the source of the literary critic's cultural authority.

Genre fiction was one way to combat this seller's problem. To the extent that individual genres relied on a set of received conventions, they could be sold and advertised as a group rather than as individual texts. But to the extent that genres were a boon to publishers, they were a bane to critics. Because genres rely on a set of conventions, they contribute to the diminution of the importance of the critic in determining what is read and what is not. As Kammen usefully puts it, in the 1950s the cultural authority of critics and intellectual began to be usurped by the "cultural power" of institutions of mass culture, paperback publishers included. The tragic dimensions of this lost battle—more precisely, the idea that this lost battle has tragic dimensions and dire consequences—is, I'll soon show, crucial to the plot of *Fahrenheit 451*, even as the novel itself is a direct consequence the rise of the much-lamented usurper, the paperback publisher. *Fahrenheit 451* is, like *Wonderful World of Books*, a quintessential product of the convoluted web of paradoxes in which the postwar book trade was enmeshed.

As noted earlier, it was in response to this problem that the book trade began promoting "reading" rather than individual books.

Science fiction, in any event, is a notable omission from Hemley's list of problematic genres, but it is likely omitted not because it was more respected by critics than were westerns or mysteries but rather because, until the mid-1950s, it was scarcely represented in book form. The genre still existed almost exclusively in pulps, and the few science fiction books that were published in the late 1940s and early 1950s were anthologies of material first published in pulps; the term "science fiction novel," much less the idea of science fiction as literature, was largely unheard of, not just in literary circles but within the science fiction genre as well. The origins of the science fiction genre are usually traced to the founding of *Amazing Stories* by Hugo Gernsback in 1926 (it was Gernsback who popularized the term "science fiction" after his first choice, "scientifiction," failed to catch on). As a self-conscious genre, science fiction is much younger than the western and the detective story, and as Reginald Bretnor wrote with some pride of his genre in 1953, "since Gernsback...it has developed independently, owing almost nothing to our main literary streams" (ix).[16] At the time of Hemley's essay, in other words, science fiction was only beginning to find its way onto the critics' radar; prior to the 1950s there exists no analog in the science fiction genre for either Edmund Wilson's famous and famously curmudgeonly attack on the detective fiction genre ("Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?" an essay included in the 1957 *Mass Culture* volume) or for the other celebrated attempts to deem detective fiction literary that prompted Wilson's rebuke.

That that was about to change—that a dialogue of sorts was about to open between science fiction writers and editors and more mainstream intellectual

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[16] For an excellent introduction to the emergence of science fiction as a self-conscious genre, see Gary Westfahl, *The Mechanics of Wonder: The Creation of the Idea of Science Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1998).

culture—is as clear a sign as any of science fiction's postwar emergence and perhaps also an example of what high culture intellectuals most feared as they worked to maintain the great divide between an exclusionary high culture and mass culture. I want to now look at how science fiction sought to make its name for itself, but without losing sight of the fact that it was transformations in the book trade that enabled its emergence. Bretnor's remark quoted above appeared in *Modern Science Fiction: Its Meaning and Its Future* (also published in 1953, around the same time as *Wonderful World*, months before *Fahrenheit 451*), a collection of essays edited by Bretnor that grew out of a symposium on the genre that featured numerous science fiction superstars, including John W. Campbell, the editor of the seminal pulp *Astounding*, Robert Heinlen and Isaac Asimov. Described by Seymour Krim in a generally derisive review in *Commonweal* as "the first book of its kind...a serious symposium on this new medium," *Modern Science Fiction* is, like *Wonderful World of Books*, another little-noted but significant complement to the famed *Partisan Review* symposium of 1952, in part because it signifies the emergence of one version of the mass culture that the "Our Country" participants feared, in part because it complements those texts in celebrating the distance of science fiction from mass consumer culture.

Indeed, one fact that *Modern Science Fiction* makes clear is that science fiction writers, rightly, did not consider themselves mere mass entertainers. Part of the stated aim of the book, in fact, is to make the case for the intellectual heft of the genre. Bretnor deems the volume "the first attempt to examine modern science fiction in its relation to contemporary science, contemporary literatures, contemporary human problems" (x-xi), and at the same time suggests, in a manner not different

from high culture critics, that the strength of science fiction is tied to its distance from conventional consumer culture: "It has attracted a wide, intelligent readership without the benefit of high-pressure publicity or pathological sensationalism" (ix). Thus, Bretnor concludes, "its presently increasing popularity is a result of its own special merit—its validity for the age in which we live" (ix). What makes science fiction science fiction is the fact that it aims to give a plausible account of the future based on what is happening in the present; what makes it relevant now is the increasing degree to which technology is determining our present and will continue to do so. As they are in *Wonderful World*'s celebrations of generalized reading and *Partisan Review*'s celebrations of high modernist difficulty, both the Cold War and the problem of mass consumer culture are prominent subtexts to *Modern*'s explanation of the importance of science fiction.[17]

As a bid for mainstream critical respectability, *Modern Science Fiction* was at best a qualified success. Krim's review of it in the June 12, 1953 issue of *Commonweal*, which describes science fiction as "a phenomenon which has been growing like Pinocchio's nose and has far-reaching literary and cultural consequences," and which treats the book as an occasion to assess the genre as a whole, is distinctly double-edged. Krim accepts the notion that science fiction "brings

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[17] Campbell, editor of *Astounding*, generally cited as the most important figure of the golden age of science fiction pulps of the 1930s and 1940s, elaborates on some of these ideas in his essay:

> The atomic bomb has had a great deal to do with the increased interest in science fiction—but only indirectly. Atomic bombs are explicitly a scientific device; they involve the most advanced and esoteric understanding of the basic nature of the universe—the sort of ideas that people have, for years, shrugged off with, "What's that got to do with me, huh?" (17).

that future to us by making both logical and imaginative deductions from the [specifically scientific and technological] temper of our times" (252). As a result, he writes, it is "often more provocative entertainment than will be found in the ordinary detective story," in large part because it "has brought to light and dramatized aspects of the contemporary imagination which our better-equipped writers, qua *writers*, have left untouched." Science fiction fills a conceptual void, but it is a literary failure: "very few [science fiction] works will endure because few of them reach the level of literature on literature's own terms" (253).

But Krim does allow for the possibility of a literary science fiction writer: "This is not to say that occasional science fiction stories by Ray Bradbury or Fritz Leiber do not raise the point of view behind science fiction to something like literature" (253). The heavily qualified "compliment"—not the genre itself but the "point of view behind" it is "something like" literature?—nonetheless conveys something of the elevated status Bradbury had attained by 1953 (this was six months before the publication of *Fahrenheit 451*), the status that the *New York Times*, as noted at the start of this chapter, gratuitously denied in 2003. Further evidence of Bradbury's stature can be found in the fact that he was given space in *The Nation*, in an article titled "Day After Tomorrow: Why Science Fiction?" to make his own case for science fiction in May 1953, one month before the publication of Krim's review of Bretnor's volume. The confluence of events—Bretnor's volume, Krim's review, Bradbury's essay among them, all occurring months apart in 1953, all still a few months prior to the publication of *Fahrenheit 451*—suggests that this year was in a sense science fiction's coming-out, the moment when what was a relatively unknown

subculture makes its present felt in the more mainstream intellectual and commercial fields.

To the extent that *The Nation*, unlike *Commonweal*, allowed a science fiction insider to discuss the genre, Bradbury's essay was a victory for the genre; comparing it with Bretnor's essay, we can find clues as to why the literary mainstream was prepared to embrace Bradbury's brand of science fiction. Like Bretnor and Krim, Bradbury begins with a claim for the genre's contemporary relevance—science fiction is particularly important *now*, for a specific set of extra-literary reasons: "there are few literary fields, it seems to me, that deal so strikingly with themes that concern us all today…there are few more exciting genres, there are none fresher" (365)—and on roughly the same grounds (science fiction extrapolates and makes predictions based on scientific trends that are largely ignored by other writers but that are increasingly important to the lives of Americans).

But Bradbury, unlike many of the contributors to *Modern Science Fiction*, wants to do more than just make a case for his genre's timeliness; he wants to make a case for its timelessness as well, for its aesthetic or literary merits—a case that does not seem of much interest to Bretnor and Campbell and a case that Krim flatly rejects—and so he continues: "it is, after all, the fiction of ideas, the fiction where philosophy can be tinkered with, torn apart, and put back together again, the fiction of sociology and psychology and history compounded and squared by time" (365). Science fiction, in Bradbury's rewriting of its history, is not a genre with roots dating back to Gernsback's founding of *Amazing Stories* in 1926; it is a "high form" that "*can* be poetry" and that "has resulted in some of the greatest writing in our past, from Plato and Lucian to Sir Thomas More and Francois Rabelais and on down

through Jonathan Swift and Johannes Kepler to Poe and Edward Bellamy and George Orwell" (365, Bradbury's emphasis). Notably absent from this list are any of Bradbury's peers writing for the science fiction pulps—no Heinlen or Asimov, no writer that actually calls himself a science fiction writer. In these regards—the retroactive canon-formation, the overblown description of the genre's literary merits (science fiction in Bradbury's description encompasses not just the philosophical novel of ideas but also the fiction of sociology *and* psychology *and*, somewhat implausibly, history), the effacement of pulp science fiction writers—Bradbury separates himself from his science fiction peers and bids on his own terms for symbolic capital for himself and the genre with which he was linked.

These specific grounds on which Bradbury bids for symbolic capital are significant, and I will return to them shortly, but I want first to emphasize again that their condition of possibility is the developing institutional structure for the dissemination of science fiction, and that that structure was tied to the emergence of the paperback and thus to all of the demographic shifts and technological advancements that led to it, chief among them all the growth of the reading audience, the same growth that made the ABPC's and NBF's expanded promotional ventures possible. As Davis notes, Pocket Books had published the first science fiction paperback in 1943, Penguin published a similar volume in 1944, and Bantam published a collection in 1950. But the genuine growth of science fiction in paperback form was still to come, a development predicted by Anthony Boucher in *Modern Science Fiction*: "more and more writers are looking with warm favor upon original paperbacks, priced at twenty-five cents or thirty-five cents and paying all the royalties unsplit, to the author" (28). The logic was simple: there was clearly more money in

book writing than in writing for pulps, and at the same time science fiction was far more likely to receive attention from paperback publishers than from traditional hardcover publishers. Boucher's prediction proved correct and it came to fruition even sooner than he perhaps would have guessed. By 1953, the paperback was beginning to do for science fiction what institutions like academic English and American Studies departments along with more commercially oriented organizations like the NBF would do for the idea of "great American literature" starting in the late-1940s; it was enabling the genre's emergence as a viable commercial entity. Science fiction may have had a special validity for the 1950s (it seems churlish, in fact, to argue otherwise), but its emergence in book form should not be solely traced to that validity.

IV. Bradbury and Ballantine

The story of Bradbury's early career exemplifies this last point. As much as the success of *Fahrenheit 451*, a novel that draws on the possibility of atomic war and the predicted technological growth of mass culture, can be said to illustrate the "special validity" of science fiction in the 1950s, the story of Bradbury's career leading up to that novel captures the importance of institutional shifts in the book trade and specifically the way the paperback transformed the science fiction genre. As what might be termed a second-generation science fiction writer, one, that is, who grew up reading science fiction pulps, Bradbury found his entry into the larger literary world through those pulps, publishing his first story with the help of Robert Heinlen in 1942. By 1951, when Bradbury published "The Fireman" in a relatively new pulp called *Galaxy*, he was already a major science fiction writer, having already

had *The Martian Chronicles*—made up, as almost all science fiction books then were, in large part of stories previously published in pulps—published by Doubleday, at the time the largest publisher of science fiction books. The positive reception accorded *The Martian Chronicles*, in particular a storied rave review from Christopher Isherwood made possible by a chance meeting between Bradbury and Isherwood in a bookstore, helped Bradbury make inroads into the literary mainstream.[18] But without some fortuitously timed institutional changes, it is conceivable that he never would have become a full-fledged novelist. Certainly *Fahrenheit 451* itself is unthinkable outside the specific story of the relationship between science fiction and the paperback.

In May, 1952, just a few months after Bradbury published "The Fireman," a young veteran of the paperback revolution, Ian Ballantine, formed his own company, Ballantine Books. More than anyone else, book entrepreneur Ballantine is the hero of the story of *Fahrenheit 451*. By the time he formed his own company, Ballantine was already something of a *wunderkind* of the book trade. Previously, he had been the point man for Penguin Books in their effort to compete with Pocket Books in the United States paperback market, and he had later served as the first president of paperback upstart Bantam Books, a crucial second development (after Pocket Books) in the emergence of the paperback, as major players in the publishing world—not just risk-takers like Simon and Schuster (which co-founded Pocket Books) and Random House but also more conservative houses like Scribner's—come to recognize its

[18] Christopher Isherwood, "Review of *The Martian Chronicles*." *Tomorrow*, October 1950, pp. 56–58.

power.[19] As Davis tells the story, companies like Bantam and Pocket Books had cornered the market, as it were, on detective stories and westerns, and so Ballantine turned to science fiction as a market with as yet untapped potential (this should not be a surprise: he had worked at Penguin when they published their first science fiction paperback and at Bantam when the company published theirs). In this effort to push science fiction Ballantine was not alone, a point worth noting because it suggests, properly, that the emergence of science fiction was more an inevitability than the product of individual inspiration; as Bonn notes, New American Library, which published the paperback version of *Wonderful World of Books*, also recognized science fiction's commercial potential.[20] These two institutions played the greatest role in making science fiction a staple of the book trade.

If the increased production of science fiction books was a market-driven inevitability, the specific strategy employed by Ballantine, designed in part to help science fiction gain some literary cachet, was an innovation. Ballantine's idea was to publish simultaneous hardcover and paperback books, the very same technique used to sell *Wonderful World of Books*, and for many of the same reasons. The hardcover would get the book some respectability (perhaps a place in finer bookstores and review pages), and it was in this context that Ballantine called its science fiction books "adult science fiction," not to advertise the luridness of the stories (there was none, unlike other genres) but to advertise the seriousness of them. The paperback, of course, sold on newsstands, at train stations and pharmacies at a low price, would

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[19] For the story of how Scribner's came to be involved with Bantam Books, see Cerf, 197-8. For Bantam's significance, see Davis, 103-109.

[20] See Bonn, 88n.

generate massive sales. Ballantine perceived other benefits as well to this strategy: the mass production of the paperbacks would allow the hardcover to be sold at a slightly lower price, and to entice authors to publish works as original paperbacks he offered a higher royalty rate than any other company.[21] It is worth emphasizing that this was, in every sense, a business decision, and if the attention it received is any measure it was one that rattled the book trade.[22] Ballantine had been pondering such a system as far back as 1937 when, as a student at the London School of Economics, he studied an early (failed) version of this approach. The paper that resulted from this study was what led Allen Lane of Penguin Books to hire Ballantine for his first job in publishing, in 1939. Ballantine's very presence in the book world—the space, that is, for a student of business rather than a student of books—is, like the emergence of the National Book Awards, a both an effect and a cause of the growth of the business.

Two versions exist of the story of how Ballantine and Ray Bradbury came to work together. In Bradbury's version, representatives from Ballantine Books, looking for original material to publish, contacted Bradbury's agent, Don Congdon, to ask him if Bradbury would have interest in expanding "The Fireman" into a full-length novel to be published in simultaneous hardcover and paperback editions. A slightly different version appears in Davis's history of the paperback; according to it the science fiction novel was Congdon's idea, and it was he who took the initiative in

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[21] See David Aronovitz, *Ballantine Books: The First Decade: A Bibliographical History & Guide of the Publisher's Early Years* (Rochester, Michigan: Bailiwick Books, 1987).

[22] Tebbel writes: "Ballantine's idea was not received with unanimous applause. Arguments for and against appeared in the press, the literary reviews, and in trade periodicals" (III, 396). For one negative reaction to Ballantine's approach, see the October 1952 issue of *The American Writer*, where Harold Guinzburg, head of Viking Press, criticizes Ballantine.

contacting Ballantine on Bradbury's behalf on hearing that the new company sought to publish original science fiction novels. However the deal was struck, *Fahrenheit 451*, published in October 1953, was to be the 41st title in Ballantine's young catalog, and both Ballantine and Congdon were integral to the writing and publication of it; behind both of them and behind the novel itself, enabling all of them, is the developing institutional structure for the production of science fiction books, itself a response to and reflection of the growth of the reading audience and the search for new ways to entice that audience.

V. Another Anti-Mass Culture Paperback

When Bradbury tells the story of the writing of the novel, he emphasizes the difference in the process of composing "The Fireman" versus that of expanding it into *Fahrenheit 451*. "The Fireman" was not commissioned; when Bradbury wrote it, he did not know who would publish it or even (he says) if it would be published at all, and he describes the writing process in the unabashedly romantic terms of artistic inspiration: "I had been seized by an idea that started short but grew to wild size by day's end. The concept was so riveting I found it hard at sunset to flee the library basement and take the bus home to reality" ("Burning," 15). Later he claims that he did not write "The Fireman": "*it* wrote *me*" (15). These descriptions suggest a kind of possession, a romantic image of the artist seized by the art. The expansion process—that of transforming the short story into a novel—was altogether different: having contracted to write for Ballantine Books, as part of specific effort on the part of the publisher to appeal to a growing demographic, Bradbury more or less had to write on demand. Could he write this way? Bradbury asserts that he was unsure: "the best

answer was to set a deadline and ask...my Ballantine editor...to come to the coast in August...with Stan Kauffmann bearing down on me from the sky, I finished the last revised page in mid-August" (18-19).[23] Though it is not Bradbury's intention to paint it this way, the language of these descriptions suggest that while "The Fireman" was a product of romantic inspiration divorced from the machinery of literary production, *Fahrenheit 451* was a business opportunity and a collaborative effort enabled by the growth of the reading audience. Little wonder, then, that *Fahrenheit 451*, a condemnation of the institutions of mass culture, is dedicated to Don Congdon, Bradbury's literary agent, along with the paperback the ultimate symbol of the modernization of the book trade in the twentieth century, of its engagement with mass culture.[24]

I make these points not to suggest that this anti-mass culture novel—it is, as I'll soon show, more stridently hostile to mass culture than anything Dwight Macdonald ever wrote—is compromised by the author's engagement with what can fairly be called institutions of mass culture. Rather I make them to set into relief some of the ironies of this book about not just the impending death of the book, but also about the impending death of the solitary, inspired, self-expressing author. Montag's growing interest in the book is triggered by his realization that "a man was behind each one of the books. A man had to think them up. A man had to take a long time to

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[23] Stanley Kauffmann, Bradbury's editor at Ballantine, tells the story a bit differently: "He [Bradbury] got the galleys and wouldn't let go of them. He was fussing with them. So I had to fly out to California and work with him for a week out there" (qtd. in Davis, 167).

