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## Three Discourses on the Age of Television

Ending is a way to proceed.

—Paul Mann

“The death of the novel is here again,” writes Natasha Walter in a 1996 report on the state of the British publishing industry. “It’s a standing joke among newspapers’ literary editors trying to find a story. Shall we commission the ‘books are out’ piece, or shall we commission the one that proves ‘books are back?’” (Walter). This endless—and ostensibly meaningless—circulation and recirculation of the tale of the novel’s demise, like the similar omnipresence of the narrative that connects technological advance with cultural decline, suggests the underlying import of such articles: rather than shedding light on the status of the book on the contemporary scene, these obituaries and rebirth announcements might serve different cultural purposes, whether merely filling column space for tired literary editors or providing ammunition in more strenuously fought culture wars. Their recurrence thus bears careful examination. This chapter situates the major conceptual formations that undergird the anxiety of obsolescence.<sup>1</sup> Neither technophobia nor the literary novel’s obituary is new; each historical reappearance of these discourses simultaneously undercuts the gravity of our contemporary mobilizations of the notion of obsolescence and reveals the ideological work that those mobilizations perform.

In addition to the death of the novel and the threat of new technologies, the third cultural narrative this chapter confronts—the third constitutive element of the anxiety of obsolescence—is the discourse of postmodernism. Postmodernism is founded in the very concept of obsolescence—obsolescence of the modern, of the individual, of History with a capital H, of Truth with a capital T. Postmodernism is also a discourse of discourse, the very self-reflexivity of which produces the inwardness that the contemporary novelist requires for his project of self-protection.

What follows is an analysis of these three intersecting discursive forma-

tions that uncovers the “relations,” as Foucault suggests, among expressions of concern about cultural change that surface in a wide range of fields.<sup>2</sup> The breadth of such discursive formations, in achieving the level of the commonplace, results in a quantum shift in the relationship between discourse and truth: such statements cease merely to describe reality and instead begin to create it.<sup>3</sup> In thinking about the “cultural discourses” of the late twentieth century, I focus not simply on the recurrence of a particular set of aesthetic or scientific or philosophical themes that surface in multiple contemporary locations but on the means by which those statements and ideas may be thought of as *doing* something—in this case, creating and perpetuating a set of hierarchical relations among cultural texts and, not incidentally, a set of power relations among cultural producers.

Such an analysis, however, must avoid the tendency toward totalization that large-scale cultural theories too often exhibit, accounting instead for the conflicts and complexities of contemporary lived experience. After all, if the discourses I examine uniformly create the reality within which I exist and the consciousness through which I understand that reality, can my discourse about them escape the epistemological structures and ideological strictures I am attempting to investigate? For instance, can I cease being postmodern long enough to critically examine postmodernism? The answer lies in the distinction theories of ideology draw between *dominance* and *hegemony*: the true significance of cultural discourse lies not in how the social world is controlled by it but in how that world is led to consent to it. Moreover, the efficacy of such discourses resides not in their univocality but rather in the negotiations among their multiple voices.

In fact, these discourses are most riven with contradictions precisely when they lay the greatest claim to totality. Stephen Connor, for instance, approaches the question of postmodernism’s self-reflexive inescapability through a paradox that festers at its heart. One is repeatedly struck, he points out, by “the degree of consensus in postmodernist discourse that there is no longer any possibility of consensus, the authoritative pronouncements of the disappearance of final authority and the promotion and recirculation of a total and comprehensive narrative of a cultural condition in which totality is no longer thinkable” (10). Such a set of contradictions, inherent in many such contemporary discourses, does not undermine the significance of those discourses but instead creates the field on which paradoxical ideological concepts do battle. Statements that declare the novel dead are, as Walter pithily points out, chronically replaced by equally authoritative statements that celebrate the novel’s revival—and are of-

ten embedded, as we shall see, in the very texts whose demise they announce. In the technological debates, “declinists” and “neo-Pollyannas” are present in roughly equal numbers, the voices on each side equally loud (Stephens 231). Each requires the other for the discourse to be complete; the shifting balance between the two sides works to define the cultural environment in which the discourse operates. The importance of the anxiety of obsolescence, then, lies less in revealing how these discourses about the media control contemporary notions about the postmodern novel than in exploring how contemporary use of those discourses illuminates the cultural ideologies within which we, as readers, operate.

### **The Novel Is Dead. Long Live the Novel.**

The novel has been dead for nearly as long as it has been alive. Its very name reveals part of the problem it faces: the genre’s practitioners have felt throughout its history the pressures of newness. In the words of William Hill Brown, the author of what is arguably the first U.S. novel, “What is a novel without novelty?” (qtd. in Gilmore 620). Novelty, however, while one of the genre’s primary attractions, makes its downfall inevitable. One critic has in fact read the death of the novel foretold in the sequel to its originary text, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*; once the novel was no longer new, it seemingly began the long trek deathward (Reed). John Barth, in *LETTERS*, his epistolary return to the novel’s origins, cites a 1758 missive in which Samuel Richardson expressed his concerns that the novel would turn out to be nothing more than a fad, and one that had likely already run its course.<sup>4</sup> Richardson thus becomes, in Barth’s narrative, not only the first English novelist but also the first English novelist to worry about the novel’s death. Just over two centuries later, Barth himself reveals a strikingly similar cluster of concerns in “The Literature of Exhaustion,” a set of anxieties with which contemporary novelists continue to grapple.

But as the examples of Cervantes and Richardson indicate, the novel’s death presupposes its birth, and each of the genre’s origin narratives has built into it a certain fated conclusion. In Ian Watt’s formulation, the novel begins with Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding, and it is irrevocably tied to the rise of a particular species of realism, as well as to the rise of the English middle class (Watt). The threat of the novel’s death, in Watt’s narrative, emanates from critiques of realism and carries with it the specter of the dying hegemony of the overwhelmingly white and male English bourgeoisie. In Nancy Armstrong’s

revision of Watt's model, however, the novel is born not simply out of the consolidation of middle-class power in England but also out of the desire to confine female influence to the domestic sphere, a relegation presented in the early novel as a *fait accompli* (see Armstrong). By considering the role of gender in the novel's origins, and by taking seriously the domestic fiction that predates Watt's triumvirate, Armstrong's narrative includes texts within the category of the "novel" that would, in Watt's narrative, be certain signs of its death.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, the novel, however defined by its origins, has always been a nervous genre, equally concerned about its present and its future, anxious about its relationships to truth and to history, apprehensive about which side of Andreas Huyssen's "great divide" between high art and mass culture it fell upon. However odd it may sound in the era of MTV and first-person shooter games, the novel was once blamed for many of the ills of youth culture that have since been charged against jazz, moving pictures, rock and roll, television, video games, and the Internet.<sup>6</sup> The argument that the novel corrupted the morals of women and adolescents revealed its ideological basis most clearly in the political turn such accusations took in the early United States. The novel was accused of being antirepublican, of producing solipsistic, individualistic (in the original negative, Tocquevillian sense) readers who shirked the masculine world of action and commerce for the feminine realm of domesticity and illusion.<sup>7</sup> This is the crux of the matter: concerns about the genre's insalubriousness mask far deeper, nearly unspeakable ideological terrors that revolve around its apparent powers of feminization.

This discourse has of course long since inverted. In his attack upon the "damn'd mob of scribbling women" who threatened his livelihood, Hawthorne began the masculinization of the novelistic form at the same time he pointedly separated his work—which he considered a form of high art—from the domestic scribbles his female competitors produced.<sup>8</sup> In the century and a half since, the novel has become the grand old man of popular entertainments and has acquired through its associations with the masculine and its aspirations to high art a thick veneer of respectability. The rise of serious study of the novel on the university level during the twentieth century—and the even more recent addition of the U.S. novel to the curriculum—has further transformed an object of moral opprobrium into a source of spiritual and ethical uplift. We have reserved our cultural concern and excoriation for a list of latecomers, the "popular" art forms that have at least temporarily fallen on the wrong side of Huyssen's great divide.<sup>9</sup> The early accusations leveled at the novel are important both as a reminder that the novel was not always considered the high-art

form it is revered as today, and as an acknowledgment that the concerns about more recent media forms revealed in contemporary cultural discourses may seem equally baseless in the coming centuries.

Moreover, just as the seemingly ahistorical sense of moral uplift attributed to the novel by those who lament its passing is in fact a relatively recent development, the suggestion of such elegizers that the novel had a “day” that is now past often vastly overestimates the historical influence of the form on Western culture. Literacy, and particularly the kind of literacy that allowed for leisure-time, nonbiblical reading, has always been the province of an elite, educated few; the reading public, especially that segment of the public with the disposable time and income available to acquire a taste for printed literature as art, has always been a minority. The image many elegizers of the novel create—a moment in the past in which a people, a culture, a nation was affected as one body by the movements of literary thought—is largely mythical, a revisionist creation of a nonexistent utopia.<sup>10</sup>

The discourse announcing the death of the novel has served throughout the twentieth century to separate the canonical from the noncanonical, the literary from the pulp, the meritorious from the meretricious. Pronouncements of literature’s death have hardly been limited to the novel, of course; in 1988, Joseph Epstein touched off a verbal avalanche in literary circles by demanding to know “who killed poetry.” His contention—that university creative-writing programs were largely responsible for the genre’s death by drowning in the roiling waters of hackdom—produced such an overwhelming response that two full issues of the *AWP* [Associated Writing Programs] *Chronicle* were given over to varying levels of agreement and rebuttal. Perhaps most surprising about this often vitriolic exchange was the number of practicing poets who took Epstein’s salvo seriously, as though his inquest negated their continuing creative lives. As Paul Mann’s *Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* suggests, such obituaries must be read with a skeptical eye:

Throughout the history of the avant-garde, guardians of tradition, ideologues of various parties, and a host of parasites, promoters, and dreamers have been ready with the news of the passing of this or that once-innovative movement or style; modern culture is typified by such deaths, by the death of painting, the death of the novel, the death of the author, the death of x or y movement, even the death of the new. (31)

Modern literary culture is particularly riven with these deaths; critics, readers, and writers alike seem all too ready in this turbulent era to take the bad news as gospel rather than with a grain of salt. Such death notices often look

a bit different, however, when one considers what the messenger—ideologue, parasite, promoter, or dreamer—might stand to gain from the proliferation of the message.

Anxieties about the novel's role in an increasingly technological world have flourished throughout the century. In the 1920s, for instance, D. H. Lawrence felt compelled to let his readers know "why the novel matters," insisting rather airily that "[t]he novel is one bright book of life. Books are not life. They are only tremulations on the ether. But the novel as a tremulation can make the whole man alive tremble. Which is more than poetry, philosophy, science, or any other book-tremulation can do" ("Why" 105). It is intriguing to note that, while Lawrence overtly compares the novel to other "book-tremulations," the notion of "tremulations on the ether" evokes a newer, if repressed, threat: radio. Indeed, Lawrence's presumed optimism about the novel's power, which begins to ring a bit of self-conscious boosterism, is reserved for the form's potential; in "Surgery for the Novel—or a Bomb," he treats much more harshly the novel as it exists:

How do we feel about the novel? Do we bounce with joy thinking of the wonderful novelistic days ahead? Or do we grimly shake our heads and hope the wicked creature will be spared a little longer? Is the novel on his death-bed, old sinner? Or is he just toddling round his cradle, sweet little thing? (114)

Ultimately, Lawrence hedges this question by claiming that the novel is simultaneously both dying of its own self-absorption—a reading of modernist experimentalism that might give us reason to return to Paul Mann's sense of the "guardians of tradition"—and displaying its as yet immature promise. That claim, rather than simply evading the issue, inadvertently reveals some of the subtext of all of literature's death notices: they are simultaneously birth announcements, clearing away the old to make way for the new—even when that "new" is a return to a mythologized, idealized past.

