Introduction

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If this book had been published in 1960, its shape would have been much different. There would have been authoritative comment on a handful of heavy hitters – mostly well-respected white men, with the odd woman, person of color, or old Leftist mixed in – and there would have been much hand-wringing over whether literature, particularly the novel, might stem the implacable rising tide of "mass culture." After all, early in the decade, *Partisan Review*, an important little magazine out of New York City, published a symposium, "Our Country and Our Culture," premised on the idea that "the artist and intellectual who wants to be a part of American life is faced with a mass culture which makes him feel that he is still outside looking in," a dire situation indeed for those who lamented the paradox proposed by the editors, that "a democratic society necessarily leads to a leveling of culture, to a mass culture which will overrun intellectual and aesthetic values traditional to Western civilization."[1] Having narrowly survived such a cultural emergency, had this book been published in 1960, the discussion would have tended toward those writers who showcased both seriousness of purpose and certain formal qualities approved by the academy and venues like *Partisan Review*.

We may well have followed the lead of eminent critic and editor Malcolm Cowley, veteran of the Lost Generation, who took it upon himself to survey what he called the "literary situation" in the US circa 1954. Summarizing the critical terrain with wry detachment, Cowley listed what he considered the au courant characteristics that could elevate a work to that ineffable realm of the literary, at least according to "younger critics":

> Today the bad words applied to fiction by a great many of the younger critics are *naturalism*, *liberalism*, *optimism* (which is either *vague* or *shallow*), *progressive* (usually put in quotation marks), *scientific*, and *sociology*. Among the good words and phrases are *tradition*, *depth* or *inwardness*, *values* (especially if they are *moral* and *permanent*), *irony*, *formal patterns, close texture*, *meanings on different levels*, *symbols*, and *myth*.[2]

Cowley's droll notes register a shift in the first years of the decade away from styles or movements deemed innovative in the earlier part of the century, such as naturalism, as well as from overt commitments to politics (hence the poor progressive is forever banished to scare quotes). In their place, he identifies the perceived importance of literature invested in tradition – an importance echoed by *Partisan Review*'s worry that mass culture will obliterate Western civilization – and suffused with values made visible by inwardness, or the experience of the individual. This sort of "depth," according Cowley's story, is best articulated via the formal elements prized by the New Criticism: irony, intricate patterns, close texture, and so on. Cowley is not so sure about the ultimate merit of literature measured in these terms, but part of his hesitation is perhaps attributable to nostalgia for his younger and more vulnerable years, as when he lays bare a basic assumption of the book: "Unlike the present age, the 1920s were a time of experiment in all the creative arts, including poetry, fiction and hot jazz" (3–4). On its face, this statement is so wrong-headed as to be absurd. It's not wrong because the 1920s were *not* a time of fertile experimentation in the arts but because this fact does not in turn mean 1950s literature amounted to a complacent reworking of tradition. In fact, one of the broad contentions of *American Literature in Transition, 1950–1960* is that the 1950s were a time of radical experimentation and change across many facets of US literature, only one or two of which seemed to Cowley worthy of discussion.

Indeed, Cowley's assessment really only seems plausible if we recall that during the 1950s good or worthwhile literature was tasked with doing particular work other cultural forms – television, the movies, popular fiction – could not. Consider, for example, a collection that appeared at the end of the decade, Herbert Gold's *Fiction of the Fifties* (1959), which had a kind of retrospective finality to it; as Gold aims to represent short fiction of the decade, he takes pains to cordon serious literature from potentially dangerous pretenders. In his introduction, he argues that certain writers are good for certain readers, those who "have been driven to asking the ultimate questions . . . What is the relation between freedom and isolation? When am I free and when am I merely isolated? When am I alone and independent? When am I responsible? When am I groupy, togethered into socialized isolation?"[3] According to the version of 1950s cultural history that emphasizes the perpetual struggle between individuality and the pressure to conform – the topic of William Whyte's widely read *The Organization Man* (1956), among others – Gold's questions are apropos, as they are all preoccupied with individual freedom versus the threats of conformity or

collectivity. Little wonder that Gold's serious writers are all but required to tackle such questions, as they illuminate the "disasters and challenges of our time" (9). A far cry from those rare creatures capable of such magic, Gold presents a catalog of those who do "NOT" offer "the strongest view of the time" (16). Here is a sample:

