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Introduction: The Rise of the American Biographical Novel

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Introduction: The Rise of the American Biographical Novel

Given all the biographical novels published over the last thirty years, we could probably assume that, if Robert Penn Warren wrote *All the King's Men* today, he would have named his protagonist Huey Long instead of Willie Stark. Indeed, Jay Parini, who was a friend of Warren's, claims that the novel would have been stronger had he done so: "In *All the King's Men*, written in the mid-forties, Robert Penn Warren felt tightly bound to the traditions of conventional historical fiction. I don't think he could see his way toward the contemporary forms of the biographical novel, or else he would have called his protagonist Huey Long, not Willie Stark."

Parini's remarks, of course, beg the question: What happened in the realm of ideas that made the biographical novel not just possible but also incredibly popular? To begin answering this question, let me explain what prohibited one of the twentieth-century's most likely writers from producing a biographical novel.

In her essay "The Art of Biography," Virginia Woolf maintains that the "novelist is free" to create, while "the biographer is tied"¹ to facts. Lytton Strachey and the new biographers of the early twentieth century revolutionized the biography by making liberal use of the creative imagination and fictional techniques in depicting a person's life, thus giving the artist/biographer the "freedom to invent" something new, "a book that was not only a biography but also a work of art."² But ultimately, Woolf concluded, this "combination proved unworkable," because "fact and fiction refused to mix."³ It should seem odd that Woolf would reject the biographical novel, because she published *Orlando: A Biography*. But for Woolf, it is impossible to reconcile the act of creating a living character and representing a person accurately. Therefore, as a biographer, she sought to represent the life of Roger Fry as accurately as she possibly could in her biography of the artist. But as a novelist, she thought that tethering herself to an actual person's

¹ Woolf (1942), "The Art of Biography," in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*. London: The Hogarth Press: 120.

² Woolf (1942): 123.

³ Ibid. For useful discussions of Woolf's complicated approach to biography, see Ray Monk's "This Fictitious Life: Virginia Woolf on Biography and Reality" and Mark Hussey's "Woolf: After Lives."

story would be death to her creative freedom. So while Woolf calls *Orlando* a biography, it is clear to her and the reader that it is fiction. After all, the subject is not a real person, but a fictional character that lives for more than 300 years, undergoes a non-surgical sex change from a man to a woman, and has a child. For Woolf, writers have to choose between the art of representing a person's life accurately, which would lead them to produce a biography, or creating a living and breathing character, which would lead them to produce a work of fiction. Blending the two in the form of the biographical novel is not an option.

For many biographical novelists, developments in postmodernism made it possible to fuse biography and the novel. For instance, Parini, Lance Olsen, Madison Smartt Bell, and Ron Hansen argue that it is no longer possible to treat historical and/or biographical representations as any more truthful than narratives of fiction because historians and biographers use the same rhetorical strategies, devices, and techniques as creative writers in constructing their narratives. Within this postmodern framework, fact is fiction, and consequently, history and biography, which were once considered to be separate and distinct from fiction, can no longer lay claim to being non-fictional. Michael Cunningham, Julia Alvarez, Joanna Scott, and Mark Allen Cunningham agree with this postmodern assessment, but they reverse the equation by underscoring the factualization of fiction. As Michael Cunningham explains, "there's no such thing as fiction, not in the absolute sense. Fiction writers work from our experience of the world and the people who inhabit it." If fact is not as factual as we once thought, neither is fiction as fictional as we once thought, which is why Cunningham concludes: "Some of us go to greater lengths than others to disguise that which we've seen and heard, but still, fiction can only arise out of what a writer has seen and heard. And so, it's really a question of degree." Contra Woolf, who claims that fact and fiction refuse to mix, these postmodernist writers argue that fact and fiction are inseparable, because fictional techniques play a crucial role in shaping fact, while facts provide the basis for fiction. This postmodern blending of fact and fiction is, in part, what made the biographical novel possible.

It was on November 6, 1968 that we first see prominent novelists in a contentious debate about the legitimacy of the biographical novel. The historian C. Vann Woodward moderated a forum with Warren, Ralph Ellison, and William Styron, and the topic was "The Uses of History in Fiction." When introducing the central ideas to be discussed, Woodward insists that there is a "distinction between the historian and the novelist."⁴

⁴ Ellison, et al., "The Uses of History in Fiction." *Southern Literary Journal* (Spring 1969): 59.

Unlike the novelist, the historian cannot "invent characters, invent motives for his characters."⁵ But Warren rejects this assumption because he holds that the past is always mediated through a specific consciousness, which means that historians, whether they realize it or not, use the creative imagination as much as novelists in order to construct their "historical characters."⁶ Though Warren claims that historians and novelists are the same in that they use the imagination to access and construct their subjects, he does make a distinction between the two. The fiction writer "claims to know the inside of his characters, the undocumentable inside," while the historian "wants to find the facts *behind* the world."⁷ Like Warren, Ellison rejects the idea that there is a distinction between "American historiography and American fiction," for "they're both artificial," which is why Ellison refers to historians as "responsible liars."⁸

Since Ellison considers history fiction, it would seem that he would favor the biographical novel. But such is not the case. At one point during the discussion, Ellison praises Warren for engaging history correctly in *All the King's Men*:

I think that Red Warren, who has always been concerned with history, has offered us an example of how to confront the problem of history as the novelist should. I think that when he wrote about a great American politician who governed his state and refused to intrude into the area of the historian, he refused because he was canny enough to realize that he could never get *that* particular man into fiction. And yet, I believe that he did use that man to bring into focus within his own mind many, many important facts about power, politics and class, and loyalty.⁹

Warren's decision not to name his character Huey Long was aesthetically sound and pragmatically astute, because he was able to articulate some crucial historical "truths" about the dynamics of power, the psychology of politics, and the structures of class. Had Warren ventured into the realm of the historian by specifically naming his character Huey Long, he would have failed to represent the complexity and details of the man and he would have made himself vulnerable to attack from historians. Indeed, Ellison specifies what historians would do to novelists were they to encroach on the historian's intellectual terrain: "the moment you put any known figures into the book, then somebody is going to say, 'But he didn't have that mole on that

⁵ Ellison et al. (1969): 59.

⁶ Ellison et al. (1969): 61.

⁷ Ibid. Warren's emphasis.

⁸ Ellison et al. (1969): 62.

⁹ Ellison et al. (1969): 64-5. Ellison's emphasis.

side of his face; it was on *that* side. You said that he had a wife; he didn't have a wife."¹⁰ Therefore, instead of naming the character after the original, as so many contemporary biographical novelists do, Ellison counsels writers to "lie and disguise a historical figure,"¹¹ as Warren did.

