



# AMERICAN FICTION IN TRANSITION

**Observer-Hero Narrative, the 1990s,  
and Postmodernism**

**ADAM KELLY**

B L O O M S B U R Y

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*For Anne and Liam*



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## Preface

The image by Gregory Crewdson that appears on the cover of this book depicts an archetypal American scene. In a small town, in the middle of a street soaked by rain and artificial light, a man stands perplexed, having lost something obscure but important. Surrounded by gloom and shadow, the figure—perhaps a detective, perhaps a gangster, perhaps a salesman—is a morally ambiguous hero in the American grain, caught in a moment of transition between what has been done to him and what he is about to do in reaction.

The image is composed in a manner that does not allow the viewer entirely to enter the man's world, however. Its intermedial quality—this is a photograph, but it could easily be mistaken for a painting, a digital graphic, or a movie still—draws attention to its artificiality and staginess, as does its heightened color, stark lines, and ordered composition. And though it is taken with a camera, the image points less to a recognizably real world than to familiar artistic renderings of an imagined world. The modernist painter Edward Hopper is an obvious influence, with his distinctive use of light and shadow to evoke the isolation of human figures in the geometry of American urban space. Another influence is the postmodern filmmaker David Lynch, and indeed the title of the series from which the image is drawn, *Beneath the Roses* (2005), alludes to the opening of Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), even if the scene depicted here is more redolent of the director's later *Lost Highway* (1997). Composed in what A. D. Coleman famously dubbed the directorial mode, Crewdson's photograph most of all recalls another genre of American postmodernism, the neo-noir film, particularly works from the early-to-mid 1990s by directors such as John Dahl, David Fincher, Carl Franklin, the Coen Brothers, and Quentin Tarantino. In retrospectively invoking these postmodern texts, Crewdson's image operates as a pastiche of a pastiche, neo-noir having drawn its characteristic motifs from the original film noir of the 1940s and 1950s. Published in the mid-2000s, a decade after the art it most clearly cites, this photograph is therefore not so much an embodiment of postmodernism as a comment upon it. In all its belated glory, it constitutes a playful reflection on the forms that American postmodernism adopted during the 1990s.

One final feature of Crewdson's image is important to the concerns of the present study. With leaves framing the shot in the top left-hand and right-hand corners, the photograph is carefully composed to suggest not the effaced camera eye of realism, but the subjective position of an observer, even a voyeur, a personage in position to capture this heightened moment in a man's life. And the figure captured by this observer is, at least in this moment, a person of consequence, a man whose anguish matters, who has lost something of value that sparks the observer's interest. The narrative dimension to the image brings these facets together: the observer is privy to this moment of transition, a moment when day becomes night both literally, in the darkening sky and the deepening rain, and figuratively, in the life of the hero. In *American Fiction in Transition*, my focus will be on a genre of the literary novel that chimes with this image.

Resurrecting an old critical term, I call this genre “observer-hero narrative,” and in my introduction and four chapters, I contend that the genre’s role in both the American literary tradition and the particular decade of the 1990s is a highly significant one.

Observer-hero narratives are hybrid affairs. This is true primarily because of their structure, which typically pits a narrator with skeptical modern impulses against a protagonist who is more mysterious and romantic in conception. The relationship between these two figures permits each novel in the genre to explore a clash of sensibilities, a clash that often reflects the transition from one historical, intellectual, or aesthetic epoch to another. Canonical American novels in this vein include *Moby-Dick*, *The Great Gatsby*, *All the King’s Men*, and *On the Road*, and whenever a new novel is published that shares its narrative structure with these books, reviewers invariably draw comparisons to *The Great Gatsby* in particular. What is usually lacking is an adequate critical vocabulary with which to address the features these novels have in common. One purpose of this study, then, is to provide, or to rehabilitate, such a vocabulary.

My study also sees observer-hero narratives of the 1990s as hybrid in a further sense, and as doubly interested in the problem of transition. The novels by Philip Roth, Paul Auster, Jeffrey Eugenides, and E. L. Doctorow that I examine in this book are animated by a contrast not only between observer and hero, but also between different ways of telling, and understanding, the hero’s story. Each novel sees the narrator oscillate between possible conceptions of a major decision the protagonist has made, and a range of representational modes—tragic, modern, postmodern—compete in the account the narrator offers. This anxiety in finding the correct way to narrate the hero’s decision points in turn to a broader anxiety, bearing on the question of how transition should be conceived in a postmodern world that seems to put the notion of genuine historical change out of bounds. What these novels dramatize most of all, I will argue in this study, is a state of ongoing transition in our understanding of transition.

*American Fiction in Transition* thus has two principal goals. On the one hand, it draws attention to the important but neglected genre of observer-hero narrative. Exploring the origins and history of this genre, it seeks to understand the central place of observer-hero narrative in the American literary tradition, and to foreground its particular association with periods of transition between literary paradigms. On the other hand, the book is engaged with accounts of postmodernism and of what might come after it, looking to novels of the 1990s in order to explore these concerns. On a theoretical level, I draw on the conceptions of postmodern agency and temporality foregrounded in Fredric Jameson’s work, and put these into dialogue with Jacques Derrida’s work on undecidability and on a range of concepts—secrecy, testimony, narcissism, justice—that exhibit undecidability. Derrida’s texts help us to conceptualize the storytelling oscillations that dominate 1990s observer-hero narratives, and to understand the new models of decision, transition, temporality, and agency that emerge from these novels. The novels in turn approach the problems of literary and cultural transition from a fresh perspective, allowing us to view both contemporary fiction and postmodern theory in a new light.