The impact of Lawrence's conviction of the derelict state of the novel appears to have been minimal; the experimentalist bent against which he railed in "Surgery for the Novel—or a Bomb" (i.e., *Ulysses*) has arguably had a more lasting effect on the literary century than has the overheated novel of tremulations (*pace* Miller and Mailer). Lawrence's contributions to the death-of-the-novel discourse nonetheless reverberate in the present. In 1987, a group of scholars connected with the journal *Novel* held a conference and in 1990 produced a volume entitled *Why the Novel Matters: A Postmodern Perplex*. Acknowledging their debt to Lawrence, the conference organizers and volume editors declared their intent to update his concerns and questions to the age

of late capitalism: “Why and how do novels ‘matter’ in postmodern times? What kind of confidence, if any, do they inspire as literary artifacts or even as newly democratized cultural artifacts? Is the novel alive and well amid competing texts and contemporary uncertainties? Is it still empowered with some of its old socio-literary clout?” (Spilka and McCracken-Flesher 5). The scholars’ projected answers to their questions are embedded, as they are for Lawrence, in the questions themselves: the novel continues to matter, though in a mode more cultural than literary; its certainty rests in its representation of uncertainties. The editors expand upon the shift they describe: “the novel continues to flourish in ethical form, and to problematize ethics throughout the world, but especially . . . wherever the problems of women and minorities are taken seriously as fictional subjects” (8)—that is, the novel is not dying but democratizing. Other critics, as we’ll see, interpret this less as a change of subject matter than as a devolution of the literary into the sociological, another sign of the genre’s moribundity.

The concerns about the novel’s continuing role raised by the *Novel* group—Does it inspire “confidence”? Does it have “clout”?—are not only for the future status of the novelist, but also for the future status of the critic.<sup>11</sup> The underlying question in “Why the Novel Matters” should be interpreted not as, Will the novel survive? but as, Should we bother reading novels anymore? This question is both honorable and self-serving, asking simultaneously whether continued attention should be paid to a form historically associated with an oppressively humanist (shorthand for racist, sexist, classist) sense of the individual and whether our critical careers will suffer from such continued attention. Similarly, we see in Joseph Tabbi and Michael Wutz’s more declarative *Reading Matters* the contributors’ “hopeful premise” that

as the scene of writing changes, the book will not be left behind—but neither will it be quite the same in its new context. How best to use the book in the new media ecology, and how to write about literary texts without resorting to hermeneutic modes of “interpretation,” are questions that preoccupy even the most text-centered of these contributions. (2)

The concern of *Reading Matters* in demonstrating that the book lives on, even in the age of cybernetics, is thus not with how to write a novel in the age of its obsolescence, but with how to write *about* one.

This concern for the critic’s integrity has long been a part of such discussions of the death of the novel and frequently takes on a pointed blame-the-victim tone. The great surge—arguably, the pinnacle—of the death-of-the-novel discourse during the late 1960s was largely created by critics of the

novel who were, according to Jerome Klinkowitz, responding to a stagnation perceived in U.S. writers' steadfast refusal to give up the well-made novel (see Klinkowitz). A number of these obituarists—among them Leslie Fiedler and Susan Sontag—point to the rise of the critic as a by-product of the demise of the novel, suggesting that only the form's death could account for critics' existence (see Fiedler; Sontag). Others, including Louis Rubin, insist that reports of the novel's death have been greatly exaggerated, largely by critics who don't know where to look for the next great thing (see Rubin). But whether they argue for the novel's demise or against it, the participation of such critics in the death discourse has the inevitable effect of drawing attention to criticism itself. On the one hand, Sontag argues in "Against Interpretation" that "[i]nterpretation runs rampant here [in the United States] in those arts with a feeble and negligible avant-garde: fiction and the drama" (10). On the other, Rubin in *The Curious Death of the Novel* insists that Sontag is able to make this argument only because she is not surrounded by Faulkners, Hemingways, Joyces, Manns, and Prousts; the lull in production while the writers of the mid-twentieth century work out their issues of influence creates the space for such obituaries. Both the "hermeneutic modes of 'interpretation'" Tabbi and Wutz resist—the very focus of Sontag's ire in her famous "Against Interpretation"—and the critical eulogies Rubin derides would by this argument be unnecessary if the novel itself were in better straits.

Much of the work of the critical death discourse revolves around what Spilka and McCracken-Flesher in *Why the Novel Matters* refer to as "the new hegemony of theory itself" (4), whether striving to create this hegemony or pointing to the hegemonists as the cause of the novel's fall. Roland Barthes in "The Death of the Author" and Michel Foucault in "What Is an Author?" together famously herald the poststructuralist demotion of the writer necessary to theory's rise to dominance. For Barthes, this dominance is achieved by replacing the positivist figure of the author with the decentered "scriptor": a construct "born *at the same time* as his text, . . . he is not the subject of which his book would be the predicate" (52). In fact, this powerless scriptor is the creation of the text's true producer, the reader. Barthes argues that "in order to restore to writing its future"—a future apparently in doubt—"we must reverse the myth: the birth of the reader must be required by the death of the Author" (55). Only in destroying the writer can writing be saved; the theorist thus kills in the medium's defense. Foucault in "What Is an Author?" similarly links writing and death, particularly as "manifested in the total effacement of the individual characteristics of the writer" (117), a destruction carried out in this case not by the critic but by the text itself: "Where a work had the duty of cre-



ating immortality, it now attains the right to kill, to become the murderer of its author" (117). Replacing the writer is the "author-function," or the figure of the author constructed through discourse, the purpose of which is "to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society" (124); the writer is thus demoted from subject to adjective. Of course, a select few such author-functions are given extended powers as "initiators of discursive practices": the "distinctive contribution of these authors is that they produced not only their own work, but the possibility and the rules of formation of other texts" (131), a description that seems to fit the theorist best.

Theory, in the narrative of its new hegemony, thus becomes both culprit and savior, murderer and hero; theory displaces the novel from cultural centrality at the same time it "rescues" the novel by announcing new ways of reading. Theory's new dominance over the novel—or what Stephen Connor refers to as "changing relationships of priority between cultural and critical activity"—is frequently read as an element in the postmodern condition; theory becomes "the mediator and validator of this new [postmodernist] fiction (indeed, for some, began to outshine some of this primary material as evidence of the postmodern temper)" (7). I will return to consider the role of postmodernist discourse in the anxiety of obsolescence later in this chapter. For the moment, it must be noted that theory's interaction with the novel is frequently imagined to be double-edged: in mediating, theory detracts; in validating, it apparently kills. The deadly force of theory, however, is only half the equation. Paul Mann argues, in his examination of the death discourses of the avant-garde, that the very telos of the avant-garde was the production of its own death theory; theory produces the movement's death, but that death has been its theory all along and a necessary element in the movement's continuance. While the novel is of course nowhere near as self-consuming a cultural form as was the work of the avant-garde, it has arguably had its death embedded in its text since volume 2 of the *Quixote*. And while certain writers and critics lay the blame for the death of the novel on the dominance of theory, the postmodernist novel has often embraced theory as its critical counterpart. The novel both resists and requires its own theoretical death to go on.

Among those who blame theory for the novel's death is Alvin Kernan, who points in *The Death of Literature* to the much-hailed death of the author, the disintegration of the canon, and the rise of "discourse" as evidence, if not causes, of that untimely demise. "Many of our best authors," Kernan complains, numbering among them Nabokov, Mailer, Malamud, and Bellow, "have experienced and not recovered from a crisis of confidence in the traditional values of literature and a sense of its importance to humanity" (3). With

such self-assured categories as “traditional values” and “humanity,” however, and with his list of “our” best authors, Kernan reveals the sticky underside of such concern about theory: the problem is less the rise of the critic or the death of the author than the dismantling of the rationalist—and largely white male—individual and his centrality in the world of discourse. As Marianna Torgovnick suggests in the concluding discussion of *Why the Novel Matters*: “It may be that the question of why the novel matters only arises in economically and socially privileged cultures or in segments of such cultures free to bask in what [Charles] Newman calls ‘the post-modern aura,’ which depends upon an inflated rhetoric of cultural crisis” (361). Indeed, one of the conclusions toward which the present investigation is working is that the anxiety of obsolescence both requires social privilege to be mobilized as a discourse and conceals the repressed anxiety that the threatened disappearance of that privilege engenders.

In fairness to Kernan, in *The Death of Literature* he distributes the blame for the decline in literature’s “authority” among the rise of theory, changes in the contemporary social structure, and a “technological revolution that is rapidly transforming a print to an electronic culture” (9). And he makes a valiant attempt at critical distance: “The death of literature looks like the twilight of the gods to conservatives or the fall of the Bastille of high culture to radicals, but my argument is, to put it simply, that we are watching the complex transformations of a social institution in a time of radical political, technological, and social change” (10). But Kernan’s rhetoric is far too colored by the anxiety of obsolescence to remain this impartial; *The Death of Literature* cannot read any of this change as benign. Moreover, the bracketing of technological change by political and social change reveals their intimate connection. One of the goals of the chapters that follow is to examine the ways in which anxieties about theoretical discourse, and fears of social change even more, are repressed and replaced by a more palatable and seemingly progressive technological concern.

Surprisingly, at one moment in his study Kernan blames the overproduction of books for the medium’s death, in much the same way Joseph Epstein blames the death of poetry on the existence of too many poets writing too many poems.<sup>12</sup> What is dying in these visions cannot be literature per se but rather some confidently asserted notion of “literary quality.” Kernan draws this distinction in a telling fashion: “if *literature* has died, *literary activity* continues with unabated, if not increased, vigor” (4). Under the category of “literary activity,” one can safely lump Jacques Derrida and Jacqueline Susann, poststructuralist discourse and Oprah’s Book Club—all phenomena

that contain or are contained by the act of reading, but that exist outside (or more frighteningly, work to undermine) the strictures of canonicity. Again, Kernan:

This is the bizarre way that things die in a society of surplus and overproduction. The end of the age of the book, and with it the age of literature, is figured not only in the difficulties of using and storing printed material, and in the amount of printed material being piled up, but in the gradual waning of the privileged position in the world of knowledge—"what is printed is true"—that the book has held for about five hundred years. (140)

The prospect of "too many books" here is made to present a technological problem—one of information storage and retrieval—but with a problem of discernment lurking behind it, the difficulty of sorting the good from the bad, the worthwhile from the waste of time, the canonical from the non-. Louis Rubin targets this question of discernment as the key to understanding claims of the novel's death, brushing aside all the usual culprits such as social and technological change: "The truth is that the only thing that can destroy literature is *bad* books"—while quickly distancing himself from that position—"and surely these are no more common than in previous eras" (7). Kernan disagrees; the "surplus" he imagines is certainly not of good books. Kernan's mobilization of economic rhetoric in contemplating the novel's relative health suggests at the same time an oddly functionalist mode of thinking about the novel's operation in culture and a critique of that mode, in much the same way Charles Newman uses the trope of "inflation" to signify both the importance and the vacuity of the postmodern. For Newman, too, overproduction leads to meaninglessness, particularly of theoretical concepts. But for Kernan, behind the discourses of technology and economics lies a larger problem that steadily erodes the book's "privileged position": epistemological uncertainty. Once upon a time, a reader could assume what was printed to be true. Now, who knows who's writing what you're reading?