While Ellison's comments are about Warren's work, they are also a not-so-subtle critique of Styron's 1967 biographical novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, which differs from *All the King's Men* because he named his character after the original historical figure. This novel caused considerable controversy for exactly the reasons Ellison mentions: people claimed that Styron misrepresented Nat Turner and made factual errors about him. Styron was prepared for this objection, but ironically, he used the work of Georg Lukács to respond to Ellison and his critics. Citing a passage from Lukács' *The Historical Novel*, Styron argues that the novelist who has a commanding grasp of an historical period can alter certain facts in an effort to "reproduce the spirit of any age faithfully and authentically."¹² Later in the discussion, he insists that writers cannot totally dispense with facts and evidence. But he does use Lukács' work to say that novelists have the freedom to disregard "useless fact"¹³ in order to get to a more substantive historical truth.

Styron did himself no favor by citing Lukács, for if Styron had read *The Historical Novel* in whole, he would have realized that Lukács would have dubbed *The Confessions of Nat Turner* an unambiguous failure. For Lukács, the ultimate goal of the historical novel is to portray a "great historical truth"¹⁴ which it does through "the poetic awakening of the people who figured in"¹⁵ momentous historical events. "What matters," according to Lukács, "is that we should re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality,"¹⁶ and this is something that the historical novel is best suited to accomplish. Lukács favored the classical historical novel, because it effectively pictured the "derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age."¹⁷ Within this framework, the author must clearly understand and accurately represent "history as a process,"¹⁸ that is, the way historical concreteness functions according to rigorous and objective laws in shaping and determining the great socio-political collisions of a particular age.

¹⁰ Ellison et al. (1969): 74. Ellison's emphasis.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ellison et al. (1969): 66.

¹³ Ellison et al. (1969): 75.

¹⁴ Lukács (1962), *The Historical Novel*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press: 319.

¹⁵ Lukács (1962): 42.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Lukács (1962): 19.

¹⁸ Lukács (1962): 21.

Given this objective, the biographical novel is doomed to failure, because the focus on "the *biography of the hero*" leads authors to overlook or misrepresent significant historical events and truths, and thus "reveal the historical weakness of the biographical form of the novel."¹⁹ Should a particular person be the focal point of an historical novel, this figure would be treated as more important than the historical transformation, which would necessarily lead to a distorted image of the society and the age.²⁰ Obviously, Lukács would fault Styron for centering his novel in the consciousness of Nat Turner.

The varying critiques of the biographical novel by Woolf, Ellison, and Lukács are important because they reflect the judgments of the literary establishment, especially those who determine the Pulitzer Prize in fiction. The first biographical novel to pose a serious challenge for the Pulitzer committee was Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Significant is the fact that the committee did not yet have a suitable vocabulary or conceptual framework for making systematic sense of the biographical novel, which in part explains its difficulty in assessing it. The 1968 report notes "the Fiction Jury could not reach a unanimous opinion" about this novel, so it submitted a form with "a minority and a majority opinion and a possible compromise selection."²¹ To come to terms with its own confusion, there is an extended discussion of Styron's novel. The report is six pages long and consists of twenty-two paragraphs. Styron's novel is discussed in twelve of those paragraphs, and it is the exclusive subject of ten. The only other novel to come close is Isaac Bashevis Singer's *The Manor*, which is mentioned in six paragraphs and the primary subject of only two.

As important as the length and focus of the report are the comments about Styron's novel, which shed considerable light on the committee's assumptions and expectations regarding fiction. Even though Lukács would have characterized and faulted *The Confessions of Nat Turner* as a biographical novel, both Styron and the committee saw it as an historical novel. This is clear from the decision of John K. Hutchens, one of the committee members, to cite Styron, who says that *The Confessions* is "less an 'historical novel' than a meditation on history."²² Lessening the degree to which *The Confessions* is an historical novel does not negate it as one. And it is worth noting that, when Styron defined his novel during the forum with Ellison and Warren, he used Lukács' *The Historical Novel* to do so. What Hutchens admires so much about the work is Styron's ability to do two things simultaneously: to

¹⁹ Lukács (1962): 320. Lukács' emphasis.

²⁰ Lukács (1962): 321.

²¹ Fischer and Fischer (2007), *Chronicle of the Pulitzer Prizes for Fiction: Discussions, Decisions, Dissents*. Munich: K. G. Saur Verlag: 294.

²² Fischer and Fischer (2007): 294.

use rich, imaginative language in order to engage the reader and to represent the historical figure accurately. On the basis of these criteria, Hutchens concludes that Styron "has written what is, in my opinion, the finest American novel of 1967, and the one that promises to be most enduring as art and re-created history."²³

Maxwell Geismar and Melvin Maddocks were the two other readers, and they disagreed with Hutchens on both accounts. Their comments are useful, because they indicate what the members consider the freedom a writer is allowed and not allowed to take with the historical record. Geismar and Maddocks claim that *The Confessions* is a flawed novel because there are "serious defects in the use of its historical material" as well as the "prose style." It might seem that these two problems are separate and distinct, but for these readers they are actually inextricably linked. Maddocks claims that the novel's writing is "too smooth, too literary."²⁴ This is a problem because such literary language lacks verisimilitude. According to Geismar, instead of replicating the "early nineteenth century language" of Nat Turner or Thomas Gray, the lawyer who took the rebel slave's confession, "Styron has added a large percent of romantic Southern rhetoric to the point of making the novel's prose so fragrant, redolent, and prolix as to be overblown and luscious."²⁵ The literary expectation is this: for a historical novel to be effective and legitimate, the language must accurately reflect the way people spoke from the represented period, and if the language fails to do this, then the author must have a faulty understanding of the historical period.

Most prominent biographical novelists reject the Geismar/Maddocks view. In their effort to represent a structure of consciousness or a historical reality biographical novelists frequently subordinate empirical facts to a symbolic truth. For instance, when discussing the construction of her fictional characters, Joyce Carol Oates claims that her "characters are more interesting, elastic and subtle than the real people." Indeed, she goes on to say that the actual historical figures are "not nearly as nuanced or subtle as my fictitious characters." This is the case because Oates uses her characters to access and represent a larger historical and cultural truth. In their assessment of a literary work's engagement with history, Geismar and Maddocks acknowledge that novelists can use fiction to illuminate the historical record, but they forbid tampering with the literal facts, which explains why they drew a damning conclusion about *The Confessions of Nat Turner*: "while William Styron may have the right to 'invent' historical incidents within

²³ Fischer and Fischer (2007): 295.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Fischer and Fischer (2007): 297.

the framework of recorded history, he has in this book taken some dubious liberties with history itself."²⁶ For Geismar and Maddocks, Styron has the right to invent scenes that illuminate the established facts about history, but he does not have a right to alter history itself. But for Oates, altering history is precisely what the biographical novelist does.

So contra Geismar and Maddocks, biographical novelists unapologetically take "liberties with history itself." But what enables them to justify this is not so much a cynical rejection of historical truth as a subordination of a particular narrative truth. Russell Banks best articulates the philosophy underwriting the biographical novelist's approach to history. In *Cloudsplitter*, Banks describes a road that the Brown family takes on its journey to the Plains of Abraham, where the family settles. After the publication of the novel, a local historian contacted Banks complaining that he made an error because the "road alongside those lakes in 1848 [...] wasn't built until the 1870s." Banks said that he had a map of the area from the time period, so he knew that there was no road there in the 1840s. But that fact did not matter, because he wanted to picture the Brown family going along the road, which was shaped like "the blade of a scimitar," as a way of prefiguring "the bloody swords that they would use much later." When I asked him to clarify and justify his motivation for taking this liberty with the historical record, he said that he at times subordinates a historical fact to "a dramatic truth." More specifically, the dramatic truth about the psychic life of the Brown family is more important than a literal truth about a road.

