CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Time of the Double Not

Classic American Literature

I don't mean for the word *classic* in the subtitle of this book to imply that the literary works I examine here are aesthetically superior to other American works not ordinarily included in the category "classic American literature." Though I find Anne Bradstreet's poetic elegies, Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia,* Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass,* Henry David Thoreau's *Cape Cod,* Sarah Orne Jewett's *Deephaven,* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's and Jack Kerouac's fiction deeply absorbing, and though I find among these and a number of other American works the coherence and the increasingly self-conscious recursiveness of a tradition, I do not mean that they compose a "Great Tradition," the metropolis of American literature, with the other traditions rusticated to regions and peripheries. Enough recovery and analysis have now been done with the other American literary traditions: their adjacent achievement doesn't require defense or demonstration. Perhaps I should have chosen "classicized" American literature, but that term is too arch, and D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature,* a perennial work, is the source of my interest in the term. Anyway, in ordinary use, *classic* means "something that has become durably interesting and important to a cadre of devotees" so that we can readily say, for example, that a certain recording by Peggy Lee or John Lennon, even a certain Coke recipe, has "become a classic" without judging its merits either way. The continuing popularity of the writers I discuss makes them all, in this sense, "classics."

But works from other traditions qualify as "classics," too, and I fear that this part of my subtitle confuses (or offends) more than it clarifies or reveals. So maybe I should have put the word *classic* between quotation

marks—"classic" American literature—or even *sous rature*, as used to be said not so long ago. Either of these would allow me to indicate a body of writing that was once considered the whole story but that has turned out to be only a part of the whole story—but still, a part, or a chapter, of American writing, an array of writings that has more holding it together than commonalities of class, race, or region among their authors. Perhaps the absence of a ready name for what was once classic American literature is a marker of ex-majority. In any case, I feel that there are sufficient internal recurrence, resonance, and dialogue among these works for them to qualify as a describable entity, and my hope is to make a contribution to that description. In this I follow, roughly, Lawrence Buell:

> One obvious way of compensating for the temptation to overgeneralize about the cultural importance of post-Puritan New England influences in the face of an increasingly pluralistic American reality is to demystify the former as a provincial ideology—however far-reaching its aspirations, however wide its prestige—and thus substantially on the same footing with America's other regional and minority cultures, though at a historical advantage because of its early start and its early strength.

My "classic American literature" is not solely determined by what Buell calls "the Puritan 'gene' in American culture," but I concur with his contention that the tradition of previously canonical American literature can be particularly identified and analyzed in terms of its characteristic engagement with a universalizing claim: "In short, the provincialism of New England Renaissance culture is confirmed by the very element that seemingly argues against it: New England's willingness to equate itself with the national spirit."[1] A national spirit, I will add below, that was itself frequently equated with human historical fulfillment. My expectation is that the more work done analyzing the DNA of TALFKAC (the American literature formerly known as classic), the richer will be our understanding of the forms of communication—inspiration, derivation, revision, citation, critique, satire, transliteration, subversion, adaptation, hybridization, mutation, transfiguration, disfiguration, allegorization, and more—between this and the other strands of American writing.

National Melancholy

To begin to sketch this tradition, I'll start with an intriguingly apposite work, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children.* Written more than two hundred years after the American Revolution, every cubic narrative inch crammed full of the cultures of South Asia, observing the aesthetic protocols of postmodernism rather than Enlightenment,[2] Rushdie's novel nonetheless richly reprises some of the most urgent issues of early American

writing. It does so because its animating concern is the relation between individual identity and the new nationality of a large and diverse social body: How do the vicissitudes of national self-understanding and personal self-understanding affect one another? More exactly, how is the understanding of oneself as participant in or particle of a nation affected when there is weakness, vicissitude, or fracture in the idea of the nation? Does weakness in the idea of the nation install weakness in individuals, or does it instead inflame preexisting historical and personal sorrows by obstructing the solace of a distracting fantasy? By what means does the precariousness of the national subject get cycled back into a renewed dependence on, allegiance to, nation? Does renewed allegiance succeed by converting the burden of loss into an appetite for sacrifice or atrocity? Finally, what is there to discover in the world—or, what world is there to discover—if the reabsorption into desperate patriotism doesn't take?