> Not the fabricated fakes of television, Hollywood, and the mass magazines (not Harry Belafonte improving race relations by playing a Chinese version of *Green Pastures* in yellowface);
>
> [. . .]
>
> Nor Sloan Wilson and Herman Wouk with their new upper-middle soap opera (an easier detergent for the togethered souls of suburban lads and lassies of whatever moribund condition);
>
> Nor the Young Fogies queerly proclaiming a brotherhood of gangbang and gangwhimper – real toadies in imaginary gardens ("I'm one Hell of a Guy, Damn! A-tearin' down society and grammar! A-preachin' of the gospel to all us delinquent kids! Man! Zip! Zen! Wow!");
>
> Nor the Elder Tired Revolutionists [who imitate Henry James and "Tom Eliot"] . . .
>
> Nor the Beauticians and Uglifiers like Tennessee W., Truman C., Speed L. ("It's so dreadful out here in the *world*. Lemme back, Ma!"). (16–17)

The virtuoso glibness camouflages a familiar attack: like the editors of *Partisan Review*, Gold worries that Western civilization itself is threatened by mass culture and that serious literature could be a vanguard in its defense.[4] This pose authorizes Gold to dismiss anything smelling of mass media, the middlebrow, or the counterculture – as well as those merely derivative of Modernism or apparently too bleak or cynical in worldview for his taste.[5] By thus chipping away at all the unwanted elements of the literary scene in the 1950s, Gold is left with that which is worthy of sober consideration, works that probe the Big Questions outlined above, thereby ennobling or at least improving those readers discerning enough to value "thought in fiction" (a group a cut above the "good citizens" hooked on "family novels, fat historical romances, suspense and mystery stories" [10]). Following this model, Gold collects fifteen writers, apologetic that Norman Mailer and J. D. Salinger had turned him down, and stoic that others like Thomas Berger, Vance Bourjaily, Ralph Ellison, Albert J. Guerard Jr., Alan Harrington, James Jones, M. R. Kadish, Wright Morris, William Styron, and Bernard Wolfe are writers "whose short fiction does not represent them at their best" (18). This leaves him with those he deems capable of wrestling weighty existential questions in abbreviated form: James Baldwin, Saul

Bellow, Anatole Broyard, R. V. Cassill, John Cheever, Evan S. Connell Jr., William Eastlake, George P. Elliott, Leo Litwak, Bernard Malamud, Flannery O'Connor, J. F. Powers, Frank Rooney, and Harvey Swados – and of course Gold himself.

Contemporary readers may be forgiven for being slightly puzzled by this list, for after all the buildup, who could blame us for expecting lights of eternal wisdom still beloved today? Instead, only three of these writers are regularly read or taught (Baldwin, Bellow, and O'Connor), with two more well-respected but somehow old-fashioned seeming, useful for emblematizing a period but appearing on fewer and fewer must-read lists (Cheever and Malamud, although see below). Some others might be mentioned in passing in literary histories (Broyard and Cassill) or were esteemed in the 1950s but have since been largely ignored (Powers, Swados and Gold himself). I think you would be hard-pressed to find any reader born after 1930 who has heard of, much less been enlightened by, the others.

On one hand, this is to be expected, since critical and popular tastes change, and the idea of a canon or canons is always in flux. But on the other, it reminds us that one reason the 1950s can still seem bland and white bread, with a literature to match, is because at the time the same kinds of writers tended to be celebrated while whole groups of others were seen as unliterary, appealing either to the masses or to fringe niche audiences – equally damning associations for defenders of high culture. This critical view has been so powerful that there remains still a persistent sense that high culture defines worthwhile literature, a sense underwritten by the usually tacit assumption that high culture is the province of white men, a demographic that dominates Gold's volume. In 2014, for example, *The American Scholar* published a list of the "one hundred best American novels" chosen by David Handlin, a well-known architect and avid reader of fiction. The list is telling insofar as Handlin represents a smart, educated reader, a self-identified "enthusiast, not . . . a scholar." Of his list of a hundred, thirteen were written or published in the 1950s: Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* (1952), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye* (1953), William Gaddis's *The Recognitions* (1955), Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), John Cheever's *The Wapshot Chronicle* (1957), Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* (1958), John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* (1960), Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* (1961), Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), and Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road* (1961).[6] What is immediately striking about this list is how audibly it echoes a 1950s critical sensibility: with the exception of O'Connor, Baldwin, and Ellison – all

of whom were notable exceptions to WASP dominance in the 1950s – Handlin's picks are predominantly white and male (if Percy's Catholicism and Bellow's Jewishness also mark some measure of difference, religious identification seems subordinate in the particular works Handlin names to questions about personal autonomy, focalized in Percy's case through existentialism and in Bellow's through his picaresque effort at the Great American Novel – recall *Augie March* opens "I am an American, Chicago born").[7] While most mid-century literary critics would have been skeptical of the aesthetic merits of a hard-boiled novel like Chandler's *The Long Goodbye* and especially of Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* (whose language Gold would have paraphrased as "Man! Zip! Zen! Wow!"), the tenor of Handlin's list would have made general sense to them.