To put the matter succinctly, all three Pulitzer committee members did not yet have an epistemological or aesthetic framework that would enable them to understand or appreciate the biographical novel. Geismar and Maddocks failed to see how Styron's subordination of certain historical facts enabled him to access and represent more substantive historical structures and truths. As for Hutchens, while he praises *The Confessions*, it is clear that he considers it a historical rather than a biographical novel.

It might seem that 1980 marks the official arrival of the biographical novel, for it was in this year that Norman Mailer received the Pulitzer Prize in fiction for *The Executioner's Song*, which chronicles the last nine months of Gary Mark Gilmore's life. But there are two separate reasons why this is not the case. First, by virtue of Mailer's own definition, *The Executioner's Song* would not qualify as a biographical novel. If, as Woolf argues, the art of representing a person accurately is the primary task of the biographer while the art of inventing scenes to create a living character is the primary task of the novelist, then Mailer's novel would qualify as a biography but

²⁶ Fischer and Fischer (2007): 296.

not a novel. As Mailer claims in his Afterword, *The Executioner's Song* is a "factual account," a "true life story."²⁷ The novel makes use of "interviews, documents, [and] records of court proceedings" to give readers "a factual account of the activities of Gary Gilmore,"²⁸ and when Mailer gets conflicting evidence about Gilmore, he chooses "the version that seemed most likely."²⁹ Given the absence of overt creative invention, it is difficult to justify calling *The Executioner's Song* fiction.

An example from Bruce Duffy's work will enable me to bring into sharp focus the distinction between *The Executioner's Song* and a biographical novel. While I have already discussed the postmodernist claim that fictionalizing reality is inescapable as the art of framing a character or story necessitates a creative shaping of material, biographical novelists do something more conscious and strategic. They invent stories that never occurred in order to answer perplexing questions, fill in cultural lacunae, or signify human interiors. For instance, Ludwig Wittgenstein had a conflicted sense of himself, for he was a Jew whose family became Catholic. In *The World as I Found It*, Duffy brilliantly pictures the famous biographical moment when Wittgenstein confesses to the philosopher G. E. Moore that he deceived him and others by concealing his Jewish heritage. Had Duffy only included scenes like Wittgenstein's confession, *The World As I Found It* would be an engaging biography and not a biographical novel. But to access and represent Wittgenstein's conflicted self, Duffy creates a scene much earlier in the novel with the Austrian philosopher in a Jewish theater, which features a play about the Jewish monster figure Yosele Golem, who is described as "a kind of beast or something." So captivated by the performance is Wittgenstein that "for five hard minutes he was the play, Yosele Golem."³⁰ During my interview, Duffy said that Wittgenstein is "so upset by a seemingly garish simple-minded scene—and so unconscious of his deeper emotions—that he passes out." This is the case because he was forced to confront in the theater "his true past," specifically his Jewish heritage. However, as Duffy told me, this scene never actually occurred. This is the kind of scene that does not appear in *The Executioner's Song*, which is why 1980 cannot be considered the official arrival year of the biographical novel.

This lack of strategic and overt invention explains the 1980 Pulitzer Committee's conflicted response to *The Executioner's Song*. The committee obviously recognized that there was a problem giving Mailer's work an award

for fiction, for it tries to make the case for it as a novel in the first sentence of the report: "*The Executioner's Song* is subtitled 'A True Life Novel!'"³¹ Something is not entirely right about this work, which is why the committee members feel the need to justify that it is actually a novel. Indeed, in its six-sentence report, the members strategically and repeatedly emphasize the way the novel expands "our conceptions of the limits of history and fiction" and "challenges our notions of fiction."³² The members obviously want to underscore how the novel challenges our definitions of fiction so that they can justify their decision to give Mailer an award for fiction. This becomes most apparent when we look at the letter that the chairman of the committee, Frank McConnell, submitted to the advisory board. McConnell notes that one committee member, Anatole Broyard, "expressed some concern that Mailer's book may not really be a novel (whatever that means)."³³ McConnell obviously didn't agree with that assessment, which is clear from his parenthetical interjection. But Broyard was rightly "worried that giving the prize to" Mailer's novel "may raise unpleasant controversy and embarrass the Pulitzer Committee,"³⁴ because, if it is correct to say that *The Executioner's Song* contains no overtly fictional characters or scenes, then it would be difficult to justify awarding it the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

The second reason why 1980 does not mark the official arrival of the biographical novel is the committee's subtle bias against the genre. The report says: "And although the story told is about real people, and based upon a great mass of documentary material, *The Executioner's Song* is an extraordinarily ambitious and powerful narrative."³⁵ Note the hint of surprise ("although") that a "novel" about a "real" person that uses "documentary material" could be a "powerful narrative." These are clearly people who have not yet read Duffy's *The World As I Found It*, Scott's *Arrogance*, Banks' *Cloudsplitter*, and Oates' *Blonde*. At this point, the literary establishment still needs to undergo a few more transformations before it could understand or appreciate the biographical novel.

The year 1999 represents a decisive move in favor of the biographical novel, for it was in this year that Cunningham's *The Hours* and Banks' *Cloudsplitter* were nominated for the Pulitzer, and that Cunningham's novel won the award.³⁶ Cunningham's novel is significant because it addresses the literary establishment directly. The novel features a prominent writer

²⁷ Mailer (1998), *The Executioner's Song*. New York: Vintage Books: 1053.

²⁸ Mailer (1998): 1051.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Duffy (2010), *The World As I Found It*. New York: New York Review Books: 145. Duffy's emphasis.

³¹ Fischer and Fischer (2007): 349.

³² Ibid.

³³ Fischer and Fischer (2007): 348

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Fischer and Fischer (2007): 349.

³⁶ Cunningham's *The Hours* also won the PEN/Faulkner Award.