"That view from below," E. J. Hobsbawm contends, "i.e. the nation as seen not by governments and the spokesman and activists of nationalist (or non-nationalist) movements, but by the ordinary persons who are the objects of their action and propaganda, is exceedingly difficult to discover."[3] Rushdie labors mightily to remedy this defect of historical reality. Our hero and narrator, Saleem Sinai, born at the instant of Indian/Pakistani independence—midnight, August 15, 1947—is the man to whom history happens, so much the object of nationalist action and propaganda as to be almost only that, a passive and immobilized receptacle of cant, violence, and spectacle. The nation (as Lauren Berlant writes concerning Nathaniel Hawthorne) "dominates his represented relation to his activity, his knowledge, his affect, his very body." For Saleem, the nation, as for Berlant's Hawthorne, is "intimate":

> In humorous and deeply serious moments, then, Hawthorne depicts national fantasy as fundamental to the political and everyday life of all Americans, whose "Americannness" is as central to their sense of entitlement and desire as any family name and tradition and sensation might be. The nation's presence in the generic citizen's daily life is more latent and unconscious than it is in his incidental, occasional relation to national symbols, spaces, narratives, and rituals: still, whether consensually or passively transmitted, national identity requires self-ablation. Citizenship becomes equivalent to life itself and also looms as a kind of death penalty: both activity in and exile from the political public sphere feel like cruel and unusual punishment. It is apparently a quality of nations to inspire identification and sacrifice, as well as to make citizens feel violated in public and private. Thus the complexity of Hawthorne's tone: the pain and pleasure of his citizenship and the sublime jocularity of his exile.[4]

When most of the members of Saleem's extended family are killed and their possessions destroyed in the 1965 India-Pakistan War, the survivors

are Saleem, his sister (more about her later), and a battered silver spittoon (inlaid with lapis lazuli) that becomes Saleem's totemic thing, the image of himself as he understands himself, history's spittoon: "O talismanic spittoon! O beauteous lost receptacle of memories as well as of spittle-juice!"[5] It's hard for me not to hear Whitman's jubilant address echoing in that sentence ("You Chinaman and Chinawoman of China! You Tartar of Tartary!"[6]) or in these:

> And there are so many stories to tell, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumors, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane! I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well. Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me. (*MC*, 4)

("I am large . . . I contain multitudes!")[7] Like Whitman, Saleem claims to be the inchoate and inarticulate mass emerged into speech, rendering Hobsbawm's view from below positively and explicitly, entering it in the literary record.

When he announces that he contains multitudes, Whitman nominates himself for the position of the great American poet, the job description having appeared in his preface to the 1855 (first) edition of *Leaves of Grass*:

> Of all mankind the great poet is the equable man. Not in him but off from him things are grotesque or eccentric or fail of their sanity. Nothing out of its place is good, and nothing in its place is bad. He bestows on every object or quality its fit proportions neither more nor less.[8]

Saleem morosely embodies all of Whitman's rebuffed attributes—grotesque, eccentric, failing in both sanity and fit proportions, especially by the end of his tale:

> Nine-fingered, horn-templed, monk's-tonsured, stain-faced, bow-legged, cucumber-nosed, castrated, and now prematurely aged, I saw in the mirror of humility a human being to whom history could do no more, a grotesque creature who had been released from the pre-ordained destiny which had battered him until he was half-senseless; with one good ear and one bad ear I heard the soft footfalls of the Black Angel of death.
>
> The young-old face of the dwarf in the mirror wore an expression of profound relief. (*MC*, 515)