This concern with supply and demand does not, however, diminish the technological concerns that surface in much of the death-of-the-novel discourse and that characterize the anxiety of obsolescence. Kernan devotes a full chapter to those fears, entitled "Technology and Literature: Book Culture and Television Culture." Sven Birkerts likewise focuses on the technological threat to the book in *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*. Birkerts, like Kernan, fears for the future of literature, but he is somewhat less apocalyptic in his approach. His concern, Birkerts claims, is to explore the ways in which literary practice registers "the shocks of the new" (3). Nonethe-

less, he writes in a distinctly elegiac mode, suggesting that one of the ways in which those shocks are registered is in the waning of literary authority.

I do not anticipate a future utterly without books, or bereft of all discourse about ideas, or entirely given over to utilitarian pursuits. No, what I fear is a continued withering-away of influence, a diminution of the literary which brings about a flattened new world in which only a small coterie traffics in the matters that used to be deemed culturally central. (194)

That such literary matters once were “culturally central” is, as I suggested earlier, a suspect notion. What is important in Birkerts, however, is the degree to which he locates in new media technologies the cause of the withering away he perceives. In “The Faustian Pact,” the final elegy in the volume, Birkerts claims to have met the devil—*Wired* magazine. This publication enacts for Birkerts “the argument between technology and soul” (211), the true evil of which seems to reside in *Wired*’s use of print to promote the very media that undermine Gutenberg’s technologies. This complicitous arrangement reverses the situation presented by the *Bold Type* editorial discussed in the Introduction, in which new media are used to promote literature. Such an exchange of support can, for a writer like Birkerts, be valid in only one direction. The lines between good and evil have been as firmly drawn as those during World War II; while *Bold Type* may be a Schindleresque figure, saving (some) novels from certain annihilation, *Wired* is a collaborator. In fact, extending this metaphor of traitorousness, E. L. Doctorow claims that writers themselves are often coconspirators in their own demise. In a brief exchange, *New Yorker* senior editor Deborah Garrison asks Doctorow the following questions: “In our culture, in which film is the primary popular art and has sadly superseded the novel and poetry, what is the standing of reading and writing? How much are people reading? How much of the film culture crosses your mind as you are making aesthetic choices?” Doctorow responds: “Serious readership has always been the minority in this country. Novelists have always been very alert to all the enemies. Today, obviously, film is the enemy; some of us sleep with the enemy.”<sup>13</sup> The novelist, by this logic, seems to face a difficult decision between being a marginalized cultural figure and contributing to the novel’s marginality, a double-edged choice rendered particularly remarkable given Doctorow’s own relationship with film.

Thus, writers and critics from across the ideological spectrum have suggested for decades that the novel is declining, has declined, should be laid to rest, is in need of revival, or some combination thereof. Some of those

concerned about the novel's obsolescence blame the rise of poststructuralist theory; some blame overproduction; some blame the changing technological climate. Many, like Kernan and Doctorow, blame the novelist himself. But the most definitive statement on the novel's death, John Barth's landmark 1967 essay "The Literature of Exhaustion," takes a very different approach to the novelist's role in his form's demise. In this essay, Barth explores the novel's imminent obsolescence from the writer's perspective, claiming to see in this obsolescence no real cause for worry; in fact, Barth's ostensible fears for the end of the novel, as played out both in this essay and in his own fiction, become an overt series of poses manipulated for the novel's continuance.<sup>14</sup> Such an admission is made apparent in "The Literature of Exhaustion." This brief text, ostensibly a study of Borges, is most relevant and insightful when Barth uses his thoughts about Borges as a pretext for discussing "some professional concerns of my own" (29). These concerns largely revolve around the state of the novel in an era when the writer seems to be facing "the used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities" (29). In one exceptionally dense paragraph, which I quote here at length, Barth sketches out both the "felt ultimacy" central to the writer's anxiety of obsolescence and the means by which that anxiety can be put to use, claiming that Borges' work perfectly illumines his subject:

how an artist may paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of our time into material and means for his work—*paradoxically* because by so doing he transcends what had appeared to be his refutation in the same way that the mystic who transcends finitude is said to be enabled to live, spiritually and physically, in the finite world. Suppose you're a writer by vocation—a "print-oriented bastard," as the McLuhanites call us—and you feel, for example, that the novel, if not narrative literature generally, if not the printed word altogether, has by this hour of the world just about shot its bolt, as Leslie Fiedler and others maintain. (I'm inclined to agree, with reservations and hedges. Literary forms certainly have histories and historical contingencies, and it may well be that the novel's time as a major art form is up, as the "times" of classical tragedy, grand opera, or the sonnet sequence came to be. No necessary cause for alarm in this at all, except perhaps to certain novelists, and one way to handle such a feeling might be to write a novel about it. Whether historically the novel expires or persists seems immaterial to me; if enough writers and critics *feel* apocalyptic about it, their feeling becomes a considerable cultural fact, like the *feeling* that Western civilization, or the world, is going to end rather soon. If you took a bunch of people out into the desert and the world didn't

end, you'd come home shamefaced, I imagine; but the persistence of an art form doesn't invalidate work created in the comparable apocalyptic ambience. That's one of the fringe benefits of being an artist instead of a prophet. There are others.) If you happened to be Vladimir Nabokov, you might address that felt ultimacy by writing *Pale Fire*: a fine novel by a learned pedant, in the form of a pedantic commentary on a poem invented for the purpose. If you were Borges you might write *Labyrinths*: fictions by a learned librarian in the form of footnotes, as he describes them, to imaginary or hypothetical books. And I'll add, since I believe Borges' idea is rather more interesting, that if you were the author of this paper, you'd have written something like *The Sot-Weed Factor* or *Giles Goat-Boy*: novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author. (32–33)

Despite Barth's insistence on his lack of interest in the material condition of the novel, he does maintain a clear interest in the apocalyptic "feeling" that surrounds it. Unpacking the feeling that has for Barth produced the "considerable cultural fact" of the novel's demise reveals the key to the cultural function of the death-of-the-novel discourse: it is endlessly productive of more discourse.

Though Barth is clear about the apocalyptic sense many have expressed with regard to the novel, "inclined to agree" as he is that the novel may have "just about shot its bolt," he never overtly states the cause of the demise of narrative literature. Instead, Barth attempts to put off this waning of influence to the notion that "[l]iterary forms certainly have histories and historical contingencies," and thus that the novel's "time" may simply be up, a monumentally shrug-shouldered assessment of the situation.<sup>15</sup> But there is a hint of something further at work in those "historical contingencies," momentarily glimpsed in the use of the "McLuhanite" label "print-oriented bastard." New, nonprint artistic and communicative forms—primarily television, though it is never named within the essay—are at the root of this decentering of print and the relegation of its writers and readers to a state of cultural illegitimacy. As one of Barth's characters frames the situation:

Nowadays the genre [of the novel] is so fallen into obscure pretension on the one hand and cynical commercialism on the other, and so undermined at its popular base by television, that to hear a young person declare his or her ambition to be a capital *W* Writer strikes me as anachronistical, quixotic, as who should aspire in 1969 to be a Barnum and Bailey acrobat, a dirigible pilot, or the Rembrandt of the stereopticon. (*LETTERS* 84)

Like the popular circus, the dirigible, and the stereopticon, the novel has become “anachronistical” not simply because its time is up, but because it has been “undermined” by newer, flashier, more technologically advanced forms of electronic communication.

But one must note that the adjective Barth uses to describe the pursuit of fiction in the age of its obsolescence derives from the text of its birth; the novel has always been “quixotic.” Barth suggests in “The Literature of Exhaustion” that whether television is actually undermining the novel is beside the point; in fact, for him, whether the novel “expires or persists” is “immaterial.” As another of his characters describes Barth’s project, in a letter to the “Author”: “A. assures me that you do not yourself take with much seriousness those Death-of-the-Novel or End-of-Letters chaps, but that you *do* take seriously the climate that takes such questions seriously; you exploit that apocalyptic climate, he maintains, to reinspect the origins of narrative fiction in the oral tradition” (*LETTERS* 438). While the belief that the novel is dying evidenced by both writers and critics is, in Barth’s own words, sufficient to create the “considerable cultural fact” of its doom, this doom is itself a worthy subject of consideration. And, Barth pithily points out, unlike the prophecy whose validity is called into question when the world doesn’t end, the novel’s most literal continued existence does not “invalidate work created in the comparable apocalyptic ambience.” Writing about the end of the novel is, after all, still writing.

Which is precisely why, unlike his characters, Barth senses “[n]o necessary cause for alarm in this at all.” Perhaps “certain novelists” might worry, seeing their livelihood disappear, but there is a solution: “one way to handle such a feeling might be to write a novel about it.” This is precisely the project Barth argues that writers such as Nabokov and Borges (and, with the hedge of false modesty, Barth himself) have undertaken: writing novels about the environment in which writing novels is no longer possible. Such an overcoming of apocalypse valorizes the author as one working against his time, one able “paradoxically” to “transcend what had appeared to be his refutation.” The writer, in his transcendence, becomes equated with the mystic, able to escape the “finitude” of the McLuhanite age. This is Barth’s impression of Borges: “His artistic victory, if you like, is that he confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work” (“Exhaustion” 31). The humanness of that work is not incidental; contained within the transcendence achieved by the successful writer is a form of reversion in which the “dead end” of the contemporary is rejected in favor of a return to the values of traditional humanism.<sup>16</sup>

Whatever the causes of its demise—technological or theoretical, overproduction or underconsumption—the putative death of the novel forms the heart of the anxiety of obsolescence. By depicting the genre as an endangered species, critics and novelists alike have built a protected space around the novel—and, not incidentally, the novelist—in which the form and its practitioners are kept safe from the encroachments of the changing contemporary world. By carefully reading the novel of obsolescence, one can begin to uncover how the representations of the novel’s “enemies” function to create that protected space, as well as how technological changes in contemporary culture serve as convenient masks for other, more threatening, social and political changes that confront the novelist. We must begin, however, by taking claims of the novel’s passing with a grain of salt; as Paul Mann points out, “perhaps the avant-garde needs its death to go on living” (38). In this, the historical avant-garde, whose nominal front-lines orientation demanded a continuous rooting out of the belated, and the novel, whose claims to newness require its repeated exhaustion, are not so different. Paraphrasing Mann, we can suggest that the postmodern novel is indeed living out its death for discourse: the death of the novel is alive and well.

