# *Introduction*

## American Fiction and Movement Conservatism

By the second decade of the twenty-first century, the robust linkage between highbrow literary fiction and progressive liberalism was virtually axiomatic. In a 2014 cover story for *National Review*, "Let Your Right Brain Run Free," Adam Bellow, son of Saul Bellow, exemplified the typical conservative lament when faced with this fact. Unusually, though, Bellow transformed his complaint that a liberal ethos dominates the major institutions of the US literary establishment into an argument for why "conservative fiction" should be "the next front in the culture war" (A. Bellow, 26). Using the left-brain/right-brain metaphor, Bellow claimed that for too long "conservatives have favored the rational left brain at the expense of the right," making the proverbial conservative mind "hyper-developed in one respect, completely undeveloped in another" (30). By the left side of the conservative mind, Bellow meant the postwar creation of "a network of think tanks, foundations, magazines, and publishing houses" that were the institutional and intellectual underpinnings of the modern conservative movement (30). To grow the right side, Bellow believed, conservatives essentially ought to recreate that massive organizational effort to produce American literature instead of political power: "We need our own writing programs, fellowships, prizes, and so forth. We need to build a feeder system so that the cream can rise to the top, and also make an end run around the gate-keepers of the liberal establishment" (30). With partisan rhetorical flourish, Bellow predicated that fiction might very well become "the beating heart of the new counterculture" (29). My book is concerned not with Bellow's improbable predication of a new conservative literary counterculture, but with the implicit literary-historical assumptions which formed the foundation of his prophecy regarding the use of literature to acquire prestige. In other words, how did it become such a widespread cultural assumption that highbrow

postwar US fiction was so tightly associated with liberalism, and how has that assumption distorted contemporary perceptions of American literary history? Essentially, the aim of *Postwar American Fiction and the Rise of Modern Conservatism* is not just to unravel the perception that highbrow literature is a natural, virtually inexorable, ally of post-sixties progressive liberalism, but also to show how that connection is a historically contingent development shaped in part by deeper arguments within movement conservatism about the purpose and acquisition of literary cultural capital.

An influential conservative intellectual and editor best known for guiding several controversial conservative books to publication – including Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education* (1991), Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve* (1994), and Jonah Goldberg's *Liberal Fascism* (2008) – Bellow tells a familiar story of how post-sixties liberalism and highbrow fiction came to be interwoven that is decidedly flawed, but it is precisely his story's flaws that illuminate the problem. Bellow's story is straightforward and causally mechanistic: Never truly investing much time or resources into postwar American literature, members of William F. Buckley, Jr.'s "conservative movement" worked incessantly to attain power via the Republican Party. Bellow assumes that the intersection between postwar literature and politics was a dynamic debate, to be sure, but one whose dynamism was largely between major institutions, writers, critics, and scholars on the liberal and Left side of the political spectrum. The modern American Right, largely indifferent to aesthetics and devoid of agency in the realm of high culture, was the static background to an intellectually rich and vibrant foreground of argumentation and debate. However, Bellow's story indicates a basic misconception of two different, though connected, historical phenomena: the postwar conservative movement's early paradoxical orientation toward highbrow literature vis-à-vis race, and several major literary writers' own evolving understanding of modern American conservatism. Indeed, one of my central claims is that while a variety of factors have shaped the aesthetic-political tastes that undergird much of the post-1945 US literary field, these tastes cannot be sufficiently understood without a better, more rigorous contextualization of the rise of modern conservatism and its evolving positons on race.

In its attempt to contextualize the important relationship between American literature and modern conservatism, this book steers away from the tempting, though ultimately fruitless, question: Whither is "conservative fiction" in the postwar United States? Since its inception in the wake of World War II, the modern conservative movement in the United States has rarely, if ever, been viewed as an important factor in postwar American