Parts of this study have appeared elsewhere in earlier forms. Chapter 1 is based on my article “Imagining Tragedy: Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*,” published in *Philip*

*Roth Studies* 6.2 (Fall 2010). Chapter 4 draws on material from “Society, Justice and the Other: E. L. Doctorow’s *The Waterworks*,” published in *Phrasis* 47.1 (Spring 2006). My article “Moments of Decision in Contemporary American Fiction: Roth, Auster, Eugenides,” published in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 51.4 (Summer 2010), offers an earlier version of the arguments of the book, and material from the article appears in various places throughout *American Fiction in Transition*. I am grateful to the editors of these three journals for permission to draw upon this work.

The writing of this book would not have been possible without the support of various institutions, colleagues, friends, and family. The project began life as part of a doctoral dissertation completed at University College Dublin, where John Brannigan and Ron Callan provided expert guidance and moral and intellectual support. I owe them both immense thanks. The book was revised and completed at Harvard University, where I have had the great privilege to visit as a postdoctoral fellow for two years. My gratitude goes to the Irish Research Council for the funding opportunity that made my time in the United States possible, and to Werner Sollors and James Simpson in the English Department for supporting my candidacy and making me welcome. While at Harvard, my understanding of dialectical thought has been enhanced by the Hegel Reading Group, organized by Will Baldwin, and my appreciation of all things literary American has been furthered by the American Literature Colloquium, with thanks especially owed to Kathryn Roberts, Nick Donofrio, Maggie Doherty, and Maggie Gram. At University College Dublin, friends and colleagues who had a particular influence on the project include Tom Murray, always an incisive interlocutor on political questions, Sharae Deckard, so often the voice in my head when I write about Fredric Jameson, and Seferin James, with whom I had the great pleasure to share many a conversation on the thought of Jacques Derrida as well as the organizational responsibilities for the Derrida and America conference we hosted at UCD in 2009. I also wish to acknowledge senior colleagues at other institutions who have supported me and my work, particularly Derek Attridge at the University of York, Stephen Burn at Northern Michigan University, Philip Coleman at Trinity College Dublin, Tony Hutchison at the University of Nottingham, and Tim Woods at Aberystwyth University. For discussions of the cover image, I thank Robin Kelsey at Harvard. Haaris Naqvi and the staff at Bloomsbury have been a pleasure to work with, and I would also like to acknowledge the helpful comments made by the two anonymous readers to whom the press sent my proposal.

Many friends and colleagues read parts of the manuscript as it moved toward completion. In addition to the aforementioned Ron Callan, Maggie Gram and Seferin James, I am also thankful to Mark O’Connell and Martin Hägglund. These people all gave generously of their time and expertise to help me improve my text. One person read the manuscript in its entirety: Ríona Nic Congáil, who not coincidentally happens to be the person with whom I am honored to share my life away from writing. I owe her more gratitude than I can express here. And finally, I want to acknowledge my family: my sister Fiona, my brother Mark, and my mother and father, Anne and Liam Kelly. This book is dedicated to my parents, who have supported me through every transition in my life thus far. I am glad to have made them proud, and hope to continue to do so into the undecidable future.

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## Introduction

*If, indeed, the subject has lost its capacity actively to extend its pro-tensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold and to organize its past and future into coherent experience, it becomes difficult enough to see how the cultural products of such a subject could result in anything but “heaps of fragments” and in a practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory.*

Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 25

*The passive decision, condition of the event, is always in me, structurally, an other event, a rending decision as the decision of the other. Of an absolutely other in me, of the other as the absolute who decides of me in me.*

Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 68

In Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), the would-be hero, Lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop, starts out as a figure of parodic omnipotence, of mysteriously excessive agency. Slothrop's penile erections around London during World War II form a pattern with sites of V-2 rocket explosions, and this strange predictive capacity soon makes him the object of scrutiny by larger forces. Pursued by two obscurely located opposing powers, the Firm and the Counterforce, Slothrop becomes the prey of a system that seems at once all-powerful and strangely haphazard, and by the novel's end he has been stripped of any temporal coherence and intimations of agency that he might have possessed. Moreover, Slothrop is not alone in his fate; the world he inhabits is one characterized more generally by what Timothy Melley has termed “agency panic.” This is a world in which events are perceived to lie beyond human control, in which “Decisions are never really *made*—at best they manage to emerge, from a chaos of peeves, whims, hallucinations and all-around assholery” (Pynchon 676). This sentence—which comments reflexively upon the construction and texture of Pynchon's own novel, its replacement of high modernist seriousness with a narrative voice that arbitrarily and

joyfully indulges peevish and whims—provides a characteristic example of the author's mix of somber antihumanist vision and knockabout comic farce. *Gravity's Rainbow's* virtuoso combination of these attributes has seen the novel widely canonized as the central document of American literary postmodernism, the fictional text that most clearly and compellingly exemplifies the postmodern worldview.