(Richard) who receives an important literary award. For Cunningham's narrator, this prize "means that literature itself [...] seems to feel a need for Richard's particular contribution."³⁷ This is a wonderful way of articulating what happened with the Pulitzer committee. It felt a need at this time for the biographical novelist's contribution. After all, so many prominent writers published biographical novels by 1999 that it was impossible to ignore them.³⁸

Most encouraging, however, is the content of the Pulitzer's jury report, which indicates a shift in the literary establishment's aesthetic expectations and theory of knowledge. For instance, when discussing *The Hours*, the committee notes that a "fourth character is Woolf herself," which contributes to the novel's "four-person complexity."³⁹ Instead of assuming that a real person as a character would be a liability, as the 1980 Pulitzer committee did, the 1999 members recognize that such a literary choice could be a huge asset. What, in part, made this possible was the committee's acceptance of postmodernism. Before 1999, postmodernism was never mentioned in any Pulitzer jury report for fiction. But in the year that *The Hours* received the Pulitzer, the committee praised Cunningham for presenting "the floating post-modern world and generation that a number of contemporary writers have tackled, but none so artfully and movingly."⁴⁰ Rather than strictly demarcating fact and fiction, biography and the novel, or a historical figure and a fictional character, postmodernists suggest that fact is fiction and that fiction is inseparable from fact. This postmodernist shift made the committee understand and appreciate a hybrid aesthetic form such as the biographical novel, which is why we could say that the biographical novel was partially legitimized in 1999. I say partially because in his interview, Cunningham acknowledges that *The Hours* is only a partial biographical novel, as Woolf is only one of four main characters.

³⁷ Cunningham (1998), *The Hours*. New York: Picador, 64.

³⁸ From the 1930s through the 1980s, Irving Stone published a number of biographical novels, but these works have a formulaic feel and have not impacted major contemporary writers. Not one of the writers I interviewed mentioned him. A few works that had a significant impact before 1999 include: Arna Bontemps' *Black Thunder* (1936); Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939); William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967); Gore Vidal's *Burr* (1973) and *Lincoln* (1984); Bruce Duffy's *The World As I Found It* (1987); Joanna Scott's *Arrogance* (1990); Jay Parini's *The Last Station* (1990) and *Benjamin's Crossing* (1997); Irvin Yalom's *When Nietzsche Wept* (1992); Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994); Madison Smartt Bell's *All Souls' Rising* (1995); David Mamet's *The Old Religion* (1997); and Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent* (1997).

³⁹ Fischer and Fischer (2007): 424.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

The convergence of history and fiction

At this point, I want to focus on concurrent developments in history and fiction that made the biographical novel possible and extremely popular. In the nineteenth century, history became an institutionalized discipline that conceived of itself as a science. As such, it distanced itself from literature by expanding and hardening the dichotomy between fact and fiction. Within this framework, historical fact became more dogmatically factual while imaginative fiction became more fantastically fictional. There were, to be sure, prominent nineteenth-century detractors, like Friedrich Nietzsche, who rejected the fact/fiction dichotomy by exposing the degree to which the scientific historian's established fact is really an anthropomorphic construction, thus suggesting that a (personal or communal) power interest played a much more crucial role in the formation of historical fact than the seemingly neutral and objective observers of history were willing to admit. But it wasn't until the 1960s, with the linguistic turn in multiple disciplines, the provincialization of western thought, the deconstruction of the correspondence theory of truth, and the valorization of postmodernism, that the fact/fiction binary was systematically and comprehensively dismantled.⁴¹ Perhaps no writer, with the exceptions of Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, anticipated the postmodern fusion of history and fiction more than Walter Benjamin. In 1997, Parini published *Benjamin's Crossing*, a biographical novel about the final year of Benjamin's life. In this work, Parini brilliantly dramatizes one of Benjamin's most important contributions to intellectual history, and it is this contribution that would pave the way for the biographical novel: "Benjamin believed that the equivalent of a Copernican revolution in thinking must occur. Fiction would replace history, or become history."⁴² By 1997, that revolution was well underway, which is why Parini could publish a biographical novel that simultaneously discusses and enacts that revolution.

⁴¹ For discussions about the history of history, see Hayden White's *Tropics of Discourse, The Content of Form, and Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* and Georg G. Iggers' *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*. For a discussion of the linguistic turn, see E. L. Doctorow's "False Documents," Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* and Judith Ryan's *The Novel after Theory*. For discussions of the provincialization of western thought, see Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* and Edward Said's *Orientalism and Culture and Imperialism*. For discussions of the deconstruction of the correspondence theory of truth, see Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Order of Things*. For discussions about the rise of postmodernism, see Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, Linda Hutcheon's *Poetics of Postmodernism*, and Ryan's *The Novel after Theory*.

⁴² Parini (1997), *Benjamin's Crossing*. New York: Henry Holt: 62.

According to Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, the mounting post-World War Two incredulity toward metanarratives gave rise to a new form of fiction, one that effectively fuses fact and fiction. For instance, in 1965, Truman Capote published *In Cold Blood*, which has been misleadingly referred to as a "nonfiction novel," a phrase that Capote, in his self-promoting way, coined in interviews about his book.⁴³ For Zavarzadeh, the fictive novel provides an overarching interpretation of the world, an "epiphanic vision" that illuminates "the ultimate structure of reality."⁴⁴ But given the postmodern exposure of such metavisions as phantoms of an overheated imagination, the traditional approach to the novel no longer made sense, so the nonfiction novelists created a work with a "noninterpretive stance"⁴⁵ to the world.

With regard to literary history, and specifically the rise and legitimation of the American biographical novel, the Capote case has done more to muddle and confuse than anything else, which is clear from Beverley Southgate's recent study *History Meets Fiction* (2009). This is a superb work of scholarship that clarifies the intellectual developments that led to the blending of fact and fiction, history and literature. Less compelling, however, is Southgate's discussion of *In Cold Blood*, which he uncritically refers to as a nonfiction novel. If we think of a novel as fiction, then we could say it invents a world that is not required to literally represent historical events and persons. And if we think of history as nonfiction, then we could say it seeks to represent as literally as possible the events and persons that exist in the world outside the text. Given these two separate activities, Capote's work would be considered nonfiction, as he makes clear in his Acknowledgments: "All the material in this book not derived from my own observation is either taken from official records or is the result of interviews with persons directly concerned, more often than not numerous interviews conducted over a considerable period of time."⁴⁶ These prefatory remarks have led Southgate to say of Capote's book: "One could hardly better that as a statement of correct procedures for a contemporary historian."⁴⁷ But while Southgate considers the book typical history, he also calls it fiction. Startling, however, is Southgate's implicit definition of a novel, which is based not so much on an author's act of fictional creation as the reader's experience of a particular

⁴³ Hollowell (1977), *Fact & Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press: x.

⁴⁴ Zavarzadeh (1976), *The Mythopoeic Reality: The Postwar American Nonfiction Novel*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press: 42.

⁴⁵ Zavarzadeh (1976): 42.

⁴⁶ Capote (1965), *In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences*. New York: Random House: Acknowledgments.

⁴⁷ Southgate (2009), *History Meets Fiction*. Harlow: Longman/Pearson Education Limited: 34.

text: "*In Cold Blood* is a novel—fiction—inasmuch as it is an imaginative construction written to hold the attention of its readers, and make them want to keep on reading."⁴⁸ Given this description, novelists are different from historians and biographers because they know how to write in an engaging way. By this logic, if a historian or biographer were to write a captivating work, it would cease to be history or biography and would, therefore, become fiction. This obviously is a dubious definition of fiction. Given Capote's approach to the material and what *In Cold Blood* actually does, it would be more accurate to refer to it as a page-turning history or biography than a nonfiction novel.