[24] The dedication reads: "*This one*, with gratitude, is for Don Congdon" (emphasis added). The "this one" suggests that Bradbury is honoring Congdon's role in the creation of the novel, as opposed to the previous work, which Bradbury produced without collaboration from Congdon.

put them down on paper" (52); it is this quality that makes the book special. If it is true that the solitary author—"a man"—was becoming obsolete, Bradbury's story—the story, that is, of how he came to lament this fact in a novel—might be an ironic example of that process in action, even as the novel strenuously asserts the book's separateness from mass culture. In this sense, Bradbury's novel is better understood less as the solitary author's lament than as an example of mass culture's and book culture's commercial interest in disseminating this lament, the interest of the culture industry in depicting the horrors of the culture industry.

But if the commercial strategy for science fiction belongs at least in part to Ballantine and the culture industry that he represents, the literary strategy bears Bradbury's stamp. Bradbury closes his 1979 "Coda" to *Fahrenheit 451*, one of numerous comments on the novel he has published since 1953, with a characteristic rhetorical flourish for the cause of art and the author: "All you umpires, back to the bleachers. Referees, hit the showers. It's my game. I pitch, I hit, I catch. I run the bases. At sunset I've won or lost...And no one can help me. Not even you" (179). What is important, again, is not that Bradbury appears blind to the help he needed in order to become a "solitary" novelist who could claim complete control of his work (much in the way some contributors to *Wonderful World* appeared blind to the book's status as a commodity); what is important, because it is so characteristic a 1950s literary strategy, is the way Bradbury exploits the discourse of the solitary author to accrue symbolic capital to himself. By announcing his solitary-ness, Bradbury makes a case for the distinctive *literary* value of his work, and it is this effort more than any other that separates Bradbury from other science fiction writers. Whereas Bradbury's science fiction peers pointedly called their genre *modern* science fiction, Bradbury's

passionate linking of reading with the future in *Fahrenheit 451* as well as elsewhere throughout his career is a willfully anti-modern gesture. It is not surprising, in this context, that Bradbury's post-*Fahrenheit* unofficial anointment as spokesman for the science fiction genre was met with skepticism within the science fiction establishment. Whereas science fiction pioneers used fiction to make the case for the grandeur of science (which Campbell described in *Modern Science Fiction* as "the magic that works"), Bradbury used science—the dangers of science—to make the case for fiction.[25]

To the extent that Bradbury distanced himself from other science fiction writers, he implicitly linked himself to more obviously literary and otherwise quite different 1950s writers like Paul Bowles and Norman Mailer, whose novels of the same era, *The Sheltering Sky* and *The Deer Park*—along with more obvious choices like Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* and *On the Road*—similarly celebrate artist-figures like Bradbury's Clarisse and Montag: outsiders whose claim to heroism is marked by their refusal to engage with mass culture or mass society.[26] This is all done in the context of an overarching and coherent critique of mass culture; moreso than Bowles

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[25] David Cochran explains Bradbury's relationship to his genre this way:

> as many science fiction fans have argued, Bradbury as not really a science fiction writer at all. Unlike Isaac Asimov, for instance, Bradbury is not a scientist and knows little about physics, chemistry, or the other fields that form the basis for science fiction. (58)

[26] Cochran observes in a recent study of Bradbury's output that "the supreme irony" of *Fahrenheit 451* is that Bradbury's assault on mass culture is made "in the guise of a science fiction novel, one of the most debased forms of mass culture and the literary establishment's equivalent of nostalgia" (56). Parts of Cochran's argument are eminently debatable: for one, he overstates the critical disdain for science fiction, which for a variety of reasons attracted less criticism than other genres (the main reason probably being that it had less mass appeal than others, and thus was a less appealing target).

and Mailer, Bradbury was interested in mass culture as not just a literary problem but a societal one, as the root of so many contemporary ills, and while subtlety is not an adjective often associated with Bradbury or *Fahrenheit 451*, it is worth considering some of the less obvious ways in which his overarching critique of mass culture plays out in the novel. Consider, for example, Clarisse's explanation for how she has come to be so different from other teenagers:

> "I'm afraid of children my own age. They kill each other. Did it always use to be that way? My uncle says no. Six of my friends have been shot in the last year alone. Ten of them died in car wrecks...My uncle says his grandfather remembered when children didn't kill each other. But that was a long time ago when they had things different. They believed in responsibility, my uncle says. Do you know, I'm responsible. I was spanked when I needed it, years ago" (30).

Two issues—juvenile delinquency and child care—here are put together to rather impressive effect, and the subtext of both is mass culture. Fears of juvenile delinquency arose in the 1950s as the combined effects of the baby boom and the economic boom created a new youth culture. In *The Seduction of the Innocent*, Fredric Wertham asserted that the comic books were a major culprit in the development of juvenile delinquency. Comic books, of course, are also a target of Bradbury's in the novel—as Beatty notes, they are the only kind of book left and those in power are happy to let people continue to read them—and his vision of future juvenile delinquency comes one year before Wertham's book and two prior to Benjamin Fine's *1,000,000 Delinquents*. (It is worth noting that fears of juvenile

delinquency in the 1950s were overstated, much like fears over the death of the book that Bradbury also exploited)

But Bradbury's prescience with regard to comic book hysteria and juvenile delinquency is for my purposes less notable than Clarisse's explanation for how she escaped the fate of other teens: "I'm responsible. I was spanked when I needed it, years ago" (30). Spanking as a means to instill discipline recalls the behaviorist child-rearing strategies propounded by John B. Watson, whose *The Psychological Care of Infant and Child* (1928) demanded clockwork precision. These child-rearing practices held sway until the 1940s, when a less rigid, more permissive strategy took hold. The primary spokesman for this new set of child-rearing practices, though not its architect, was Dr. Benjamin M. Spock, whose *Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* was first published in June, 1946. John Diggins sums up Spock's notion of child-rearing this way: "before the child arrived at school he must be reared properly in an atmosphere of benevolent and systematic attention" (201). Spankings and punishments, remnants of an earlier age of behaviorist-styled child-rearing, fell out of fashion in the wake of Spock's more permissive approach.[27]

In many senses, Spock's book is the quintessential text of the paperback revolution (and, indeed, it was identified as such by Davis in his history of the softcover). The reasons go beyond the book's well-timed (for the baby boom) mass popularity. Mass culture, according to its critics, was bad because it coddled its audience rather than challenging it. As the editors of *Partisan Review* noted in its famed 1952 symposium, it responded to market pressures and thus turned culture into

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[27] See William F. Tuttle's essay, "America's Children in an Era of War, Hot and Cold: The Holocaust, the Bomb, and Child Rearing in the 1940s" in *Rethinking Cold War Culture*, eds. Peter J. Kuznick and James Gilbert (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 2001).

a commodity, it told people what they wanted to hear rather than what they needed to hear. Critics of Spock's approach would assert that his famed paperback offers an analogous shift in parenting instruction. It told parents what they wanted to hear about child-rearing rather than the hard news that they presumably needed to hear about how to raise their child. Finally, not only was the advice congenial, the book itself had a good bedside manner. As Davis sums up: "He wrote a friendly book, speaking to new mothers with a voice of gentle reassurance rather than the condescendingly stern tones of medical authority" (7). That Bradbury takes aim at this approach shows that his critique of mass culture is more far-reaching than has been noted.

It is the "condescendingly stern tones" of cultural authority, however, far more than those of medical or child-rearing authority, that are Bradbury's famous focus in the novel. The fact that these authorities have been banished is presented as a tragedy of awesome proportion, and it is also what sets us up for what I will argue is an exceedingly curious ending. As Faber, the English professor, tells Montag, "there's lots of Harvard degrees on the tracks between here and Los Angeles" (132), critics, scholars and teachers whose place in the culture has been usurped by mass culture, whose expertise has been rendered obsolete by a new form of modern mass culture. But how and why this process occurs is a somewhat vexed issue in the novel, and I want to suggest that to the extent that this is a vexed issue it is because Bradbury straddles the line between the humanist assertions of the book's importance favored by the NBF and the more radical, exclusionary idea of culture favored by some modernist intellectuals.

At the end of the novel, Montag listens in shock as Granger, a former college professor, explains that he and his associates, like the firemen whose job it is to

destroy all books, "are book burners, too. We read the books and burnt them, afraid they'd be found" (152). "All we want to do," Granger explains, "is keep the knowledge we think we will need intact and safe. We're not out to incite or anger anyone yet" (152). The assumption that books have the power to "incite or anger" people is of course a commonplace that hardly needs to be defended, a crucial one for the book trade during the Cold War, crucial to the idea that the book was a Cold War weapon, a means to contain Communism, to promote individual thought and democratic action.

This idea of the value of the book, in short, is a match for the idea of the book as expressed in texts like *Wonderful World* and by organizations like the National Book Foundation. Not only are books important works of art (though they surely are), they also play an important role in society to the extent that they are read by the greatest number of people, for whom they hold the key to liberty and the survival of democracy; as Faber reminds Montag, in a remark the echoes the more portentous statements in *Wonderful World*, "'If there were no war, if there was peace in the world, I'd say fine, *have* fun! But...all *isn't* well with the world'" (104), a fact that presumably makes the book more important than ever. It is not hard to see why the book trade would embrace a text that endorses this view: in this moment, at least, *Fahrenheit 451* is *Wonderful World of Books* as science fiction dystopia—which is to say that it is a much more effective version of it—both in the sense that it advertises the book on virtually the same terms (as bulwark against atomic war and totalitarianism, as culture threatened by mass culture) but also that it is a product of the same economic forces (the expansion of the book trade) and thus implicated in the

same set of ironies regarding the fact of its mass distribution and its representation of mass culture.

The problem with understanding the novel this way is that Granger's notion that books might incite the public is at odds with much of the rest of the novel. In fact, most of *Fahrenheit 451* explicitly denies the book's (any book's) revolutionary political potential in the modern world. As Montag's two teachers, Beatty the fireman and Faber, tell it, books disappeared not because the totalitarian state feared their power to incite, but rather because of what amounted to market concerns, because, finally, people preferred mass culture to literature. Faber explains to Montag that , "the public itself stopped reading of its own accord," (87), suggesting quite clearly that books had lost their power to incite before the government deemed them illegal. Beatty, Montag's boss, offers a more nuanced, much-quoted explanation of the decline of the book: "It didn't come from the Government down. There was no dictum, no declaration, no censorship, to start with, no! Technology, mass exploitation, and minority pressure carried the trick, thank God'" (58).[28] The emergence of profit-driven mass culture led to the decline in popularity of the book, which led to political support for the elimination of books that could be exploited by dictatorial institutions. The elimination of books was a process, an inevitability, it seems, in the context of the marriage of capitalism and scientific advancement, and not a matter of decree.

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[28] In recent years, this sentence has attracted much attention, as Bradbury has come to seem an early critic of the so-called political correctness that figured largely in the culture wars of the 1990s. Still, we need to recognize that within the novel itself, Bradbury's concern above all else is to preserve the book and high culture from whatever might threaten it—his concerns, that is, are rooted in the culture wars of the 1950s rather than those that took place four decades letter.

Part of the reason this point is worth making is that it is so at odds with what might be called the packaging of the novel. Everything about what Gerard Genette calls the "paratext" of *Fahrenheit 451*—the title ("the temperature at which books burn," according to the novel's tag line), and the focus on Montag the fireman and Beatty his boss, the famous front cover illustration featuring pages aflame—suggest that book-burning has great significance, that government-mandated censorship is a root cause of the decline of the book that the book describes and laments. But this is not the case: censorship in *Fahrenheit 451* is an effect, not a cause; the cause that produces the decline of the book and ultimately the censorship regime that is essentially an afterthought is simply mass culture, understood in the novel as a *combination* of large-scale, exploitative institutions and the growing (mass) public that had the time and (presumably) the money to consume their products and lacked the will and/or the desire to resist them. That combination—made concrete in the novel by both the addictive television screens that fill all four walls of a room, the "seashells" that people forever keep in their ears, and people consumed by a desire to escape from a world gone bad—is the true target of Bradbury's ire in *Fahrenheit 451*.

All of which—the denial of the book's revolutionary power in the age of mass culture and the contempt for the masses implicit in such a denial—suggests that *Fahrenheit 451* has less to do with any humanist assertion of the cultural importance of the book (the kind we see in *Wonderful World*) than it does with the more exclusionary modernist idea of culture. "Today," Clement Greenberg asserts at the end of his seminal essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), "we look to socialism *simply* for the preservation of whatever living culture we have right now" (21). The implication is that capitalism is fatal to culture, and moreover, that the preservation of

culture is less the means to a better world than it is the end in itself, the reason for trying to improve the world. *Fahrenheit 451* shares with Greenberg's essay the radical idea that civilization needs to change in order to save culture—and to the extent that he shares this view his idea of the value of the book is in the *reverse* of the NBF's idea, and his novel anything but an advertisement for a generalized notion of the cultural value of reading. The NBF, to put it slightly differently, suggests that culture will save civilization. In Bradbury's novel, culture cannot save civilization; civilization is doomed anyway, and its rejection of the book is a symptom of a larger problem rather than the cause of its problem. "'The whole culture's shot through,'" Faber tells Montag. "'The skeleton needs melting and reshaping'" (87). The problem in *Fahrenheit 451* is not that the art produced by mass culture is not good enough, nor is it that the oppressive government denied people the right to read; the problem is that the masses are not good enough to appreciate art, and so they sought out leaders that would ban books that the market could not support anyway. Rather than asserting, as *Wonderful World* does, that the solution to the world's problems is mass reading, *Fahrenheit 451* looks back nostalgically to an age in which fewer people read: "'Once, books appealed to a few people, here, there everywhere. They could afford to be different. The world was roomy. But then the world got full of eyes and elbows and mouths. Double, triple, quadruple population'" (54). In bemoaning this fact, in bemoaning the spread of literacy, Bradbury has far more in common with Dwight Macdonald and Clement Greenberg than he does with the National Book Foundation that honored him in 1999.

If anything, in fact, Bradbury's novel advocates a more radical position than the two critics. Historian Richard Wolin notes that "a distinct flirtation with nihilism

was a corollary of the conviction that widespread destruction was required before anything of lasting value could be built" (8). *Fahrenheit 451* flirts openly with this kind of nihilism far more than it promotes a recognition of the social or civic value of the book; in 1939, at least, Greenberg might have seen socialism as culture's salvation (perhaps not so later), but as Bradbury describes a culture that can only be saved via its own destruction, his novel does not entertain this hope. The end of the novel, wherein a small community of educated readers, including Granger, read memorized books to each other, living in a world with no means to distribute texts to readers who presumably are incapable of understanding them anyway and who, furthermore, are about to be destroyed in an atomic war, is a kind of modernist fantasy masquerading as book promotion. Maybe after nuclear annihilation, the novel suggests, the survivors and the new civilization they produce will appreciate books and they can be distributed widely. Until then, books should be left to the few. "'Maybe,'" Montag muses early in the novel, before meeting Faber, "'books can get us out of the cave. They just *might* stop us from making the same damn mistakes'" (74). By the end of the novel, this hope for the book has been dashed, and this is where the true irony of Bradbury's novel's place as a promoter of the cultural and political importance of the book: Kenneth C. Davis calls the postwar era that of the "paperback revolution," on the theory that the paperback was a revolutionary democratic force for culture. *Fahrenheit 451*, as I have shown unthinkable outside the context of that revolution, ends by imagining the anti-paperback revolution, that which occurs only by not attempting to distribute books to the masses, by limiting distribution of books to a degree never imagined even by the most exclusionary

modernists. The great divide was never harder to bridge than it is in this mass-produced paperback.

IV. Selling Fahrenheit 451

It is an irony worth noting that one reason that the masquerade works, one reason that a novel ultimately hostile to the democratization of culture can be seen as an advertisement for it, is that the novel was and still is promoted as a humanist culture-as-savior text by commercial literary institutions; it is not surprising that the most radical anti-modern, if not nihilistic, notions of the book are effaced in the efforts to market it. On the front cover of a reissue of *Fahrenheit 451*, from 1982, for example, were the following words: "The classic bestseller about censorship—more important now than ever before."

This copy has more to tell us about how books can be successfully marketed in the age of mass culture than it does about the text or context of *Fahrenheit 451* itself. Indeed, even if we accept the dubious proposition that this is a book about censorship, it is hard to understand why *Fahrenheit 451* would be more important in 1982 than it was in 1953, not just the height of McCarthyism but also a year rife with obscenity-based book bannings on a local level;[29] and lest we strain to attribute the 1982 front cover copy to, say, the Reagan-era reemergence of Cold War tensions in the early 1980s, it is worth noting that the blurb of the 1993 reissue of the novel—a hardcover, fortieth-anniversary edition about which more will be said later—similarly proclaims that "the message of *Fahrenheit 451* is as relevant today as when it was

[29] The January 23, 1954 issue of *Publishers' Weekly* included as one of four major trends for the book trade in 1953 "a wave of censorship that had no previous parallel in the United States" (286).

first published." The true lesson to be derived from this disingenuous front cover copy is not the importance or lack thereof of *Fahrenheit 451* at any time so much as it is the fact that in 1993, as in 1982, as in 1953, announcing the imperiled state of the book—whatever the reasons, whatever the lack of context—is a good way to sell books, a lesson borne out not just by the repeated use of the paratextual "books are threatened" motif to sell *Fahrenheit 451*, but also by the frequent reissues themselves. *Fahrenheit 451*'s enduring popularity as an advertisement for the book—for this is how it is packaged—is the best evidence of the mass popularity of the culture-is-threatened motif.