It is no coincidence, then, that the fate of Pynchon's protagonist in *Gravity's Rainbow* resonates strongly with the account of contemporary subjectivity provided by Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), the text that could be called the central document of American theoretical postmodernism. Applying to Pynchon's novel the terms of my opening epigraph from Jameson, we might say that while Tyrone Slothrop's "cultural products"—those sexual escapades that offer him his nearest approximation of self-expression—already appear "heterogeneous and fragmentary" at the beginning of *Gravity's Rainbow*, by the end of the novel the protagonist has himself become a "heap of fragments": "The plan went wrong. He is being broken down instead, and scattered" (Pynchon 738). For Jameson, Slothrop's disintegration would be a metaphorical figure for the plight of the human subject under late capitalism, an economic world-system that remains unrepresentable at the scale of subjective consciousness and destroys the subject's organic relation to "the temporal manifold," extinguishing the possibility of organizing "past and future into coherent experience."<sup>1</sup> While in Pynchon's novel the underlying cause of the damage is not quite as identifiable as it is for Jameson, this is the case in part because the temporal relationship between cause and effect has itself been irreparably damaged in the world of *Gravity's Rainbow*.<sup>2</sup> Pynchon and Jameson appear to be singing from the same hymn-sheet in this respect, at least, that in both writers what we have come to call postmodernism is defined by a concern with *events* rather than *decisions*. "Decisions are never really *made*," Pynchon writes, and the story he and Jameson both tell—that a de-centering of the human subject has rendered individuals incapable of organizing time, that a narrative sense of one's destiny has been imperiled by grand historical shifts and contemporary economic and technological developments—has become the central fable of postmodern literature and theory.

In *American Fiction in Transition*, I read four US novels of the long 1990s as responses to this postmodern fable, as fresh engagements with questions of temporality, agency and decision at the human scale. Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000), Paul Auster's *Leviathan* (1992), Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), and E. L. Doctorow's *The Waterworks* (1994) are all examples of a genre of the novel that, following the critic Lawrence Buell, I call "observer-hero narrative." In this genre, a dramatized first-person narrator retrospectively tells the story of an important figure in his or her life who has died. In these 1990s novels, the deceased figure seems to embody a certain kind of heroism, in that his or her life seems to offer a model of decision and temporal agency set against a postmodern backdrop that has placed these qualities out of bounds. I say "seems" here, however, because the real drama in these novels concerns how best to represent and explain, how best to tell the story of, the life and decisions of the hero in question. The classic narratological divide between story and discourse is embodied in these novels by the division between the hero and the observer, and a range of

explanatory paradigms and representational modes—tragic, modern, postmodern—are brought to bear by the narrator on his storytelling task. Each novel becomes in large part the story of the problem of telling the story, the problem of explaining the seemingly inexplicable decisions the hero takes, the key transitions to which his life bears witness. And understanding the transitions of an individual life, finding a model to narrate the decisions implied by the events of the plot, has a larger significance: I read these novels as allegorical engagements with the problem of transition understood more broadly, at the historical and theoretical levels.

For Jameson, postmodernism not only names a historical deep freeze, wherein human agency no longer appears as the motor of historical transition, but the term also signifies the difficulty of gaining sufficient critical distance to address that freeze. “Postmodernism, postmodern consciousness,” he declares, “may then amount to not much more than theorizing its own condition of possibility, which consists primarily in the sheer enumeration of changes and modifications” (ix). The possibility of agency and decision grounded in subjective experience, a possibility central to nineteenth-century realism and still operative for Jameson in the individuating character of high modernist style, has been eroded in both postmodern life and postmodern texts.<sup>3</sup> Replacing this possibility is a list of phenomenological symptoms that aid the maintenance of the systematic status quo—in *Postmodernism*, Jameson writes of the loss of historical consciousness, the sense of a perpetual present, the waning of affect, the replacement of the temporal by the spatial, the annexing of the natural by the cultural. These facets make up the “cultural dominant” of the late twentieth century, and in Jameson’s view literary texts can no longer maintain a critical relation to that dominant.<sup>4</sup>

Jameson’s own critical response to this situation involves a renewal of the dialectical method, and I will return to it later in this introduction. But in the chapters of this study, I take an alternative route, seeing in observer-hero narratives of the 1990s a response by literary texts to the postmodern condition and the twinned problems of individual agency and historical transition. In taking this route, I argue that a key question facing any discourse—literary or theoretical—that wants to respond to the postmodern situation, is how to rethink the notion of the event to bring it closer to the notion of the decision. This is one way to describe the project undertaken by Jacques Derrida in his late work, where, as we shall see in Section V of this introduction and in the chapters that follow, he treats the decision precisely as an event both connected to and breaking with the prior determinations of structure, both linked to the freedom of a subject and breaking with any determined account of that freedom. It is this double gesture that makes Derrida’s philosophy a suitable frame for understanding the double movement of contemporary observer-hero narratives, where the story of inexplicable decisions made by the protagonist-hero, framed through the narrator’s point of view, provides a literary correlative for what Derrida calls “the decision of the other in me.” Reading this overlooked narrative genre, and focusing on the theme of transition, I explore the contemporary American novel for its engagement with important aspects of the intellectual context of the late twentieth century. Framing my readings in Derridean terms, throughout *American Fiction in Transition* I take the literary novel seriously as a site of contemporary resistance to postmodern fragmentation and stasis, a place

where the postmodern diagnosis we find most clearly articulated in Jameson can be incorporated and staged as simply one possible mode of interpretation among others.