At stake here is not what writers are doing as much as the scholarly definition of writing in the postmodern age, and no work has done more to bring clarity to the discussion than Linda Hutcheon's 1988 study *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, which is subtitled *History, Fiction, Theory*. It was this triad that enabled Hutcheon to formulate her most enduring contribution to literary history, which is the idea of historiographic metafiction. The postmodern theorist's recognition that history and fiction are human constructs enables writers to rethink and revise accepted versions of the past. Historiographic metafiction incorporates historical events into a literary work, but given its awareness of crucial developments in theory, it also reflects in a critical way on the questionable process of converting those events into an official version of history. In his interview, Lance Olsen incisively expresses how Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction can be used to illuminate his work and the biographical novel more generally. But Hutcheon's model can also be used to explain a major development from Capote's *In Cold Blood* to Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*. In *The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative*, Phyllis Frus claims that Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* are the first to take the label of the "nonfiction novel."⁴⁹ However, she argues that Mailer's novel goes beyond Capote's in that it contains critical self-reflections that call attention to the narrative construction of history and thereby tacitly undermines its own narratorial authority,⁵⁰ which is why Mailer's work is much closer to Hutcheon's historiographical metafiction than Capote's *In Cold Blood*. But because *The Executioner's Song* lacks the overt creative invention of a novel, it would actually be more accurate to refer to it as historiographic metabiography than historiographic metafiction.

⁴⁸ Southgate (2009): 35. Southgate's emphasis.

⁴⁹ Frus (1994), *The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative: The Timely and the Timeless*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 181.

⁵⁰ Frus (1994): 181–4.

Literature and the subconscious

The questions at this point are these: what has made contemporary writers so willing to go beyond Capote and Mailer by inventing characters and scenes and altering historical and biographical facts in the biographical novel? And what has led ordinary readers and the literary establishment to accept such liberties? While there are many competing answers to these questions, one of the most important revolves around our growing understanding of the subconscious. Nietzsche articulates most clearly the idea that would have a decisive impact on both the content and form of post-nineteenth-century literature. In *The Case of Wagner*, Nietzsche formulates a two-tiered conception of the human, which significantly undermines the trustworthiness and authority of the knowing human subject: "all of us have, unconsciously, involuntarily in our bodies values, words, formulas, moralities of *opposite* descent—we are, physiologically considered, *false*."⁵¹ There exist in our bodies words, values, formulas, and moralities that frequently conflict with our rational conception of ourselves. For instance, on a conscious level, we might say to others and ourselves: I am not a racist. But at the subconscious level, many of us have absorbed and internalized racist words and values, which make many of us "racist" despite our intentions to the contrary. Given the way words, values, moralities, and formulas of opposite descent invade our bodies without our consent ("unconsciously, involuntarily"), it is impossible for us to be physiologically true.

This model impacted post-nineteenth-century literature in two separate ways. First, many prominent writers shifted their focus from the realist's external world, which was now seen as superficial and untrustworthy, to the world of the subconscious, which was now regarded as more fundamental and primary. Second, many prominent writers used this two-tier model to illuminate contradictory political behavior. For example, Richard Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son* examines the contradictory psychology of a typical white American liberal. Mr. Dalton donates money to the NAACP, hires underprivileged blacks, and supports racial uplift. And yet, much of his fortune comes from the massive exploitation of blacks—he charges exorbitant rents for rat-infested apartments in all-black areas of Chicago. How is it possible to explain that a white liberal, who philanthropically hires Bigger Thomas, makes his fortune by systematically exploiting and violating blacks, such as the Thomas family which is forced to live in one of Dalton's

⁵¹ Nietzsche (1967), *The Case of Wagner*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books: 192. Nietzsche's emphasis.

slum tenements? In an essay titled "How 'Bigger' Was Born," Wright offers an explanation. What concerned him is less people's conscious and rational thought than "the implicit, almost unconscious, or pre-conscious, assumptions and ideals upon which whole nations and races act and live."⁵² To put the matter starkly, post-nineteenth-century novelists were starting to realize that, if they want to understand the deepest and most important "truths" about humans, then they need to find a way to access and represent not what people consciously say and think about themselves, but the underground mental life, which frequently contradicts what people say and believe about themselves.⁵³ The deepest "truth" about Dalton is not to be found in his philanthropic statements and efforts, but his "unconscious, or pre-conscious" assumptions, which lead him to contradict what he says and does.

This focus on the subconscious is of crucial importance for Gore Vidal, who could be described as one of the most important figures in the development of the American biographical novel.⁵⁴ Vidal published *Burr* in 1973 and *Lincoln* in 1984, and he provides a way for understanding why contemporary biographical novelists feel free to invent scenes and characters in order to illuminate the life of an actual historical figure. According to Vidal, one gets "to the essence of a culture not by looking at what is said but by looking at what is not said, the underlying assumptions of the society, too obvious to be stated. Truth—or some crucial aspect of truth—resides in those silences."⁵⁵ The aesthetic task of the novelist, therefore, is to develop aesthetic techniques for accessing and representing a person's or a culture's subconscious.

Oates' spectacular novel *Blonde*, which portrays the transformation of Norma Jeane into Marilyn Monroe, brilliantly deploys and justifies one of the most important techniques for illuminating the subconscious. For example, when working on a scene for the film *Niagara*, Oates' Norma

⁵² Wright (1998), "How 'Bigger' was Born," in *Native Son*. New York: Perennial Classics: 445.

⁵³ Wright's two-tiered portrayal unleashed a massive reaction against white liberals, which would reach its apex in the 1960s. For a wonderfully insightful discussion of this development, see Lawrence P. Jackson's *The Indignant Generation*.

⁵⁴ The line of connection between Vidal and contemporary biographical novelists goes through Jay Parini. Parini and Vidal were close friends, and in 1990, Parini published *The Last Station*, a biographical novel that has been published in more than twenty-five languages and made into a Hollywood film. Parini acknowledges that Vidal offered him useful suggestions for writing *The Last Station*. Parini is also heavily involved with Bread Loaf, the famous writer's conference at Middlebury College. Many of the most prominent biographical novelists today have had close contact with Parini and have been debating the aesthetics of the biographical novel with him for the last twenty-five years.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Jay Parini (1997), "Mentors," in *Some Necessary Angels: Essays on Writing and Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press: 15–16.

Jeane expresses concern to the director that her character Rose Loomis is formulaic and underdeveloped. This is typical 1950s Hollywood, which consistently portrays females as simplistic clichés. Oates' Norma Jeane wants to give her character depth, so she asks if she can rewrite some of the dialogue. The answer, of course, is no. So she decides to act the character in a way that would express Rose's complexity. To clarify her approach, Oates' Norma Jeane says to the director:

It came to me last night. Rose had a baby, I think. And the baby died. I didn't realize it consciously but that's why I play Rose this way. She has to be more than the script says; she's a woman with a secret.⁵⁶

Norma Jeane clearly does not consider this story literally true, for she says that she thinks rather than knows that Rose had a baby. More importantly, Rose's "secret" is not something that is consciously represented in the script or film, for it occurs on a subconscious level ("I didn't realize it consciously"). In preparing to act the character, Norma Jeane detects something in the behavior that requires an explanation, something that functions at the level of the subconscious to impact and determine Rose's mysterious behavior. The only way to make sense of the character is to invent a story that would clarify the visible action. The story may not be true in a literal sense, but it rings true insofar as it functions to illuminate the truth of the character's complexity. In this instance, projecting into being a subconscious secret creates a more plausible female character, one more truthful and authentic than Hollywood's cardboard women of the 1950s.