Given Handlin's position as a committed amateur reader, it is not surprising that his list should tend toward the sorts of works that were lauded in the 1950s and subsequently packaged as modern classics – in this regard only Salinger is conspicuously omitted. For a twenty-first-century critic more conversant in the less-lit corners of the literary landscape, Handlin's list might seem serviceable, though limited in scope. Such is the contention of Sandra M. Gilbert, whose response was intended "not as an alternative to but as a provisional expansion of Handlin's list."[8] Of Gilbert's hundred novels, sixteen are from the 1950s: Carson McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1951), J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), Conrad Aiken's *Ushant* (1952), E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* (1952), Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* (1953), Randall Jarrell's *Pictures from an Institution* (1954), Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955), James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956), Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), H. D.'s *Bid Me to Live* (1960), Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), and Tillie Olsen's *Tell Me a Riddle* (1961). As she accounts for her choices relative to Handlin's:

> In recent decades ... we've come to understand the force of women's writing throughout American history, and we've come to understand, too, the emergent power of those hyphenated literary traditions, traditions shaped by African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Italian-Americans, Jewish-Americans, as well as Native Americans, Chicanas, and Chicanos. Too, we've come to appreciate the generic range and diversity of American fiction. Not every great American novel is what we now call a "mainstream" publication ... But most of the books he includes would fall into any publisher's mainstream (even, dare I say, male-stream?) category.

When Gilbert writes about what "we" have come to understand or appreciate, she is not so much referring to readers such as Handlin, but to fellow literary critics or social and cultural historians. Indeed, despite lingering impressions of the American 1950s as more or less the Cleavers' block on *Leave It to Beaver*, its variety of literature and culture is not exactly news to scholars. For decades there has been a whole critical cottage industry pushing back against popular, facile memories or depictions of the 1950s, from social and cultural histories like Douglas Miller and Marion Nowak's *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (1977) to Stephanie Coontz's rejoinder *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (1992), to critical collections such as Lary May's *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* (1989) and Joanne Meyerowitz's *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945–1960* (1994), whose very title renounces the fuzzy nostalgia reified by *Leave It to Beaver* in syndication. In 2005, with volumes like Meyerowitz's specifically in mind, Deborah Nelson claimed that "Nearly all scholars working on the 1950s in the US make a distinction between their own critical revisions of the decade and mainstream nostalgia for the 1950s as a time of prosperity, family togetherness, and national strength. Against the massive edifice of this ideal, a revisionary account has been mounted, primarily from the political Left and in the realms of gender and sexuality studies."[9] However ironically, versions of this "revisionary account" have become a standard way for literary and cultural critics to frame the 1950s in retrospect.

Like Nelson, Joel Foreman, in the introduction to his important collection *The Other Fifties: Interrogating Midcentury American Icons* (1997), takes May, Meyerowitz, and others as examples of scholars who have the advantage of historical hindsight, and are thereby capable of presenting a more complex picture than someone writing at the very end of the decade. He therefore contrasts *The Other Fifties* to Joseph Satin's *The 1950's: America's "Placid" Decade* (1960), which argues for quiescence as the era's defining feature, choosing to focus on its most obvious, Beaver Cleaver-like contours – enticing fodder for any scholar with revisionist impulses. Foreman's answer to Satin could well apply to the present volume:

> Writing in the late fifties, [Satin] could not possibly interpret as we do the emergent trends (civil rights, cultural diversity, feminism, the collapse of the communist bloc) which are now visible and so unavoidably shape our thinking about the past. With the knowledge of these trends as an interpretive foundation, the writers of the essays in this book tease out the contradictions built into the representations of a culture in transition.[10]