### The Media in the Garden

As I’ve already indicated, the novel is hardly the sole literary form whose death has been critically mourned; one might similarly investigate the “ends” of the epic, the long poem, the sonnet, the drama in verse, the tragedy, poetry and the theatre altogether, the belletristic essay, and the literary letter. Each of these genres is “dead,” and yet each lives on, albeit in altered forms. The epic has been reborn in the big novel (e.g., *Gravity’s Rainbow*, *Underworld*); the popular poem flourishes in song lyrics and the spirit of the theatre in independent film; et cetera. Each form is altered by its historical circumstances of production and reception and by the forms that succeed it; this alteration does not equal death but the recombination of old forms into new. Of course, this tension between old and new is not limited to the literary sphere; each advance in communications technologies has produced a similar outcry among cultural watchdogs, mourning the loss of the trusted old form and decrying the apparent cultural decline produced by the new. Plato reports Socrates’ story condemning the rise of writing in an oft-cited passage of the *Phaedrus*. In this narrative, King Thamus refuses the invention of the Egyptian god Thoth, insisting that writing “will introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it” (79), destroy-



ing the facility of memory by allowing the student to rely upon written records.<sup>17</sup> Whose judgment this rejection of writing ultimately represents—that of Thamus, Socrates, or Plato—is open to question, but it is important to note that the Socratic method of teaching relied upon the existence of a primarily oral culture, and that the introduction of writing to that culture could undermine the method. Similarly, Gutenberg’s miraculous invention, so justly praised by critics of television, was itself accused of the same erosion of cultural standards that the boob tube has ostensibly produced.<sup>18</sup> Just as Mann argues that the modern era is typified by the numberless “deaths” of varying cultural forms, the era is likewise characterized by the continuous hue and cry over the cultural effects of new technologies. Much of this lamentation, however, is less interesting for its claims than for its motives; as Cecelia Tichi suggests of the battle between television and the book: “at issue here is resistance to technological change by groups perceiving their interests to be imperiled by that change” (*Electronic Hearth* 175). The lament over a new technology inevitably goes up from the quarters that house the old technology, from those who stand to lose (whether in financial terms or in less material terms of cultural status) if the old form disappears. Thus Plato’s deploring the rise of writing; thus the call among Venetian abbots and scribes for banning the printing press; thus Neil Postman’s concerns about television and computers. Nonetheless, these lamenters owe something to the very technology they argue against, a point that doesn’t wholly disprove their critiques but does reveal something of the complexities of the media ecology. We have Plato’s words today because of Thoth’s invention. Alexander Pope’s conviction that “the invention of Printing” was intended as “a scourge for the sins of the learned” (qtd. in Stephens 34) comes despite the connections of his fame to the printing of the *Dunciad*. And numerous sites dedicated to the work of contemporary techno-lamenter Neil Postman have sprung up on the World Wide Web.<sup>19</sup>

In what follows, by relying heavily on studies of the rise of individual technologies, I trace a common thread of anxiety that runs through the histories of the new communications media that have arisen since the mid–nineteenth century. The cultural discourse that surrounds such technological change has repeatedly invoked three separate yet intertwined concepts about the new forms: technologies of mechanization have produced concerns about dehumanization; technologies of image production have been greeted with concerns about illusion and ideology; and technologies of interconnection have confronted concerns about the loss of the individual. The first of these concepts, which I refer to as “the machine,” posits in the increasing mechanization

of U.S. culture a turn from putatively human values to those that devalue the human. The second concept, “the spectacle,” reveals anxieties about the relative importance of the image and the word in its concerns about the manipulation of visibility. The third concept, “the network,” relays fears about a growing web of physical interconnections through which the individual might be subjugated to the mass. Each new form of communications developed during the twentieth century interacts with at least one of these concepts, and most with more than one. Anxieties about vaudeville and other forms of popular theatre, as well as those about *USA Today* and the contemporary newspaper, connect the notions of the spectacle and the network. Anxieties about photography and film mobilize the notions both of the spectacle and of the machine. Anxieties about the railroad and other forms of transportation, as well as about the radio, link the machine and the network. And anxieties about television and the Internet terrifyingly link all three concepts.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, the dual existence of these fears, manifesting both on the cultural (in the sense of aesthetic or technological) and on the social level, suggests the deep imbrication of changing modes of cultural production and changing social structures. Cultural forms develop out of and reflect their contemporary social structures, while they also affect the developing futures of those societies. Although this volume is not fundamentally concerned with unpacking the precise nature of that interconnection, it is important to note the mutual implication of the cultural and the social, and in particular to interrogate the moments at which writing that is ostensibly about one set of fears (cultural anxieties about the network’s tendency to undermine individualism, for instance) reveals the latent presence of those fears’ repressed other (social anxieties about the racial, ethnic, or gendered nature of the mass overtaking the unmarked “individual”). Such moments repeatedly indicate the ways that anxieties about the social, particularly in an age so concerned (at least at a surface level) with avoiding the appearance of racism, or sexism, or ethnocentrism, are often contained within and masked by more palatable discussions of the aesthetic or the technological.

The rise of the machine as a figure of literary concern during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, then, signals a deep cultural ambivalence about the processes of modernization, a simultaneous fascination and revulsion. The intimate relations between writers and mechanisms throughout U.S. literature, as explored by such critics as Leo Marx and Cecelia Tichi, hint at a connection between technological and cultural production, as the dominant technology of any culture gives shape to that culture’s understanding of the world. In an era dominated by the computer, the relationship between that

technology and representations of virtual reality is easy to spot; such a relationship between mode of production and representational content, however, long predates the contemporary period. The U.S. identification with and anxiety about the machine can be dated, as Leo Marx's work indicates, to the introduction of steam-driven manufactures into Jefferson's pastoral ideal; as early as the late eighteenth century, the writings of manufacturing's proponents present "a prophetic vision of machine technology as the fulcrum of national power," revealing "peculiar affinities between the machine and the New World setting in its entirety: geographical, political, social, and, in our sense of the word, cultural" (Marx 155–56). These affinities between the machinic and the cultural become pronounced in the moment of modernization. The spread of mechanization, from clockworks to the steam engine to the factory production line, dramatically affected modernist cultural production, as new technologies encouraged the replacement of Romantic conceptions of being in nature with views of the human being as a form of machine.<sup>21</sup> This shift reflects a simultaneous cultural rejection of the Romantic dominant and a longing for the return of that dominant in response to the machine. Marx's "machine in the garden," the trope of technology's incursion into a mythologized nature, thus recurs in literary texts from the late nineteenth century onward as a continuing and intensifying—rather than momentary and localized—conflict between the Romantic ideal and a changing contemporary culture.

This conflict is due, however, not to the replacement of nature by the machine but to the protracted, if tenuous, coexistence of the two. Frederic Jameson, in one of his famous formulations of the distinction between modernism and postmodernism, points directly to that coexistence, claiming that in modernism "some residual zones of 'nature' or 'being,' of the old, the older, the archaic, still subsist; culture can still do something to that nature and work at transforming that 'referent.' Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good" (ix). Thus, for Jameson, the postmodern differs from the modern largely in terms of completion; the project of modernization, in process during the earlier era, is over in the later. This sense of completion, however, seems to suggest the perennially deferred nature of the postmodern, as the conflict between the machine and something we continue to think of as "nature" continues into the present. This suggests that, rather than indicating an authentic break between the modern and the postmodern, Jameson's gesture toward modernization creates a historical continuity across the periods it affects, an ongoing conflict between Romanticism and technology.

Modernism as an aesthetic was in part born out of the clash between the

technological and the natural. Tichi argues that, in the modern period and “[u]nder the aegis of engineering, the U.S. novel of the early twentieth century conceptually changed. The lineage of narration yielded to one of construction” (“Technology” 477). By her argument, the shift from narration as the novel’s key invisible element to the visibility of its processes of construction produced an “amalgamation” of technology and literature. This amalgamation, however,

occurred with such rapidity that it often had the appearance of discontinuity. Suddenly loosed from their separate categories, technological and organic figures of speech seemed to jostle each other, suggesting the tensions that inevitably arise in times of rapid sociocultural change, when the old order seems to vanish in the onrush of the new. (*Shifting Gears* 18)

Such anxieties as here surface in the tension between the technological and the organic result whenever an old order, or an old mode of being, or an old means of making sense of the world is threatened with disappearance. The Romantic view of nature, for instance, was driven in part by a vast connotative shift in the concept of the “mechanism.” Once identified with nature and “the celestial ‘machine’ ” (Marx 162), the concept came for the Romantics to represent that *opposed to* the organic; in this shift, the machine becomes that which is specifically unnatural. Post-Romantic cultural thought has largely maintained that opposition, while gradually shifting allegiances within it, allowing the tension between the organic and the technological to intensify. In realist fiction, for instance, writers began looking equally closely at the machine and at the garden; naturalism’s positivist philosophy further understood that garden as a special type of machine. Modernism thus results from the *continuing* problematic coexistence of the technological and the organic, slightly transformed by a new speed that gives rise to the “appearance of discontinuity.” The formalist tendencies of the modernist writer in viewing the novel as a construction reveal an ongoing interest in the clash of technology and nature; the modern “shock of the new” arises in those writers’ formal enactment of that clash in exposing what Tichi calls the “gears and girders” of their texts (*Shifting Gears* xiii).

Such conflicts between the organic and the machinic, and between the Romantic and the modern, are enacted in the technology of photography and revealed in the reception of that technology in the mid–nineteenth century. Photography in its very form implies a changing status quo; the ability to “fix” a moment in time highlights that moment’s motion.<sup>22</sup> The technology of

photography thus paradoxically communicates obsolescence through its claims to permanence. Moreover, in undermining previous notions of time and permanence, and in its seemingly objective accuracy, photography appeared at its birth to announce a direct threat to painting. This threat was famously received by French artist Paul Delaroche, who is said, upon his first viewing of a daguerreotype, to have exclaimed: “From today on, painting is dead!” (see Levinson 46). However, as Jean-François Lyotard points out, the challenge that photography posed was not to painting per se, but to one of the functions painting had been thought of as serving:

The challenge lay essentially in that photographic and cinematographic processes can accomplish better, faster, and with a circulation a hundred thousand times larger than narrative or pictorial realism, the task which academicism had assigned to realism: to preserve various consciousnesses from doubt. Industrial photography and cinema will be superior to painting and the novel whenever the objective is to stabilize the referent, to arrange it according to a point of view which endows it with a recognizable meaning. . . . (74)

The air of obsolescence thus in the nineteenth century settled not around painting in general, but around pictorial realism; the mechanism of photography communicated more directly with realist epistemology than could the painter. Photography simultaneously threatened to displace literary realism as well, illustrating the fundamental disconnect between the ideals of realist writing and the materials at its disposal:

Writers had been able to describe a landscape. But no writer, no matter how skilled and no matter how committed to realism, could produce a representation of a landscape—or a room or a face—as completely and exactly as a photograph. This was a major new development in the ancient competition between images and words. Nature, after all, has never been persuaded to pick up a pencil and “reproduce herself” in words. (Stephens 75)

Photography thus undermined the realism espoused by painting precisely through its technological advances and the power it wielded to represent more, faster, better. It further undermined literary realism by calling the very possibility of verbal verisimilitude into question.

But the new medium, while thus undermining literary realism, gave support to its claims about the truth value of realistic representation. In fact, the new form became a site throughout the Victorian period of the ongoing literary contest between Romanticism and realism (see Green-Lewis). Each side

in this conflict saw photography as evidence of its own superiority, evidence of either the sufficiency or the insufficiency of empiricism in accounting for reality. But each position nonetheless created anxiety in the writer about his relationship to the new form. Anxieties about the photograph among Romantic writers stem not from its apparent capacity to capture reality but from two conflicting senses of its weakness as a representational form: its inability to capture the intangible, immaterial aspects of reality; and conversely, through technical “tricks,” its ability to alter reality, or to lie. Where the figure of the photographer appears in the Victorian romance, he is thus largely represented as evil, the possessor of malevolent powers; these powers are “both affirmed and controlled by their relegation to the fringes of novelistic action” (Green-Lewis 7). For the realist writer, on the other hand, photography captured the tangibility of things as they are and supported his faith in the possibility of adequate knowledge of truth through the perceptions of the senses—but did so perhaps a bit too well. “Photography,” Jennifer Green-Lewis points out, “promised a superior grasp of reality, a realism more real than the thing itself” (30). Through its apparent ability to capture reality, photography helped shove Romanticism out of the cultural spotlight. But by “outperforming” literary realism, photography began to call that mode’s basis into question as well.