Having arrived at what he hopes is the end of his afflictions, the point of ultimate physical and emotional crumbling, or at least a pause, Saleem has begun to write, at length, a mutilated Scheherazade attempting to postpone further dissolution. Saleem's misfortunes do not preclude his election to the post of nationally representative self, however, but rather ensure it, his own physical and psychological disassembly (not to mention

his incessantly split-prone and digressive narrative) mirroring "our ancient national gift for fissiparousness" (*MC*, 459). To be sure, at an earlier age he had aspired to be the Whitman of India: "At the end of 1947, life in Bombay was as teeming, as manifold, as multitudinously shapeless as ever . . . except that I had arrived; I was already beginning to take my place at the centre of the universe; and by the time I had finished, I would give meaning to it all" (*MC*, 144). But if, as Whitman promises, "To the perfect shape comes common ground,"[9] Saleem is by the end a complete failure of the promise. Rather than compelling India/Pakistan to assume form, the linkage between self and nation compels him to accept his own undeniably incoherent being, the final failure of Whitmanian aspiration.

For the sake of contrast I have reduced Whitman to the announced program of the 1855 preface, and this isn't fair to the deep interest of his writing, "as tangled as any canebrake or swamp." For example:

Of the turbid pool that lies in the autumn forest,
Of the moon that descends the steeps of the soughing twilight,
Toss, sparkles of day and dusk . . . toss on the black stems that
Decay in the muck,
Toss to the moaning gibberish of the dry limbs.[10]

In Whitman's later years somber moments like this one might indicate either personal disappointment or national agony, or a conjunction of the two. Such melancholy representativeness has some Saleem Sinai in it, except that Whitman is always either exuberant or melancholy, never exuberantly melancholy, which Saleem almost always is (he is much closer to Herman Melville's Ishmael than to Whitman's persona; *Midnight's Children* has a lot to do with *Moby-Dick*, with Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* as go-between). His humorous desperation may well issue from the profound relief felt by the dwarf before the mirror, the relief of a clear measurement of his loss rather than a discovery that he is, after all, comely. This levity indicates something about Saleem's motives for writing the book—its exploration of the historical origins of his contorted being and its survey of the extent of the damage—indicating also the way in which his political vision differs from Whitman's. For Whitman the notion of the perfect sociopolitical shape retains its power to the end: if his melancholy ranges between wistfulness and violent despair, it is nevertheless always about the failure to achieve perfect national form, always linked to an ideality that never ceases to measure an actual world's deficiency. For Saleem, though, perfect form is a lethal and potent fantasy. Before the hour of independence,

the city was poised, with a new myth glinting in the corners of its eyes. August in Bombay: a month of festivals, the month of Krishna's birthday and Coconut Day;

and this year—fourteen hours to go, thirteen, twelve—there was an extra festival in the calendar, a new myth to celebrate, because a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history, although it had invented the game of chess and traded with Middle Kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless quite imaginary; into a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will—except in a dream we all agree to dream; it was a mass fantasy shared in varying degrees by Bengali and Punjabi, Madrasi and Jat, and would periodically need the sanctification and renewal which can only be provided by rituals of blood. India, the new myth—a collective fiction in which anything was possible, a fable rivalled only by the two other mighty fantasies: money and God. (*MC*, 124–25)

Against the deployment of such a fantasy, the exhibition, or even the parading, of Saleem's mutilated form represents an attempted check or brake.

Saleem depicts the machinery by means of which fantasy is deployed for mass consumption in the story of his sister, first nicknamed "the Brass Monkey," then renamed Jamila Singer when her mesmerizing voice carries her rapidly to a prodigious celebrity as a singer of patriotic melodies: "Purity—that highest of ideals!—that angelic virtue for which Pakistan was named, and which dripped from every note of my sister's songs!" (*MC*, 377). Emerging from the same alembic, her fervor and idealism seem to separate her from her melancholiac family, from "the detachment which came to afflict us all (except Jamila, who had God and country to keep her going)—a reminder of my family's separateness from both India and Pakistan" (*MC*, 377). However readily Saleem here differentiates himself from his sister's affirmations, he has told us earlier that he responds deeply to her singing, probably because her singing is not purged of the minor chords playing through their family's history:

With her first note, the Brass Monkey sloughed off her nick-name; she, who had talked to birds (just as, long ago in a mountain valley, her great-grandfather used to do) must have learned from songbirds the arts of song. With one good ear and one bad ear, I listened to her faultless voice, which at fourteen was the voice of a grown woman, filled with the purity of wings and the pain of exile and the flying of eagles and the lovelessness of life and the melody of bulbuls and the glorious omnipresence of God; a voice which was afterwards compared to that of Muhammed's muezzin Bilal, issuing from the lips of a somewhat scrawny girl. (*MC*, 336)

The sorrows upon which Jamila Singer's voice draws are familial—failures in love and business, depression and alcoholism, destroyed political hopes, religious confusions, migrations from Kashmir south to Bombay then north to Karachi—all of which are a prelude to the death of the family members in the 1965 war and to Saleem's subsequent wanderings and sufferings. But Jamila's popularity derives from her ability to generalize

sorrow rather than to communicate her own singularity, to articulate by proxy the enormous burden of mourning produced by the recent history of the two fledgling nations: the 1919 Amritsar Massacre, in which the British occupation forces killed four hundred protesters and wounded twelve hundred others; partition, which bisected a society and forced massive migration, and during the course of which approximately half a million died; the 1947 and 1965 Kashmir wars; the Bangladesh secession; the internal political violence perpetrated by various administrations in both nations; racial and religious violence within both societies. When the reader pauses to consider the magnitude of historical affliction in the background of *Midnight's Children*, the trauma behind Saleem's humor becomes clear: it's as though Joseph Conrad's Marlow had responded to his own horror by joking his way through the story of his passage into the heart of King Leopold's Congo (as if, too, Marlow were an African), joking with such an unabating consistency that the horror could be glimpsed only after various extrapolations and triangulations. Perhaps Saleem's greatest testimony to Jamila Singer's ability to enter sorrow rather than to shun it is his willingness, as a narrator, to be lyrical, plangent, rather than jocular-baroque, for the moment he spends describing her song.

Saleem's diagnosis of his family's and his society's suffering does not commence, however, with the loss of life. The novel begins in 1915, when Saleem's grandfather, Aadam Aziz, returning home to Kashmir from studying medicine in Switzerland, attempts to bow to the ground in prayer, bangs his nose (making it bleed), and admits to himself that he has lost his faith. European modernity has deprived him of the ability to reinstall himself into a way of life, but it has not supplied him with a replacement: "He resolved never again to kiss earth for any god or man. This decision, however, made a hole in him, a vacancy in a vital inner chamber, leaving him vulnerable to women and history . . . He became—what?—a stupid thing, neither this nor that, a half-and-halfer" (*MC*, 4, 13). Accounting for Aadam Aziz's vulnerability to women would take me too far off track, but I want to underline Saleem's assertion that there are varying degrees of vulnerability to history. If as Fredric Jameson famously remarked, history is what hurts, there are more and less capable ways of emotionally metabolizing the hurt, and history also affects these metabolic systems. History hurts the ability to survive the hurt of history: Saleem's narrative begins not with the consequence of violence but with an erosion of the capacity to assimilate the consequence of violence, so when the fatalities commence, there is nothing that can be done with them; they simply pile up, and stay. A "half-and-halfer," Aadam Aziz is the prototype for his family and nation(s), an inhabitant of what Martin Heidegger called "this realm of Between," "the time of the gods that have fled *and* of

the god that is coming. It is the time of *need*, because it lies under a double lack and a double Not; the No-more of the gods that have fled and the Not-yet of the god that is coming."[11]