This last point is made most ironically by the text on the same 1982 edition's back cover—"OVER 4 1/2 MILLION COPIES IN PRINT." One wonders if the book designers appreciated the particular irony that this paratextual advertisement so closely resembles the famed McDonald's announcements of how many billions of people they have served. McDonald's is, like *Fahrenheit 451* itself, another institution with roots dating back to the 1950s dependent on both the technology and philosophy of mass production, and the emergence of demographic shifts that could make that philosophy profitable. McDonalds is also, of course, exactly the kind of institution for which Bradbury has the greatest ire.

The 1993 reissue of the novel, in contrast to the pocket-sized paperbacks, is a grand affair—a special hardcover edition produced to capitalize on the novel's fortieth anniversary, fleshed out with several prefaces and afterwards Bradbury had written over the years, and a new one as well for the occasion. The hardcover edition, surely meant to commemorate the novel's importance and achievement, is like the 2000 NBF honor a form of canonization. With four million paperback copies of the

book in print, it is difficult to imagine a large audience for this more expensive hardcover edition. It is a throwback, albeit a relatively inexpensive one, to an age of expensive "special editions" of books designed for a small audience, the sort of small audience imagined at the end of *Fahrenheit 451* as the preservers of the possibility of a non-totalitarian future. And it is appropriately blind to the irony of this effort.

Chapter Three

The Novelist and/as the Organization Man: *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and the Making of a Typical Novel

"Nowadays," Jonathan Franzen writes in his introduction to Sloan Wilson's novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955), "the book is remembered mainly for its title, which, along with *The Lonely Crowd* and *The Organization Man*, became a watchword of fifties conformity."[1] While the novel will likely always remain obscure relative to its title, it has gained a higher profile in recent years. The occasion for Franzen's comment—the novel's return to print in 2002, not long after reissues of Riesman's and Whyte's sociological works in 2000 and 2001 respectively, and for the first time since the early 1980s—is one sign of this. Another is the renewal of academic interest in the novel over the past two decades: it now rates a mention in most cultural histories of the 1950s,[2] and in recent years numerous historicist literary scholars have examined it as well as a sort of anti-road novel, a quasi-sociological story of conventional, conformist middle-class, middle-management life from the decade famous for it.

These critics' assessments have generally been negative: one scholar deems the novel "quintessentially middlebrow," while another calls it a "typical mid-fifties

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[1] See Franzen's introduction to *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2002). The novel, Franzen says, "will provide you with a pure fifties fix."

[2] John Patrick Diggins asserts that the novel portrays a 1950s "conformist archetype" (216). In *Grand Expectations*, James T. Patterson, in the course of linking the novel with Whyte and Riesman, surmises that it "skewered the soulless, consumerist lives of suburbanites and the corporate world" (338). Robert Frank calls it a "quintessential text of Organization society" (38).

bestseller" (May 157).[3] According to these readings, the novel takes on the characteristics of the characters it purports to portray realistically. It is, in other words, doubly typical, not just a novel about a middle-class man with a middling job but also, aesthetically speaking, a middling novel, not just a novel about 1950s conformist culture but also, by virtue of its failure to sustain its critique of that culture, a novel that conforms to it. For contemporary critics, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* is a paradigmatic statement of unearned male middle-class angst and, beneath its happy ending, a depressing story of capitulation to the corporation. This view of the novel is not all that different from its early negative reviews;[4] the revival was brought about less by a reinterpretation of the text than by first a shift in focus on the part of literary scholars that made typical, non-literary novels the object of study and second a reconsideration of latent anxieties in 1950s culture.[5]

As I'll argue in this chapter, much of the novel's reputation as a typical text is tied to its famous title; in this sense, what is perhaps most interesting about the revival of interest is the degree to which, in spite of it, Franzen's point about the title still

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[3] See Chapter Two, "Quintessentially Middlebrow" in Ruth Pirsig Wood's *Lolita in Peyton Place*. In addition, Catherine Jurca cites it as a representative 1950s suburban novel. Elizabeth Long probably started the revival of interest in the novel when she cited it as a representative bestseller of the "corporate-suburban" genre. See *The American Dream and the Popular Novel* (New York: Routledge, 1985).

[4] The July, 1955 *Commonweal* review of the novel asks the following question: "What is the moral of the novel supposed to be anyway: the self-pitying shall inherit the earth?" Catherine Jurca, in her recent study of the novel, makes a similar point: "he is above all the man for whom suburban-corporate existence is defined as endless suffering" (139).

[5] See, for example, *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, a collection of essays edited by Lary May (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001). See also Joel Foreman, Ed., *The Other Fifties: Interrogating Mid-Century American Icons* (U of Illinois P, 1996) and Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narrative, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Duke UP 1995).

holds, if not quite in the way he intended it. Even among those scholars who have brought the novel its somewhat dubious renown, that is, the title exerts an unusually strong influence on how it is understood, and while the title's enduring prominence is partially a historical accident, even as such it is the byproduct of a specific and heretofore unexamined design. That design, the subject of the first part of this chapter, is also to a large extent responsible for the novel's revived reputation as a sort of ur-1950s text. The broad aim of this chapter is to reconsider *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* in the context of the network of powerful postwar institutions that produced and promoted it, to study, that is, the process by which what I'll argue was an idiosyncratic unnamed manuscript was transformed into a "typical" text. The title, which was instrumental in this transformation and which remains by far its most famous aspect, is a good place to start, but because the selection of the title is inextricable from the process that enabled the writing and promotion of the novel itself, and because that process is embedded in the larger story of the growth of the book business over the first half of the twentieth century, its story can only be told in a roundabout way.

There are two published versions of the story of how the title was arrived at, and while they differ in key respects that will be considered later, they converge on three points. First, the title was one of the last decisions made about the novel, well after the manuscript was completed and shortly before it went to print. Second, Wilson's original choice—"for some reason," he writes in his memoir (211)—was *A Candle at Midnight*, a lyrical title far removed from *The Man in the Gray Flannel*

Suit.[6] Finally, in both versions of the story the decision ultimately rested not with Wilson but with Richard Simon, then the president of Simon and Schuster, Wilson's publisher. This is because Wilson had neither a literary nor commercial track record prior to the novel's publication, while Simon, a legendary figure of the book business nearing the end of a storied career, had for somewhat obscure reasons taken on the novel, or more precisely the novelist, as a kind of pet project. Simon has yet to figure prominently in scholarly assessments of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, but more than anyone else, he is the author of contemporary perceptions of it; the distance between *A Candle at Midnight* and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* suggests something of the difference between Wilson's intentions for his novel and the enduring interpretation that Simon imposed on it.

I. The Publisher

To make this argument is at least momentarily to lift the novel out of its usual perceived thematic context of organization men and lonely crowds and to situate it instead in the context of the culture of mid-century American publishing. This is a strange move in the sense that publishing history has generally received little attention in literary scholarship,[7] but in another sense it is perhaps less of a shift than it might seem, because the world of publishing in the 1950s was undergoing changes that would make it more like the conventional business culture that the novel

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[6] The "candle at midnight" reference alludes to a scene in the novel in Italy, when Tom is alone with Maria. It is this aspect of the novel that, as I'll argue in this chapter, is most obscured by the decision to call it *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*.

[7] See John Sutherland, "Publishing History: A Hole at the Center of Literary Sociology," *Critical Inquiry* 14 (1988): 574-589, for an argument for the need for more attention to the publishing industry.

purportedly describes. The novel, I'll argue, is ultimately better understood as a product of those changes within the publishing world, and in the relations between that world and the more conventional corporate world, than as an attempt to represent the conventional corporate world itself, a subject about which Sloan Wilson, an aspiring writer almost from birth, knew next to nothing. This is in part because Wilson's novel is far from a sociological study of middle-class existence in the 1950s; it actually dramatizes a version of his own atypical experience on the margins of corporate America as he struggled to forge a career as a professional writer. It is also because the specific process by which the novel became "typical"—it was promoted by its publisher as such specifically to capitalize on the public interest in corporate culture and middle-class existence—exemplifies the developing strategies employed by publishers to exploit its new and growing links mass culture institutions. Thematically *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* is reputed to fit squarely in the 1950s, but this reputation—and prior to it the novel's very existence—is in part a consequence of the fact that it was written, published and promoted at a moment that fits squarely in between two eras in publishing history.

In his recent memoir, Jason Epstein deems the 1950s the last decade of publishing's golden age, when it was "still the small-scale, highly personal industry it had been since the 1920s" (8). In his multi-volume history of American publishing, however, John Tebbel calls the 1950s the first decade *after* the golden age. Both authors mean the same thing by "golden age": the moment when publishing was, again quoting Epstein, "a cottage industry, decentralized, improvisational, personal...performed by small groups of like-minded people" (1), as opposed to what publishing would become, a "conventional business" (4). Epstein and Tebbel, in other

words, are nostalgic for the same moment in publishing's history; ultimately what their difference in periodization indicates is that the 1950s were a transitional time for American publishers, a moment when they were caught between their previous incarnation as a group of growing but still relatively small, sometimes family-owned businesses, many formed in the 1920s, and the moment when they were consolidated into mass media empires, as they would be in the 1960s and after.[8] *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* is an unlikely product of this awkward transitional moment.

To make this point we need to know something about the history of the company that published the novel. Simon and Schuster, which Simon co-founded with Max Schuster in 1924, had been one of those upstart companies of the golden age, and its story, and Simon's role in that story, captures the book business's transition perhaps better than that of any other publishing house.[9] It was Simon and Schuster that, as Tebbel puts it, introduced a new concept to the publishing world, "the businessman as publisher" (II, 156). The company's growth—it enjoyed faster expansion than any other new company in American publishing history—is properly attributed not to high literary values (the company first achieved success by selling the first-ever crossword puzzle books) but to business innovations, or, more precisely, to the fact that it brought a business sensibility to the publishing arena. The company used sophisticated marketing techniques (among other things, it was the first house to

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[8] Michael Korda, whose career as an editor spans roughly the same period as Epstein's, suggests that the perception of publishing as a cottage industry in the 1950s might have been wishful thinking: "book publishers in those days like to refer to themselves with a certain pride as 'a cottage industry'...but the age of the cottage industry was already coming to an end" (44-45).

[9] Today, the correct company name is Simon & Schuster, but when it was founded, it was Simon *and* Schuster. Simon and Schuster themselves resisted the ampersand, but after they were gone the change was made. Today the company is owned by Viacom.

test market its books), invested more on advertising per book than any other house, and more than any other company exploited the possibilities of the "house-generated idea," whereby editors conceived ideas for books in response to perceived demand and hired authors to write them.[10] This last idea is perhaps the best example of the book business's transformation from a producer-oriented (that is, author-oriented) business to one that is more consumer-oriented.

In addition, Simon and Schuster was involved in the most significant efforts to bridge the gap between publishing and mass culture institutions, the efforts that would help to lead American publishers out of their purported golden age and into the second half of the twentieth century, an ambivalent age of "synergistic" relationships with mass media corporations. The most famous of these innovations is the company's 1939 partnership with Robert de Graff of Pocket Books to start what Kenneth C. Davis has called "the paperbacking of America," the most significant development in twentieth-century publishing and the one that did the most to give the book any kind of "mass" exposure. Less celebrated, but equally telling, and, as I'll show, indirectly crucial to the genesis of Wilson's novel, Simon and Schuster cemented its status as a symbol of twentieth-century publishing modernization in 1944 when it, along with Pocket Books, was merged into Field Enterprises, a relatively small multi-media conglomerate that also included four radio stations, a newspaper, and a textbook publishing company. It was at this point that Simon, no longer the co-owner of the company he had founded, became its president. The merger, more a harbinger than an immediate trendsetter, foreshadowed later multi-

[10] The most famous example of this is J.K. Lasser's lucrative annual books about income taxes. See Tebbel, II, 556 and Schwed, 77-78.

media conglomerations and reflected a belief on the part of all parties involved—later proven correct—that books in the postwar era could be a growth industry. Marshall Field himself was inspired to enter the publishing business by the chance sighting of Pocket Books on display at a Ligget's drugstore in Chicago. Field soon became convinced that "big business procedures had overtaken the old-fashioned book business, and...he wanted to be in on the ground floor" (Tebbel, III, 71).

Not surprisingly, the growth of the book business and the merger it enabled exacted a personal toll. By 1955, Simon was unhappy with the choice he had made to sell his company, though it had proven to be a profitable move. He missed the control he had had when Simon and Schuster was a smaller business that he could run with a co-owner's degree of autonomy, and he resented having to answer to others. Simon had risky ideas that he wanted to pursue, but the rest of the company, for obvious reasons much more conservative post-merger, was not receptive. Simon was a businessman, but he was not a 1950s businessman;[11] he was an innovator, not an organization man, and so his unhappiness can be understood in the context of two distinct but related 1950s discourses: first, the critique of the modern corporation and its dehumanizing effect on the individual and second, the nostalgia that many postwar novelists and publishers would come to feel for the earlier "golden age" of gentlemanly publishing; unlike the others who shared his nostalgia, Simon was in part responsible for the change he and they lamented.[12]

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[11] See Chapter 1, "A Cultural Perpetual Motion Machine: Management Theory and Consumer Revolution in the 1960s," of Frank's *Consumption of Cool* for more on corporate culture of the 1950s.

[12] When Simon died in 1960, Bennett Cerf wrote in a tribute in *Saturday Review* that "the real Dick Simon...began to die in spirit way back in 1944, when he sold the control of his business to the late Marshall Field" (qtd. in Tebbel 3, 78). In his

His solution—and, apparently, the rest of Simon and Schuster's solution as well—was to set up an imprint all his own within the company in order to publish his pet projects.[13] This imprint was called New Ventures, and Simon's idea was that it would function like the old, pre-merger Simon and Schuster, a point emphasized in Peter Schwed's account of the company's history: "Simon was allocated a separate budget to create his own private undertakings...essentially the two Dicks [Simon and his protégé Dick Grossman] had to make New Ventures work on their own" (193). For Simon, this was in a sense a return to the 1920s, when he and Max Schuster alone ran the company, took risks, and almost literally made something out of nothing: the company had begun with an office, a budget of $8,000, and no books to publish. Predictably, New Ventures was a short-lived idea—the golden age had passed, and by the time books that originated with New Ventures were published, the imprint had already been folded back into the rest of Simon and Schuster—but it was crucial in the production of a few notable successes, of which *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* was the first.

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memoir, *What Shall We Wear to This Party?*, Wilson explains Simon's unhappiness as follows:

> Dick's problems stemmed mostly from the fact that he and Max Schuster had sold the publishing firm...gradually Dick had begin to learn that he was not the captain of his ship any more. For the first time he was answerable to a board of directors...Worst of all, the words "published by Simon and Schuster" were printed on several books which Dick Simon personally loathed" (248).

[13] In telling the story of New Ventures, Peter Schwed suggests that this decision was very mutual; as much as Simon wanted autonomy, that is, the rest of Simon and Schuster wanted him away from the company's decision-making. "At about this time," Schwed writes, "it had been agreed that Dick Simon's books should be separated editorially from the regular publishing program of the firm" (193).

For a variety of reasons, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* is unthinkable outside of the context of this chain of events. For one thing, no publisher besides Simon was willing to give Sloan Wilson an advance large enough allow him to support his family while he wrote his novel. This is simply because, as noted earlier, Wilson had no track record on which a publisher's investment could be justified. A large, bureaucratized business would not show interest in Wilson because he was an unsafe investment, and a small house, which might be more willing to take a chance on an unsung writer, would lack the money needed to support Wilson, his wife, and three children for any stretch of time. A maverick with money, which Simon was, was required to give Wilson a chance to write his novel. This suggests one of a few ways in which, as I'll now argue, the novel is a distinctly old-fashioned Simon and Schuster success story—the type that was generally no longer possible in the newly incorporated world of publishing—produced in a new era. Now considered a novel quintessentially of its time, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* is in this sense not just an anomaly but an anachronism.

To understand this is to put into a useful context Wilson's preface to the first edition of his novel, which includes the following:

> During dark hours when there was no realistic reason to suppose that the manuscript was ever going to get finished, Richard L. Simon, my publisher, administered miraculous transfusions of skill and courage. He emboldened me to have a try at this book in the first place, and now that the work is done, leaves me feeling as though he had fought at my side through a long war. There is no greater friendship.

As expressions of thanks go, this one is unusually effusive, the language probably more melodramatic than anything in the novel itself; comparing the process of writing a novel to the experience of going to war is probably not an unusual analogy for the 1950s, but figuring the publisher as a miracle worker, wartime comrade-in-arms, and the novelist's greatest possible friend is more than unusual. In a peculiar way, it transgresses postwar literary ideology.

Pierre Bourdieu describes the relationship between writer and publisher within the field of literary production as one of "adversaries in collusion" ("Production," 79). In Bourdieu's framework, the relationship is collusive rather than openly collaborative in order to perpetuate the romantic idea of the solitary artist, divorced from the business concerns that would be the first priority for a large-scale publishing house like Simon and Schuster. The notion that the publisher-writer relationship is an adversarial one is one of the means by which artists and literary institutions "produce belief" in the value of art (Wilson's comparison of the writing process to war might be construed as another means to this end), one of the ways, that is, in which they make the case that the novel is something more than a mere commodity. In the short term, the author accrues symbolic capital. The long-term effect of belief, the reason, that is, commercial publishers as well as authors might have an interest in this adversarial relationship, is that it can help to sell books. As I've shown throughout this dissertation, in the 1950s, as the population of educated readers grew and the publishing business developed stronger ties to mass media industries—ties that I'll soon show are clearly in evidence in the story of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*—

literary novelists were often quite public about their disputes with publishers; stories about the struggle to publish became part of the story of literary works.[14]

Wilson's preface shows him to be, in contrast to these authors, either unaware of this strategy for accruing symbolic capital or unwilling to employ it; the preface of the novel tellingly reproduces what I will later discuss as the novel's supposed literary sin, representing big business as benevolent enabler of the individual rather than as a stifling force, the enemy against which individuals must fight.[15] Indeed, Bourdieu's framework is probably more relevant to the novel's *representation* of the relationship between the corporation and the individual—and the way that relationship has been negatively received by critics—than it is to the preface. The preface, in other words, is relevant to the extent that the novel depicts the circumstances that produced it. It offers readers a way of understanding the novel that is otherwise unavailable.