These concerns about the new medium, however, often pick up their vocabulary from the discourses of the spectacle and the machine; critics of early photography raised concerns alternately about the morally dubious nature of a form that can fool the public with realistic illusions and about the aesthetically questionable status of a picture created by an apparatus. Both concerns are aimed at writerly or painterly self-preservation. The critic who argues about photography’s manipulation of illusion reveals an anxiety that “is not lest its viewers mistake a photograph for its original subject but rather that the photograph is a superior kind of painting, that painting as he knows it and painters such as he has been have been superseded by the technology of the camera” (Green-Lewis 52). Similarly, many of the concerns about the new form’s status as art focused on the photograph’s mechanical origin, equating the work it produced with the products of the factory or the assembly line. This discourse inevitably reveals underlying anxieties about class and gender: “Photography’s frequent figuration as mechanical work and its association with menial labor were obviously in part the consequence of anxiety about the wide social range of photographers and no doubt contributed to its metaphoric evolution as a product of science rather than art between the mid and late nineteenth century” (42). Claims of aesthetic decline thus conceal more personal concerns; technological obsolescence stands in for and masks the social. Already, in this

first incursion of “new media” into the territory of the old, we see in evidence many of the concerns critics will voice a century later about television.

Though not, strictly speaking, a communications medium, the railroad demands brief consideration for a number of reasons. First, as Leo Marx argues, the U.S. railroad—that quintessential machine charging through the unspoiled garden—was “*the* revolutionary machine of the age” (180). The dramatic change in transportation, both of people and materials, that its technology wrought was a necessary factor in the rapid course of industrialization that produced the modern era. Moreover, the railroad profoundly captured the U.S. imagination. “The invention of the steamboat had been exciting,” claims Marx,

but it was nothing compared to the railroad. In the 1830s the locomotive, an iron horse or fire-Titan, is becoming a kind of national obsession. It is the embodiment of the age, an instrument of power, speed, noise, fire, iron, smoke—at once a testament to the will of man rising over natural obstacles, and, yet, confined by its iron rails to a predetermined path, it suggests a new sort of fate. The “industrial revolution incarnate” one economic historian has called it. Stories about railroad projects, railroad accidents, railroad profits, railroad speed fill the press; the fascinating subject is taken up in songs, political speeches, and magazine articles, both factual and fictional. (191)

The railroad became the focus both of national pride in U.S. ingenuity and of national anxiety about the increasing power of the machine and the decreasing power of the individual. But the railroad also effected radical transformations in contemporary epistemologies. On a most basic level, the necessity of coordinating railroad schedules led to the institutional regulation of time, including the development of time zones. Furthermore, in creating new metaphors by which Americans lived, the railroad transformed the culture’s notions of history, lending itself to visions of inexorable progress (see Marx 194–207).

But beyond these contemporary shifts, the railroad paved the way for future changes in communications. As Wolfgang Schivelbusch has argued, the railroad was a necessary element in bringing about the perceptual changes that prepared early twentieth-century culture for the rise of the new media that captured communications: the cinema and the radio.<sup>23</sup> In the railroad, argues Schivelbusch, lie the origins of the modern “annihilation of space and time” upon which twentieth-century perceptions of the real depend. This foreshortening of space—in which the train’s speed caused to be “displayed in immediate succession objects and pieces of scenery that in their original spatiality

belonged to separate realms” (60)—is directly connected to the filmic notion of montage, as the compression of space leads to the destruction of Walter Benjamin’s “aura”:

The remote regions were made available to the masses by means of tourism: this was merely a prelude, a preparation for making any unique thing available by means of reproduction. When spatial distance is no longer experienced, the differences between original and reproduction diminish. In the filmic juxtaposition—i.e., the perception of *montage*, the juxtaposition of the most disparate images into one unit—the new reality of annihilated in-between spaces finds its clearest expression: the film brings things closer to the viewer as well as closer together. (42)

Moreover, the railroad’s mechanicity allowed it to achieve what Schivelbusch calls “pure speed,” which he defines as “speed perceived as an independent quality because it is divorced from the organic base of horse-power. (At the beginning of the twentieth century, the human voice was subjected to that same process of dissociation from its natural habitat, its natural condition, by the microphone and the radio)” (48). The railroad’s speed, then, is achieved precisely by heightening the already extant conflict between nature and technology, dissociating perception from its “natural” origins.

Thus the mechanics of the railroad exist as the precursors to filmic montage and radio’s sound projection. But a more fundamental change lay in the transformations the railroad caused in visual perception; according to Schivelbusch, the railroad

and the motion it created became integrated into [man’s] visual perception: thus he could only see things in motion. That mobility of vision—for a traditionally oriented sensorium, such as Ruskin’s, an agent for the dissolution of reality—became a prerequisite for the “normality” of panoramic vision. This vision no longer experienced evanescence: evanescent reality had become the new reality. (64)

Just as photography bespoke obsolescence through its simultaneous ability and failure to “fix” an instant in time, the railroad hastened obsolescence by introducing motion into perception. Speed and motion become part of the new sensorium, which accepts change—and ever-accelerating change—as normal.<sup>24</sup> Contemporary anxieties surrounding this speed-up frequently connect such increases in motion—conveyed in metaphors of “unrest,” of an unhealthily nervous activity—to a takeover of humans by machines (see Marx 174). Thus Emerson: “Things are in the saddle, / And ride mankind” (Emer-



son).<sup>25</sup> The machines producing the world's speed-up are perceived as controlling human direction. Many of these concerns are, as Leo Marx phrases it, "stock expressions of the widespread and largely impotent anxiety generated by mechanization; no doubt the most popular, closely akin to the 'men-will-become-machines' trope, was the Frankenstein fable: the story of the robot that destroys its heartless creator" (184). Such worries about the machine, however, whether it is transforming human nature or carrying the potential to destroy it, are securely rooted in contemporary ideologies. The "men" who require protection from the rapacious values of the machine are inevitably of a certain race, a certain class, and a certain gender; "mechanization will hardly seem a menace to those upon whom society confers little dignity of soul (or status) in the first place" (189). In fact, the democratizing power of the machine is precisely part of the problem; during the nineteenth century, the railroad partly obliterated class distinctions, for 90 percent of the railroad's passengers traveled in the same accommodations.<sup>26</sup> All these factors—the interconnection of the nation through the "annihilation of space and time," the increase in machinic power and authority, and the bringing together of disparate social classes—led to often violently stated antagonisms toward the railroad. Perhaps only the most extreme representation of this antagonism was the Ohio school board that declared the railroad "a device of Satan to lead immortal souls to hell."<sup>27</sup>

Film—once similarly described as a "primary school for criminals"—adds to such misgivings about mechanization further misgivings about illusion.<sup>28</sup> The very technology of film is founded in the illusion of motion, created by a rapid succession of still images, which served to heighten concerns about the still image's ability to manipulate reality and, in effect, to lie. But visible in this critic's commentary is the true source of early twentieth-century anxieties about film: not the images displayed or their motion, but the audience in attendance. It was for this reason that, in the first attempts to regulate the new medium, the rules targeted not film producers but exhibitors. That the producers (in the very early days of film, that is, before the establishment of the West Coast studios) were largely middle class and U.S. born while the exhibitors were often immigrants is not incidental. As Robert Sklar argues in *Movie-Made America*, film has its origins in working-class entertainment; the rise of film was particularly "galling" to reformers, not because of its content but because "workingmen and immigrants had found their own source of entertainment and information—a source unsupervised and unapproved by the churches and schools, the critics and professors who served as caretakers and disseminators of the official American culture" (18–19). Official culture felt

itself under threat from both a new technology and a swelling working class. Much complaint about the cinema used the former threat to cover for the latter; according to Sklar, the critics of the new medium “rarely said what was on their minds,” dealing instead “with symptoms rather than causes, surfaces rather than depths” (123). Thus, early calls for film censorship frequently and unsurprisingly speak of protecting women and children from depictions of licentious and otherwise immoral behavior rather than of protecting middle-class, white U.S. culture from the encroachments of values foreign to it. And thus, much early academic and writerly anxiety about film centered upon its co-optation of narrative from the novel, its manipulation of fantasy, and its use as an ideological tool, only rarely mentioning—and then in a protective, paternal fashion—those gullible masses for whom the new medium had become a primary cultural experience.

Each new technological form threatens those that have gone before. Images threaten print; photography threatens painting; film threatens the novel; television threatens film; the Internet threatens television. But, as Paul Levinson indicates, cultural jeremiads about new communications technologies, while often rightly sensing the implied loss of old forms, frequently operate under complex motives.

Although we can sympathize with such fears on the human level of appreciating the pain attendant to any kind of cultural loss, our ethics also need to note that for most people the old way of communicating and thereby living is usually inferior to the new. Indeed, new media since the printing press have in every case served to ultimately further the democratization it engendered, with the result that critics of the new media have usually been defenders of the elite, attempting to bar the new onslaught of the masses. (56)

The onslaught of those masses—and in particular, their “otherness”—is the subtext of the anxiety of obsolescence. The masses attendant behind fears of new media come closest to the surface of texts of obsolescence as these engage with the concept of the network, but they are also visible in mobilizations of the concepts of the spectacle and the machine. In the chapters that follow, I focus in upon the contemporary novel’s readings of each of these three central concepts as they revolve around television, which serves here as a metonym for something broader that might be characterized as the “electronic media.” As I use this term, I mean to speak inclusively of all media forms (including photography and film) that participate in or are defined by the machine, the spectacle, and the network. “Television” should thus be read less as the historical culmination of these forms of mediation—leading to a teleological

narrative of media development—than as a figure for these three concepts of mediation, the key late twentieth-century form that embodies all the complaints about the influence of the communications media on U.S. culture. As these complaints would have it, the television set itself is a machine that distances us from humanity, encouraging us to think of ourselves as machines; the televisual product is a spectacle, distracting us from the “real”; the television broadcasting system is a network of one-way connections that destroys our ability to speak back to the sources of power while providing that power with a terrifying means of control and surveillance. But by reading closely, we can uncover in diatribes about the evils of television the attempt to protect an elite and elitist culture from the incursion of the viewing masses; the true terror of television for many of these writers is not the screen or the content, but the boobs who watch it.