The date of Heidegger's essay, 1936, reminds us of the desperate remedies that are attempted in "the time of *need*," homicidal or genocidal coercions that confess the quandary they can't rectify (not thereby redeeming themselves). In Rushdie's novel this sort of recoil-by-means-of-atrocity often takes the form of a fundamentalist antimodernism designed to annul the alienation that Aadam Aziz imports, as a sort of virus, into his homeland. Though American culture is itself periodically convulsed by a fundamentalist antimodernism from the eighteenth century on, the writers that concern me in the essays collected here are focused on the image or fantasy of the splendid future, the spiritual nation on the verge of achieving itself, the not-(quite-)yet rather than the no-more. Melville's Wellingborough Redburn, always only a step or two ahead of his own private sorrows, but also almost always (therefore) upbeat, expresses this feeling of a national prospect quite succinctly when, contemplating the ethnic heterogeneity of his fellow Americans and their concomitant lack of strong national feeling, he consoles himself by thinking of approaching restitution plus fabulous interest, a nation more national than any before:

> On this Western Hemisphere all tribes and people are forming into one federated whole; and there is a future which shall see the estranged children of Adam restored as to the old hearthstone in Eden.
>
> The other world beyond this, which was longed for by the devout before Columbus' time, was found in the New; and the deep-sea-lead, that first struck these soundings, brought up the soil of Earth's Paradise. Not a Paradise then, or now; but to be made so, at God's good pleasure, and in the fullness and mellowness of time. The seed is sown, and the harvest must come; and our children's children, on the world's jubilee morning, shall all go with their sickles to the reaping. Then shall the curse of Babel be revoked, a new Pentecost come, and the language they shall speak shall be the language of Britain. Frenchmen, and Danes, and Scots; and the dwellers on the shores of the Mediterranean, and in the regions round about; Italians, and Indians, and Moors; there shall appear unto them cloven tongues as of fire.[12]

Which brings us back to Jamila Singer's performance, since she moves her audience by way of an appeal to the nation, the future on the other side of the time of the double Not, rather than to tradition, the recoverable splendor of ancient culture. Of particular interest here, to me, is the means of her appeal. Rather than turn away from atrocity as her brother does, she presents it directly but alternates tones of suffering with images of national glory: "the voice of a grown woman, filled with the purity of wings and the pain of exile and the flying of eagles and the lovelessness

of life and the melody of bulbuls and the glorious omnipresence of God." Though Jamila doesn't sing about Pakistan, national triumphalism is present symbolically as the purity of wings and the flying of eagles—purity, as Saleem reminds us repeatedly, is in the name of the nation (Pakistan = Land of the Pure). The technique of the song, therefore, is oscillation: presence/absence/presence/absence/glorious presence; or, nation/loss/nation/loss/national triumph. If each citation of loss indicates that Jamila Singer can face trauma when her brother cannot, the structure of her song indicates that she can do so because the idea of the nation functions as an imaginative consolation for loss, and because it does so not by modeling or precipitating the gradual acknowledgment of loss that allows the mourner to proceed out of the time of the double Not and back into life but by proposing the nation as an imminent substitute or compensation for what is lost, proposing it as the cure, generating thereby what Benedict Anderson calls "unisonality," "the echoed physical realization of the imagined community."[13]

This fantastic recompense undergirds what Sacvan Bercovitch calls the American Jeremiad. For Bercovitch, Elizabeth Dillon argues,

> while geography is meant to incarnate the truth of America, its failure to do so is reinscribed within a teleological, prophetic narrative in which landscape embodies not the truth of America but the promise of the incarnation of this truth. In short, self-division and failed incarnation are temporally displaced into a narrative structure which implies that such a division will be overcome with time. Autobiography thus assumes the form of "prophetic fulfillment" in which the failure of incarnate truth is "not divisive but progressive." Bercovitch concludes, "For Puritan and Transcendentalist alike . . . auto-American-biography meant simultaneously a total assertion of self, a jeremiad against the misdirected progress of the 'dead' present, and an act of prophecy which guaranteed the future by celebrating the regenerate 'Americanus.'" While Bercovitch emphasizes the collapse of sacred and secular narratives as well as the conjoining of personal and "federal" eschatology, his account of autobiography indicates the extent to which a "jeremiad"-like structure informs the narrative of the liberal subject as well: the loss and self-division experienced by the subject are interpreted as evidence of a prophetic narrative in which loss is countered by gain, suffering is evidence of election.[14]