In the present introduction, I lay the groundwork for my four literary case studies by explicating central concepts and elaborating on a range of contexts already alluded to in brief. I begin by reviewing nascent debates about American fiction of the 1990s, focusing on recent scholarship that argues for a transition beyond postmodernism in the fiction of that decade. By sketching out the critical background in this way, I aim to clarify my intervention in a rapidly expanding field. In the second section I introduce the genre of observer-hero narrative in fuller terms, by reconstructing a critical debate now over three decades old. Here the theme of transition also gains in definition, as I argue for a transitional role for this narrative genre in literary history. In the third section I outline the specific importance of observer-hero narrative in the American literary tradition, while in the fourth section I seek to anticipate critical concerns with my methodology and selection of literary case studies, particularly with regard to questions of genre, gender, and race. The final section then outlines in broader detail the implicit theoretical debate between Jameson and Derrida that underlies my inquiry. This is where many central claims of my study are highlighted, and the key tenets of my reading method clarified. I conclude the introduction with a brief overview of a forerunner to my study, Jerry H. Bryant's *The Open Decision* (1970). This text, like my own, reads the novels of its era as exemplifying a series of concerns in the realms of culture and ideas; the differences between Bryant's methods and mine, however, offer an instructive comparison between critical conceptions of the relationship between literature and literary theory in our respective eras.

## I Postmodernism in eclipse: American fiction in the 1990s

Scholarship on American literature and culture in the 1990s is still in its nascent phase, but if critics have so far agreed on one thing, it is that the decade marked a period of transition. For historicist critics, the post-Cold War and pre-9/11 status of the 1990s made this transitional quality inevitable. Against Francis Fukuyama's famous neoconservative argument that the fall of communism heralded the end of history as the "end point of mankind's ideological evolution" (Fukuyama 4), Phillip E. Wegner, in *Life Between Two Deaths*, views the long 1990s as "one of those transitional phases" (9), a time offering utopian possibilities that now risk being forgotten, "a moment of heated debate over the direction of the future" (1). Samuel Cohen, in *After the End of History*, argues that the decade was characterized by "a markedly retrospective quality" to American culture (10), a quality evident in a spate of historical novels—by major figures including Pynchon, Roth, Don DeLillo, and Toni Morrison—that "connect the past to a future whose tenuousness places it at the center of the contemporary American historical imagination" (4). For critics writing primarily about literary-historical rather than historical formations, the period likewise offers a tale of transition. Andrew Hoberek, for instance, has located in American novels of the 1990s the beginnings of

a “contemporary transformation of what counts as serious fiction” (“Cormac” 485), a turn by recognizably literary writers, such as Cormac McCarthy and Michael Chabon, to the wholesale appropriation of genre as respectable terrain for creative work. Hoberek calls this “a transition in parentheses: not finished but increasingly visible as an emergent phenomenon” (486), a sentiment that echoes Daniel Grassian’s claim that the 1990s witnessed “a period of literary eclecticism and hybrid fictions, which utilize a wide variety of literary approaches, have conflicting viewpoints and blend media and technological forms” (2).

The specific strand of this scholarly conversation with which I am most concerned bears on the idea that the 1990s witnessed the signs of a transition beyond postmodernism, variously understood. By the early 2000s, critics were already sounding the death-knell of postmodernism: in the 2002 reprint of her influential study *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon called postmodernism “a twentieth-century phenomenon, that is, a thing of the past” (165), while on the opening page of *Postmodern Debates*, from 2001, Simon Malpas suggested that if postmodernism named a space of critical debate, then the debate had already moved elsewhere (1). These declarations, and others like them, depict the 1990s as the decade when postmodernism was on the wane.<sup>5</sup> As a consequence, critics have coined new terms to classify the period’s literary output: Jeremy Green has suggested “late postmodernism” to characterize American fiction of the pre-millennial moment; Christian Moraru has identified the emergence of what he calls “cosmodernism” during the decade, conjoining cosmopolitanism with modernist aesthetics; Rachel Adams has written of the eclipse of postmodernism by “American literary globalism.” Other critics have favored the term “post-postmodernism”: while Grassian avoids the phrase because it “suggests we have moved past postmodernism” (17), Stephen Burn uses post-postmodernism to categorize 1990s fiction by writers such as Jonathan Franzen, Richard Powers, and David Foster Wallace, writers who self-consciously engage with their postmodern forebears in their work. Explaining the emergence of this movement and this term, Burn comments: “Looking back from the perspective of the millennium, the 1990s appears to have been a transitional decade for American fiction, torn between the emergence of a generation of writers seeking to move beyond postmodernism and the prolonged vitality of many writers—Barth, Gaddis, Pynchon, Coover—associated with the rise of the movement” (9–10).

Burn’s narrative of generational succession in the 1990s recalls the situation in the American 1950s, when postmodern writers including Barth, Gaddis, and Pynchon were emerging at a time when by-then-canonical modernists such as Faulkner and Hemingway were still dominant figures. In his introduction to a journal issue entitled *After Postmodernism*, Andrew Hoberek confirms the sense of shared valence between these two decades, declaring that “American fiction has entered a phase of as-yet-uncategorized diversity similar to the one that prevailed following World War II” (“Introduction” 240). In a move that will resonate with my methods in *American Fiction in Transition*, however, Hoberek adds a caveat: the task of conceptualizing a transition away from the dominance of postmodernism may well involve rethinking the very notion of transition itself. Hoberek draws particular attention here to Jameson’s characterization of the thinking of transition as a peculiarly modern problem, further exacerbated within



the postmodern era as Jameson conceives it. Whereas modernism, in Jameson's words, "also thought compulsively about the New and tried to watch its coming into being," postmodernism, concerned less with the temporal than the spatial,

looks for breaks, for events rather than new worlds, for the telltale instant after which it is no longer the same; for the "When-it-all-changed," as [William] Gibson puts it, or better still, for shifts and irrevocable changes in the representation of things and of the way they change. (*Postmodernism ix*)<sup>6</sup>