Internet technologies, in this model, serve as a temporary media “future,” a form still in development, but one that has been much written about in relation to these three core concepts. Despite the Internet’s heavy reliance on text, the new medium’s adaptations of writing to the visual limitations of the computer screen (as well as the often-discussed fact that the World Wide Web only “took off” once the ability to transmit images was written into its code) firmly connect this medium to the terms of the spectacle.<sup>29</sup> The computer itself is often viewed as a foreign, threatening technology that has furthered our capitulation to mechanical values and heightened our sense of the human as a machine.<sup>30</sup> And the frequent debates about privacy, security, intellectual property, and censorship on the Internet rely upon the terms of the concept of the network. But this is not to point to the Internet as an endpoint of the media narrative. U.S. media culture has given the impression since the late 1990s of being on the cusp of some new convergence of extant technologies, a cross-fertilization whose first new shoot was seen in a short-lived hybrid technology, WebTV. In this very preliminary stab at a new integrated medium, the three concepts of spectacle, machine, and network functioned once again. As the press materials described it: “WebTV is not the Internet tacked onto your TV screen—quite the contrary. WebTV is designed to harness the power of the Internet to make watching television more involving, more entertaining, even more inspirational.”<sup>31</sup> The contradiction embedded in these statements—WebTV is not just television plus the Internet; it’s television with the Internet added!—reveals part of the reason for the ultimate failure of the technology: it wasn’t new.<sup>32</sup> It was also far too literal an attempt to combine these two quite opposed media. Television, as McLuhan pointed out more than thirty years ago, is a “cool” medium; the viewer becomes absorbed by it. The Internet, on

the contrary, is “hot”; a user (note already the important shift in terms) must take an active part in completing the communication. These two forms simply cannot be slapped together. Frankly, we don’t want television to be any more “involving” than it already is. As Bruce Owen suggests: “sometimes it’s nice to be passive” (10).

Worse, expecting the Internet to be a new form of television—and expecting our new convergence models to follow in the footsteps of older media—falls into the egregious fallacy that Levinson describes, following McLuhan, as “rear-view mirrorism,” the determination to read new forms through the lenses of the old (see Levinson 126). Hence the “horseless carriage” and the “wireless”; hence also “interactive television,” an unwitting oxymoron repeatedly perpetrated by well-meaning futurologists. This rear-view mirrorism may in part be responsible for the cultural anxieties about new media we see in the anxiety of obsolescence, as it suggests that new media can and should take over the roles of older forms, making them obsolete. But new media take unpredictable paths of development. Whatever the future of the communications media holds, we must keep in mind one key fact about all the aforementioned struggles among media: none of the forms under threat have disappeared. As Levinson demonstrates in his case study of the changes effected in radio by the rise of television, old forms often find niches within which to operate, filling demands that the new media overlook.<sup>33</sup> Thus impressionist (and expressionist, and cubist, et cetera) painting, which uses visuality in ways ignored by photographic realism. Moreover, many media battles are resolved not by such a division of territory but by the formation of new hybrids. Such is the argument advanced by Tabbi and Wutz in the introduction to *Reading Matters*:

As the systems theoretician Niklas Luhmann has argued, an enlarged media environment leads not only to “differentiation”—a definition of each medium’s alterity from other media—but also to a productive ecology, a reciprocity between media that ensures the continued presence of older, less advanced storage and communications technologies: “The higher complexity of a new level of development makes it possible to reinvest the old [in this case, print] with new meaning, as far as it lets itself be integrated. New technological developments do not necessarily mean the forceful negation of older media, but rather their recombination.” (9; bracketed insert in original)

In this notion of media recombination, we can see the importance of cable television, pay per view, and the VCR, all of which recouped an audience for film just when television threatened to kill it off.

Given these models, there is no reason to suspect that print generally, or the book in particular, or the novel most specifically, will die. The medium, or the genre, might instead come to fill a particular cultural role ignored by film, television, and the Internet. Or print and the electronic media might produce a new hybrid. This hybrid might look something like the e-book, or it might look like hypertext on the Web. It is more likely, however, that it will take a form we cannot yet imagine; “e-book” and “hypertext” both smack of the rear-view mirrorism we should work to avoid. We might instead consider Stuart Moulthrop’s vision of the future of print:

It is part of the paradoxical nature of postmodernism that old categories do not die; instead they stick around, generating influence anxiety. While certain media ecologists once thought print might be dead, we now find ourselves in what Jay David Bolter calls “the late age of print.” The culture of writing did not vanish apocalyptically in a flash of cathode rays; it has persisted, stubbornly mutating, reappearing on what Donna Haraway calls “etched surfaces of the late twentieth century”—silicon chips and digital displays. Print is undead. (269)

It is curious, of course, to think of print as “undead,” existing in a vampire state of sorts—until we remember that Haraway intended the cyborg body itself as the quintessential contemporary “etched surface” (see Haraway 176). Just as the cyborg, by being both human and machine, is in Haraway’s view able to escape the oppressive binaries of gender and race, so text—in a future that will be both print and electronic, both tangible and intangible, both dead and alive—may find a path out of the ideological quandaries in which it is bound.

### **Postmodernism Is (What Postmodernism Is)**

In the meantime, there is postmodernism to contend with. In certain arguably suspect ways, the foregoing sections of this chapter, as well as the remainder of this volume, refer to “postmodernism” as if it were an already-defined, well-established, universally agreed-upon thing. Which, from one perspective, it is: in its popular usages, which are numerous and widespread, the term has taken on an almost prosaic regularity. “Postmodern,” the root term, seems to indicate a chronological period that begins with the Holocaust, or the dropping of the first nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or the Kennedy assassination, or the election of Ronald Reagan, or some other moment of cultural

trauma, but that is in any case witnessed in its fullest flowering in the 1970s and 1980s and is generally considered still to be in evidence. “Postmodernity,” its first cognate term, seems likewise to indicate the specific cultural and material conditions of existence during this chronological period, circumstances that include but are by no means limited to a shift from monopoly capitalism to multinational capitalism, a decline in industrialism and concomitant rise of some “third-wave” electronic business culture, and a transformation of the primary arena of political economy from the nation-state to the “global village” (see Toffler; McLuhan). Finally, “postmodernism” seems to indicate a loosely defined and yet recurrent set of cultural manifestations of or responses to the conditions of postmodernity, styles that are evidenced in fragmentation, pastiche, parody, self-referentiality, and other highly ironized modes of discourse.

Of course, the three terms are used far more interchangeably than I suggest here. To be certain, the discourse of postmodernism is laden with contradictions: as a phenomenon, postmodernism is either specifically aesthetic or more generally cultural; it is either revolutionary or reactionary; it is either the end of ideology or the inescapable conclusion of ideology. It is, as Stephen Connor has pointed out, the authoritative pronouncement of the death of all authority, the totalizing vision of the impossibility of totality, the master narrative of the end of all master narratives. It is expressed in architecture, art, literature, the media, science, religion, and fashion, and at the same time it is equivalent to none of these. It is both a continuation and intensification of what has gone before and a radical break with all traces of the past. It is, above all, simultaneously critical and complicit (see Hutcheon). This swarming contradiction and complexity, however, rather than confusing the issue of what, precisely, postmodernism is, may make it more comprehensible. That all conversations about postmodernism seem to degenerate into a debate about whether it is a good thing or a bad thing, whether one is “for” it or “against” it, is the most postmodern gesture of all: for, among the many things that postmodernism is, it is none more than the discourse of itself. A welter of the self-referential, postmodernism is more or less precisely what postmodernism is.

Moreover, it is a discourse determined by the concept of obsolescence, even as obsolescence is conversely determined by the discourse of postmodernism. Postmodernism, like the anxiety of obsolescence, is a reality created by its own discourse; as John Barth might have it, all this talk about postmodernism has been enough to create “the considerable cultural fact” of its existence. Like the death of the novel, whether it exists or not is beside the point; that

so many critics and writers seem to agree that it exists—even without agreeing on what it is—is the more interesting phenomenon. Charles Newman refers to postmodernism as “a terminological fiction” (16), a notion I like, invoking as it does both fictitious terms and fictitious terminations. Both postmodernism and the anxiety of obsolescence are informed by a rhetoric of postness, the sense of a culture that has suffered a radical break. And in both cases, the cultural sense of terminus evoked by the discourse serves not to illuminate but to obscure a kind of social reality.

Postmodernism has fed within the academy what David Simpson calls “an industry of definition and sub-definition” (1); this industry is not an offshoot or a by-product of the concept but the concept itself. While this volume thus resists the notion that “postmodernism” itself can be precisely defined, such definitions are de rigueur for any text that employs the term. This ritual generally involves a look back through the history of the term’s usage in the interests of uncovering either an originary meaning truer to the critic’s interests or a new, evolving meaning that shifts the term to its current employment. In what follows, I similarly explore that history, but not with the intent of discovering what “postmodernism” means. Defining the term in this sense presupposes its existence as a sign, however unstable, for some real referent that exists in the world as we know it. On the contrary, postmodernism is not a *thing* but a discursive function; my interest in the history of postmodernist discourse is not in what “postmodernism” means but in what it does (see Connor 10). One thing it does, according to Connor, is provide a common language for an academy in crisis. As the study of “high culture” has, throughout the modern period, become steadily less revered as a focus of intellectual pursuit, institutions previously dedicated to studying such high culture have begun to protect themselves with theories that describe what has “gone wrong” with the contemporary. Yet as Connor suggests, if the reorganization of cultural priorities “produces a sense of resentment at being pushed from the centers of power and influence, it can also offer the customary consolations of life at the margins” (12). The terms of this discourse begin to sound a bit familiar: as with the anxiety of obsolescence, a predatory popular culture has presumably shoved an older cultural institution from a position of centrality to a position of marginality. And as with the anxiety of obsolescence, both claims are dubious: the utopian vision of a past in which the intellectual pursuits of the “high” represented by the traditional academy were central to cultural life is a revisionist history; blaming changes in contemporary culture for the marginalization of academic pursuits is equally questionable. But the discourse of postmodernism

and its attendant theorizations of the contemporary create a protected space within which the academy can function. Hence the importance of defining that so-slippery term; the debates about its meaning *are* its meaning.<sup>34</sup>

This is not, however, to endorse the cynical view Charles Newman promotes of postmodernism as a wholly vacant concept caught up in cycles of academic self-validation, postmodernism as a theory that, like many such intellectual concepts in the age of inflation, possesses solely exchange value and is devoid of use value. Rather, as Connor suggests, examining the critical discourses of postmodernism reveals how they themselves function as responses (and hoped-for solutions) to Jurgen Habermas's "legitimation crisis," providing new "criteria of value" under which choices can be made (Connor 8). The problem rests in the frequent lack of engagement of those criteria with what one might think of as political or social reality. This lack of engagement is read by Christopher Norris (following Perry Anderson, in that endless chain of academic citations) as a result of the fall of Marxism: "a recourse to theory is typically the response of any marginalized fraction of dissident intellectuals, excluded from the mainstream of political life and left little choice but to cultivate a range of more or less hopeful alternative visions" (Norris 1). Here again, postmodernism becomes a protective measure, one of the consolations of life on the margins.