What the preface really points to is neither Wilson's desire to transgress literary ideology nor his ignorance of belief-producing strategies. It points, rather, to a genuinely close relationship that Simon and Wilson developed during the time Wilson wrote his novel, and that relationship must be understood as a function of New Ventures's unusual attempt to recreate an older model of book publishing within a thoroughly modernized corporation. Advertising one's distance from one's publisher, in other words—Bourdieu's *denegacion* or disavowal—was a relatively

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[14] Two examples of this anti-publisher rhetoric are discussed in this dissertation: Norman Mailer's struggles to get *The Deer Park* published and Paul Bowles's struggles with Doubleday and New Directions.

[15] The connection between the preface and the novel is surely not a coincidence. As I'll discuss later, there is ample reason to believe that Hopkins, the self-destructive, inner-directed president of the UBC, is modeled at least in part on Simon.

new strategy for dealing with a relatively new set of circumstances. Wilson did not employ that strategy in part because he never found himself in this set of circumstances. A telling indicator of New Ventures' distance from the conventional publishing world is the fact that Wilson trusted Simon enough to fire his literary agent, that postwar symbol of the author-as-businessman, and negotiate directly with his publisher. He never had cause to regret that decision while Simon was still working.[16] As I have begun to suggest, Wilson's atypical relationship to his publisher is reproduced in the partially autobiographical plot of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, in which a man's fealty to the corporation is justified by the corporation's remarkably—and, to many readers, implausibly—good treatment of him.

Before pursuing this point, there is one final way in which the novel is a kind of old-fashioned Simon and Schuster triumph: it allowed Simon to flex his selling muscle. It can even be said that this publisher-author relationship, with the emphasis on the publisher, was *structured* to allow Simon to sell. At the time he offered Wilson a book deal, the novel did not exist, even as an idea (thus allowing for the possibility that a character could be in part modeled on the publisher), and Simon, moreover, had never read a word Wilson had written. Wilson had been recommended to Simon by a friend, a story that I will consider in depth later in this chapter, and Simon professed to be uninterested in Wilson's writing ability: "'Generally,'" Wilson remembers Simon telling him, "'I tend to deal more in men than in manuscripts'" (*Party* 196). Simon was, as Tebbel says, a "super-salesman"; he had started his career in publishing as a salesman for Boni and Liveright. Part of the legend of Simon and

[16] When Simon became too ill to work, shortly before his death, Wilson's happy experience with publishers came to an end. See *Party*, 250-258, where he reports mistreatment by both Hollywood executives and agents.

Schuster's early years stems from the fact that it was formed before it had books to publish; the content of the books mattered less than the ability to sell them. The principle was the same in 1955. Whatever Wilson produced, Simon likely believed he could sell it, and for him the central question surrounding Wilson's manuscript called *A Candle at Midnight* was not "what is this book about?" but "what is the best way to sell it?" This is where the change in titles comes into play.

II. The Title

The "official" version of the story of the title appears in two places. The first is the jacket copy of the first edition of the novel, at the end of the author biography: "And to this his publisher wishes to add that it was Mrs. Wilson who so ably summarized the theme of her husband's book by suggesting the title *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*." In his memoir, Wilson elaborates. In February 1955, after the manuscript was finished and four months before the book arrived in bookstores, Elise Wilson convinced him that *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* was a better choice than *A Candle at Midnight*, but Simon resisted at first, on the grounds that it was too similar to Mary McCarthy's short story "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt" and to the movie *The Man in the White Suit*.[17] Wilson records Simon's explanation for his fateful change of heart as follows:

> "On the train going to work today I counted more than eighty men wearing gray flannel suits," he said. "*Eighty*, and I walked through only a few cars. It's a uniform for a certain kind of man, and I think it

[17] Later Wilson adds still more detail, writing of "the exact moment when I had scrawled *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* with a pencil on a list of possible titles" and "the fact that my wife had backed this particular title when Dick Simon was arguing for another" (236).

> will make a great title for the book. We'll go to press as soon as we can" (qtd. in *Party* 212).

There is every reason to accept the reason that Simon here offers for enthusiastically approving the title, but there is ample reason to doubt that a rush-hour epiphany was required for him to approve the choice.

Why did Simon like the title so much? The broad answer is clear enough, and it helps us to understand *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* as an old-fashioned publishing triumph that was marketed to capitalize on a set of contemporary concerns. "By the middle of the 1950s," Thomas Frank writes, "talk of conformity, of consumerism...were routine elements of middle-class American life" (11). It was this talk—this media interest—that Simon sought to exploit. He saw in the title, that is, the basis for a marketing campaign, according to which the subject of the novel would be not merely one man in one suit but a group of men who wear the same kind of suit. Thus Tom Rath, Wilson's protagonist, would be made to represent the new "everyman": one of the growing class of middle-class, middle-management suburban commuters, a group that had already received attention as a postwar phenomenon from sociologists Riesman and C. Wright Mills and also in the mainstream press. Not only is this decision made long after the novel is written, it is also made, I'll soon argue, with little attention to the manuscript itself.

Regardless, the novel's commercial success quickly validated Simon's idea: the fact that *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* was one of the top-selling books in 1955 is just one aspect of this validation, which can also be understood in several less obvious ways. The long-term effects, surely unanticipated by Simon but surely the product of his marketing efforts, are equally notable. The novel's title has entered the

vernacular, and the novel, now studied as an artifact of a bygone era, is back in print. Fifteen years after his novel was published, Wilson was as effusive about his publisher's marketing achievement as he had been about his publisher's friendship in the preface: "No one," he writes with characteristic gratitude in his memoir, "ever did a better job of advance publicity on a novel than Dick Simon did with my book" (224).

As the aforementioned preface to *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* indicates, Wilson was given to overstatement regarding Simon, but it is possible that in this case Wilson actually understates Simon's achievement; in changing *A Candle at Midnight* to *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, Simon did more than just promote a single novel and publicize a catchphrase, and it is this fact that both casts doubt on Wilson's version of the story of the title and points, as well, to what may be the paradigmatic significance of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. Wilson's account, whereby Simon's random train ride triggers his embrace of the title, presents this decision as a fairly innocent process. But the idea that a random train ride was required to make Simon aware of the phenomenon of men in gray flannel suits is implausible. This is true not merely because, as Frank notes, middle-class conformity was a topic of mainstream media attention throughout the first half of the decade, but also because Simon was almost certainly aware of this attention. The most famous articles on the subject of middle-class existence are the ones that William H. Whyte wrote for *Fortune* throughout the early 1950s. These articles, of course, were later expanded into *The Organization Man* (1956), a critical study of the effect of modern life—particularly modern corporate and suburban life—on old-fashioned American

individuality, published to great critical and also popular acclaim one year after Wilson's novel.[18]

The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit's relationship to *The Organization Man* is an unusual one. While Whyte's book includes a fairly mocking assessment of Wilson's novel[19]—in fact, its criticism sets the tone for decades of criticism that followed—typically, in both literary studies of the novel and histories of the era, Wilson's text is seen as the novelistic complement to Whyte's work of popular sociology, and both are understood as sort of naïve (Wilson's moreso than Whyte's) contributions to the discourse on middle-management, middle-class existence.[20] It is almost impossible to find a recent study that mentions Wilson's novel that does not link it with *The Organization Man*; what these studies rarely mention and never consider in any depth is the fact that both texts were published by Simon and Schuster, one year apart. Both books, in fact, originated under Richard Simon's short-lived New Ventures imprint.[21] It is thus hard to resist speculating that Simon's motivation for promoting Wilson's novel as he did was his realization that it would help him promote another of his books, soon to be published. This is especially the case because unlike Wilson, who was selected at the essentially blind

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[18] One example of how commonplace the critique of corporate culture had become can be found in C. Wright Mills's review of *The Organization Man* in the *New York Times*. In a generally favorable review, Mills notes that Whyte's book mines "a very old theme" and that it "provides nothing new" (6).

[19] After mockingly summarizing the plot of the novel, Whyte notes that in a novel such as Wilson's, which he cites as symptomatic, "society is so benevolent that there is no conflict left in it for anyone to be rebellious about" (251).

[20] See Thomas Frank for one example of this. See also Jurca, 135, 137 for allusions to Wilson's Whyte-styled sociological aims.

[21] My source for this is Schwed's history of Simon and Schuster, 194.

recommendation of a friend, Whyte was a known commodity, an editor and writer for a Time, Inc. publication, and given that Simon and Schuster had published his first book, *Is Anybody Listening* (1952), it seems fair to assume that he had a fairly longstanding relationship with Simon. All of which suggests that the title of Wilson's novel figured in not one but two marketing efforts; there seems little doubt that *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* functioned as a kind of novelistic advertisement for *The Organization Man*; it is possible that Simon intended it that way.

That, at least, is one way to interpret the unofficial, revisionist version of the story of the title, which comes from Schwed's history of Simon and Schuster:

> Nobody [at Simon and Schuster] was very happy about the tentative title, *A Candle at Midnight*. Wilson was talking to Simon...about how the book idea had first occurred to him: "I went crazy on that commuters' train each morning, seeing all those guys in gray flannel suits—" He was interrupted by Dick Simon's shout of jubilation: "That's it!" Some book titles are born, some are achieved, and some are thrust on us, and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* falls into the third category. (194)

Regardless of whether Schwed's story is the right one, his conclusion is almost certainly incorrect.[22] The title is best understood, both stories suggest, not as an idea thrust upon a passive publisher, but rather as an opportunity seized by a savvy marketer.

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[22] Unfortunately, Schwed makes no mention of the discrepancy between his version of the story of the title and previously published versions.

How that opportunity was seized is best seen in the ways that what Gerard Genette terms the "paratext" was put to work to promote a particular reading of the novel.[23] Everything about the physical, material first edition of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* outside of the text of the novel itself—every part, that is, designed not by Wilson but by Simon and Schuster—announces its putative subject as the typical middle-class man and along with it announces Simon's marketing wizardry. The front cover illustration, for example, was a faceless, gray, silhouetted man standing besides the title, a fairly obvious attempt to communicate the title character's loss of individuality in the corporate world.

In fact, the silhouette says more about the corporate world than is immediately apparent. A deal for a movie version of the novel was struck before the first edition was in bookstores; the silhouette was designed specifically to evoke Gregory Peck, its star. Simon and Schuster's original plan was to use Peck's actual picture on the front cover instead of the silhouette, figuring that his fame would help sell the book and also drum up interest in the movie that would appear soon after. This decision was rejected on the grounds of taste and marketing; the publisher decided that it would be unseemly to promote a movie so blatantly on the cover of a novel, a concession to old-fashioned literary values made easier by the realization that the very facelessness of the cover illustration functioned as a comment on the novel's purported subject

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[23] Genette explains the idea of the "paratext" as follows:

> A literary work consists, entirely or essentially, of a text, defined (very minimally) as a more or less long sequence of verbal statements that are more or less endowed with significance. But this text is rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal and other productions, such as an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations…These accompanying productions, which vary in extent and appearance, constitute what I have called elsewhere the work's paratext. (1)

matter. All told, then, the cover figures in three marketing campaigns. Used to help promote the novel itself, *The Organization Man*, and the movie version of the novel, it conveys *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*'s participation in the new world of cross-promotion, the developing "synergistic" relationship between the publishing industry and the institutions of mass culture that mergers like that of Simon and Schuster into Field Enterprises were designed to exploit. Written and published only because Richard Simon briefly created an "old" version of Simon and Schuster within a new one, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, by the time it was published, would become an example of the marketing possibilities for the book in the age of mass culture, neatly linking Simon and Schuster with both Time, Inc. (Whyte's employer) and Twentieth Century Fox, which produced the movie.

If the cover illustration is the clearest visual symbol of the novel's purported subject, the oft-quoted original jacket copy was the most explicit aspect of Simon's marketing effort, and it imposed an interpretation on the novel that it has yet to shake. It is, for this reason, worth a close look: "This is a novel about the man in the gray flannel suit," it begins. "In these particular pages, the man's name is Thomas Rath. He happens to work at Rockefeller Center in New York City, and his home happens to be in a near-by Connecticut suburb." The use of first "these particular pages" and then the repetition of the "happens to" construction seem to be designed to suggest that Rath could have any name, could live anywhere, and could work anywhere. In fact, Rath was deliberately named to suggest an angry character,[24] and while Rockefeller Center may be a random workplace location, its selection by Wilson was

[24] "Tom Rath was of course a very angry man," Wilson writes in his 1983 afterward to the novel. "When I named him 'Rath' I thought I might be criticized for making this too obvious."

likely not random: it was the address of Simon and Schuster's offices, suggesting an autobiographical subtext to the novel rarely considered by critics. The jacket copy asserts that Rath is but one of many just like him. In so doing, it does to him what in the 1950s the corporation was said to do its employees: it denies Tom Rath his individuality, his distinctiveness as a literary character, by asserting that he could be anyone, anywhere. By shifting the focus away from what is unusual about him, it renders him faceless.

This point is soon made explicit:

> Although this novel is about the Rath family, the man in the gray flannel suit is a fairly universal figure in mid-twentieth century America. The gray flannel suit is the uniform of the man with a briefcase who leaves his home each morning to make his living as an executive in the near-by city.

The unusual "although" at the start has the effect of further diminishing the importance of the Raths themselves. The real story here, the jacket copy suggests, is not the Raths themselves but a sociological phenomenon. The rest of the jacket copy is similarly devoted to effacing whatever might be unusual or contingent about the experiences that the novel describes, and to the extent that it strains to do this it suggests what is obscured by studying the novel as a kind of sociological case study: "Though most men do not fall in love with girls in Rome and don't, even in the course of war, kill seventeen men, each man has his own problems about which the world knows very little. These men are all over America wearing gray flannel." This is a fairly extraordinary sentence in that even as it suggests other ways in which Wilson's novel might have been marketed by Simon and Schuster and interpreted by

readers—as a romance, a story of lost love, or as a war story, or both—it does so only to dismiss those ways and thus dismiss even the most extraordinary experiences as basically irrelevant. The jacket copy is an example of the very problem it purports to expose.

The jacket copy thus constitutes a powerful interpretation of the novel, and while I will challenge it later, it is first worth noting how influential it has been. It is telling, for example, that most recent studies of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* quote at least part of this text, which of course Wilson did not write.[25] Much of the recent attention the novel received has been devoted to debunking the novel's paratextual claim about Tom Rath's universality. This is a worthy goal, but the studies never note that it is not Wilson but the publisher making this claim. To put it slightly differently, the story of the novel's genesis and promotion might matter less were the novel actually about the stereotypical man in the gray flannel suit. That it plainly is not is a fact that has been lost to literary history, obscured in part by Simon and Whyte, in part by the historicist imperative to focus on the typical, and in part, as I'll now show, by certain choices Wilson made in fictionalizing his experience. I am not arguing that there are no aspects of the novel that are "typical"; rather my point is that what is at least equally of interest about the novel is first the institutional effort to portray it as typical and second the heretofore obscured idiosyncratic aspects of Rath's experience. In the following sections, I will shift focus away from Rath's universality and onto his particularity.

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[25] This pattern of citing the jacket copy also begins with Whyte's *Organization Man*. "As the dust jacket says," Whyte notes, "Rath is a true product of his times" (131). See also Jurca, who writes that the "protagonist of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* was billed, preposterously, as 'a fairly universal figure in mid-twentieth-century America'" (139).

III. The Polite Hipster

If we assume that Wilson conceived of the experience of the returning veteran seeking work in a large corporation as a paradigmatic 1950s experience—and there is some reason to support this view—then the novel's aim is sociological for about the first 10 pages. In this time, Rath, with some reservations, but with the prospect of a higher salary too good to resist, decides to apply for a public relations job at the United Broadcasting Company (UBC). "'I've never thought of you as a public-relations man,'" (6), his wife Betsy says to him when he tells her about it, and we are given to understand that public relations is considered a particularly demeaning enterprise. As Catherine Jurca notes in her study of the novel, public relations had been cited by Mills and Riesman as the paradigmatic example of dehumanizing corporate work, the mid-twentieth-century version of the scrivener.[26] At the job interview, Mr. Walker, the personnel man, asks Rath to spend one hour writing his autobiography. "'Explain yourself to me,' Walker explains before adding, 'Tell me what kind of person you are. Explain why we should hire you'" (11). Rath is free to write whatever he wants, Walker explains, but the last sentence should begin this way: "The most significant fact about me is..."

It is at this point that the novel begins to stray from the typical. Burdened by painful memories of his hellish World War II service, Rath finds himself both perplexed and offended by the autobiography requirement. One's life cannot be summed up in an hour, particularly when one killed 17 men during a war and then

[26] Public relations, Jurca says, citing Riesman and Whyte, "not only entails working with people and symbols rather than things but is one step further removed from material labor: it symbolizes the symbols" (151).

returned home to a placid suburban life. The war experience seems at once too essential to be left out of an honest autobiography and too *real* to be included in a superficial job interview, an exercise in self-promotion and therefore, presumably, as suspect as the public relations job itself. The autobiography request seems to Rath both inappropriate and impossible to carry out honestly, an example of the kind of degrading conformist dishonesty that the corporate world demands, exactly what he had feared when he decided to apply for a job at UBC. What is most interesting about this reaction is how over-the-top it seems to be, how exaggerated Rath's discontent seems to be at a fairly innocuous request: Rath's initial response to Walker's request is this: "son of a bitch...I guess the laws of cruel and unusual punishment don't apply to personnel men" (11-12). But how bad is it, really? An autobiography is merely another way of talking about oneself, which is what one does at a job interview. Among other things, the fact that somehow being asked to *write* about himself in a dishonest, self-promoting way is worse than being asked to talk about himself in such a way lends Rath's frustration an almost literary cast. It is a writer's frustration, and in the throes of it, Rath imagines an angry response:

> "The most significant fact about me is that I detest the United Broadcasting Corporation, with all its soap operas, commercials, and yammering studio audiences, and the only reason I'm willing to spend my life in such a ridiculous enterprise is that I want to buy a more expensive house and a better brand of gin." (13)

As he will throughout the novel, Rath here flirts with an unappealing cynicism even as he idealistically condemns the emergent mass culture that his prospective employer represents and produces. Rath's previous job had been with a foundation established

by an "elderly millionaire...to help finance scientific research and the arts" (3), and his attack on mass culture is consonant with those of postwar intellectuals who decried the effect of mass culture on high culture, just as his and his wife's general suspicion of the corporate public relations work is consonant with 1950s representations of corporate conformity. These moments link the novel with prevailing 1950s discourses, but what is characteristic about this scene is the way it sidesteps these discourses rather than participating in them. Rath's job turns out to have little to do with the mass culture he here purports to abhor, and he always works outside of the corporate culture he fears and disdains. What is striking about the novel is not its typical-ness but the way it seems to work so hard, often to the point of implausibility, to elude the typical.