In the American context that anchors Jameson's postmodern diagnosis, recent events such as the September 11 attacks, the election of Barack Obama, and the economic crisis of 2008 have all offered popular candidates to signify a new moment "when-it-all-changed." When it comes to considering "the representation of things and of the way they change," however, Hoberek advises a critical approach toward this fascination with immediately visible, ostensibly paradigm-altering events. With the comparison to the earlier postwar decade in mind, he contends that "if contemporary fiction is indeed post-postmodern, this does not exemplify some singular, dramatic, readily visible cultural transformation—the search for which in fact constitutes a postmodern preoccupation—but grows out of a range of uneven, tentative, local shifts" ("Introduction" 241). Studying these local shifts will enable us to think more clearly about larger ones, argues Hoberek, and thus the proper critical response to contemporary transition consists "neither of assertions of postmodernism's continued relevance nor of sweeping declarations of a potential successor but rather of concrete analyses of literary form and the historical conditions that shape it" (240). In his contribution to *After Postmodernism*, Timothy Bewes goes further, directly contesting Jameson's diagnosis of "a certain spatial turn" in the postmodern. According to Bewes, Jameson's own formulations—which emphasize fragmentation and stasis as the by-products of postmodernism's spatial dominant—constitute an obstacle to historicizing the contemporary and to thinking transition: "The task of theorizing what comes after the postmodern, then, may well have to begin by challenging the spatialized notion of the postmodern as an epoch that may be succeeded by anything at all" (274). In order to provide this challenge to the Jamesonian emphasis on space, in his essay Bewes looks to cinematic tropes in the later fiction of Paul Auster.<sup>7</sup>

The critical approach adopted by Hoberek and Bewes—with contemporary literary fiction read against a background of Jamesonian theory—offers a good example of the way present debates about postmodernism regularly oscillate between theoretical ground and artistic practice.<sup>8</sup> The complex history of the term itself indicates one reason for the prevalence of this critical dynamic. While "postmodernism" initially gained prominence as a characterization of stylistic innovations in the work of US fiction writers of the 1960s and 1970s, its breadth of cultural reference would later extend almost unstoppably, not least in the synthetic work of Jameson, the first to describe postmodernism as a cultural dominant.<sup>9</sup> A legitimate response to subsequent confusions around the term is offered by Burn, who argues that "such tangled histories and often conflicting usages" make futile the attempt "to explore what the end of

*postmodernism* might mean in an interdisciplinary sense” (3). Burn therefore retains postmodernism as a descriptive category for literary aesthetics while bracketing its cultural and theoretical overtones. Yet if we wish to persist in reading literature as an index to wider culture—if, as Hoberek puts it, we want to see “stylistic shifts in works of literature” as indexing “larger cultural changes” (“Introduction” 237)—then it remains important to connect changes in contemporary literary form to postmodernism understood in its expanded sense as a cultural dominant.

In *American Fiction in Transition*, I therefore follow critics such as Hoberek and Bewes by attending to local manifestations of literary change in contemporary writing, and by suggesting the way these literary changes challenge certain characteristic features of cultural and theoretical postmodernism. Moreover, my aim in this book is to move the debate forward through a focus on four case studies in a genre of the novel—observer-hero narrative—that historically specializes in monitoring transition, in dealing with breaks and exemplifying shifts “in the representation of things and of the way they change.” In the next two sections, I define this literary genre, outline its history, and point to some features that make it an apt lens through which to view the problem of transition in late-twentieth-century American literature and culture.

## II Observer-hero narrative: Defining the genre

In order to introduce observer-hero narrative as a literary-critical term, it is necessary to reconstruct an all-but-forgotten scholarly debate now more than 30 years old. Conceived in its narrowest terms, the debate concerned the best generic designation of a recognizable group of novels, including such canonical works as *Moby-Dick*, *Heart of Darkness*, *The Good Soldier*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Doctor Faustus*. In 1971 Kenneth Bruffee published an article putting forward his proposed coinage for the genre, “Elegiac Romance,” following the article with a book-length study of the same name in 1983. In 1979, and apparently without knowledge of Bruffee’s earlier essay, Lawrence Buell published a discussion of much the same group of works under the title “Observer-Hero Narrative.” Here is the definition that begins Buell’s piece:

This genre may be defined in brief as a story told by a dramatized first-person narrator about a significant relationship or encounter he has had with another person. The two figures are both opposites and counterparts, the second person perceived both as contrasting with the first in outlook or life-style and as embodying in purer or more extreme form qualities which the observer has or sympathizes with in moderation. The observer’s world seems more like our world, while the second person’s seems more intensely focused and more romantic by comparison. The structure of the narrative is built upon the interplay of these psychic universes. (93)

To this structural outline Buell adds a number of other features common to examples of observer-hero narrative. At the level of character, the hero tends to exert a pull on

the mind of the observer that lies deeper than any rational explanation (95). At the level of discourse, the observer's account of the hero is always biased in some way, and the former always acts as both admirer and judge (97). At the level of story, the action is almost entirely concentrated in the hero—"the hero is a do-er and a be-er, whereas the observer is a thinker and a seeker" (96)—and that action always ends in the same result: "As a rule, the action centering in the hero ends conclusively and tragically, with his death, while the witness pauses on the brink and philosophizes" (100). At the level of meaning, finally, the narrative induces a certain nostalgia (albeit usually of an ambivalent kind) for the values of a more noble past: "The hero is characterized in such a way as to renew the observer's (and the reader's) faith in the possibility of a degree of grandeur that we had more or less assumed to have faded from the contemporary world" (101). With these common features in mind, Buell includes a section in his essay justifying the designation of observer-hero narrative as a distinctive literary genre.