There is no loss, really, only a reinvestment of riches. In this scheme, the hole in the self turns out to be the space reserved for the coming glory, and the patriot is on the very verge of emerging complete and full. The intractable fact of loss is converted to the negotiable fact of desire. At the cost, of course, of the knowledge of one's mutilation, the knowledge necessary for an advance into a real future rather than into an embalming fantasy: putting down the tools of the work of mourning to pursue a phantom of quick repair, neglecting the work, leaving the tools out in the

yard, rusting. Thus, though Saleem's break into brief lyricism acknowledges the power of his sister's summons, the swift resumption of his style's abiding malformity signals allegiance to another law, one expressed in Emily Dickinson's wisdom:

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To fill a Gap
Insert the Thing that caused it—
Block it up
With Other—and 'twill yawn the more—
You cannot solder an Abyss
With Air.

Saleem's paraphrase of the emotional structure of Jamila's song is analytic, as if to analyze were to escape the Siren's allure, a strategy that confesses, in turn, that there is an allure, because it needs to be resisted. This tacit confession deepens Saleem for us, suggesting he is not simply tone deaf to "mighty fantasies" such as God or nation but rather responsive and horrified at once, like Ishmael recalling Ahab's charisma, at the susceptibility to destructive conversion that lies at wait in faith, a liability that is not eliminated by simply doing away with faith, which probably isn't possible, or good, anyway.

Such a deep division in response to the song of the nation, to the way it "hails" many in their deepest layers, and in response to the cost of participation, underlies the essays that follow. When I think back on my young self, I recall my own divided response to the American call. At a time when adolescence and the Vietnam War were driving me away from patriotic exercises such as the Pledge of Allegiance, when recruiting officers from the U.S. military were invited to make their pitch during pep rallies in my high school gym before football games—a time when several of us who studied disaffection and cultivated ostracism as a badge of honor aimed our version of that derisory omniscience particular to teenagers at war and football (think globally, act locally)—I responded then nevertheless, with great fervor, to literary evocations of America, Whitman, but even more in those days, to Thomas Wolfe's "The Promise of America," the final chapter of *You Can't Go Home Again*: "And we? Made of our father's earth, blood of his blood, flesh of his flesh—born like our fathers here to live and strive, here to win through or be defeated—here, like all the other men who went before us, not too nice or dainty for the uses of this earth—here to live, to suffer, and to die—O brothers, like our fathers in their time, we are burning, burning, burning in the night!"[15]

When I began at the University of Wisconsin in Madison in 1971, the antiwar movement was still strong, and I joined in, though I was guilty of

some Hawthornian loitering around the margins, probably guilty, too, it must be confessed, of being in it (like Hawthorne's faint-hearted hippie-before-the-fact Miles Coverdale) for the social and erotic opportunities as much as for the cause. I can recall, though, even during this time of what felt like strong and unequivocal commitment, a division of feeling that I attempted to rectify, in at least one heated conversation, by arguing that America could be innocent of the political crimes of the United States, that the spiritual entity was not identical with its current political avatar. This insistence, which I remember putting forward while playing pool in a bar with an unyielding Stalinist from Pennsylvania, returned to mind fifteen years later when I read Bercovitch's essay "The Music of America," where he observes that oppositional thinkers from Thoreau to Martin Luther King Jr. have commonly phrased their indictments in terms of "disparities between the theory and the practice of Americanness" between present political reality and an imminent America: "They had thought to appropriate America as a trope of the spirit, and so to turn the national symbol, now freed of its base historical content, into a vehicle of moral and political renovation."[16] America wasn't really at risk in my heart either, so when I finally got around to reading *The Great Gatsby* during the spring of my senior year (Nixon having resigned, with my approval, the previous summer), I was completely and utterly absorbed—without any worry that I was compromising my politics (not that my politics weren't compromised by any number of factors, only that I wasn't worried about it)—by its fervent revival of national wonder, especially in the aria/anthem with which it closes.