literature, especially prose fiction. This typical viewpoint is persuasive if one treats postwar conservatism as a uniform bloc of writers and thinkers clustered around the influential magazine *National Review* and its founder William F. Buckley, Jr., whose early rise to fame before the launch of *National Review* (November 1955) was due to two controversial books: one arguing that students were being indoctrinated into secular collectivism at his alma mater Yale University (*God and Man at Yale*, 1951), and the other asserting that Joseph McCarthy's crusade against supposed communists in the United States was not just defensible but commendable (*McCarthy and His Enemies*, 1954). As Macel D. Ezell pointed out in *Unequivocal Americanism: Right-Wing Novels in the Cold War Era* (1977), the first book-length study investigating the intersection between postwar conservatism and American fiction: "Imaginative literature constitutes only a small part of the mass of right-wing materials published in the Cold War era. . . . This is in keeping with the very limited number of novelists who publicly identify with right-wing causes" (1). While organizing *National Review*'s fifth anniversary celebration, Ezell notes, Buckley advertised a formal dinner in a fall sixties issue by listing the names of prominent conservatives who would be in attendance. He named only two self-identified "conservative" fiction writers: John Dos Passos and Taylor Caldwell (1). When *National Review* launched the "Conservative Book Club" in 1964, just one of the twenty-nine sponsors, Dos Passos, was a fiction writer (1). Though a valuable piece of early literary analysis on the modern conservative movement, Ezell's book reproduced a flawed assumption regarding the philosophical coherence of postwar conservatism: That Buckley's effort at *National Review* to combine traditionalists, ultra-capitalists, and aggressive cold warriors was a natural synthesis of compatible positions, producing an ultraorthodox metric for aesthetic judgment. Until the veritable explosion of historiographic scholarship on postwar conservatism in the American academy beginning in the last decade of the twentieth century, it was routine for scholars to emphasize the conservative movement's ideological rigidity, intellectual shallowness, and as a corollary, its comparative irrelevance within the sphere of American culture.[1] But in casting movement conservatism as a monolithic intellectual undertaking spawned by *National Review*, earlier literary scholars such as Ezell tended to construct aesthetic categories that produced rather anemic inquiries concerned with defining "true" conservative writers as understood through the narrow aperture of an ideologically inflexible definition of modern conservatism.

I should stress that I do not regard Ezell's accounts, or even more recent accounts, of this relationship between the chimera "conservative fiction"

and the conservative movement itself as poorly argued or simply unpersuasive. On the contrary, the paltry accounts of American conservatism and literature correspond to, what seems in the current discourse like, an already tenuous relationship. Writing for the *Daily Beast* in 2012, James McGirk sums up well, if somewhat hyperbolically, the longstanding consensus explanation for the lack of "serious literary fiction for Republicans," stating that the American "right has been radicalized by a ridiculous ideology that would be outrageous if expressed in literature" (McGirk). McGirk assumes that conservatives understand novels as political tools that are different in degree but not in kind to, say, a campaign stump speech or a late-night Fox News diatribe. The cluster of assumptions that underpin such a viewpoint looks something like this: Conservative fiction in the postwar United States is produced by conservative authors who meet the peculiar definitional criteria of "conservative" if they have been accepted by, or positively affiliated with, the modern conservative movement. When conceptualized in this way, the absence of a significant body of conservative fiction appears so self-evident that it hardly requires further research.

In his more recent scholarly essay "The Plight of Conservative Literature" published in the celebrated anthology *A New Literary History of America* (2010), Michael Kimmage runs into precisely this kind of definitional dead-end. Kimmage conceptualizes the "conservative novel" as a work that not only essentially adheres to the conservative movement's sacred trinity of traditionalism, capitalism, and anti-communism, but one which also has had an impact on the movement itself and American culture more broadly. "The challenge, for conservatives," Kimmage writes, "has been to sponsor literature as a living branch of contemporary culture. The conservative emphasis on precedent and experience, the anti-utopian cast of the conservative mind, leads conservative authors to autobiography, to a nonfiction reckoning with the dilemmas of history, politics, and the self" (949). It is only when one enlarges the category of literature to include highly stylized memoirs like Whittaker Chambers's *Witness* (1952) that fictional techniques can be said to "have had substantial influence on the conservative movement" (951). Kimmage points out, in other words, that postwar movement conservatives have not been able to rally around American novelists who are at once "authentically" conservative, culturally relevant, and canonically important according to literary critics and professional scholars. Kimmage provides us, then, with an account of what seems self-evident in contemporary literary studies: postwar conservatives have not been able to marshal support for their movement in the semiautonomous field of high literary culture. Insofar as "literature" retains any

aesthetic-cultural value in this account, the phrase "conservative literature" approaches the oxymoronic. It appears, in short, that American literature has not been very important to the emergence of postwar conservatism, and that postwar conservatism has not had much to do with "serious" highbrow American literature.