Not all contributors to the debate agree with Buell's use of the category of genre: Walter Reed, for instance, rejects the term in characterizing his four nineteenth-century "meditations on the hero" as forming not a genre but rather "an imaginative structure of thought" (9). Addressing this problem directly, Kenneth Bruffee begins *Elegiac Romance* with a prologue on the question of genre, citing the work of a range of postwar critics who constitute the field of modern genre theory, from Wayne C. Booth and Northrop Frye to Claudio Guillén and Alastair Fowler.<sup>10</sup> Bruffee goes on to contend not only that Buell's observer-hero narrative is "a coherent category of twentieth-century fiction" (30), but that what Bruffee calls elegiac romance in fact constitutes the major subset of Buell's larger genre, "the epicenter of the class" (27). Elegiac romance represents "the fourth and most recent phase in the evolution of the quest romance tradition" (32), comprising "an effort to dispense with heroes and heroism entirely" (55), and featuring a narrator who is "a new and distinctively twentieth-century figure" (51). For Bruffee, this narrator is the central figure in every example of elegiac romance, the character who grows and changes as the tale is told; hence, he argues, elegiac romance fictions demand to be read as the narrator's story, as "pseudo-autobiography concealed as pseudo-biography" ("Elegiac" 467). Bruffee is also committed to a Freudian understanding of the genre, in which the narrator is involved in "symbolic projection" and the conscious detail of the story eventually gives way to the discovery of an "inner truth" associated with the narrator's unconscious (*Elegiac* 68). The story represents the narrator's attempt to work through material he has repressed: "By revealing and understanding the trauma, through telling his tale, he resolves the neurosis" (134). This working through of past repression—which Bruffee suggests is Oedipal in source (148)—helps the narrator to recover "the coherence of his inner world" (52); this makes "the 'thread of logic' underlying this new understanding" into the "ultimate subject" of elegiac romance (135). Conceived in this way, elegiac romance represents, according to Bruffee, "a neglected resource for understanding 'modernism'" (57).

By comparison with Bruffee's analysis of elegiac romance, Buell's description of observer-hero narrative is not simply broader in scope, it is also less prescriptive as regards content and interpretation. One advantage of his nomenclature, for my purposes here, is that it foregrounds the formal and structural qualities of the genre, its division

into two primary character roles, only then suggesting its varying possible meanings. Citing René Wellek and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature* as support, Buell claims that "most outer forms [. . .] seem to suggest a certain angle of vision on reality." In the case of observer-hero narrative, this implies a particular epistemology—"objective reality is unknowable"—and suggests, at its ethical core, "an ambiguous evaluation of heroism" (103). Recognition of this epistemological skepticism and ambivalence regarding heroism makes Buell more circumspect than Bruffee, for whom the observer-narrator is always in the end a pragmatic realist who "exposes and copes with the delusion of hero-worship and outgrows it" (*Elegiac* 15). As I will show in the chapters that follow, Bruffee's modernist understanding of the genre as a quest resolved on the symbolic level is merely one interpretative possibility put forward by observer-hero narratives of the 1990s, to be placed next to older and newer understandings.

It is apt, then, that unlike Bruffee, Buell declines to consign his version of the genre to strict historical limits as an offshoot of modernism's inheritance of the quest romance tradition. Rather, he outlines a number of nineteenth-century genres that shared (and continue to share in their present-day forms) technical features with observer-hero narrative, including Gothic fiction, framed tales, the historical romance, the bildungsroman, the familiar essay, and the biographical reminiscence (103–7). Buell remarks further that on a thematic level the genre's emergence in the nineteenth century was the product of two connected trends in western literature since the Renaissance, namely "the gradual disappearance of the traditional hero, and the rise of interest in subjective consciousness as a literary subject" (103). While Buell refuses to overly delimit possible interpretations of the texts he names, he does, nevertheless, suggest that the juxtaposition of two psychic worlds found in observer-hero narratives tends to mark the genre as a transitional one; as he puts it, the genre "reflects a pervasive malaise in the culture that keeps harping on it" (108).

Although Buell does not go on to make the point, it might be added that periods which our established stories of literary history usually associate with aesthetic transition have indeed been marked by the publication of a number of significant texts fitting the description of observer-hero narrative. For example, Robert Marler has shown how the emergence in US magazines of the modern short story from the traditional tale can be traced to the 1850s; it was during this decade that Herman Melville, in observer-hero narratives such as "Bartleby, the Scrivener," "Jimmy Rose" and *Moby-Dick*, was fusing aspects of the decaying romance tale with features of the realist mode that would flourish after the Civil War.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in the period between the dominance of realism and the era of high modernism, the key transitional figures in the Anglo-American sphere, Joseph Conrad and Henry James, both experimented with the genre, the former producing some of its signature texts.<sup>12</sup> Most strikingly of all, the late 1950s and early 1960s, the period traditionally considered the run-up to the emergence of postmodernist fiction in the United States, produced a surfeit of observer-hero narratives. Mark Harris's *Bang the Drum Slowly* and James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* were published in 1956, while Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* was issued in 1957, though it was completed earlier in the decade. Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and John Barth's *The End of the Road* appeared in 1958, and these were followed

in 1959 by three important texts exploiting the observer-hero structure: "Seymour: An Introduction" by J. D. Salinger, *Henderson the Rain King* by Saul Bellow, and *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles. In 1962, two more significant examples appeared, Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (which overtly parodies certain conventions of the genre, for instance the passive/active construction of the observer/hero), and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey. By contrast, the periods that critics normally associate with the dominance of literary realism, high modernism, and postmodernism produced few examples of the genre. Those that did appear in these periods, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Willa Cather's *My Mortal Enemy* in the mid-1920s, or Gore Vidal's *Burr*, Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift*, and Joan Didion's *A Book of Common Prayer* in the mid-1970s, were written by authors not usually associated with the more experimental formal trends in their respective eras.<sup>13</sup>