Even as the present volume shares with *The Other Fifties* the premise that America in the 1950s was a "culture in transition," our approach to understanding the nature of this transition differs as we are particularly focused on literature. For in a move that would have given the editors at *Partisan Review* a collective heart attack, *The Other Fifties* focuses primarily on popular culture since "mass media representations of the 1950s are quintessential representatives of their time ... [that] captured the needs, desires, and expectations of so many people as to provide significant indexes of the changing behavior and the internal tensions of that cultural body we call America" (6). This methodology means that literature is relevant mainly when viewed as part of a matrix of mass culture, and so therefore the most widely read novels or widely seen plays are of the most interest. But this approach runs the risk of ironically retrenching the divide between high and mass cultures 1950s gatekeepers tried desperately to maintain while reversing its terms: popular culture is dynamically "representative" and therefore worthy of consideration, whereas high culture is stodgily esoteric, understandable to a privileged few, so therefore not immediately vital to understanding the "cultural body we call America." Of course, in the aftermath of postmodernism and poststructuralism, such bifurcation may seem very much *of* the 1950s, even as there were many constituencies in the decade who would have balked at the supposedly singular power of serious, highbrow literature.

Building on more recent scholarship that has helped to reframe our understanding of 1950s literature and culture, *American Literature in Transition, 1950–1960* looks at not only those writers deemed worthy of consideration by contemporaries like Cowley and Gold but also those Gold mocks – writers for television, middlebrow best sellers, the Beats, and those still writing committed literature are all discussed at length in this volume, and are examples of the creative ferment of the period.[11] Because the novel was the most visible site of the confrontation between the highbrow literary and mass cultures, both Cowley and Gold – like many others in the 1950s – focus on fiction to the exclusion of poetry (for Cowley, the literary situation is apparently a narrative one, as he only gives more than passing mention to T. S. Eliot, whose influence he sees everywhere), even though there was tremendous energy in this genre. With all the usual caveats about the fluidity or arbitrariness of poetic "schools," for instance, it is worth pointing out that the 1950s was the decade when the writers and artists associated with the radically experimental Black Mountain College flourished, as did the Beat writers, those of the New York School, as well as the so-called Confessional Poets, all of whom are explored in this volume.

For those 1950s cultural arbiters invested in maintaining highbrow literary culture, the Cold War and the mass media were the twinned demons looming over this culture, and as I have said "serious" literature was held out as a singular resource that might counter the darker tendencies of each. With the hindsight mentioned by Foreman, this volume of course recognizes the marked importance of the Cold War (Chapter 1) and the influence of mass media (Chapter 2), but tries to understand them in new ways. Thus Part I, "Cultural Issues," begins with a chapter looking at various models for conceptualizing the relationship between the Cold War and the literature of the 1950s. Chapter 2 challenges the assumption that "mass media" was a monolithic cultural wasteland by demonstrating its more complex, "literary" elements, using television dramas as illustrative examples. The chapters to follow explore other cultural issues vital to understanding the particularity of 1950s American literature: the rise of popular understandings of psychoanalysis (Chapter 3), the connection between the decolonizing Third World and domestic race relations (Chapter 4), the imbrication of different kinds of religious thinking into nearly every facet of American life, including literature (Chapter 5), and the unavoidable politicization of daily life (Chapter 6). These issues are especially instructive with respect to literature, and Part I is organized around them with the aim of helping us think about what was distinctive about the 1950s in terms of the social, the cultural, and the historical.

Implicit in the nostalgic, *Happy Days* version of the 1950s is that it was a culture by and for middle-class white people, particularly men. While no one would dispute that this demographic played a defining role in the literature and culture of the American 1950s, it was in fact only one of many demographics, and Part II, "Varieties of Literary Experience," takes readers through the range of subject positions important in the 1950s, but still not visible in many accounts of the era. Beginning with an analysis of WASP culture (Chapter 7), Part II emphasizes that while middle-class whiteness was certainly an important dimension of the 1950s experience, we should be careful not to conflate it with the totality of that experience. This chapter is therefore followed by analyses of African American literature (Chapter 8), Chicana/o literature (Chapter 9), and Asian American literature (Chapter 10). Of these, only African American literature would have been recognized in the 1950s as an identifiable subset of writers; in *The Literary Situation*, Cowley even remarked that Mexicans were "such recent arrivals and were so handicapped educationally that they had no writers to speak for them in English; their admired representatives were still boxers or baseball players" (155). Despite their invisibility to Cowley, there were indeed

people of Mexican – and Asian American – descent writing in English in the 1950s, even if, as parts of bodies of work, they were not classed as such until later decades. These chapters acknowledge how tricky it is for literary scholars to name or identify like bodies of work, and many of them in fact take this difficulty as a starting point for their explorations. Thus while some readers may be surprised to find chapters on, say, Chicana/o literature in a book about the 1950s, the fact remains that such literatures were produced during the decade, and contending with them represents a critical shift in both how we map "1950s literature" and how we understand the American experience as reflected by such literature – even as some constituent voices have not been as amplified as others.