While Rath characteristically opts to forgo his imagined outright rebellion (in fact he never seriously entertains it), it is important to recognize that he does so not in favor of conformity or capitulation to a corporation he claims to detest but instead in favor of an understated, polite rebellion; after several abortive attempts at the kind of autobiography he thinks Walker wants, Rath decides not to write one at all. Instead, using little of the time allotted to him, Rath writes a paragraph that includes only the most basic information about him before concluding this way: "...after considerable thought, I have decided that I do not wish to attempt an autobiography as part of an application for a job" (17). "'I've written all I think is necessary,'" Rath tells a surprised Walker when he turns in his paper a full fifteen minutes before his allotted hour runs out.

Literary history, with assists from Richard Simon and William H. Whyte, has tended to remember Rath as, in Wilson's words, "the squarest guy in the world," and

Wilson as either an apologist for conformity or a failed critic of it, but this episode seems to have all the elements needed to make Rath and Wilson heroes to the literary counterculture: a refusal to write on demand; a refusal to write dishonestly; in the act of giving up the job, a self-sabotage in the name of principle; an attack on the cultural bankruptcy of a mass culture institution; and even, in Rath's recognition of the impossibility of assimilating his war experiences into his postwar suburban life, some old-fashioned postwar alienation. The only thing, it seems, that prevents the character from attaining the status of a hipster—albeit an unusually polite one—is the improbable fact that Rath gets the job, apparently though not explicitly in part because of his quiet rebellion. After Rath turns in his non-autobiography, Walker tells him he will hear from UBC in about a week; the letter offering a second interview arrives only three days later, suggesting, implausibly, that his quasi-literary refusal to follow orders has been rewarded by the mass culture institution. All of this happens without satisfactory explanation from UBC and without even any remark by narrator or character on its strangeness. No one ever tells Rath or the reader that the corporation admired his refusal to write an autobiography, but it is difficult to draw any other conclusion about his hiring. The seeming strangeness of the novel is embodied in this episode. The stereotypical organization man would have written his autobiography; the stereotypical organization would have rejected an applicant for not doing so.

This strange moment is made stranger by the fact that similar episodes recur throughout the novel; these are the moments that have given the novel its reputation as "middlebrow" and these are that moments that led Whyte to assert that in the world of the novel there is no longer any reason to be rebellious (251). Repeatedly Rath

finds himself faced with what appears to be a situation with two choices—either lie in order to succeed or tell the truth, maintain honor, and fail. Each time, after wavering, Tom chooses truth, and each time (always to his surprise—he chooses truth with the fatalistic attitude he developed jumping out of planes during World War II) the truth leads to success, exactly the kind of success that he thought required lying. The novel's central, prolonged workplace drama involves Rath's wavering over whether he should tell Hopkins his honest opinion of a speech Hopkins plans to deliver. After much hand-wringing, Rath decides to give his honest opinion ("'I'm afraid I just don't think it's a very good speech'" (222)), and of course he is rewarded for his candor ("'You've helped me cut through a lot of fog on this...can't thank you enough!'" (223)).[27]

And in the end, of course, Rath fears that telling Hopkins that he is not happy as his personal assistant will cost him everything. He confesses to Hopkins and is rewarded with an even better job out of the corporate "rat race." This is undeniably a suburban version of a Hollywood ending, unsatisfying to the extent that it feels unrealistic, but it should not be confused with an apologia for conformity. Rath never

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[27] Since these worries are intended to illustrate the perceived need to conform—the social ethic—required by the modern corporation, it is worth nothing that Wilson seems to based it on his experience working not for the a typical corporation but for a publishing company, Houghton Mifflin. Soon after World War II, Wilson worked there as a reader, and he describes the experience this way in his memoir:

> Almost invariably I hated the books which the editors of the big publishing house planned to publish and loved the manuscripts which they were in the process of rejecting. Still, it would be quite possible for me to write reader's reports which would agree with Paul Brooks, I realized. All I would have to do would be to praise all the manuscripts I loathed and knock hell out of those I loved. This did not seem a good way to start a career in publishing. When I told Paul that I had concluded that publishing was not the best career for me, he looked immensely relieved (153).

gives in to the organization or conforms for the sake of it, and what is odd is that the organization never asks him to do so; rather, what happens is that the organization rewards him for his polite refusal to conform and is, moreover, the site of and the enabler of his honesty. In Whyte's terms, Rath seems to have found the postwar corporation at which the protestant ethic has not been replaced by the social ethic.

While the sheer implausibility of Rath's good fortune—working for the corporation that does not demand that he conform—is certainly the novel's major literary sin, the grounds for viewing the novel as a kind of corporate propaganda, on a plot level, Rath's situation is not at all difficult to explain: *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* is the story of a man with an unusual job. Walker begins Rath's second interview by saying as much:

> "I think I should begin by saying that this isn't just an ordinary job in the public-relations department we're considering...as a matter of fact, this position wouldn't really be with United Broadcasting at all, expect in a purely technical sense...you would be working directly for Mr. Hopkins on an outside project completely unrelated to the company." (24)

The job turns out to be a campaign to raise public awareness about mental health issues, which for obscure reasons is of great importance to Hopkins. The unusualness of Rath's situation is made more explicit when he tells his friend Hawthorne, who also works for UBC, that he will be meeting Hopkins. "'Hell...I've been working for this damn outfit for four years, and I've never laid eyes on the guy'" (29). What I am trying to suggest is not just that Rath's corporate experience is unusual but that that unusual quality is acknowledged in the novel; the novel is not blind to it. The

circumstances that surround Rath's hiring are strange because the job is strange; the job is strange because it is unrelated to the business of the corporation. This is not a novel about corporate life.[28]

IV. The Author

But if it is not a novel about corporate life, then what is it? One way of approaching this question, as I have suggested, is to point out that Wilson was fictionalizing his own experience. Prior to writing *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, Wilson worked as Assistant Director of a non-profit corporation called the National Citizens Commission for the Public Schools, which was later shortened to Better Schools, Inc. This was no ordinary advocacy group. Established in the late 1940s, the rationale of Better Schools was that that the need to improve public education was particularly urgent because of the Communist threat. The commission was the brainchild of then-Harvard president and noted Cold Warrior James B. Conant; the responsibility for organizing it was passed on to Harvard alumnus and president of

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[28] Of course, this explanation raises as many questions as it answers. Making the job a charitable one is easily construed as a facile way to justify its sentimentality and its happy ending. But it should be noted that, in the same way that attacks on mass culture and corporate culture appear in the novel without being its subject, this skepticism about the possibility of a benevolent corporate executive does as well. The flip side of the novel's chronicle of Rath's job experiences is the story of his opinion of Hopkins. Is he really concerned about the nation's mental health, or is the campaign just a way for him to put himself into the spotlight? Jurca and others have cited Rath's doubts about this as an example of his almost incurable and unappealing cynicism, but in fact it was Hawthorne who put the idea that Hopkins's concern for the mentally ill was not genuine ("'the poor son of a bitch wants fame! And he's in a position to buy it'"); Rath himself was much more willing to give Hopkins the benefit of the doubt, soberly telling his friend, "'I think there's something wrong with your theory'" (27-28). Hopkins's kindly treatment of Rath and his willingness to listen to criticism in the end convinces Rath of Hopkins's sincerity. The absence of an ulterior motive is what allows for a tidy ending to the novel's workplace storyline, and while that makes the novel less interesting, Rath's continued wariness about Hopkins's motives suggests that corporate propaganda was not his goal.

Time, Inc., Roy Larsen. It is thus an example of the mobilization of powerful United States institutions in the effort to contain Communism. Members included such luminaries as Walter Lippmann and George Gallup among other corporate and labor leaders. One corporate executive, Neil McElroy, then the president of Procter and Gamble, used his presence on the commission as a springboard into public service. He was appointed Secretary of Defense under Eisenhower just days after the Soviet Union launched the Sputnik satellite in 1957, an event that paved the way for the Federal Defense Education Act of 1958, a massive federal investment in education that serves as the clearest link between federal education policy and the Cold War.[29]

In and of itself, Better Schools barely rates as a historical footnote today, but it does merit a small place in 1950s literary history, for two reasons. The obvious reason is that Wilson's experience there is the basis for the work he describes in the novel. Wilson's work for Better Schools entailed ghost-writing speeches—Rath's major task when he starts working for UBC—and meeting with corporate executives and other leaders to impress on them the importance of public education, which (along with Simon) no doubt informed Rath's representation of benevolent bosses Ralph Hopkins and Dick Haver, the head of the Schanenhauser Foundation. More important, awareness of Wilson's Better Schools experience helps us locate some of the strangeness of the novel's corporate storyline in the fact that Wilson divorced it from the very specific experience on which it is based. It is hard to accept that the president of a television network is overly concerned with mental health awareness, but it is easy to understand that such a figure would be concerned about containing

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[29] Rudolf Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read* (also from 1955) is perhaps the classic statement of Cold War fears transformed into educational jeremiad. Flesch writes in his Preface: "Just as war is 'too serious a matter to be left to the generals,' so, I think, the teaching of reading is too important to be left to the educators" (xiii).

Communism. One might wonder, then, why Wilson left the Cold War out of his novel, why, that is, he invented a civic-minded cause for Hopkins that had no clear connection to larger national interests. This choice on Wilson's part, more than any other, renders his character faceless and enables Simon's marketing effort. The prosaic explanation might be that Wilson himself was unaware of the Cold War implications of the work done by Better Schools. Nowhere in his memoir does he link the commission's work with the Cold War. When the theme of education does show up in an unusual subplot near the end of the novel, when Wilson's children complain about the condition of the public school, there is no attempt made to link the Raths' efforts to improve the schools to larger concerns.

The other reason that the Better Schools experience is crucial brings us back to the institutional origins of the novel, this time from the author's perspective rather than the publisher's; before Better Schools became the experience on which Wilson based much of his novel, it was the experience that put him in the position in field of literary production in which he could write a novel at all. Like the story of the title, this story can only be told in a roundabout way.

In the same way that Tom Rath found himself working on a civic-minded project without intending to, Wilson had come to Better Schools by accident. Like many other mid-century writers and aspiring writers, and like William H. Whyte, he went to work for Time, Inc. prior to writing his book. Time, Inc. was a frequent target of postwar intellectuals, even as it hired them, and at the moment Wilson was hired,

the late-1940s, the company was getting worse in this regard.[30] James L. Baughman describes it, without intended irony, as follows:

> Those joining *Time* as writers in the late 1940s and early 1950s...accepted the new regimen. Old timers could see it coming. The magazine no longer hired so many class poets, touched by radicalism, accepting Luce's paychecks for a few years before leaving to write the American *Iliad*. Now 'careerists,' still male, filled the office. Although usually Democrats, they acquiesced to the magazine's editing routine. They were *Time*'s "organization men" (166).

Wilson, a Democrat and not a radical, was aware of the company's reputation. As he describes it in his memoir, his decision to work for Time was distinctly that of a writer by necessity selling out his literary ideals in order to support his family:

> In those days I was still young enough to think in melodramatic terms. The question obviously was whether I would sell my soul to the devil. The answer came to me unhesitatingly: yes! The devil would undoubtedly prove to be a difficult employer, but no problem he could offer would be worse than trying to raise two children on fifty dollars a week (15).

Wilson's father was a poet and journalism professor, and his mother a journalist and woman's rights activist. Wilson was raised to be a writer, and he never considered doing anything else; the misgivings that Tom Rath felt about leaving a charitable

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[30] As Allan Ginsberg writes in "America" (1956), written months after *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* was published: "I'm addressing you / Are you going to let your emotional life be run by Time Magazine?" (40). Dwight Macdonald, who like Whyte once worked for Time-owned *Fortune*, famously remarked in *Against the American Grain* that *Time* "gives Americans something to read when they aren't thinking" (401).

foundation to work for a television network are the misgivings Wilson had about selling his literary soul to Luce. Like Rath, Wilson took the job because it paid more than his previous job (as a newspaper reporter in Providence, Rhode Island). Thus the start of the novel, in which Rath decides to leave his job for corporate America, is modeled on an aspiring writer's paradigmatic postwar experience; if it is typical, it is only because the literary world was in the process of becoming more like conventional organization society.

Wilson found Time, Inc. even worse than he had feared. He assigned stultifying work for its in-house organ, *FYI*—worse even than writing for *Time*, Wilson was initially assigned to write pro-Luce propaganda for an audience of *Time* employees. "The bright-eyed eagerness of *FYI* about all the workings on *Time* would not be easy for me to contrive," Wilson writes, "no matter how anxious I was, as the saying went, 'to sell out' for money" (173); earlier he notes that "writing for *Time* had seemed a definite downward step which was necessary for financial reasons, but being assigned to *Time*'s house organ seemed to place me about as low as a writer could go" (172). This might be said to be the work of the prototypical man in the gray flannel suit, and it is tempting to say that if he had stayed there Wilson might actually have written the protest against conformity that social and literary critics crave. But to say this is to misunderstand the process by which the novel was produced, specifically to ignore the institutional network that created the novel; in light of the story of Wilson's path to publication that I am about to recount, it is probably more apt to say that if Wilson had continued writing for Time's house organ, he would not have written a novel at all. In any event, Wilson did not stay long at *FYI*. Almost immediately after being assigned, Wilson was summoned to Roy Larsen's office and

offered the opportunity to work for what would become Better Schools, Inc. It was, in one sense, an incredibly lucky moment for Wilson. But in another sense, it was not luck at all.

IV. Connections

Nicholas Lemann describes American culture in 1945 as follows:

> High-Protestant men of the Eastern seaboard occupy the White House, all of the great university presidencies, the captaincies of finance and the professions, and many other leading positions, and each has rough access to the others." (4)

Sloan Wilson, himself a Protestant man of the Eastern seaboard, benefited immensely from this network of relations; his career testifies to the power of it. Wilson was asked to work directly for Larsen on the Better Schools project for the same reason he was hired by Time in the first place: a recommendation from a famed, well-connected Harvard professor (non-Protestant but still powerful Paul Sachs, whose family co-founded Goldman Sachs), who happened to know Roy Larsen well and whose daughter happened to have married into Wilson's wife's family. "In principle," Wilson writes in his memoir, "I disapproved of the practice of using a family connection to get jobs, but in practice I employed it as much as possible" (154). Wilson was lucky enough to know the right people, and not for the last time.

Wilson's connections and good fortune implicate him in a sort of classic postwar irony. Better Schools' campaign was founded on the idea that public education was fundamentally democratic, and thus useful in a battle against a totalitarian ideology. Public education, it was believed, would ensure that the best and

brightest of students would have the opportunity to rise: its buzzword was meritocracy. Merit and not ideology nor economics nor class would determine one's ability to succeed. What is perhaps most important about the irony that Wilson was appointed to a commission promoting the importance of meritocracy not because of his merits but because of where he had gone to college and who he had known there--"This was a job," Wilson writes, "for which I had absolutely *no* qualifications" (175)—is that it is altogether typical and not at all surprising.

In any event, Wilson did want to rise on his literary merits. After two years at Better Schools, he quit his comfortable job in order to pursue again his literary ambitions, a fairly reckless decision. But he found himself in the same circumstances that prompted him to work for Time in the first place; with a family to support, he needed a sizable advance in order to begin writing in earnest. With his limited literary and commercial track record (he had published one little-noted and commercially unsuccessful novel and several *New Yorker* stories), he had to face the realities of the postwar book business and the vocation of writing: no publisher was willing to give him what he needed. Wilson began looking for other jobs; he was immensely surprised when Simon contacted him and offered him as much money and as much time as he needed to complete a novel. Not only had Simon never read a word Wilson had written, as I have already noted, Wilson had never contacted Simon to even ask for an advance. With no literary or commercial track record, he considered Simon and Schuster out of his league. In a world where publishing houses were less and less likely to read an unsolicited manuscript, an unsolicited offer to publish from one of America's largest and most successful publishers was an extraordinary event.[31] So

[31] See Coser et al. for a discussion of this development after World War II.

what prompted the offer? The answer is mundane but telling. Simon's offer was the result of a recommendation made on Wilson's behalf but unbeknownst to him by Roy Larsen, his former boss at Time. As Wilson recounts Simon's words: "'I haven't read anything you've written...but Roy Larsen says you're a person who might do something someday, and Roy has good judgment'" (196). Wilson's ability to write the novel that would become *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* is a product of his small place in a network of powerful postwar institutions. The links between first Harvard and Time and then Time and Simon and Schuster (and the company's place amid these major institutions in and of itself says something about the growth of the book business) are essential, hidden aspects of the genesis of Wilson's novel, just as the links between the novel, the movie version of the novel, and *The Organization Man* are essential, hidden aspects of its reputation.

"The union of bosses" Wilson writes in the novel, "is the most powerful union in the world" (25), and apparently the sentiment appealed to him, because he repeats it later, with a key addendum: "the union of bosses is powerful, but, within its self-prescribed limits, marvelously scrupulous" (37). As noted earlier, from Whyte's review to the present Wilson's portrayal of the corporate world as benevolent has been cited as a problem. But given Wilson's own set of experiences leading up to the writing of his novel, it is not surprising that he represents bosses as marvelously, and this attitude in biographical context points to another way to understand the novel.