My overarching argument hinges on the premise that this standard conceptualization of "conservative fiction" is not so much wrong as categorically reductive, which is to say grounded in a set of discourse norms that discourage critics from interrogating the dominant narrative which has, by now, ossified into the commonplace notion that modern American conservatism has little to do with highbrow literature. By returning, in the early chapters of this book, to the origins of the conservative movement and reexamining the importance its thinkers placed on American literature as an ambivalent form of cultural capital, I construct a new contextual account of post-1945 literary production that clarifies not only the stale category of "conservative fiction" but, more importantly, a few of the basic assumptions regarding the cultural politics of postwar American fiction. For my purposes, then, the category of "conservative fiction" is not an especially interesting or fruitful object of scholarly analysis in itself; rather, it is one of the seemingly insignificant stray threads that unravels the fabric holding together the discourse of contemporary literary politics in which highbrow literary fiction seems like a natural ally of progressive liberalism. Toward the end of this book, I show that this prevailing notion that "conservative fiction" is just another media arm of the conservative movement – that is, the view that novels such as Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* or Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins's *Left Behind* series belong to the same insular conservative media universe as Rupert Murdoch's Fox News Channel – is a rather recent invention. During the early years of modern conservatism, several of the movement's most prominent intellectuals did not equate "conservative fiction" with literary works that were essentially propagandistic vehicles for partisan political issues. The use of literature for blatant political activism, traditionalist conservatives such as Russell Kirk, Whittaker Chambers, Robert Nisbet, and Peter Viereck believed, was a trademark of revolutionary socialism. For them, to posit a relationship between one slice of Western literature called "conservative" and another slice called "leftist" would amount to a false dichotomy. Although they certainly recognized a genre like Soviet realism as leftist literature, they did not acknowledge a one-for-one correspondence with a similar body of "conservative literature."

For conservative thinkers such as Kirk and Chambers, to regard conservative literature as just another instrument of partisan politics would have

been to accept the sociopolitical framework of the Left. Instead, they identified the "great" works of Western literature in general, and American literature in particular, as de facto conservative in their depth, complexity, and tragic profundity.[2] According to these conservatives, while leftist literature aimed to cause the ideological scales to fall from the eyes of proletarians around the world, great Western literature went about its noble task of interrogating what T.S. Eliot called the "permanent things," those enduring human problems whose complexity had always exceeded – and always would – the shallowness of political parties, electoral campaigns, and all of the trivial accouterments of redistributing formal power in society (Eliot, 76). As the preeminent theorist of traditionalist conservatism in the fifties, Russell Kirk and his allies defined "conservatism" as a broad mood or disposition that did not privilege partisan politics, and they placed a high value on literature, embracing its formal nuances and complexities, which manifested in their championing of literary titans like Dostoevsky, Hawthorne, Eliot, and Faulkner. By interrogating the "nature of man" in light of the immense upheavals of the first half of the twentieth century, these authors were not writing doctrinaire conservative literature so much as writing "great literature" that inevitably expressed conservative themes. The most important theme to be gleaned in the postwar moment, for Kirk and others, was the rupture of tradition ushered in by the radical changes wrought by totalitarianism, most notably Soviet Communism and German Nazism, both of which they saw as monstrous ideological twins of the collectivist Left, and the rising threat of a uniquely leftist "American Fascism." Thinking within the broad historical terms furnished by the Western liberal arts tradition, conservative traditionalists insisted on the superiority of high literary culture to guard against the looming totalitarian terror unleashed, in their minds, by state-enforced progressive liberalism – most notably and problematically, the civil rights movement's post-*Brown* v. *Board* fight for desegregation and full enfranchisement. Ultimately, though, the early conservative movement's commitment to the cultural capital associated with formally difficult literature was inextricably bound up with a staunch defense of Jim Crow segregation, and the conservative movement's later shift in racial politics (from de facto support for segregationist policies to colorblind, neoliberal individualism) triggered a deeply conflicted aesthetic shift in conservatives' perceptions of literary value from modernist literary fiction to mass-market commercial fiction.