Just as Oates' Norma Jeane invented this scene in order to illuminate the "truth" of Rose's female complexity, so too has Oates invented this scene in order to illuminate the "truth" of Norma Jeane's female complexity. After Norma Jeane tells the director about her approach to Rose's character, he resorts to an *ad hominem* attack: "A dizzy blonde he'd want to call her. That was the quickest strategy of dismissal. Was he worried she'd undermine his authority as director, the way 'Rose Loomis' undermined the authority and manhood of her husband?"⁵⁷ Hollywood males have a subconscious agenda, which is to typecast Monroe into the role of the dumb blonde. But Oates' Norma Jeane knows the men's subconscious goal, which is to straitjacket women into the role of a weak, dependent, and harmless plaything, and she has strategically devised an approach to undermine the men's efforts. But the director, who assumes that Norma Jeane is as mindless as the female character in his film, cannot imagine that Norma Jeane has the intelligence

⁵⁶ Oates (2009), *Blonde: A Novel*. New York: Ecco: 330.

⁵⁷ Oates (2009): 330. Oates' emphasis.

to grasp and portray character complexity or to read and challenge his patriarchal agenda. To expose the director's flawed assumptions, Oates renders Norma Jeane's complexity, which gives the lie to the director's sexist assumptions. In essence, what sets Rose and Norma Jeane apart from the husband and director is their complexity and depth, the women's "secret" life of the subconscious that the men can neither see nor appreciate.

What Oates brilliantly does in *Blonde* is to create a fictional scene in order to express a subtextual biographical "truth." The scene she invents about Norma Jeane is not true literally because it did not occur, as Oates said in her interview with me. However, the "truths" about the patriarchal agenda of creating mindless female characters and Norma Jeane's effort to debunk male projections of women accurately reflect the kind of subtextual battle between the actual Hollywood and the real Norma Jeane. Therefore, the novelist's creative invention has enabled Oates to portray not a literal "truth" about Norma Jeane's day-to-day experiences on the set of a film but, as Vidal says, an underlying "truth" regarding the conflict between Hollywood's patriarchal assumptions and Norma Jeane's feminist agenda, "truths" that reside in the subconscious silences that inform and illuminate visible action.

The cultural shift from the deductive to the inductive imagination

The growing skepticism about and discontentment with the universal and the ahistorical certainly contributed to the rise of the biographical novel. From Nietzsche, through Wittgenstein, to the French poststructuralists, there was a mounting suspicion that ahistorical pronouncements, what Jean-François Lyotard refers to as metanarratives, are not only epistemologically untrustworthy but also politically dangerous. Zavarzadeh argues that it was this incredulity toward the ahistorical metanarrative that gave birth to the nonfiction novel, which immerses readers in a welter of historical facts and refuses to provide an overarching explanation to unify the particulars. Such approaches totally dispense with ahistorical claims. While many contemporary biographical novelists adopt the postmodernist view that all knowledge systems are human inventions, most do not dispense with the universal or the ahistorical. Different for them, however, is the nature of the overarching claim within a literary text. To bring into sharp focus the difference, let me return to "The Uses of History in Fiction" debate in 1968, because it reflects the major cultural shift that gave rise to the biographical novel.

Ellison makes the case "for the autonomy of fiction" which is why he says "that novelists should leave history alone."⁵⁸ For Ellison, the writer's task "is to create symbolic actions which are viable specifically, and which move across all of our differences and all of the diversities of the atmosphere."⁵⁹ This describes perfectly what Ellison does in *Invisible Man*. Like many twentieth-century American writers, Ellison addresses the contradiction at the core of the contemporary western polity, which could be stated thus: Contemporary western political systems seemingly support the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all people. Yet, these same political systems have developed strategic methods for excluding large segments of the population from obtaining such rights. To illuminate the psychological epistemology that enables political leaders to justify their contradictory behavior, Ellison creates the Brotherhood. The political agenda of the Brotherhood is of ultimate importance for both the members and the leaders. Therefore, if individuals cannot advance one of the Brotherhood's objectives, they exist outside history. As such, they can be used and abused with impunity. The problem here is not that political leaders take sadistic pleasure in violating those outside history—this is Cross Damon's view of political leaders in Wright's *The Outsider*. Within the framework of Ellison's novel, the problem is that, given the construction of their inner eyes, the political leaders do not even see those who exist outside of their history-making agenda. As for the members of the Brotherhood, the political leaders frequently do not see them as individuals, because they only see them as instruments for advancing the goals of the organization. Within this context, as soon as a political agenda is established within a person's body, the psychological epistemology will determine what can and cannot be seen, what does and does not belong to history.

From the time it was first published, readers have suggested that the Brotherhood is really the Communist Party. But as Arnold Rampersad notes, Ellison pointed "out repeatedly that the Brotherhood is an invention. It is, indeed, no more the Communist Party than Invisible's college is Tuskegee Institute."⁶⁰ Ellison was adamant on this score because his approach to the novel was based on the power of the deductive imagination. Once Ellison details the way a psychological epistemology functions within the Brotherhood to render certain people and groups invisible, that model could be applied to many people and groups, such as the Republican Party, the Democratic Party, and the Communist Party. If the Brotherhood were the

⁵⁸ Ellison et al. (1969): 73.

⁵⁹ Ellison et al. (1969): 74.

⁶⁰ Rampersad (2008), *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*. New York: Vintage Books: 245.

same as the historically specific Communist Party, then his novel would no longer contain its most important "symbolic actions" that could apply to a wide variety of political parties.

During the 1968 forum, Ellison appeared defensive and aggressive in relation to Styron, but there was a good reason why. At stake was Ellison's approach to the novel as cultural criticism and social critique, and the rise of the biographical novel signaled the decline of the deductive imagination, which was central to Ellison's aesthetic. The deductive-imagination approach starts with an ahistorical precept, which can then, through an act of the imagination, be applied to specific political groups and people. Put more concretely, once readers understand how the Brotherhood's psychological epistemology functions, they can then use their imagination to apply Ellison's model to many specific parties, people, and organizations in the real world. But given the growing skepticism about universals and metanarratives, there was a shift away from aesthetic models that started with an ahistorical precept and a shift toward models that foregrounded the historically specific, which explains why the biographical novel became increasingly more popular with both average readers and prominent writers after the 1970s.