Two hypotheses follow from the above observations. The first is that, as the example of Joseph Conrad suggests, writers of fiction might be thought of as aesthetically transitional (at least through the relevant parts of their careers) precisely to the extent to which they favor the genre of observer-hero narrative. Applying this insight to the case of *Pale Fire*, for instance, helps to account for the critical disagreement regarding the classification of Nabokov's work as postmodernist or not, a disagreement also to be found in scholarship on Auster, Roth, and (to a lesser extent) Doctorow at the other end of the postmodern epoch. Moreover, in recent critical work on John Barth, the one author named above who is definitely considered a postmodernist, *The End of the Road* tends to be allocated a transitional place in his corpus. The flexibility of the observer-hero structure of the novel is testified to by one critic—"By putting his own aesthetic formalism on trial in *The End of the Road*, Barth produced a text more dialogically robust than the aesthetically ordered worlds of the postmodern novels that followed" (Conti 83)—while the general scholarly consensus is that it was not until the mid-1960s that Barth's work shifted, as another critic puts it, "from the existentialist style of novels such as *The End of the Road* to the more obviously postmodern works like *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), *Chimera* (1972), and *Letters: A Novel* (1979)" (Punday 596).

A second hypothesis (indeed, something of a corollary to the account of literary history provided above) is that periods of aesthetic transition might be identifiable through the number of significant observer-hero narratives they produce. The evidence for this becomes especially compelling when we take into account those features of the genre that suggest two representational modes in conflict. At the level of content, the two-character narrative structure, in offering an extended comparison of differing personalities channeled through the representing consciousness of one, allows for a correlative contrast between worldviews, a contrast that can be taken as exemplary on a wider level than simply the lives of individuals. Hence, the contrast between narrator and hero can register the pressure of the new against the resistance of the old, or it can offer something more like a dialectic of two intellectual tendencies in a particular era. It can provide a contrast between two modes of social life, or between more fundamental modes of perception or ontology. Registering at the level of discourse, the contrast can suggest how particular conventions of representation

struggle to depict certain ideas and figures, and the narrative arc of a specific observer-hero text can demonstrate a shift toward new modes of understanding and new representational possibilities. These shifts are often explicitly felt and described by the narrator, meaning that, as Buell notes, “observer-hero narratives are forever moving beyond the narrative level into discursive meditation,” a realm in which “plot becomes eclipsed by commentary” (99). In this way, observer-hero narratives often attempt to allegorize their own interpretation, suggesting “their ulterior significance or implication” within the text itself (100), and thus allowing historical variations in the narrator’s interpretive assumptions and representational moves to indicate the major concerns, and contradictions, of different periods.

For example, Marlow’s depiction of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* allows the narrator (and the reader) to glimpse the possibilities of amoral power that the official colonial narrative of the late nineteenth century wished to deny, while simultaneously invoking the epistemological uncertainty that will come to be associated with the modernist worldview. Similarly, Nick Carraway, in his evocation of Jay Gatsby, comes to recognize the social contradictions masked by the pursuit of the American dream at the same time as he privileges an epiphanic modernist aesthetic, most notably in the scenes at Gatsby’s parties. In *Doctor Faustus*, Adrian Leverkühn embodies for Serenus Zeitblom the painfully ambiguous relation of art and politics in an era of creeping totalitarianism, and Zeitblom’s plodding tale of genius likewise suggests the incommensurability of two kinds of art. In *The End of the Road*, the contrast between Jacob Horner and Joe Morgan has its roots in their competing philosophical orientations toward the world, displayed in their inhabitation of different language games. In all of these cases, the novel in question can be seen both as a presaging of change and as a symptom of that change, marking in the contrasts between observer and hero the tensions, both cultural and representational, that informed the context in which the text was written.

Both Bruffee and Buell underplay these historical shifts in the meaning and morphology of observer-hero narrative, preferring to describe the genre in terms that emphasize aspects that all its examples share. This is to some extent a byproduct of the need to classify the genre for the first time, to participate in what Wellek and Warren, in their theory of genre, call “the discovery, and the dissemination, of a new grouping, a new generic pattern” (227). Both Bruffee and Buell see the genre as developing in response to a set of identifiable historical factors in the nineteenth century, but then treat it as a relatively static formation throughout the twentieth century. In doing so, they also favor epistemological concerns over ideological ones, more or less ignoring socio-cultural perspectives on genre that were emerging in the period in which their work appeared, for instance in the growing influence of Bakhtinian theory, the political criticism of Jameson, or perspectives on the relation between genre and gender offered by the work of feminist critics.<sup>14</sup> Most notably for my immediate purposes here, Bruffee, and to a lesser extent Buell, overlook the particular role played by the genre of observer-hero narrative in the American literary tradition. In choosing to begin his history of elegiac romance with a discussion of Conrad, rather than Hawthorne, Melville or Poe 50 years earlier, Bruffee can make a case for the genre as a specifically twentieth-century phenomenon, and therefore coincident with a

post-heroic period: “heroism and hero-worship have ceased to be viable themes in Western literature. Together they are a (largely nineteenth-century) delusion, and both have been discredited in the twentieth century” (*Elegiac* 15). It is no coincidence that in downplaying the hero’s role in favor of the observer, the “exemplary modern figure,” and in relegating nineteenth-century examples in favor of post-Conradian ones, Bruffee also glosses over the American dimension. The theme of heroism has played a particularly important role in the US context, and as the prominence of novels written by American authors in the discussion above indicates—and as Buell recognizes in an aside (94)—observer-hero narrative has played a conspicuous role in the American literary tradition.