By focusing on the historical development of the conservative movement's ambivalence about highbrow literature as a form of cultural capital, I hope to avoid another reductive line of argumentation based on the notion

that postwar American conservatives have used the discourse of high literary culture *purely* for cynical and meretricious ends. In that kind of account, the post–World War II conservative movement was, at its core, little more than a group of revanchist culture warriors raging against postwar liberalism's expansion of rights, especially in relation to racial minorities. Instead, I argue that the political strivings of conservatives – some motivated cynically, others sincerely – cannot be so easily separated from their long-time admiration for highbrow literature. In my retelling, then, conservatives are not one-dimensional, diabolical antagonists in postwar literary and cultural history, but actors in an under-theorized narrative of American literary history who formed alliances and shored up ideological disputes in ways that estranged them, at times unwittingly, from the very forms of highbrow literature they sought to preserve and protect.

Far from being apathetic about the culture capital afforded by literature in the early postwar period, movement conservatives had not only routinely tried to recruit serious novelists to bolster their movement's intellectual and cultural reputation; they had also positioned themselves as the true guardians of highbrow culture, American literature in particular, with a hybrid discourse that combined early twentieth-century New Humanism of the Irving Babbitt variety, New Criticism, Southern Agrarianism, and a neo-Burkean traditionalism that looked favorably upon Jim Crow segregation. Beginning in the sixties, though, conservatives found it increasingly difficult to position themselves simultaneously as the disinterested champions of complex, morally ambivalent literature *and* as the populist defenders of aggrieved white innocence, laissez-faire capitalism, and aggressive American nationalism. By the end of the century, movement conservatives never stopped sincerely thinking of themselves as the custodians of American high culture – as their fierce, though sometimes unsophisticated, defenses of the Western canon attested – but their determination to create a constellation of partisan organizations and policy institutions while deploying a mixture of neoliberalism and racially coded populism distanced conservatives ever further from the literary institutions, major novelists, and even habits of mind that nourished highbrow literature. In my account, then, the roughly half-century shift in the literary tastes of American conservatives does not simply unmask conservatives as cynical, bad faith actors (though, to be clear, some polemical conservatives occupied just those roles); instead, I show that they were largely members of a hybrid, political-philosophical insurgent movement that deployed concepts of literary prestige and cultural capital in contradictory ways over time that formally mimicked their unique ideology of neo-aristocratic traditionalism, reactionary cultural populism, and neoliberal capitalism.

## Scholarly Context

Before delving any deeper into the nuances of my overarching argument, I need to contextualize the extant scholarship on contemporary American fiction, especially as the field intersects with postwar American politics and the rise of movement conservatism. Although this book's *raison d'être* is that few wide-ranging, chronological accounts of postwar fiction and movement conservatism exist, I do not mean to imply that there is not already a great deal of valuable scholarship on specific dimensions of literature and "conservatism," an expansive term that encompasses everything from broad definitions of conservative aesthetic forms to specific, real-world conservative politics. Specifically, scholars have examined roughly four (sometimes overlapping) areas: first, the well-established connection between conservative, even authoritarian, politics and the reactionary modernism of writers such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound; second, the emergence of the reactionary branch of New Criticism and its members' influence on conservative writers such as Flannery O'Connor and their institutional role in professionalizing post-1945 literary studies; third, the ways in which the post-seventies conservative Christian resurgence realigned parts of the literary and cultural fields while much of the Western world was supposedly undergoing a process of public secularization; fourth, the occasional analysis of American conservative writers or movement conservative ideology in literary scholarship that examines the relationship between American fiction and postwar progressive liberalism.

Since the chapters that follow deal mainly with American culture after World War II, the latter two areas of scholarship are especially important to this book.[3] Thus far, the most systematic scholarly work on postwar American fiction and a specific dimension of the modern conservative movement has emerged from the subfield of religion and literature. In the same year that the philosopher Charles Taylor published *A Secular Age* (2007) – his magisterial tome critiquing the "subtraction story" at the heart of modernity's "master narrative of secularization," which mistakenly contends that religious authority and experiences have simply receded in the face of Enlightenment reason and technology – Lawrence Buell inquired into the under-theorized nature of conservative Christianity in the field of literary studies in ways that echoed Taylor (Taylor, 530). Was American literary studies "in danger of being 'left behind' like the characters in LaHaye and Jenkins' [*Left Behind*] series," Buell asked, pointing out that one of the most conspicuous disparities between contemporary literary studies and "the drift of mainstream US culture is that religiocentric frames