Wilson's novel thus stands as a fictionalized and transformed story of the growth of the book business and a fictionalized and transformed story of a Cold War public relations effort. What is most interesting about it is how it alters what actually happened to him: while Richard Simon's marketing campaign has served to obscure

Wilson's intentions for his novel, Wilson's transformation of his own experience in the novel obscures his debts to the institutions and privilege that got him a publishing deal. In the novel itself, Rath rises not by connections but by an inner-directed honesty. In this it is more like more celebrated 1950s novels than has ever been acknowledged: a story of the power of institutions over the individual but also an example of the power of stories about the individual's refusing to cave in to the institution.

IV. Artists in a World of Gray Flannel

The literary problem with Rath—what makes him "typical"—is that, as Thomas Frank writes, he "can imagine no alternative to the corporation and the commute" (38). Unlike other, more celebrated novels of the era, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* seems to lack an "artist" character—a character who separates him or herself from conventional life, who refuses to play by typical rules. But one "artist" who does appear in the novel briefly is Rath's uncompromising five-year old daughter, Janey:

> She did everything hard: she screamed when she cried...upon deciding that she wanted to play with ink, she carefully poured ink over both her hands and made neat imprints in the wallpaper, from the floor to as high as she could reach. Betsy was so angry she slapped both her hands and Janey, feeling she had been interrupted in the midst of an artistic endeavor, lay on the bed for an hour sobbing and rubbing her hands and eyes until her who face was covered with ink. (2)

This scene might be said to include much of what is wrong with the Raths and 1950s culture, because it seems to link their desire for a comfortable middle-class existence—represented by their suburban home, the greatest symbol of that existence—with the need to stifle their daughter's artistic expression.

As has been well-recorded in recent studies of postwar literary culture, a still-celebrated canon of 1950s novels themselves celebrate characters like Janey, outsiders who refused to live according to the dictates of whatever organization it was that was trying to impose rules on them.[32] The most famous of these characters—Kerouac's Sal Paradise and Neal Cassady, Salinger's Holden Caulfield, Bellow's Augie March, and Paul Bowles's Port Moresby among others—are sometimes perceived as stand-ins for their authors. The authors, in other words, gained symbolic capital from the characters they represented, though the authors themselves, as I've shown throughout this dissertation, could only gain their opportunity to advertise this vision of artistic freedom by linking themselves to institutions of commercial artistic production that were large and growing larger.

As I have argued in this chapter, something of this need to connect to larger institutions is in evidence in evidence in the plot of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, in which Rath only gets to be his honest self because his employer allows it. The clearest way in which the novel shows the growing interconnectedness of the corporate and literary fields, ultimately, is through its other artist character, Ralph Hopkins. Given that he is corporate boss, in charge of the organization that supposedly demands conformity, Hopkins's benevolence has been a target of critics; he is no doubt based in part on Roy Larsen and in part on Richard Simon. The oddest

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[32] See especially Morris Dickstein's *Leopards in the Temple* and Thomas Schaub's *American Fiction of the Cold War*.

thing about Hopkins, however, is not his sincerity. The oddest thing about him is that, in a novel that seems to have no place for the belief-producing artist, it is Hopkins himself who has most of the characteristics of the high artist. Hopkins's job requires all of the suffering, the detachment, the avoidance of family that artist-characters of other postwar novels—not just Holden Caulfield and Neil Cassady but also Bowles's Port Moresby (dead in the Sahara), Bradbury's Clarice (killed by the government), Mailer's Marian Faye—exhibit. As Rath explains to his wife, talking about Hopkins:

> Why do you think Hopkins is great? Mainly, it's because he never thinks about anything but his work, day and night, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. All geniuses are like that—there's no mystery about it. The great painters, the great composers, the great scientists, and the great businessmen—they all have the same capacity for total absorption in their work. (250)

Like these characters, Hopkins pays for his passion dearly; we are led to believe that he is on the verge of death from a heart attack. The fruits of his labor—the money—seem hardly to matter to him. His pleasure comes from the work. Certainly, the last thing one would expect Hopkins to do is actually watch television for entertainment. If there is any way in which *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* is subversive, it is this: Because it positions the corporate giant as a great artist, the novel can be read as an unwitting challenge to the highbrow conventional wisdom about the relationship between art and corporate culture, published at the moment that artistic and corporate institutions were growing closer

Chapter Four

From Novel to Sensation to Blockbuster: *Peyton Place* and the Narrative of Cultural Decline

Peyton Place, Grace Metalious's scandalous first novel, was an immediate and unprecedented commercial success. At a time when first novels typically sold a total of 2,000 copies, it sold 60,000 copies in the first ten days of its official release and 104,000 copies in its first month. It was the second-best-selling novel of 1956 despite not arriving in bookstores until September 24 of that year, and it went on to be the best-selling novel of 1957 as well, spending a total of 59 weeks at the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list. That this is, in a sense, only the first part of the story of *Peyton Place*—it was soon followed up by various multimedia attempts to capitalize on its fame that, in terms of audience, dwarfed the success of the novel itself—should not obscure the extent of this popularity. *Peyton Place* became, in its time, the best-selling novel of the twentieth century.[1]

With unprecedented success came, perhaps inevitably, efforts to interpret that success. And in the 1950s, culture critics did not have to look far for an interpretation of the *Peyton Place* phenomenon. This was, of course, the decade marked by the

[1] All figures here are taken from "Open Secrets: Rereading *Peyton Place*," Ardis Cameron's introduction to the Northeastern University Press reissue of the novel, and *Inside Peyton Place*, Emily Toth's biography of Metalious.

"great debate" over mass culture.[2] For reasons both obvious and obscure this debate has had a lasting impact on our understanding of *Peyton Place*, both its immediate reception and its more recent recovery as a novel of neglected literary merit. Thus to understand the novel's success and the ways in which that success has been described—the subjects of this chapter—it is necessary to contextualize this debate over the fate of culture, to understand it, that is, not just as a comment on culture that may be right or wrong but also as a facet *of* culture that assumed importance at a specific moment for a specific set of reasons.[3]

As much recent scholarship has discussed, and as I discuss throughout this dissertation, what was at issue in the debate, as it played out in essays, symposia and texts such as *Partisan Review*'s "Our Country and Our Culture" issue (1952), *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (1957) and *Culture for the Millions* (1959), was whether mass culture was a healthy if not revolutionary force for the democratization of culture (this was a less popular choice among intellectuals and artists) or (the more popular choice) if it was a threat to high culture and/or to American democracy, perhaps even a harbinger of totalitarianism. The kind of

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[2] For more on this debate, see Michael Kammen, *American Culture, American Tastes* and, for a close look at one critic who did not see mass culture in apocalyptic terms, *The Lively Arts: Gilbert Seldes and the Transformation of Cultural Criticism in the United States*. See also Chapter 3, "Art as Antidote: The Mass Culture Debates," in Joli Jensen, *Is Art Good For Us? Beliefs About High Culture in American Life* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 2002).

[3] "Mass culture" is used in this chapter as it was conventionally understood in the 1950s. Cultural sociologists today aim for more rigorous terminologies for different forms of culture and different modes of cultural production. See, for one excellent example of an attempt to draw distinctions between different kinds of culture once lumped together as "mass culture," Paul Dimaggio, "Market Structure, the Creative Process, and Popular Culture: Toward an Organizational Reinterpretation of Mass-Culture Theory," reprinted in Lyn Spillman, ed., *Cultural Sociology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 2002).

anxiety that characterized this latter, more popular choice was not new to the 1950s, of course, or even to the twentieth century; as Patrick Brantlinger shows in *Bread and Circuses*, laments about the spread of culture date back at least as far as the Roman Empire.[4] These laments have taken the form of cultural jeremiads, what I will call narratives of cultural decline. The terminology of these narratives varies ("kitsch," "masscult," the "culture industry" all being variants of the same twentieth-century phenomenon) and so too do the specific targets (from "bread and circuses" to television and comic books), but the essential story of superior culture for the few threatened by an encroaching culture for the masses remains unchanged.[5]

The pertinent question about the 1950s version of the narrative of cultural decline is why it moved from the periphery to the center of cultural discussion when it did. Why, that is, did these narratives increase in number, urgency and theoretical sophistication in the fifteen years after World War II? One partial answer to this question involves such extra-cultural factors as the widespread American disillusionment with the Communist Party by the 1950s, which shifted the focus of many intellectuals away from utopian politics towards matters of culture. A second, obviously related matter is the start of the Cold War itself, which made an American totalitarian state seem a possibility and the masses thus something to be feared. Just as important, the Cold War provided a particularly effective vocabulary for describing

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[4] Patrick Brantlinger, *Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).

[5] "Kitsch," as I discuss later in this chapter, is Clement Greenberg's term. "Masscult" is Dwight Macdonald's term; he resists "mass culture" on the grounds that what is produced for the masses does not deserve the name "culture." "The culture industry" is Adorno and Horkheimer's term, on the grounds that the focus should not be on the masses but on the small group of owners that produce culture for the masses.

mass culture: when critics described mass and middlebrow culture's rise as a kind of slow and covert invasion, the rhetoric was clearly appropriated from Cold War fears of Communist infiltration.[6] The more obvious reason for the increasingly intense rhetoric about mass culture involves the emergence of television and the explosive growth of paperback books, both of which raised the ire of culture critics and in effect gave them their great subject.[7] Finally, we should not overlook such less noted and not unrelated institutional and demographic factors as the growth of the population of readers—a development obviously essential as well to *Peyton Place*'s success—and the rise of the English Department, the growth, that is, of an audience for predictions of culture's demise.

It was probably inevitable that *Peyton Place*, with its combination of scandal and unprecedented sales totals, its luridness ripe for accusations that it coarsened culture, would come to be seen in the context of those predictions. But my argument is not just that in the 1950s *Peyton Place* became enmeshed in a highbrow conversation about the fate of culture and the relationship between mass culture and high culture. While this is true to an extent, it is easy to overstate and easier still to misrepresent the degree to which "highbrow" intellectuals commented on *Peyton Place* at all. In spite of this, *Peyton Place*'s reputation, not just its literary reputation but also the interpretation of its success as a historical and cultural event and indeed

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[6] The most famous example of this vocabulary is probably Dwight Macdonald's description of middlebrow culture, which he said "threatens to engulf everything in its spreading ooze" (63).

[7] This point—the degree to which the postwar critics that attacked mass culture were in some sense or other invested in that mass culture and maybe even enjoyed it—was made memorably by Harold Rosenberg in his review of the Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White's *Mass Culture* text. See "Pop Culture: Kitsch Criticism" in *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994).

the apparently felt need to interpret that success, is surely in part a function of the fact that it achieved its mass popularity at the historical moment when anxiety about this kind of popularity was at its zenith; as I will show in this chapter, the narrative of cultural decline has complicated our efforts to understand *Peyton Place*'s success, to locate it in the context of cultural change in the twentieth century and describe its importance in relation to that change.

This chapter has two broad aims. The first is to reconsider *Peyton Place* and its receptions specifically in order to examine the multiple ways in which the novel has figured in and been refigured by various retellings of the narrative of cultural decline. Both the original dismissal of *Peyton Place*, a process that began shortly after the novel was published, and its eventual revival as a novel of literary merit, which did not occur until the 1990s, have relied in different ways on the notion that Metalious's novel either causes or exemplifies a seismic shift in American culture, that it is essential to the regrettable usurpation of literary culture by mass culture. The second aim is to use the often told but in certain respects unexamined story of the publication and promotion of *Peyton Place* as an occasion to revisit and reassess the narrative of cultural decline on institutional grounds. The novel's substantial but neglected connections to publishing's purported "golden age" constitute a challenge to the idea that the novel was produced by institutions of some new and threatening "mass culture." In fact, there are substantial genealogical links between the institutions that produced *Peyton Place* and those that produced the most celebrated modernist texts of the 1920s and 1930s. Far from a symbol of Huyssen's "great divide" between modernism and mass culture, and far from the "first blockbuster," as recent revisionist accounts of the novel describe it, *Peyton Place* is an unlikely

symbol of institutional continuity, and the story of its success challenges an enduring narrative of 1950s cultural rupture and decline.

I. The Carnival and the Commodification of Culture

How inescapable was the narrative of cultural decline in the 1950s? So much so that a version of it can be found in *Peyton Place* itself. Chapter 19 of Book Two of *Peyton Place* describes the town's annual carnival, "The Show of 1000 Laffs." The original owner of the carnival, Metalious tells us, was a "true 'carny'" named Jesse Witcher, and while Metalious never does explain what it is that makes a carny true, Witcher's authenticity seems to be tied to one of the few details that Metalious does tell us about him, the fact that he "liked his whiskey and woman…a helluva lot more than he enjoyed paying his bills" (257). As a carny, in other words, Witcher was an indifferent businessman, his authenticity signified at least in part by his inability or refusal to turn his carnival into a viable commodity. By the time the carnival is described in the novel, September 1939, the bank had foreclosed on it. Mill-owner and bank chairman Leslie Harrington, Witcher's supremely inauthentic opposite, assumed ownership, eager to turn his employees into paying customers on their state-mandated day off.

The novel is coy about why Harrington decides to buy the carnival. When his friends question the decision he presents it as a kind of lark, the driven businessman's lone non-business pleasure: "'God damn it…I got a right to have something just for the hell of it, don't I? With some men its electric trains or postage stamps. With me it's carnivals'" (257). Ownership of the carnival is just a hobby, the capitalist's form of leisure—in the same way that attending a carnival would be a form of leisure for

working people—and it is for this reason, Harrington explains, that he chooses to stage the carnival in his hometown of Peyton Place on Labor Day, when he could easily make more money staging the carnival in a more populous location.

Harrington's purchase and un-strategic use of the carnival might thus be seen as a humanizing moment for the novel's central villain, if not for the more sinister private motive: by staging the event in Peyton Place on a mandated day off for workers, Labor Day no less, Harrington makes back from his mill workers some of the money he pays out to them in salary. Harrington is willing to sacrifice the extra profits he would make by staging the carnival elsewhere in order to enjoy this irony, which is made all the richer for the reader when we remember that traveling carnivals, even when not owned by big business leaders, as they typically were not during their pre-World War II heyday, were noted for their scams and frauds.[8] If anything, Harrington's purchase ups the ante on this trickery; his hobby, such as it is, is less the carnival per se than it is the cynical exploitation of and exercise of power over his employees. For those employees, the carnival itself becomes less an escape from work—on the one day out of all meant to honor them for their work—than an example of the insidious degree to which the work, and the employer, dominates their lives.

Harrington is, in short, an untrue carny, and the results of this inauthenticity are both dire and aptly grotesque: Kathy Ellsworth, Allison MacKenzie's friend and the daughter of one of Harrington's mill-workers, loses her arm in a fun-house

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[8] See Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988).

accident that is the result of Harrington's negligence.[9] Compared to the novel's more salacious moments, the carnival episode is tame, but the story of Kathy's injury resonates in the context of old and new efforts to locate the novel's place in cultural history and in the history of the American book trade that have dominated the intermittent critical conversation about *Peyton Place* almost from the moment it was published. The brief description of the shift in the carnival's ownership captures in miniature something of an inevitable shift in the ownership of entertainment in the twentieth century, the movement of what might seem to be a genuine form of popular culture towards something like what Kammen calls "proto-mass culture," now owned not by the people but by larger businesses with commercial interests.[10] Kathy Ellsworth's injury can be seen as a sign of what is lost with this shift in ownership, and when she loses her lawsuit against Harrington despite his plain culpability, the sinister degree to which Peyton Place's nascent culture industry is in league with the larger power structure—the breadth, that is, of Harrington's power—is revealed. "It would have been impossible," Metalious explains, "to find twelve people in Peyton Place who neither worked at the mills nor owed money on mortgaged property at the Citizens' National Bank where Leslie Harrington was chairman of the board of trustees" (287). Harrington is, to put him in terms appropriate to the 1950s, the most

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[9] The problem with commodified, "mass" culture, Dwight Macdonald explained in 1953, is that it is "imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen" ("Theory" 60). As Peyton Place's chief businessman, Leslie Harrington is ideally suited to the role of the owner who ruins what had been a cultural activity, fabricating, to use Macdonald's term, a carnival that was, when owned by Witcher, "authentic."

[10] Kammen deems the period from 1908-1938 the era of "proto-mass culture," the somewhat clumsy term intended to correct for the indiscriminate use of the term "mass" to describe forms of culture that do not in fact reach the masses. See Chapter One of *American Culture*, "Coming to Terms With Defining Terms."

powerful of the town's power elite (Metalious makes sure to tell us that he owns not just the carnival but also the field in Peyton Place on which the carnival is held), and the novel's carnival episode functions as an unlikely allegory of the commodification—and thus the decline—of a form of authentic culture.

II. Carnivals, Novels, Cultural Decline

It is appropriate in several ways that Metalious's date for the carnival, where the negative consequences of the shift in ownership are made concrete in Kathy's injury, is 1939, not just the year that war breaks out in Europe (Labor Day in 1939 was September 4, three days after Germany invaded Poland), but also the year, and the season, that *Partisan Review* published Clement Greenberg's seminal anti-mass culture essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," perhaps the most influential of all the narratives of cultural decline written in the twentieth century. Greenberg's essay is famous for its attack on what he calls kitsch for its role in the prophesied destruction of high art: "the avant-garde itself, already sensing the danger, is becoming more and more timid every day that passes. Academicism and commercialism are appearing in the strangest places" (9).

It might seem too great a leap to link the decline of Metalious's carnival to the decline of Greenberg's avant-garde art. But it is worth remembering that Greenberg's essay, to be mimicked by numerous similarly styled narratives of cultural decline in the 1950s, tells not one but two inseparable stories of cultural decline, not just the decline of high culture at the hands of kitsch but also, in a more direct way, the erasure of what Greenberg calls folk culture, which falls victim to the same phenomenon: "Kitsch...has flowed out to the countryside, wiping out folk culture"

(12). The stories are inseparable because in Greenberg's account the participants in what had been a strictly regional folk culture are transformed by the creation and dissemination of kitsch into the passive, impersonal market for mass culture products, and it is the emergence of this market that threatens high art. Metalious's carnival episode combines elements of Greenberg's two stories; carnivals themselves are somewhat akin to what Greenberg considered folk culture, but what happens to Metalious's carnival happens to be quite similar to what culture critics of the 1950s said was happening to high culture: it was commodified, in this case by Harrington, and therefore in some sense or other ruined.