This sense of postmodernism as a replacement for a failed Marxist vision is arguably the case for that most influential of postmodernists, Fredric Jameson. Jameson entered a debate already in play, of course. As most histories indicate, the first real theorization of the term (which had begun cropping up significantly earlier) began in the late 1970s with the exchange between Jean-François Lyotard and Jurgen Habermas.<sup>35</sup> Already the rhetoric of the histories becomes deceptive, however, as the "exchange" was in appearance (and follow-up) only; Habermas probably was not aware of the publication of *La Condition postmoderne* at the time he was working on "Modernity—An Incomplete Project." Thus, the only "exchange" rests in Lyotard's response to Habermas, "Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?" (see Anderson 37). Nevertheless, despite the radical differences between these two perspectives—for Lyotard, postmodernism is anarchic, an aesthetic recuperation of the sublime; for Habermas, it is a reactionary perversion of the Enlightenment project—their conjunctions say far more about the nature of postmodernism. As Perry Anderson suggests, their interventions were

strangely indecisive. The original background of both thinkers was Marxist, but it is striking how little of it they brought to their accounts of postmodernity. Neither attempted any real historical interpretation of the postmodern,



capable of determining it in time or space. Instead, they offered more or less floating or vacant signifiers as the mark of its appearance: the delegitimation of grand narratives (dateless) for Lyotard, the colonization of the life-world (when was it not colonized?) for Habermas. Paradoxically, a concept by definition temporal lacks periodic weight in either. . . . The net effect was a discursive dispersion: on the one hand, philosophical overview without significant aesthetic content, on the other aesthetic insight without theoretical horizon. (45)

These oddly hollow theories highlight the difficulty of accommodating postmodernism to a socially engaged criticism. As Anderson notes, the concept is “by definition temporal” and yet is impossible to historicize. (Does it really come after? After what?) The problem, of course, is that dogged “post” and the hyphen that frequently follows it. Despite Newman’s contention that the hyphen is the term’s “most distinctive feature” (17), the atemporality of the concept and the vacancy of its signifiers lead one to suspect that the hyphen, when used, is misplaced: “post-modernism” might better be conceived of as “postmodern-ism,” an almost metaphysical belief in a thing called the postmodern.

Into this muddle, enter Jameson, who quickly complicated the issues in this debate with the 1984 publication of his essay “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” and the 1991 publication of the volume bearing the same name. Jameson’s postmodernism accedes to many of the formulas already employed by Lyotard and Habermas in their initial offerings, pointing to, among the “constitutive elements” of postmodernism, a “depthlessness” that has resulted from the destruction of the depth models or master narratives that had previously informed and structured cultural life, including the hermeneutic model of inside and outside, the dialectical model of essence and appearance, the Freudian model of latent and manifest, the existential model of authenticity and inauthenticity, and the semiotic model of signifier and signified (see Jameson 12). Jameson further links postmodernism to the rise of the simulacrum and the weakening of historicity, notions that both draw from earlier models. However, Perry Anderson, in *The Origins of Postmodernity*, argues that in five decisive moves Jameson redrew the entire map of postmodernism, creating, in a sense, the territory over which subsequent postmodernist battles would rage (see Anderson 49). First, and most importantly, Jameson linked postmodernism to the economic order of late capital; by locating postmodernism through an already existing framework of cultural materialism, Jameson situated it historically—in both the small- and large-*H* senses. Second, Jameson focused much of his discussion of postmodernism

on contemporary changes in the lived experience of the subject, a subject now “decentered” and “fragmented” beyond repair. Third, Jameson furthered one of the constituent impulses of Lyotard’s *La Condition postmoderne* by expanding postmodernism as a concept to describe the whole spectrum of the arts, as well as the discourse flanking it, seeing an “immense dilation” of the sphere of culture and the “effacement” of the “frontier between high culture and so called mass or commercial culture” (Jameson x, 2). Fourth (though fifth in Anderson’s enumeration), Jameson manages to explore postmodernism without falling into the sort of good thing/bad thing position taking that nearly all variants on this debate degenerate into, insisting on the one hand that “every position on postmodernism in culture—whether apologia or stigmatization—is also at one and the same time, and necessarily, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today” (3), and on the other that postmodernism as a “cultural dominant” subsumes all positions both for and against within its protean ooze.

Throughout Anderson’s description of Jameson’s significant contributions to the debate, however, in which Jameson’s additions to the discourse seem to have far greater life than that discourse’s ostensible object, we can see what Steven Connor refers to as “the self-conscious density of the debate itself, which began to cast a progressively longer and longer shadow over its alleged object of analysis” (6). That shadow produced some notable blind spots. Given Jameson’s own insistence that every position on postmodernism is inherently a political position, I want to spend some time considering Anderson’s reading of Jameson’s fourth decisive move on this new postmodernist front. Anderson claims that Jameson explores, where Habermas and Lyotard before him had not, the social bases and geopolitical patterns of postmodernism. While it is unquestionably true that Jameson lays out the *cultural* bases and geopolitical patterns of postmodernism—pointing, for instance, to “the deep constitutive relationships of [the features of postmodernism] to a whole new technology, which is itself a figure for a whole new economic world system” (6)—Anderson’s claim for genuine consideration of the *social* order on Jameson’s part is questionable. Phillip Brian Harper, in *Framing the Margins*—which is revealingly subtitled *The Social Logic of Postmodernism*, a pointed contrast with Jameson’s “cultural logic”—indicates the shortcomings of the Jamesonian project, along with those of Habermas and Lyotard:

However differently they might interpret the political meaning of subjective fragmentation, though, all our theorists conceive of that meaning in terms of macro-level social and economic structures, leaving aside considerations of more contingent political phenomena, in particular those having to do with

the social identities of the various subjects who manifest fragmentation in the postmodern context. (9)

What Harper refers to as “macro-level social and economic structures”—such as that globalizing technology that Jameson reads as a figure for the economic world order—might best be subsumed within the category of the cultural, given Jameson’s sense of that sphere’s dilation to both accept and self-identify with commodity production generally. Jameson’s location of postmodernism within the economic structures of late capital functions, then, as a specifically *cultural* postmodernism, taking its politics wholly on the macro level, from a post-Marxist perspective.

This cultural postmodernism can be contrasted, with Harper’s help, with a more properly social postmodernism that genuinely attempts to account for those “more contingent political phenomena” that occur on the level of the subject. Taking again the example of postmodernism’s much-hailed “de-centered subject,” Harper explores Jameson’s thinking about the implications of this subject. As Jameson indicates, the existence in the postmodern of a de-centered subject suggests either that a shift has occurred, and a once-centered subject has been decentered by the postmodernist forces at play, or that a veil has been lifted, and we postmoderns can now see the centered subject for the fiction that it always was. Unfortunately, this reading of the past and present status of the subject excludes a key social consideration:

It appears logical enough to juxtapose the atemporal quality of the post-structuralist position against the contextual specificity dictated by the historicist one, but when we consider the case of a number of socially marginalized and politically disenfranchised groups in the United States, it becomes clear that a sort of timelessness is actually inscribed within the historicist analysis: Granting the historicist claim for a “once existing centered subject,” it must also be acknowledged that, for certain groups in the United States—people of African descent, for instance—the historical status of such a subjectivity is precisely that of *never having existed*, due to the historical distribution of the power to conceive of oneself as a centered, whole entity. Jameson’s positing of the historicist perspective as fundamentally opposed to a conception of the centered subject as never having existed indicates a deep fault in the theory of the postmodern subject, an oblivion into which the experiences of marginalized populations have been cast, effectively untheorized. (Harper 11)

By failing to consider the importance of social positionalities in arguing for the historically specific state of the postmodernist subject, Jamesonian postmodernism ignores the social construction of that subject. A truly social

postmodernism, such as that explored in Harper's text, heightens the political stakes involved in postmodernist discourse by acknowledging within its theories the effects of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Harper again:

Rather than conceiving that fragmentation as deriving solely from the various technological, economic, and philosophical developments that I cite above as reorienting our idea of human subjectivity in the late twentieth century, I would like to suggest that postmodern decenteredness may actually be a function of the increasing implication in the "general" culture of what are usually thought of as socially marginal or "minority" experiences. (11–12)

Insofar as the discourse of postmodernism tells us anything useful about the life-world or has any real political efficacy, it is thus less in confronting a totalizing set of technological and economic obstacles to centered subjectivity than in interrogating the manner in which social relations, and changes within those relations, contribute to the experiences of the contemporary subject.

I suggest that the choice on the part of the postmodernists to consider the former and not the latter, while perhaps not conscious, was also not innocent.<sup>36</sup> The failure on the part of the major players in the postmodern debate to consider those socially marginal experiences in the formation of their predominantly cultural discourse highlights the function of the discourse of postmodernism, particularly in its position within the framework of the discourse of obsolescence. The political shifts in contemporary critical thought—particularly those since the late 1960s—highlight "difference" as a site of progressive activity. This often-disparaged turn to "identity politics," exacerbated by the seeming collapse of Marxism in the 1980s, threatened to close a number of largely white male critics out of the vanguard of contemporary discourse. These critics' turn, in response, to a cultural postmodernism obsessed with shifts in the structures of technology and of economics, is a self-protective gesture, an attempt to find prolonged political relevance in a radically changing social structure.<sup>37</sup> Thus we turn again to Christopher Norris's comment, with a slightly different emphasis: "a recourse to theory is typically the response of any marginalized fraction of dissident intellectuals, excluded from the mainstream of political life and left little choice but to cultivate a range of more or less hopeful alternative visions" (1). In this context, the self-diagnosis of the ills of marginalization on the part of a group of theorists overwhelmingly both white and male becomes quite politically charged. It also becomes increasingly clear that the discourse of postmodernism is cultural criticism's expression of the anxiety of obsolescence.

### The Postmodernist Writer

So, to recap: The anxiety of obsolescence, a cultural pose struck by the beleaguered postmodern novelist, has at its root three discourses with which it is mutually constitutive. These discourses—the death of the novel, the threat of new technologies, and the rise of postmodernism—all bespeak obsolescence in the interest of creating a protected space within which a threatened form might continue to flourish, but do so in highly suspect ways, ways that reveal a certain desire to submerge questions of social hierarchy within a more comfortable cultural framework. All that remains, before setting out to examine the anxiety of obsolescence in its primary texts, is to consider just who that postmodern novelist is.

My investigation into the novel of obsolescence takes the work of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo as a metonym of sorts for the work of a larger cluster of postmodern U.S. writers concerned with the relationship between the novel and television. While other authors and texts enter my analysis at key moments, I focus on these two novelists in no small part for practical purposes; fully examining the instances of this discourse as it recurs across the literature of the period (much less across multiple genres and national literatures) would no doubt require a multivolume set. To analyze this discourse in sufficient detail, the field must of necessity be narrowed. However, the choice of these two novelists is significant—as, arguably, the two most important U.S. literary novelists of the late twentieth century, their work has wielded huge influence over the development of the contemporary U.S. literary scene. Many other novelists have written many other very important novels, and yet Pynchon and DeLillo remain, arguably, the Hemingway and Faulkner of the postwar period; no understanding of the era can be complete without a full accounting of their influence.

I hope, however, that my focus on these two novelists might be understood in contradistinction from what has come to form a second-order postmodern debate, a constant wrangling among critics and writers over which practitioners and texts can be properly considered “postmodernist.” Within the debate that revolves around the novel, one finds numerous articles that have defined a core set of writers who together are considered the postmodern “canon,” insofar as such a thing can be said to exist. Among others, and in no order but the alphabetical, these writers include, in addition to Pynchon and DeLillo, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, William S. Burroughs, Robert Coover, William Gaddis, William Gass, John Hawkes, Norman Mailer, and Kurt Vonnegut (see, e.g., Hassan; Barth, “Replenishment”). Further compli-

cating matters is the work of more recent critics whose revisionist investigations of the postmodernist novel explore the writers left off the canon-forming lists but whose stylistic and thematic concerns warrant their inclusion, such as Kathy Acker, Joan Didion, Maxine Hong Kingston, Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed, Leslie Marmon Silko, and so on (see Harper; also Hite and W. Steiner). Given the very size and diversity of these lists, it appears evident that, despite the presumed death of the novel, despite the depredations of technology, and despite the hopelessness of the postmodern, novelists have not stopped writing, nor have they stopped making an impression on contemporary culture. As the editor of *Bold Type* suggests, the novelist's supposedly precarious existence on the edge of contemporary culture might actually be a benefit: "In this more marginal context, it may be that writers will be liberated and literature as an art form will flourish anew" (Weissman). Indeed, as we have seen, life at the margins has its consolations.