I've included this little memoir as a rough indication of what I brought to the writers discussed in these essays, of what I found in their works, of the reasons why I think I may have chosen to write on these writers, these poems and books. A quick glance at the table of contents reveals the limits of my group: all are European American, all are men except Bradstreet and Jewett, all are Northern except Jefferson, all are of Protestant and English descent except Fitzgerald and Kerouac. Only Whitman can be said to have come from the working class. (The question of sexual preference [or lack of the same] is more complicated, given the closet, given also differing understandings of same-sex love.) Because the group is drawn from what was at one time considered the canon of American literary achievement, I should repeat the point I made in my discussion of the "classic" that the coherence of concerns among these writers—their persistent exploration of a cluster of issues—is not for me the coherence of the Great Tradition but rather the coherence of one among several strands. Almost certainly, I think, the sorts of questions I explore concerning nationality and subjectivity would be less urgent, or take a different form,

among writers who, less beckoned to by nationalist fantasies, were less disturbed by weaknesses in national identification but more at risk for violence perpetrated or allowed by the more nationally minded. A different sorrow—different but linked causes and outcomes, the locked door or mutilating entryway rather than the empty room, perhaps, other forms of solace, and other forms of fantasy.[17]

The fact remains, though, that academic critics did extricate this particular strand from the entire array of American writing and put it out front of the rest. Though I do not wish to perpetuate the aesthetic supremacism of Great Tradition rhetoric, it may be that my arguments concerning these works can contribute to an understanding of the causes for such rhetoric. By identifying the forms of personal and social desire addressed in these works, we may be able to understand more about the desire or anxiety—rather than the objective judgment—that results in a canon: What is the nature of the taste of those who respond to *this* song? To what need did these works respond best? What does it tell us about such works that such a need seizes upon them? How is needy understanding defective or partial? With such questions we do not scuttle the works that made up the canon but rather return them to the heteroglot archive from which they were conscripted, which makes them still more interesting, because speculative answers to these questions might, in turn, help us understand more fully the specific differences between canonized works and other American literary practices. When Harriet Jacobs, for example, ends her narrative with "tender memories of my good old grandmother, like light, fleecy clouds floating over a dark and troubled sea,"[18] she declines to practice conclusion by appeal to futurity, the open closure of works as disparate as "Song of Myself," *Walden*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Great Gatsby*. The more we know about the connection of futurity with nation, and about the structure that switches grief over the lost into desire for the elusive, the more we will be able to appreciate the majesty of Jacobs's decision to end with a pledge of allegiance to particular remembrance.

The line of American writing that has concerned me in these essays is therefore finite, as it were, in textual space, bounded on all sides by other expressions and genres. Elisa Tamarkin, for example, has excavated a considerable archive of cultural phenomena from the antebellum period in which the slightness of American nationality is supplemented by surprisingly fervent Anglophiliac identifications, rather than by the consolation of an America about to be.[19] The tradition that concerns me is finite, too, in literary history, coming to final expression in Thomas Wolfe, Hart Crane, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac, maybe John Updike, ultimately receiving a fond autopsy (or maybe not, maybe not fond, or maybe not

an autopsy) in Pynchon, jumping from there to Rushdie, whose admiration for Pynchon is strong: "*Vineland*, Mr. Pynchon's mythical piece of Northern California, is of course also 'Vinland,' the country discovered by the Viking Leif Eriksson long before Columbus, 'Vineland the Good'; that is to say, this crazed patch of California stands for America itself. And it is here, to Vineland, that one of America's great writers has, after long wanderings down his uncharted roads, come triumphantly home."[20] Rushdie is no fan of national homecomings, and the cadence of this passage is surprisingly triumphal, but perhaps the suggestion that the "crazed patch" is a synecdoche—a part that expresses the gist of the whole, like Emerson's Representative Man, or like Saleem Sinai—for America allows Rushdie to celebrate without irony. Rushdie is probably contrasting the ending of *Vineland* with the ending of *The Crying of Lot 49*, where Oedipa Maas loses her faith that a crazed patch of southern Californian sprawl contains within itself the possessible essence of a true America: "San Narciso at that moment lost (the loss pure, instant, spherical, the sound of a stainless orchestral chime held among the stars and struck lightly), gave up its residue of uniqueness for her; became a name again, was assumed back into the American continuity of crust and mantle."[21] When he concludes this sentence with a reference to the North American lithospheric plate, Pynchon invites the reader to think that Oedipa has moved from great expectations to lost illusions, after the pattern of the classic novel, matured, as Georg Lukács put it. But she is not relinquishing fantasy for sobered realism: rather, the loss of San Narciso is the loss of her belief that she has come to the end of a series of premonitions or clues, arrived at the essence they had been prognosticating. The loss of this belief, therefore, does not end the pursuit but rather sends her back into an infinite (and infinitely branching) series of clues, each leading to the next, without arrival (at least before the last page):