The subsequent chapters thus focus on other key subjectivities in the 1950s: gay and lesbian culture (Chapter 11), feminist literature (Chapter 12), and youth culture (Chapter 13). Although contemporary readers are no doubt acquainted with 1950s youth culture through tropes like the rebellious teenager or the leather-jacketed tough – still vivid thanks to films like *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *The Wild One* (1953) – the other energies in gay and lesbian and feminist literature may be less familiar. These literatures especially have been victims of the hypermasculine culture exemplified by a writer like Norman Mailer, who in 1959 surveyed those he perceived as his literary adversaries, making declarations such as "the only one of my contemporaries who I felt had more talent than myself was James Jones," author of *From Here to Eternity* (1951), a World War II novel apparently rival in Mailer's eyes to his own *The Naked and the Dead* (1948).[12] As he works his way around "the talent in the room" – a room occupied almost exclusively by straight white men – Mailer pauses to wonder why no women command his attention, then speculates that it is probably because "a good novelist can do without everything but the remnant of his balls" (472). However reluctantly, he is finally able to "admit" the merits of a handful of women writers, so long as his appraisal is framed in sexualized terms: "the early work of Mary McCarthy, Jean Stafford and Carson McCullers gave me pleasure" (472). Although Mailer puts it more crassly than others might, his position is not all that unusual for a straight white male in the 1950s, and it is this sort of thinking that has compounded the dismissal of other subjectivities and experiences, leading, as I have said, to the impression that it was *only* straight (white) men who wrote during the decade. The chapters in Part II correct this impression and aim to help make a greater multiplicity of such voices heard.

Part III, "Schools, Movements, and Sensibilities," comprises chapters organized around works that share conceptual or thematic affinities.

Sometimes these affinities were clear to people in the 1950s, if not always properly understood (the Beats or Confessional Poets, for example), whereas others are really only discernable in retrospect because they needed subsequent work to bring them into focus (proto-postmodernism), or because the political climate rendered them taboo (committed Leftist writers). Part III begins with a phenomenon that was legible in pieces, but did not yet have a name: Proto-postmodernism (Chapter 14), which describes the development in the decade of aesthetic and philosophical features that would later be associated with postmodernism. Following this, chapters take up some more established ways the 1950s have been categorized or understood by literary scholars: the experimentation at Black Mountain College (Chapter 15), the Beat movement (Chapter 16), the Confessional Poets (Chapter 17), and the New York School (Chapter 18). Although these groups are well known to students of twentieth-century literary history, each chapter problematizes the very notion of a school or movement with the aim of exploring what if anything was distinctive about them in the context of 1950s history and culture. Indeed, what is perhaps most useful about these chapters is that they do not merely repeat conventional wisdom about those flying under particular banners, but rather interrogate why they have been seen by literary critics as what Gold would have called "groupy, togethered." Chapters 19 and 20 look at the concepts of exile and committed writing, respectively, to explore other kinds of "togethered" writers who have not been as readily perceptible to literary critics. Although there is a long tradition of American émigré writing, for example, those figures sometimes fit uneasily into broader generalizations about the 1950s as domestic and "contained." Moreover, as Chapter 20 argues, thanks to the political mandates of the Cold War, committed writers on the Left were and continue to be all but erased from most literary histories, even though they were producing significant writing throughout the decade.

Finally, Part IV, "Formats and Genres," investigates some particularly consequential modes of literary production in the 1950s: little magazines (Chapter 21), best sellers (Chapter 22), and science fiction (Chapter 23). These chapters can be read in conjunction with one another as they represent differing facets of the 1950s literary scene sometimes unnoticed by those tuned exclusively to the highbrow. Although, as we have seen, some little magazines, such as *Partisan Review*, did their best to maintain high culture, there was a proliferation of other kinds of avant-garde or countercultural magazines during the decade that were influential in certain, often nonoverlapping, circles, and Chapter 21 charts the fragmentation of highbrow consensus over the course of the decade. Likewise the best seller, long