Properly understood, carnivals are not "folk culture," and it is worthwhile to make this point, to consider where carnivals fit in the story we tell about cultural change in the twentieth century, because it helps to understand better the story told about the cultural change that has surrounded *Peyton Place* since it was published. Seeking to develop useful definitions out of notoriously ill-defined terms, Michael Kammen suggests that a workable notion of folk culture should take into account its participatory and pre-industrial nature. Carnivals do not qualify by this standard, and in fact it might be argued that they their emergence is one of the developments that contributed to the end of folk culture in the United States. Carnivals came to American life in the 1890s on the back-end of industrialization— along with circuses, dime museums, and amusement parks, "part of the burgeoning world of the 'popular

amusement' industry" (Bogdan 69).[11] They were nothing that approach "mass culture," in that they were distinctly regional and played to relatively small crowds whose participation was essential, but at the same time their flourishing was a product and byproduct of industrialization: the emergence of train lines made the traveling carnival economically feasible, and the carnival rides themselves required technological advancement.

The birth of the traveling carnival is usually traced to another seminal date and place in the history of American culture, one that relates specifically to this industrialization: the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, 1893. The Fair itself was a monument to American progress, and visitors flocked to the famed Midway Plaisance—set up for amusements specifically so that the Fair could turn a profit. It was there that the world saw, for the first time, the Ferris Wheel, an engineering marvel for its time. The success of the entertainment exhibitions at the Fair was what convinced entrepreneurs of the possibility of a successful traveling carnival.[12] The resulting growth of the carnival is easy to quantify: by 1902, there were 17 traveling carnivals in the United States; in 1905 there were 46; and in 1937 there were close to 300. A new form of culture, a product of a combination of technological and demographic change, had emerged.

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[11] Kammen writes, "I draw a marked distinction between what British scholars refer to as 'traditional' popular culture (flourishing in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries) and the considerably more commercialized and technologically transformed popular culture that emerged at the close of the nineteenth century and then blossomed exuberantly in the twentieth" (6). Carnivals would seem to fall into the latter category.

[12] As Bogdan puts it, "The showmen working the Midway Plaisance, too, not only shared the same grounds and experiences but even met to discuss common problems. It was at this exposition…in the area around Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, that the idea for a collective amusement company was first discussed and the carnival as we know it was born" (59).

What began in 1893 was in decline by 1939, however, in large part because of the emergence of more mass-produced forms of culture of the kind that Greenberg describes. Carnivals are usefully understood as an early, intermediate step on the road to a culture that earns the label of "mass," not only because they helped to replace folk culture but also because they too were eventually replaced by more technologically advanced and more "mass" forms of culture, with which regional, participatory carnivals could not compete. When they emerged, in other words, carnivals might have easily been viewed as a cultural problem to whatever extent they replaced a more genuine form of folk culture, but by the time they were fading away, replaced by something more technological and less participatory, a kind of nostalgia for them was discernable; Metalious, who set the decline of the "Show of 1000 Laffs" at the historical moment when the American carnival industry was irreversibly losing ground, draws on this nostalgia in her description of the shift in the carnival's ownership.

According to Greenberg and numerous other contemporary theorists of cultural decline, a prime offender in the demise of both high and folk cultures was the combination of industrialization and mass literacy: "Kitsch is a product of the industrial revolution which...established what is called universal literacy" (9). This brings us to another reason that Metalious's date for the carnival's commodification/ruin is appropriate: it happens also to be the year that Pocket Books was formed by Robert De Graff and Simon and Schuster, fulfilling the promise (or, for Greenberg and others, the cultural threat) of the mass availability of the book. Pocket Books, as I have discussed in this dissertation, was not the first effort to sell paperbacks, but it was the first effort to sell such books that worked, and the fact that

it worked where previous efforts had failed suggests that it had found its historical moment: technology (the ability to cheaply mass-produce and distribute books) and demographics (the emergence of a mass audience for those books) combined to spread books far and wide. It is this combination of mass production and mass demand that the institutions that produced and promoted *Peyton Place* would exploit, with greater success than had ever been done before, in 1956.[13] In much of the scholarship on *Peyton Place*, the story of the novel's unprecedented success marks 1956 as a year like 1893 and 1939, a moment in cultural history when culture shifts profoundly because of technological and demographic changes.

III. From Novel to Sensation

One of the earliest such assessments of *Peyton Place*'s place in American culture came in January 1957, a little more than three months after the book arrived in bookstores, when it was written that "the decline and fall of the American novel predicted by the pessimists had one corroboration in the sensation of the year, Grace Metalious's *Peyton Place*" (Butcher 35). Given the well-documented pervasiveness of narratives of cultural decline in the fifteen years after World War II, the sentiment is not surprising, but perhaps it is surprising that the comment appeared not in *Partisan Review* or even in, say, the *New Yorker*—publications that were, as it were, in the business of culture, ensconced in what Bourdieu calls the "field of cultural production"—but in *Publishers' Weekly*, a trade magazine that at the time was not

[13] For more on the story of the paperback, see Kenneth C. Davis, *Two-Bit Culture: The Paperbacking of America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984). For a close look at one company that includes a broad overview of the paperback phenomenon, see Thomas L. Bonn, *Heavy Traffic and High Culture: New American Library as Literary Gatekeeper in the Paperback Revolution* (New York: Meridian, 1990).

even in the business of reviewing novels and that was, as the very idea of a "trade magazine" suggests, in the business of business, entrenched in the larger economic world. This is one reason that this assessment is worth our attention.

Another reason is the rather sly way in which it implicates the novel in the narrative of cultural decline. Strictly speaking, *Publishers' Weekly*'s assessment is not merely a book review if it is one at all; the badness of *Peyton Place* is only implicit (as though so obvious that it does not need to be elaborated) in the idea that it corroborates a far-reaching and unspecified decline of the novel. The idea that a single bad novel could be evidence of a widespread decline in the quality of all novels is specious, because novels deemed bad are written every year: even assuming that an objective rating of novels were possible, the only evidence for such a decline would be the absence of good novels rather than the presence of bad ones, much less the existence of a single bad one. But it is notable that *Peyton Place* is, in fact, not identified as a novel in *Publishers' Weekly*'s assessment, a designation that would in itself signal an aesthetic achievement. Instead it is called a "sensation," a term that not only denies the novel its status as such but also insists on viewing it in the context of its popularity, as a kind of constructed media event, the product of a hype machine. The problem that *Peyton Place* represents is found, in other words, in the relationship between its badness and its astounding popularity; the number of people willing to spend their time and money on something so bad. James Baldwin noted in the symposium eventually published as *Culture for the Millions*, another seminal document of the debate over mass culture, that he was "less appalled by the fact that *Gunsmoke* is produced than...by the fact that so many people want to see it" (121). Something similar is at play in *Publishers' Weekly*'s designation of *Peyton Place* as a

sensation rather than a novel, and although *Publishers' Weekly* does distance itself from the narrative of the novel's decline that it alludes to by attributing it to unnamed "pessimists," the fact that it concurs with those pessimists regarding the quality of *Peyton Place* suggests some degree of assent with the narrative in which they situate it; it seems unlikely that the magazine intended to suggest that the novel corroborates a nonexistent decline.[14]

One might argue that it is a mistake to make so much of a cultural assessment that appears in a source so rarely given to theorizing about culture, a source with little credibility or authority as a voice of criticism. But this disconnect is, for my purposes, precisely the point. *Publishers' Weekly* was founded in 1873 by Frederick Leypoldt, a co-founder of Henry Holt and Co., as a periodical devoted specifically to the book as commodity, as a chronicle of the book *trade*, and its existence and growth demands to be understood as at once a contribution to that trade and a sign of its development and modernization, a sign, that is, of the commodification of the book. Given *Publishers' Weekly*'s clear interest in the financial well-being on the book trade, and given the fact that its audience was comprised of people—publishers, booksellers and literary agents—with a clear interest in that economic well-being, it seems plausible to expect that the mass success of *Peyton Place* or any novel would have been cause for *Publishers' Weekly*'s celebration.

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[14] Who, specifically, were "the pessimists" to which *Publishers' Weekly* referred? Thomas Hill Schaub addresses that issue in *American Fiction in the Cold War*. Writing about New Critics and "New York Intellectuals" in the 1950s, Schaub asserts that "the most dramatic and consequential agreement among these critics was their uniform dismissal of most recent and contemporary American fiction" (41). This idea had filtered into mainstream magazines, where laments over the state of the novel became more common.

The fact that, at least in this case, it was not, and the fact that the narrative of cultural decline, here figured specifically as the decline of the novel, had filtered down from "highbrow" sources not just to mainstream middlebrow periodicals but also to a magazine explicitly devoted not to literary culture but to the commerce of book production, illustrates some of the paradoxes of the postwar culture wars; it might reveal as much about 1950s culture as does the success of *Peyton Place* itself. More than any high-culture or middlebrow attack on *Peyton Place*, *Publishers' Weekly*'s condemnation of the novel-as-sensation suggests not just the complicated dual status of the novel as commerce and art but also how mixed the artistic and commercial fields were at the moment when critics were trying their hardest to reinforce distinctions between those fields. Elsewhere in this dissertation I have aimed to show the perhaps surprising salability of culture marketed as "art" after World War II; the emergence of the art-house cinema and the surprising profitability of James Laughlin's New Directions publishing house are examples of this phenomenon. *Publishers' Weekly*'s condemnation of *Peyton Place*, and the specific grounds of that condemnation, is the sort of complementary opposite of this phenomenon: not only were avant-garde publishers turning profits, but commercial magazines were assuming the roles of high-culture critics, complete with their own version of the cultural jeremiad.

One striking aspect of *Publishers' Weekly*'s assessment—one way to appreciate how completely and swiftly the novel's popularity transformed perceptions of it—it to consider how far removed it is from the fairly good reviews *Peyton Place* received when it was published just three months earlier. As Emily Toth has documented, while *Peyton Place* did not receive raves, it was not unkindly reviewed

in such mainstream publications as the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *Time*, and the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "She has humor, heart, vigor, a feeling for irony," wrote Phyllis Hogan in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "She captures a real sense of the temper, texture, and tensions in the social anatomy of a small town," according to *Time*. "The pace is swift, for Mrs. Metalious has great narrative skill," said Edmund Fuller in the *Chicago Sunday Tribune* (qtd. in Toth 135).

Publishers' Weekly's own original capsule description of the novel is notably different from what it would write months later:

> Another very promising first novelist has written a rather grim but powerful study of a small town in New Hampshire in which there is considerable illicit sex, murder, and suicide. Before the final page, however, most of the characters are happy and properly married. Messner plans a $10,000 advertising campaign. (916)

The capsule is striking for how different it is from the same publication's assessment of *Peyton Place* just three months later; the description of Metalious as a "very promising first novelist" is particularly telling, all the moreso because it is an idea that was echoed even in critical moments of other reviews.[15] After hailing Metalious as literary kin to revolt-from-the-village luminaries like Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis, for example, Carlos Baker concluded in the *New York Times Book Review* in late-September, 1956 that "Metalious is a pretty fair writer for a first novelist...if Mrs. Metalious can turn her emancipated talents to less lurid purposes,

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[15] The passage is equally striking for its inaccuracy. There are no murders in the novel (Selena Cross is acquitted of the charge of murdering her stepfather) and there is only one suicide, and while most of the secondary characters are married, most of the important ones are not. Finally, the novel is concerned with the happiness of but a few, and the rest, consumed by their own hypocrisies, are presumably miserable. But

her future as a novelist is a good bet" (4). What is particularly notable in these passages, surprising in retrospect if hardly so in context, is how Metalious's output is described in terms of possibility and potential; her career is considered a literary one and it is on those grounds that she succeeds or fails. As *Publishers' Weekly*'s January 1957 dismissal indicates, however, within months and well before the novel gave way to a movie, a plainly inferior literary sequel and a television show, the subjects of Baker's review—the novel as novel and the author as novelist—and, in a sense, Baker's review itself and all the rest of the novel's immediate critical reception had already been effaced and, as it were, erased. As early as January 1957, that is, *Peyton Place* already was what it has remained in most critical conversations to this day, not so much a novel, good or bad, that could be talked about in terms of literary success or failure, but instead something nebulous and indefinable called a "sensation," and as such a symbol in an often-told narrative of cultural decline.

The reissue of the novel in 1999 by Northeastern University Press, after it had spent years out of print, was an attempt to remedy this, to restore attention to *Peyton Place* as a novel. In that sense, it constitutes a challenge to the sort of assessment the novel received (or the absence of an assessment) in *Publishers' Weekly* in 1957; Ardis Cameron's introduction makes a convincing case for the novel's literary value as a proto-feminist text disdained in its own time by the largely male literary establishment. In another important sense, however, *Publishers' Weekly*'s reassessment of the novel in 1957 is a challenge to an argument made by Cameron about the novel's place in American culture. Cameron argues that the erasure of the novel in the historical memory is a consequence of the damage done to it by the movie versions, the literary sequel and especially the television show, which, as

Cameron asserts, "aggressively relocated [*Peyton Place*] within a narrative more in tune with the conservative politics of domesticity, social consensus, sexual conformity, and male privilege" (xvii). Cameron rightly notes that the television audience for the original *Peyton Place* television show far exceeded that of the novel, and while it is no doubt true that the spin-offs have altered our understanding of and memory of the original, and more specifically that the television show quite intentionally replaced the novel's overt sexuality and unsentimental expose of hypocrisy with conformity and conventional morality, the *Publishers' Weekly* review suggests that the process of erasure began well before the movie, the first spin-off, arrived in theaters.[16]

III. The Novel as Blockbuster

The recent reevaluation of the novel is both welcome and problematic. Both Toth and Cameron argue convincingly that *Peyton Place* is a novel of neglected literary merit—and that that merit has been missed in part because of the entrenched sexism of the literary establishment and in part because of that establishment's knee-jerk disdain for the popular, the tendency towards what Cameron aptly calls "the conflation of well-liked with badly written, of pop with trash" (xvii). What neither

[16] A contradiction in Cameron's argument reveals another problematic aspect of her analysis of *Peyton Place* and historical memory. While asserting on the one hand that the memory of *Peyton Place* the novel has been usurped by its decidedly less lurid, more staid television show offshoot, Cameron at the same time argues convincingly that the name "Peyton Place" survives in the public memory and in the language as a kind of code word for luridness and debauchery, "a salacious trope for erotic excess, serial philandering, and the trivialization of sex" (xvii). This may be, as Cameron argues, far from Metalious's novel, but it is even farther from the television show. It is difficult to reconcile the claim that "Peyton Place" survives as a trope for luridness with the claim that the novel was usurped by the staid and non-lurid television show.

reader addresses is the way this reevaluation of the novel as literature necessarily alters our understanding of the novel's place in book history, and indeed our understanding of development of the book trade in the second half of the twentieth century. If *Peyton Place* is a novel of literary merit, then the narrative of cultural decline in which it has previously figured needs either to find a new symbol or to be revised. If it is a novel of literary merit, its claim to an important place in the history of the book trade is suddenly ambiguous. As *Peyton Place* gains in literary status, in other words, its place in the history of the book trade, and along with it the narrative we tell about the postwar book trade, becomes more of a cipher.

In this context, Cameron's designation of *Peyton Place* as America's "first blockbuster" book is unusually resonant, and while she ascribes no rigorous definition to the term, it bears some scrutiny for what it suggests about the novel's place in American culture. The term "blockbuster" is itself an ambiguous product of the postwar emergence of mass culture. Its origins date back to World War II itself, to the megaton bombs that were said, literally, to destroy entire blocks. As early as the 1950s, apparently, the term was in use in movie advertisements and the like to connote an enormous popular success. There is something suggestive in the double-sided quality of the term, used by advertisers to describe commercial success that was meant to engender still more commercial success, but soon to be used by critics to signify the problem of commercial success.

To call *Peyton Place* a blockbuster would be uncontroversial; the idea it is the *first* blockbuster, however, is something different, because it suggests that the novel either occurs after or triggers (this appears to be Cameron's intention) a break in cultural history, after which things were not the same as they were before. Otherwise,

why would Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With The Wind* (1936), the best-selling novel prior to *Peyton Place*, not be the first blockbuster? Why not Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)? If not these earlier novels, why not Jacqueline Susann's *Valley of the Dolls* (1966), with which *Peyton Place* is often linked, or Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* (1969), which supplanted *Peyton Place* as the top-selling novel?

Cameron implicitly addresses these questions by giving special historical significance to Metalious's novel, asserting that it first "helped create...the modern reading public" (ix) and that its success then "transformed the publishing industry" (vi), and while she offers scant evidence for these broad claims, in the context of them the designation "first blockbuster" suggests connections between Cameron's conception of cultural history and Thomas Whiteside's in his study *The Blockbuster Complex* (1980), which gives the term its fullest treatment. Although Whiteside never mentions *Peyton Place* in his discussion of the blockbuster (and Cameron never mentions Whiteside in designating *Peyton Place* the first of such), there are obvious reasons to connect his study with Metalious's first novel

What Whiteside calls a blockbuster is the product of, among other things, the postwar expansion and consolidation of the book trade and its developing links to mass culture institutions. He argues that "drastic changes" befell the book trade starting in the late-1950s, and the moment he cites as the trigger of these changes is Random House's decision to sell thirty percent of its stock to the public in 1957, which was followed quickly by its decision to take over Alfred A. Knopf and Pantheon Books, which was itself soon followed by RCA's takeover of Random House, the sequence of events figuring in Whiteside's narrative as one example of widespread concentration within the publishing industry that has had a deleterious

effect on the quality of literature produced.[17] "The upshot" of this consolidation, Whiteside writes, "is that the entire economy of trade-book publishing seems to have become focused on the pursuit of 'the big book'—the so-called blockbuster" (19). In this formulation, with its emphasis on not just success but on the "pursuit" of that success, blockbusters are usefully understood not merely as books that happen to prove enormously popular; rather they are books designed to be popular, the product, that is, of the publishing industry's awareness of the possibility of a certain level of mass commercial success. The possibility of success, moreover, includes not just book sales but also movie and maybe even television show tie-ins, the likelihood—if not, as was and is often the case, the certainty—of which are built into the decision to publish the book in the first place.[18] Whiteside warns that as a result, "the trade-book business seems on the way to becoming nothing more than the component of the conglomerate communications-entertainment complex which happens to deal primarily with books" (22). To call a novel a blockbuster in Whiteside's sense of the term is to make both a negative literary judgment—a kind of fait accompli given the circumstances of the book's production—and to observe a new set of institutional relationships between publishers, Hollywood studios and television; it is moreover, to cite the latter as the cause of the former in what amounts to a familiar, if more concrete and dispassionate, narrative of cultural decline, not unlike the narrative of

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[17] For another, more personal discussion of the Random House consolidation see Jason Epstein's memoir/study of the postwar book trade, *Book Business: Publishing Past, Present and Future* (New York: Norton, 2001).