San Narciso was a name; an incident among our climatic records of dreams and what dreams became among our accumulated daylight, a moment's squall-line or tornado's touchdown among the higher, more continental solemnities—storm-systems of group suffering and need, prevailing winds of affluence. There was the true continuity, San Narciso had no boundaries. No one knew yet how to draw them. She had dedicated herself, weeks ago, to making sense of what Inverarity had left behind, never suspecting that the legacy was America . . . If San Narciso and the estate were really no different from any other town, any other estate, then by that continuity she might have found the Tristero anywhere in her Republic, through any of a hundred lightly-concealed entranceways, a hundred alienations, if only she'd looked. She stopped for a minute between the steel rails, raising her head as if to sniff the air. Becoming conscious of the hard, strung presence she stood on—knowing as if maps had been flashed for her on the sky how

these tracks ran on into others, knowing they laced, deepened, authenticated the great night around her.[22]

Remanded to the network of clues, Oedipa resumes her transit through an American evermore-about-to-be, the pursuit of a national essence that flees across a chain of signs, infinitely deferred, never achieved or arrived at. Pynchon's deferred America was a preliminary point of connection between American literature and poststructuralist theory,[23] with the difference that Jacques Derrida, in those days at least, didn't include "nation" in his catalog of obscure objects of desire: "It would be possible to show that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated the constant of a presence—*eidos, arche, telos, energeia, ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject), *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, or conscience, God, man, and so forth."[24] "And so forth" leaves room for "America" in the list, but a full articulation of Derrida's thinking with American literature had to wait for Bercovitch's insight into the structure of the jeremiad, its perpetually maintained distinction between the current imperfect, prefigurative avatar of America and America in its pure state, the avatar and the clue indicating a future that incites renewed pursuit, like Dashiell Hammett's massively possessive Gutman in *The Maltese Falcon*, named after his own desire, rising from the current leaden avatar to continue along the bird's line of flight. I'm echoing Philip Kuberski here:

> Each American literary movement is coincidental with a *thing* that, by offering a theory of why writing has lost its authenticity, returns as guarantor of a new attempt at telling the truth about . . . things. The thing leads a charmed life, appearing at crucial moments whenever our culture fears that it has become too much of a product of words, designations, or myths. But the charismatic return of the thing is not without its risks: the thing resists language, especially a cultural language content to refer to its own effaced references as true and authentic (i.e., not language). The thing is then a charm, but a dangerous one because it redeems only by chastising, like the "American jeremiad" that Bercovitch sees in American culture's consistent self-criticism for losing its mission and authority.[25]

For Bercovitch and Kuberski, as for Pynchon, the clue, the ordinary thing supposed to bear an ulterior indication of an irresistible but perpetually elusive—in flight along a line of subsequent clues—nation, this particular permanent futurity of the nation, rather than the imagined land waiting at the end, is itself the crucially American thing. If therefore, Rushdie is right, and *Vineland* is a Pynchonian arrival, even if to "a crazed patch," this would mean that Pynchon believed himself to have passed out of a tradition of writing he had expressed and analyzed so fully in *The Crying of Lot 49*, a fond autopsy, as I suggested above.