### III Observer-hero narrative: The American dimension

David Minter’s *The Interpreted Design as a Structural Principle in American Prose* (1969) offers a close analog to the studies by Bruffee and Buell discussed above, but one that focuses, as its title suggests, solely on American texts. Alluding to characters from Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*, Minter explains that “interpreted design” is his term for “works structured by the juxtaposition of two characters, one a man of design or designed action, a Hollingsworth, who dominates the action of his world, the other a man of interpretation, a Coverdale, through whose interpreting mind and voice the story of the man of design comes to meet us” (3–4). Unlike Bruffee and Buell, who are concerned solely with a formal structure in narrative fiction, Minter’s study treats as examples of interpreted design not only novels by Hawthorne, Fitzgerald and Faulkner, but also a range of Puritan jeremiads, as well as autobiographies by Edwards, Franklin, Thoreau and Henry Adams (in these autobiographies, Minter explains, “the characteristic dialectic is between older (investigating-interpreting) and younger (designing-acting) versions of the same man” [21]). Although Minter makes clear that interpreted design should be understood as a response to “cultural and intellectual developments that are modern rather than merely American” (7), he nonetheless notes the genre’s relevance to “America’s faith in a fluid world that invites man to shape his fate” (23), and also to “America’s uneasiness with her success” (25). Minter even goes so far as to generalize interpreted design as a figure for the history of America itself: “A part of what has troubled America is closely related to the themes central to the interpreted design: namely that in building, perhaps grandly and at least stupendously, her builders have succeeded only by failing; that they have built as they have only by failing repeatedly to build as they had intended” (23).

This critical tendency to generalize outward, from claims about literary texts to claims about “America” as a homogenous concept and unified historical agent, should remind us that we are in the territory here of the myth-and-symbol school of literary criticism, an approach that dominated the discipline of American Studies while it was at its height in the early postwar era. Critical texts of this period such as Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land* (1950), R. W. B. Lewis’s *The American Adam* (1955),

and Ihab Hassan's *Radical Innocence* (1961) established the figure of the quester-hero as central to the mythology of America and "the American mind." Theodore Gross's *The Heroic Ideal in American Literature* (1971) is a study almost parodically in this vein, opening with a series of breathless declarations: "Literary heroes dramatize the moral texture of a country. Creations of the imagination, they embody the unspoken ideals, the undesired terrors, the dream life and the mundane existence of their readers. Heroes represent a people, and by discovering the meaning of their character, by returning to the roots of their behavior, we discern the moral figure in the tapestry of a nation" (v). The grand abstractions found in these sentences, which implicitly connect modern American literature with Greek and Roman epic, were already under serious critical pressure by the time Gross published his book. In 1972, Bruce Kuklick published "Myth and Symbol in American Studies," a hard-hitting critique of the philosophical idealism of the myth-and-symbol school, and in "Paradigm Dramas," a 1979 essay that inaugurated what would become an institution in American Studies—the synthetic state-of-the-field article—Gene Wise argued that "American Studies has never recovered from the earthquake-like jolts of the sixties, and the consciousness those events forced upon the culture" (314). The theme of heroism, in the new post-sixties context of cultural pluralism, began to look more like a repressive ideological fiction than an expression of the moral imagination of a nation. As a consequence, rather than celebrate the figure of the hero, critical treatments on the theme published in more recent years—such as David Simmons's *The Anti-Hero in the American Novel* (2008) or Jonathan Mitchell's *Revisions of the American Adam* (2011)—have tended to analyze the function of heroic representations in particular periods, adopting a historicist methodology that firmly denies R. W. B. Lewis's claim that the American hero is "an individual emancipated from history" (5).

To invoke the theme of the hero in a discussion of American literature, consequently, is to tread perilously close to a set of now rejected assumptions about the relationship between literature and national character. And yet, as many recent studies also testify, the ideology of the heroic individual has had a serious role to play in American culture, right up to the present day.<sup>15</sup> It is with this in mind that it becomes possible to regard observer-hero narrative—with the critical distance it offers through its narrative division between story and discourse—as a genre ideally suited to express, and to critically engage with, the anxieties that accompany American culture's hagiographic streak. One does not have to view the hero as a representative of the soul of the American people, as Minter does, to understand the cultural work the genre can accomplish.<sup>16</sup> Taking this attitude toward observer-hero narrative also allows us to specify further the historical conditions of the genre's emergence, building upon Buell's analysis. Such a move is required because although, as Buell argues, the Romantic interest in consciousness, allied with a range of technical developments in related genres, can be held responsible for the wider emergence of observer-hero narrative in the nineteenth century, this set of factors hardly explains the striking fact that so many of the genre's major early exponents—Irving, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville—hailed from the United States.



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