[18] More on the relationship between the process of making television shows out of books and movies can be found in Christopher Anderson, *Hollywood TV: The Studio System in the Fifties* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1994). As Anderson discusses, one of the early efforts to make a television show out of a book/movie was *King's Row*, the novel that was an influence on Metalious when she wrote *Peyton Place*.

the decline of the Peyton Place carnival.[19] When big business enters the picture, the culture suffers.

To clarify *Peyton Place*'s place in the history of the book trade, the first point that needs to be made is that in crucial ways it does not fit Whiteside's definition of the blockbuster; old and new literary judgments aside, it fails the institutional test. The novel was not the product of anything approaching multimedia corporate calculation; as Cameron and Emily Toth, Metalious's biographer, emphasize in their retellings of the story of the novel's publication, the scale of the novel's success was a surprise to most everyone associated with it, and its origins can be traced not to the high-powered marketing campaign of a mass media corporation but rather to the efforts of a modest publishing house called Julian Messner, Inc. The novel's original advertising budget was $10,000, which was modest even by Messner's standards; that same year Messner budgeted $25,000 for a new novel by Francis Parkinson Keyes, who had been to that point Messner's most commercially successful novelist. Four years prior to the publication of *Peyton Place*, Thomas Nelson and Sons had spent an unprecedented total of $500,000 (fifty times what was spent on *Peyton Place*) to market the *Revised Standard Bible*. If any text deserves the title of "first blockbuster," it is this one. In contrast, *Peyton Place* was not published with mass success in mind.

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[19] For more rigorous, and inconclusive, studies of the effects of consolidation on literary production, see Paul M. Hirsch, "U.S. Cultural Productions: The Impact of Ownership." *Journal of Communication* 35 (1985): 110-121; Walter Powell, "Control and Conflict in Publishing." *Society* 17 (1979): 48-53.

IV. Genealogy

All of which suggests that we have not yet hit upon a useful way to describe *Peyton Place*'s place in the history of the American book trade. Past attempts to address this issue have fallen short, I have aimed to show, because they have insisted on viewing the novel as something new, as the sign of a change afoot or a turning point towards cultural decline. But the novel's commercial success on its own, I will now argue, is perhaps best seen as an end, a culmination of literary and demographic trends over the course of the first half of the twentieth century.

At the center of this story is Julian Messner, Inc. Both Toth and Cameron emphasize the fact that at the time *Peyton Place* was published, Messner was run by Julian Messner's ex-wife and widow, Kitty Messner, then one of only two women in America in charge of a publishing house.[20] The other, both note, was Helen Meyer at Dell, which published the paperback edition of *Peyton Place*. But this point has been made less to fix the novel's place in book history than to help re-frame it as a proto-feminist text, the value of which was seen by the independent women who ran these two houses but not by the otherwise male literary establishment; while this aim is laudable, however, and while it supports a valid point about the novel's defiant representation of independent women, it has obscured Messner's and thus the novel's significant connections to publishing's past. Those who published *Peyton Place*, the novel, used marketing techniques developed over the first half of the century; indeed, some of those people were linked to the promotion of some of the most celebrated modernist texts of the 1920s and 1930s.

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[20] Cameron notes that Messner "staffed the firm almost entirely with women: women were the editors, sales directors, publicity agents, readers, and editorial assistants, as well as the company's typists and secretaries. What seems to have turned off other publishing houses fired the imagination of Messner and her staff" (xix).

Julian Messner, Inc. is a small piece of the publishing story of the first half of the twentieth century, and that story properly begins in Greenwich Village (which makes a brief appearance in *Peyton Place*) with the founding of the Washington Square Book Shop in 1911. The shop was founded by two brothers, Albert and Charles Boni, and it quickly became a meeting place for Greenwich Village artists and activists like John Reed, Emma Goldman, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Max Eastman and others. The Boni brothers, somewhat like Witcher, Metalious's "true carny" in *Peyton Place*, were true believers in art but poor businessmen. Their bookstore failed to turn a profit while they were running it, and their stated reason for entering the publishing business was not to turn a profit but to overcome "the philistine attitude of the American public toward the arts" (Satterfield 17); they were, according to Harry Scherman, who went on to found the Book-of-the-Month Club, "bitten by the idea of being publishers of *avant garde* books" (qtd. in Satterfield 16). The Bonis' first publishing venture was the Little Leather Library, which they co-founded with Scherman in 1915, low-cost reprints of short classics and abridgements of longer ones, including works by Shakespeare, English romantic poets, Shaw, Ibsen, and Tolstoy. The Little Leather Library proved to be an enormous financial success, but the Bonis never were able to enjoy it: financial problems at the bookstore forced them to sell their share of the Library before it found its stride.

In 1915, after he had sold his share in the Washington Square Book Shop, Albert Boni met Horace Liveright and together they developed the idea of the Modern Library: inexpensive reprints (the Library offered titles previously sold for up to ten dollars for sixty cents) of the best of modern literature. Liveright was a businessman with socialist symphathies and capital to invest; Boni was the artistic

soul with a passion for avant-garde books. Early Modern Library authors included Strindberg and Ibsen, de Maupassant, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer; as Jay Satterfield describes it in his recent study of the Modern Library, Boni and Liveright initially aimed for "titles that exuded a scandalous air" that would appeal to their audience of bohemians (20). This is a recipe for commercial success that, in a way, would be repeated with the publication of *Peyton Place*, and the connections between the two are more than analogous.[21]

The Modern Library was an immediate success, proving the existence of an audience for literature advertised as "modern" and "avant-garde," and shortly after its emergence Boni and Liveright announced plans to expand into a conventional publishing house that would publish original books. As Boni and Liveright the company, which published Eugene O'Neill, William Faulkner, and Sherwood Anderson among others, is forever associated with the Greenwich Village art scene on the 1910s and 1920s, with modernism and a golden age of literature, the association between it and *Peyton Place* might seem a strange move—as strange, perhaps, as the attempt to link the carnival's decline in the novel to Greenberg's prophesied decline of high art in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch"—but that perception of strangeness, a product of what recent scholarship insists is a misguided tendency to link modernism with the rejection of commerce, is part of the point.[22] First, for all of its deservedly privileged place as disseminators of American modernism, Boni and

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[21] For more on Liveright and Boni and Liveright, see Tom Dardis, *Firebrand: The Life of Horace Liveright* (New York: Random House, 1995).

[22] The best study of the tendency to link high modernism with the rejection of commerce is Huyssen's *After the Great Divide*. Rainey's *Institutions of Modernism* offers a compelling critique of this tendency.

Liveright's legacy is as much commercial as it is literary. The company functioned as a kind of training ground for some of the most successful American publishers of the twentieth century; one-time Boni and Liveright salesmen Richard Simon and Bennett Cerf went on to found Simon and Schuster and Random House, respectively, and they were key players in the founding of two of the most important paperback houses as well, Pocket Books (Simon) and its eventual competitor Bantam Books (Cerf with help from other publishers). More important, as much recent scholarship has discussed, some of the savviest and most sophisticated marketing efforts of the early twentieth century were for modernist novels.[23]

There is, moreover, a clear and as yet unnoted line connecting the marketing of those novels and the eventual marketing of the scandalous *Peyton Place*. When Cerf and Simon worked in Boni and Liveright's sales department, their manager was Julian Messner. Messner's role at Boni and Liveright was considerable. In addition to managing the sales department, Messner was, Tom Dardis notes in his biography of Liveright, the company's "general factotum" who Liveright intended would assume the role in the company held by the Boni brothers after they left in July 1918 (67). It is said that when Cerf bought the Modern Library from Liveright (who was, in his storied profligacy, also not unlike Witcher the carny), Messner pleaded with Liveright to reconsider.[24] Messner remained loyal to Liveright after the sale, which, along with

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[23] See in addition to other critical studies of the selling of modernism cited in this article, Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1998). Rainey focuses on the strategic marketing efforts of high modernists writers Eliot, Joyce, Pound and H.D. and those who helped them produce their works.

[24] Dardis puts it this way: Messner was "horrified and outraged at the prospect of the firm's losing, without a word of warning, its chief asset and glory as well as its bulwark against future bad times. Under no circumstances could Horace do something so monstrous!" (229).

his drinking, triggered Liveright's demise, and he was at Liveright's bedside when he died in 1933.

The company Messner formed in 1933 when he set out on his own was to remain considerably smaller and more modest than Random House and Simon and Schuster: in 1956, for example, Messner published 45 books to Random House's 146 and Simon and Schuster's 180. Emily Toth suggests that this modesty was intentional:

> [Julian and Kitty Messner] wanted to publish books that most interested them, including juvenile books; their adult list would be small, so they could give each book individual attention...for the first few years, Kitty and Julian did everything. He was president and in charge of sales; she was secretary, treasurer and all-around clerk...Both did editorial work, and except for the advertising—handled by Aaron Sussman from the start—Kitty could do any job in the publishing firm. (101)

Aaron Sussman is rarely more than a footnote in most accounts of the creation of the *Peyton Place* phenomenon, but he might be the unlikely key to whatever privileged place the novel does have in book history. Among other things, Sussman is credited (by Toth) with rejecting Metalious's original title for her novel, *The Tree and the Blossom*, and suggesting *Peyton Place* as an alternative. But what Sussman did for the novel is probably less important than where he came from. Prior to working for Messner, Sussman had been in charge of advertising for Boni and Liveright; he later went on to establish his own agency, Spier & Sussman, which continued to handle advertising for the Modern Library after Cerf took over, and later handled advertising

for Cerf's Random House.[25] Thus among many others, Sussman wrote the famous "How to Enjoy James Joyce's Great Novel *Ulysses*" ad for Random House in 1934, originally published in *Saturday Review*, hailed then and now as a landmark in the marketing of modernism to the general reading public.[26] Almost unknown to twentieth-century literary history, Sussman has the unique distinction of helping to sell both the most celebrated literary novel published in English in the twentieth century, a high point of high modernism and high culture, and one of the most reviled, the purported symbol of the that culture's decline.

The connections between *Peyton Place* and *Ulysses* go beyond the fact of Sussman's involvement. In the attempt to revive interest in *Peyton Place* as a novel of literary merit, it has been common to note thematic similarities between it and more celebrated literary novels like *Lolita*.[27] However, another, perhaps more fruitful, set of connections can be found between the way *Peyton Place* was marketed and the way celebrated literary novels were marketed. This requires rethinking *Ulysses* as much as it requires rethinking *Peyton Place*; we are not accustomed to thinking of a novel like *Ulysses* as a great commercial success, helped by a savvy marketing campaign, but that is just what it was (and, needless to say, what it continues to be): Bennet Cerf notably and accurately described *Ulysses* as "a big commercial book"

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[25] Sussman receives a single mention in *At Random*, Bennett Cerf's memoir: "Aaron has been invaluable to us" (123).

[26] Catherine Turner devotes a chapter to this advertisement specifically and the selling of *Ulysses* in America generally in her study *Marketing Modernism Between the Wars* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2003). See Chapter Six, "How to Enjoy James Joyce's Great Novel *Ulysses*."

[27] See Ruth Pirsig Wood, *Lolita in Peyton Place: Highbrow, Middlebrow, and Lowbrow Novels of the 1950s* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995). As Wood notes, Metalious's and Nabokov's novels share a plot element: a quasi-incestuous relationship between a stepfather and his unwilling, underage stepdaughter.

(94), "a great best seller" (95). It was, Cerf noted, Random House's first important trade publication that was not a reprint. The advertisement Sussman designed was no small part of *Ulysses*' success: a coupon attached to it was redeemed for purchase of the novel 25,000 times (Turner 210). Like *Peyton Place*, moreover, and like early Modern Library texts, *Ulysses* sold in large part on the basis of scandal.

In fact, two things link *Ulysses* to *Peyton Place*: the exploitation of a scandal that preceded publication, and Aaron Sussman. *Ulysses*' scandal was more or less genuine—the novel had famously been banned in America for obscenity. *Peyton Place*'s pre-publication scandal, on the other hand, was a contrivance—marketers exploited a perhaps untrue story that Metalious's husband was fired from his job because of the novel about to be published.[28] But this suggests, more than anything, perhaps, that over the course of the century, lessons about the value of scandal had been learned from previous marketing triumphs. There are, in fact, reasons to think that those lessons were learned from *Ulysses* itself: as Turner argues convincingly in *Marketing Modernism*, well before Random House published *Ulysses* Sylvia Beach had made the scandal surrounding *Ulysses* the center of her marketing campaign for the limited edition version of the book. One of her techniques, soon to be borrowed for *Peyton Place*, was to create advertisements made up of bad reviews and attacks. Scandal, and the potential of that scandal to lead to strong sales, was no doubt part of the reason Cerf wanted to publish *Ulysses* in the first place. When he announced that Random House was going to publish it, an advertising agent wrote to him that the novel was "the most talked about book since the bible" (qtd. in Turner 175). Prior even to publication, in short, the novel was what *Peyton Place* would be twenty-three

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[28] See Toth, 120-125.

years later: a sensation. Cerf, moreover, was not under the illusion that *Ulysses* sold solely on the basis of literary merit: "perhaps," he wrote, "many did read the last part to see the dirty words; in 1934 that sort of thing was shocking to the general public" (95). This speculation matches the recorded reactions by shocked and thrilled readers of *Peyton Place* in 1956, the reactions that Ardis Cameron documents in her introduction to Northeastern University Press's reissue of the novel.[29]

The links between *Ulysses* and *Peyton Place* are institutional rather than literary, and what they suggest is that the commercial success of the one is not that different from the commercial success of the other, a truth obscured in the prevalent narratives of cultural decline of the 1950s that have dominated discussions of *Peyton Place*'s place in book history. Those narratives of decline notwithstanding, it is clear that no great institutional divide separates *Ulysses* from *Peyton Place*; they are products of the same book trade. Both novels, that is, were commodities marketed to great success by some the same people using many of the same techniques. Ironically, when viewed in its institutional context, the story of *Peyton Place* has more to tell us about the marketing of literary novels that preceded it—the fact that they were marketed with great savvy, their dual status as both works of art and commodities, and the impressive growth and modernization of America's publishing industry in the first half of the twentieth century—than it does about postwar cultural decline, the consolidation of the book trade, and the literary value or lack thereof of the blockbusters that came after.

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[29] See Cameron, vii-viii.

VI. From Peyton Place to Greenwich Village

Boni and Liveright's Greenwich Village makes an unlikely appearance in Metalious's novel. *Peyton Place* is, among other things, a portrait of the artist—Allison MacKenzie—as a young woman. Until the moment Allison leaves Peyton Place for New York City, New York City functions for her in a way familiar to those versed in the story of Boni and Liveright and the Washington Square Book Shop. It is a kind of ideal escape from the combination of hypocrisy and conventional morality that characterizes Peyton Place, and it is a symbol of artistic and personal freedom, bound up in Allison's twin desires to become a writer and to avoid conventional married life. Midway through the novel, speaking to Kathy Ellsworth, who wanted to marry and have babies and was soon to be a victim of Harrington's carnival, Allison says, "'I'm going to move away...as fast as ever I can after I finish high school...to New York City'" (222). Earlier, she notes: "New York...that's where all the writers go to get famous," and Kathy replies: "Maybe we could go together and be bachelor girls in an apartment in Greenwich Village, like those two girls in that book we read" (213). In Allison's imagination, which Metalious frequently reminds us is naïve, New York City is the anti-Peyton Place, a haven of authenticity and artistic freedom; it is telling that her decision to leave Peyton Place for New York is in part motivated by her unhappiness after Kathy's injury at the inauthentic carnival.[30]

The events in New York City, told in a flashback after Allison returns home to Peyton Place for Selena's trial, have been called the least interesting and least

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[30] The primary cause of Allison's decision to leave is no doubt the revelation that her father had been married to a woman who was not Allison's mother at the time Allison was conceived. But Metalious suggests that the carnival incident and its aftermath were also factors in her decision to move to New York by having Tomas Makris, the novel's most brutally honest character, express the idea: "'her determination [to leave] took on form...after Kathy Ellsworth's accident, during the trial'" (273).

convincing part of the novel, but like the carnival episode they are noteworthy in the context of attempts to locate the novel in both literary history and the history of the book trade. When Allison arrives in New York City in the early 1940s, she finds that the literary world is not what she thought it was. It is an unforgiving business in which concepts like literary merit are complicated by the presence of middlemen and the need to sell books. This fallen, compromised world is embodied in the love triangle in which Allison becomes enmeshed. On one side of it is David Noyes, an ambitious writer of the sort, presumably, that would have been at home at the Bonis' bookstore: "David was twenty-five," Metalious writes, "and had been hailed as a brilliant new talent by the critics on the publication of his first novel. He wanted to reform the world" (356). On the other side is her literary agent, Brad Holmes, a married man who seduces her, and whom, Allison quickly learns, she needs in order to get published. Noyes is an artist, but Holmes, the unscrupulous businessman, is necessary for a career: "she never would have begun to be successful without Holmes" (353). This portrayal of the 1940s book trade, while maybe an unconvincing product of Metalious's imagination in the 1950s, nonetheless aptly suggests that changes to that trade that have been attributed to the emergence of postwar mass culture and the success of *Peyton Place* itself in fact predate that success; if literary culture was in decline in 1956, it was not because of *Peyton Place*.

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