of explanation started to go out of fashion at about the same time evangelical Christianity began to seize control of public culture to a degree unprecedented since colonial times" (32). In the wake of Buell's warning, more scholarship began to emerge that focused wholly or in part on the intersection of evangelical Christianity, conservative American politics, and contemporary fiction.[4] Undoubtedly, though, the most significant piece of book-length scholarship to emerge in this area has been Christopher Douglas's *If God Meant to Interfere: American Literature and the Rise of the Christian Right* (Cornell University Press, 2016). In the best book-length treatment of postwar fiction and political conservatism to date, Douglas argues that major liberal-leaning novelists were routinely confounded by the post-seventies conservative Christian resurgence because of the way this resurgence functioned "both in terms of a religion extending its universal and metaphysical claims to everyone and a kind of descent-based cultural identity within the broader frame of American multicultural reality" (135). Declaring that the conservative Christian resurgence "has been the unrecognized religious context for US literary production since the 1970s," Douglas traces a surprising network of linkages between the Christian Right, postmodernism, and multiculturalism (3). The Christian Right, Douglas contends, should not be viewed as a movement that stood in simple opposition to either postmodernism or multiculturalism; rather, evangelical-based Christian conservatism routinely borrowed intellectual forms and concepts from these seemingly progressive movements. The double register of American conservative religious discourse – that is, a universal theology open to everyone *and* a specific, white cultural identity – produced the very conditions that allowed the conservative Christian resurgence to become complexly intertwined with postmodernism and multiculturalism. This book concurs with Douglas on several points, especially the notion that conservative discourse often speaks in a variety of double registers, and aims to build on his groundbreaking scholarship in a few ways. Most significantly, I add a fuller chronological exploration of the relationship between postwar fiction and modern conservatism, stretching from the World War II era to the early twenty-first century. In addition, while Douglas focuses almost exclusively on liberal-leaning novelists, I analyze novelists, critics, and intellectuals who are affiliated to varying degrees with both postwar liberalism and conservatism.

Notably, the methodological principle of selection that undergirds the catalogue of liberal-leaning novelists that Douglas draws upon in *If God Meant to Interfere* dovetails with the last area of literary scholarship

I outline earlier: the intersection between postwar American fiction and progressive liberalism. Over the past few decades, when literary scholars have examined the relationship between post-1945 literature and politics, they have often concentrated on the relationship between literature and politics *on the political Left*, and only occasionally included a writer affiliated with movement conservatism.[5] However, perhaps the most fascinating way that postwar American conservatism has manifested in recent literary scholarship is through, what I would describe as, a kind of shadow presence. Without identifying and analyzing it in significant historiographic depth, modern conservatism is sometimes tacitly invoked when scholars write about, and against, the deep entrenchment of white supremacy, neoliberalism, hetero-normativity, patriarchy, and bellicose American foreign policy. In these accounts, the apparent absence of modern American conservatism is a pseudo-absence that recalls the discourse surrounding Victorian sexuality in Michel Foucault's famous account of the "repressive hypothesis": ostensibly repressed but constantly debated and discussed in coded language (*History of Sexuality*, 12–15).

For instance, in their influential 2005 essay "Do You Believe in Magic? Literary Thinking and the New Left," Sean McCann and Michael Szalay reconstruct a persuasive narrative about the political implications of post-sixties American literature by emphasizing a constellation of aesthetic disputes between the technocratic rationality of the old New Deal Left and the anti-authoritarianism of the New Left. Pinpointing 1967 and its much-publicized "Summer of Love," McCann and Szalay argue that this pivotal year marked "a decisive turning point in the history of oppositional politics in the US – a shift, years in the making, away from the organizational thinking of the Old Left to the meliorism of mainstream liberalism" (436). Essentially, for McCann and Szalay, organizational collective politics receded in the face of an increasingly individualistic culture of personal freedom, for the New Left put its faith in "the spontaneous, the symbolic, and ultimately, the magical" (436). Noting that major American novels since the social upheavals of the sixties have tended to echo the New Left's critique of bureaucratic faith embedded in the ideology of the Old Left, McCann and Szalay argue that writers such as Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, and Toni Morrison embraced not just an anti-government stance but an anti-politics stance characterized by "a fascination with the limits of calculation [that ran] hand in hand with a sacralization of the sublimely irrational," leading to the implicit thematic notion that "the most appropriate attitude toward mundane political conflict or social tension is the effort to transcend it" (449; 447). While they provide