Central to the new aesthetic of the biographical novel is the inductive imagination. Unlike the so-called nonfiction novelists, who refuse to offer an overarching vision, biographical novelists immerse themselves in a historically specific figure in order to draw a more cross-cultural conclusion. To illustrate, let me briefly discuss Madison Smartt Bell's trilogy about Toussaint Louverture. These works intelligently and poignantly portray the bizarre forms of racist logic that enabled France to justify its brutal enslavement and violation of Haitians. Most ironic, of course, is that the democratic ideals of the French Revolution were not seen as applicable to blacks in Haiti. In a response to a historian's subtle critique and extensive praise of the trilogy, Bell indicates how his novels function to illuminate not just the political situation in Haiti but also the United States.

In his essay, Bell claims "Haitian society has gone much further toward solving the problem of racism, derived from the history of colonialism en masse, than has the society of the United States."⁶¹ After citing examples to support his point about the persistence of racism in the United States, Bell says that the "root of the problem is a good two hundred years in the past, enlaced with the three revolutions that concluded the eighteenth century."⁶² If

⁶¹ Madison Smartt Bell (2001), "Engaging the Past," in *Novel History: Historians and Novelists Confront America's Past (and Each Other)*. Mark C. Carnes (ed.). New York and London: Simon & Schuster: 207.

⁶² Ibid.

we want to make some progress in eradicating contemporary race problems, examining the situation in Haiti (as represented in Bell's trilogy) would supply some answers. This is the case because, while Haiti, France, and the United States had revolutions that supposedly extended human rights to all people, only Haiti actually extended such rights to blacks. For Bell, the "failure of the American and French Revolutions to extend their ideology to all people created fault lines in the societies that resulted from them, fault lines that still promise and produce earthquakes today."⁶³ Given this failure, the situation seems dire. However, literature can move us forward, for if we understand and internalize the lessons of the Haitian Revolution, this would enable us to bring to fruition the democratic ideals implicit in our own incomplete Revolution. As Bell claims in the concluding sentence of his essay, "we must embrace the Haitian Revolution before we can fulfill our own."⁶⁴

Through extensive research and expert artistic representation, the skillful biographical novelist immerses readers in a historical situation. In the case of Bell's trilogy, this enables readers to see some of the root causes of the race problem in Haiti. Having understood the historically specific example, readers can then use the inductive imagination to do a cross-cultural analysis and application. The biographical novelist's approach is the perfect response to the old-school universalism informing Ellison's work, which Edmund White unambiguously denounces in his interview, and the noninterpretive stance of the so-called nonfiction novelists. Ellison claims that fiction "manipulates reality, as it tries to get at those abiding human predicaments which are ageless and timeless."⁶⁵ The biographical novelists of the postmodern age are certainly less comfortable making "ageless and timeless" Truth claims. But neither do they abandon their role as social and political critics, so they clearly reject the nonfiction novelist's approach of refusing to take an interpretive stance. Literature that appeals to the inductive imagination is the response to the two extremes. Instead of inventing a symbolic character or group that exposes and expresses a timeless truth (Mr. Dalton in *Native Son* or the Brotherhood in *Invisible Man*), biographical novelists derive a "truth" from the experiences of a concrete historical figure. But the "truth" that they derive is not a traditional universal, which would apply to all people in all places at all times. Rather, it is a cross-cultural and cross-temporal "truth" which we could refer to as a limited or provisional universal.⁶⁶

⁶³ Bell (2001): 207–8.

⁶⁴ Bell (2001): 208.

⁶⁵ Ellison et al. (1969): 64.

⁶⁶ For an insightful and useful discussion of provisional and constructed universals, see the debates of Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek in *Contingency, Hegemony,*

For example, Bell does not make a universal claim that is supposed to illuminate all racist polities, including, let us say, Nazi Germany. His focus is on those countries that had democratic revolutions in the eighteenth century but struggled with extending human rights to blacks. A cross-temporal and cross-cultural application of Bell's insights about Haiti would enable Americans to illuminate the contradictory ideology on which our contemporary political system is based. We see this same strategy and approach in Banks' *Cloudsplitter*. Banks examines the racist views of nineteenth-century Americans, but he also explores the taboo topic of homosexual desire through his narrator, Owen Brown, who is a repressed homosexual. When I asked him if there was evidence to suggest that Brown was homosexual, he said no. However, he said that there were parallels between the race issues of the nineteenth century and the issues of homosexuality of the twentieth century. Through a cross-temporal act of the inductive imagination, it is possible to see how nineteenth-century racism can be used to illuminate twentieth- and twenty-first-century homophobia.

Developments in Oates' corpus best chart the transformation in the literary imagination. In *Blonde*, Oates insightfully pictures the contradictory psychology of prominent American politicians. As a liberal, it would seem that JFK would have a progressive view of women. But in his relationship with Monroe, he is "a patrician patriarch."⁶⁷ With regard to the inductive imagination, JFK is not merely a typical male of the 1960s. He also represents the contradictory psychology of a powerful male liberal of the 1990s. Notice how Oates draws a clear parallel between JFK and Bill Clinton. Marilyn enters the President's room, and he is on the phone talking to "a White House adviser or cabinet member."⁶⁸ Oates describes what happens in a way that unmistakably recalls the Monica Lewinsky scandal: "Glamely the Blond Actress began to stroke the President's penis, as one might stroke a charming but unruly pet while its owner looked on proudly. Yet, to her annoyance, the President didn't hang up the phone."⁶⁹ Published in 2000, this novel was written in the late 1990s, at the height of the Lewinsky affair. But what is crucial to note is the transformation in Oates' writing during this period.

Like Wright, Oates targets the contradictory psychology of white male liberals in her fiction. Also like Wright, she authors a work that requires readers to use the deductive imagination to critique the American polity. That novella is *Black Water*, which was published in 1992 and is like Warren's

Universality. For a rehabilitation of the universal within the context of literature and cognitive studies, see Patrick Colm Hogan's "Literary Universals."

⁶⁷ Oates (2009): 708.

⁶⁸ Oates (2009): 705.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

All the King's Men in that it does not name the protagonist after the original figure. This novella is clearly based on the 1969 Chappaquiddick incident, when Senator Ted Kennedy had a car accident that resulted in the death of Mary Jo Kopechne, who is named Kelly Kelleher in the novella. But instead of naming her character Kennedy, Oates simply refers to him as the Senator. Also, the novella is set in the 1990s, after the first war in Iraq had already started, and the incident occurs on July 4 rather than July 18, thus giving it much more political significance. These changes enable Oates to construct a symbolic character (a universal or metanarrative) that embodies the reckless patriarchal psychology of so many prominent political figures of the 1990s. And once this symbolic character is clearly defined, readers could then use the deductive imagination to illuminate the behavior of a wide range of powerful American males.

By 2000, with the publication of *Blonde*, Oates produced fiction that required readers to use the inductive rather than the deductive imagination. Oates names her character Marilyn Monroe, and while she never actually refers to the President as JFK, the historical correspondences make such a conclusion inescapable. That historical specificity functions as an argument confirming Oates' critique of the patriarchy. This is not the work of the fictive imagination, which can easily concoct a sexist character that could be used to critique powerful males in the real world. In the postmodern age, we are more skeptical of such fictional abstractions because they resemble ahistorical precepts or traditional metanarratives. What we see in *Blonde*, therefore, is an empirical portrait of a known philanderer, whose reprehensible behavior contributed to the death of an actual woman. But Oates' concern is not just the patriarchal politics of the 1960s. By subtly using details from the Lewinsky case to describe JFK's treatment of Monroe, Oates invites readers to use the inductive imagination to draw a clear link between the patriarchal politics of JFK and Clinton. What JFK did in the 1960s Clinton continued to do in the 1990s. Or, read the other way, we can use the records from the Lewinsky case in order to illuminate what occurred between Monroe and JFK. My point is this: There is something much more penetrating and persuasive about literature that requires an act of the inductive rather than the deductive imagination, which, in part, explains why the biographical novel has become increasingly popular.

To be more specific, *Blonde* is a much more compelling critique of white male liberals than either Wright's *Native Son* or Oates' *Black Water*, because she avoids the charge of using the fictive imagination to concoct a sexist character that functions like an ahistorical Truth. By naming names and fictionalizing factual figures, Oates produces a searing portrait that is much more difficult to dismiss as the product of a paranoid or a runaway

imagination. And by inviting readers to use the inductive imagination to link the white male liberals of the 1960s and the 1990s, Oates makes her implicit argument and cultural critique both persuasive and relevant. The shift from the deductive to the inductive imagination not only makes logical sense, but it is also a necessary aesthetic move for contemporary writers who want to continue in their role as the culture's most insightful social critics.

The interviews

The interviews in this volume have more than just individual merit. They are valuable in relation to each other. For example, in 1997 Anita Diamant published *The Red Tent*, which was, as Terry R. Wright notes, "a publishing phenomenon."⁷⁰ This biographical novel imagines the life of Dinah, who is raped in Genesis. After the rape, there is almost no information about Dinah in the Bible. But in *The Red Tent*, Diamant imagines what happens to Dinah both before the rape (also absent from the Bible) and after, as she goes to Egypt, bears a son, becomes a midwife, and gets married. This international best-seller sold more than two million copies and has been translated into twenty languages. Given its extraordinary success, it only makes sense that subsequent writers would author biographical novels about female religious figures, so Sherry Jones published *The Jewel of the Medina* (2008) and *The Sword of the Medina* (2009), which picture the life of Muhammad's nine-year old child bride A'isha; and Rebecca Kanner published *Sinners and the Sea* (2013), which gives a name and a voice to the nameless and voiceless wife of Noah from Genesis. Both Jones and Kanner acknowledge their debt to Diamant, but they also take this subgenre of the biographical novel in a different direction. This is important, because if we want to chart and define the evolution and nature of this subgenre, it is useful to hear how these writers conceive their work in relation to each other.

But here I want to issue a word of caution and to clarify my decision to put the interviews in alphabetical order. There was a temptation to organize the interviews according to subgenres. For instance, Diamant, Jones, and Kanner have written biographical novels about female figures from a religious tradition, so I could have created a section that contained the interviews of these three writers. However, an equally legitimate subsection such as feminist biographical novels would have probably included Diamant,

⁷⁰ Wright (2007), *The Genesis of Fiction: Modern Novelists as Biblical Interpreters*. Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate: 113.

Jones, Kanner, Oates, Scott, Alvarez, and Kate Moses. In other words, categories obviously shift dramatically on the basis of the overarching descriptor, and many of the novels and novelists categorized here could appear in multiple categories.

Even though I do not use a subgenre classification system to organize the interviews, I do ask writers to locate their work within specific traditions. One provocative and insightful subgenre could be the slavery insurrectionist biographical novel, which would include Bontemps' *Black Thunder*, Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Bell's *All Souls' Rising*, and Banks' *Cloudsplitter*. Another subgenre could be the biographical *Künstlerroman*, which would include Scott's *Arrogance*, Oates' *Blonde*, M. Allen Cunningham's *Lost Son*, White's *Hotel de Dream*, Parini's *Passages of H.M.*, and Moses' *Wintering*. Many of the novels focus on anti-Semitism, which would mean that Scott's *Arrogance* would be in the same tradition as Duffy's *The World as I Found It*, Parini's *Benjamin's Crossing*, Olsen's *Nietzsche's Kisses*, and Hansen's *Hitler's Niece*. There is obvious value in asking writers to think about their work within specific traditions, but there is also a clear danger of pigeon-holing their work, which is another reason I have decided not to organize the interviews according to subgenres.

With regard to the interviews, it is important to note that these are not exact transcriptions. I recorded all interviews, which I immediately sent to my research assistants, who transcribed them. I then spent a few days editing them, eliminating redundancy and fluff and refining the language. Finally, I sent each edited version to the author, who had the opportunity to add, delete, or revise. The author then sent the final copy to me. This process varied from one writer to the next. Many authors only reviewed and edited one version of the interview. Others went through multiple drafts. I always left it up to the writers to determine when the interview was complete.

I see this work as merely a beginning. There are many more great American biographical novelists, but because of limited time and resources, I could not include them in this volume. For instance, I would have gladly interviewed David Mamet, Margaret Cezair-Thompson, Jerome Charyn, Therese Anne Fowler, Geraldine Brooks, Jim Shepard, Bruce Olds, Brian Hall, David Maine, and Barbara Mujica, just to name a notable few. I especially regret not having interviewed Vidal before his recent passing. But I believe this book honors him and his work by acknowledging and carrying on his legacy.

What really needs to be done is to clearly define what the biographical novel is uniquely capable of doing. In 1986, Milan Kundera breathed new life into the novel by encouraging us "to discover what only the novel can

discover."⁷¹ Shifts in our theories of knowledge have necessitated corresponding developments in the form of the novel, so what is needed are studies that clarify precisely what only the biographical novel can discover. Liam McIlvanney and Ray Ryan recently published an edited collection of essays titled *The Good of the Novel*, and they have rightly noted that "the novelness of novels is coming back"⁷² in part because of the decline of theory. I have strategically avoided interjecting too much theory into the interviews not just because of its decline but also because most of the writers in this volume consider it mind-numbing and intellectually reductive. One writer went so far as to say to me off the record that the current crisis in the humanities is a consequence of theory's alienating, obscure, and anti-democratic jargon. In many ways, I have followed McIlvanney and Ryan's lead by posing questions that any serious thinking person who loves reading literature could ask: "What is it that the novel knows? What kinds of truth can the novel tell?"⁷³ My questions in these interviews are the same, but they narrow the focus by discussing specifically the biographical novel. My audience, however, is not just academics. These interviews should engage people in and out of the university, and they do what all novels should do, which is to expand our understanding of the world and each other, raise perplexing questions about life, and confirm that humans are insoluble mysteries.

⁷¹ Kundera (1988), *The Art of the Novel*. New York: HarperPerennial: 5.

⁷² McIlvanney and Ryan (2011), *The Good of the Novel*. New York: Continuum International: viii.

⁷³ McIlvanney and Ryan (2011): xii.