It is particularly to the point, then, that the *Bold Type* editorial begins with Don DeLillo's claim that we live in "a period of empty millennial frenzy" ("The Power of History" 62, qtd. in Weissman). John Barth, as we have seen, distinguishes the novelist's millennialism from that more frequently associated with mystics, pointing out that "if you took a bunch of people out into the desert and the world didn't end, you'd come home shamefaced, I imagine; but the persistence of an art form doesn't invalidate work created in the comparable apocalyptic ambience" ("Exhaustion," 32). The novelist is not immune from his own millennialism; his sense of his imminent demise and disappearance is of a piece with the querulous cries of that prophet in the desert that the world—or at least the "Western civilization" part of it—is coming to an end. But he has the luxury of putting his "empty millennial frenzy" to creative use. In 1997, the literary world saw the release of huge new novels—huge in both size and reception—by both DeLillo and Pynchon, while also watching the launch of WebTV. This was a significant coincidence. This study confronts the uncomfortable coexistence of these two writers and the electronic media, exploring through the connected discourses of television as machine, television as spectacle, and television as network, these writers' engagement with their own anxiety of obsolescence.

It is because this study draws primarily from the work of Pynchon and DeLillo that the novelist of obsolescence as I have described him thus far has been so relentlessly masculine. In addition to this pragmatism of signification, however, there are larger, more theoretical reasons for suggesting that the novelist confronting the anxiety of obsolescence is male. First, this

novelist is following in the tradition of Bloom's always-male poet, confronting, doing battle, and engaging in other such masculinist metaphors of contest and conquest. But more importantly, many of these readings of DeLillo and Pynchon should be extrapolated outward to connect with other members of that "canonical" group of white male writers whose texts form the core of what has, until recently, been considered the "postmodern." One critic of the postmodern novel, in attempting to delineate this canon, has posited two contrary forms of postmodernist fiction: the aesthetic and the oppositional (see Francese). This distinction casts into opposing camps formal experimentalists such as John Barth and politically motivated writers such as Toni Morrison. The flaw in this model is most clearly revealed when considering Pynchon and DeLillo, two novelists who significantly cross the line, as both combine late-modernist experimentalism with pointed commentary on the condition of postmodernity.

There nonetheless remains reason to separate these writers from a novelist such as Toni Morrison, whom I consider in the final chapter of this volume. This separation is based not on an essentialized authorial identity (white men versus a woman of color) but on the socially situated subject positions that their narratives construct. Moreover, such a separation cannot be made contingent upon a split between a false dichotomy of aesthetic postmodernism and oppositional postmodernism, as each set of writers clearly interacts with both categories. Rather, we might best be served by returning to my characterization of the split between cultural postmodernism and social postmodernism. Pynchon and DeLillo, like Jameson, repeatedly demonstrate in their highly formalist novels an obsession with the macro level systems of technology and economics, the movement of politics on a national and international scale, the global sweep of war—systems that engulf the individual and render him powerless. Morrison, by contrast, puts very similar techniques to work in exploring the local and familial effects of systems of domination that function to construct the marginalized subject in its contingent specificity, systems that do not obliterate but create the individual. Simply put, writers operating within a socially oriented postmodernist perspective, like Morrison, do not, by and large, show evidence of the anxiety of obsolescence in their texts. Such writers' interactions with and representations of television have much in common with Harper's description of the African American subject and its decenteredness; rather than a once-centered self now decentered, the "historical status of such a subjectivity is precisely that of *never having existed*" (11, emphasis in original). So with the electronic media: rather than once having had a voice and now find-

ing themselves silenced in the cultural realm by these new technologies, such voices' historical status is that of never having existed. And just as Marianna Torgovnick suggests that the death-of-the-novel discourse requires economic and social privilege to make any sense, so the anxiety of obsolescence requires cultural privilege (see Spilka and McCracken-Flesher 361).

This does not mean that postmodernist critiques, whether theoretical, critical, or fictional, bear no import for the writers I describe as social postmodernists; as bell hooks suggests, such critiques can "open up new possibilities for the construction of the self and the assertion of agency" (par. 10). However, where such critiques are used to undermine the notion of agency, and where they appropriate the language of marginalization, these critiques have the (perhaps unintentional) effect of closing down the possibilities for radical liberation on the part of previously disenfranchised subjects. Harper argues that "the subjective disorientation entailed by social marginality is implicated in dominant conceptions of the generalized postmodern condition, with the political consequence that its specific sociopolitical import is obscured in discourse in and about contemporary culture" (28). I suggest something slightly but crucially different: Pynchon and DeLillo deploy the discourses of cultural postmodernism with the effect not simply of appropriating the experience of marginality to the writer's cultural position, and not simply of obscuring the specific sociopolitical import of social marginality, but with the further effect of camouflaging an at times troubling set of sociopolitical concerns. In this paradoxical fashion, the return of the anxiety of obsolescence's repressed winds up not obscuring but rather highlighting questions of social marginality. In the end, the novel of obsolescence functions as a contemporary version of the "melodrama of beset [white] manhood" defined by Nina Baym, in which the threat that television poses to the novelist functions as an acceptable cultural scapegoat for what is a much stickier social issue: the perceived dominance on the contemporary literary scene of fiction by women and racial and ethnic minorities (see Baym).

For the moment, I'd like to look at two key instances in which Pynchon and DeLillo figure most clearly the altogether circumscribed spaces they imagine remaining to the writer in the age of television. Writers still abound in the postmodern novel—in fact, for many of the novelists of obsolescence, the writer is the quintessential postmodern figure, postmodern precisely in his presumed decenteredness. Thus one encounters repeatedly in the novel of obsolescence the presence of the novelist as a character within his own text—"John Barth" in *LETTERS*, "Richard S. Powers" in *Galatea 2.2*, "Paul



Auster” in *The New York Trilogy*—suggesting both the author’s reduction to the mere creation of his work, on the one hand, and his attempts to keep that work under control through his presence, on the other. This decenteredness becomes not only a danger to the author but also a badge of honor that marks his cultural marginalization; in fact, as we shall see in thinking about Don DeLillo’s *Mao II*, the most “successful” postmodern novelist is ironically the one who does not publish.

Pynchon’s view of the role of the writer is confronted most directly in *V.*, particularly in the Confessions of Fausto Maijstral:

while others may look on the laws of physics as legislation and God as a human form with beard measured in light-years and nebulae for sandals, Fausto’s kind [poets, that is] are alone with the task of living in a universe of things which simply are, and cloaking that innate mindlessness with comfortable and pious metaphor so that the “practical” half of humanity may continue in the Great Lie, confident that their machines, dwellings, streets and weather share the same human motives, personal traits and fits of contrariness as they.

Poets have been at this for centuries. It is the only useful purpose they do serve in society: and if every poet were to vanish tomorrow, society would live no longer than the quick memories and dead books of their poetry. (326)

Thus the job of the poet—and by extension, the novelist, who works with the same metaphors on a larger canvas—is to clothe what is essentially inhuman in the trappings of the human, to keep the world convinced that it runs on a human principle, without which deluded conviction all culture would fall into utter ruin. Writers are, in this view, the only members of society able to see beyond that veil of “comfortable” metaphor, and thus have been charged with the responsibility for upholding it. One might well ask two questions here, however. First, who is living the necessary lie? Arguably, Fausto’s delusions of grandeur regarding the importance of poetry in a dying world are what keep him moving forward; it may be his own conviction of his importance to the world that is deluded. Second, if the job of the writer is the maintenance of the illusions of metaphor, has Pynchon himself not violated the code by giving us all this blurred peek behind the curtain?

In fact, Pynchon’s writerly strategy across his career has been an absolute inversion of Fausto’s insistence on allowing humanity to “continue in the Great Lie” so that poetry itself may live on. Pynchon pulls back the cloak of metaphor, pointing out the determination of the twentieth century by the machine and the image, declaring at every opportunity that those things that

made us human—including poetry, and potentially the novel—are at an end. The responsibility of the writer, in Pynchon's estimation, is not making society comfortable with its delusions, but rather maintaining a profoundly political opposition to the dominant culture. The response of that culture to the writer's work only reveals the necessity of his continued opposition. Take, for instance, Winthrop Tremaine, army-surplus dealer, in *The Crying of Lot 49*: " 'Books.' You had the feeling that it was only his good breeding that kept him from spitting. 'You want to sell something used,' he advised Oedipa, 'find out what there's a demand for.' " (149). The demand for books, according to this representation, is gone from the world, though Tremaine's pleasure in the surge in demand for surplus rifles and swastika armbands gestures toward the lingering need for the novel's political work.

In *Mao II*, DeLillo creates an extended portrait of the contemporary writer as prophetic voice in the desert. *Mao II*'s writer-protagonist is Bill Gray, a novelist whose retreat from the world has augmented his status as cult figure. In fact, an argument can be made that this status has actually been created by his reclusiveness; as Scott Martineau, his creepily obsessive but nonetheless brilliant assistant, insists:

Bill is at the height of his fame. Ask me why. Because he hasn't published in years and years and years. When his books first came out, and people forget this or they never knew it, they made a slight sort of curio impression. . . . It's the years since that have made him big. (52)

This is the paradox that the contemporary writer must face, a world in which a writer gains fame by not publishing, by refusing to interact with the surrounding culture. Years earlier, in DeLillo's *Ratner's Star*, the tortured novelist Jean Venable explicates the conundrum:

There's a whole class of writers who don't want their books to be read. This to some extent explains their crazed prose. To express what is expressible isn't why you write if you're in this class of writers. To be understood is faintly embarrassing. What you want to express is the violence of your desire not to be read. The friction of an audience is what drives writers crazy. These people are going to read what you write. The more they understand, the crazier you get. You can't let them know what you're writing about. Once they know, you're finished. If you're in this class, what you have to do is either not publish or make absolutely sure your work leaves readers strewn along the margins. This not only causes literature to happen but is indispensable to your mental health as well. (410–11)

This friction between author and audience, between author and culture, becomes literalized in *Mao II*. Bill Gray, in his reclusiveness, in his cult status, in his long silences between novels, but also in his desire to have an impact on the wider culture, is arguably DeLillo's portrait of Pynchon—but also perhaps an idealized portrait of himself, that writer who reportedly circulated at the 1998 National Book Awards dinner while handing out cards that read “I don't want to talk about it” (see Atlas).

Scott works actively to keep Gray in hiding, to discourage him from publishing his latest novel. But Gray manages, in the course of the book, to elude Scott's watchful protection, emerge from his seclusion, and enter the electronic culture, a world for which he is utterly unprepared. This world doesn't conform to the romantic images he holds of it; as his editor says, during their first meeting in decades:

“You have a twisted sense of the writer's place in society. You think the writer belongs at the far margin, doing dangerous things. In Central America, writers carry guns. They have to. And this has always been your idea of the way it ought to be. The state should want to kill all writers. Every government, every group that holds power or aspires to power should feel so threatened by writers that they hunt them down, everywhere.”

“I've done no dangerous things.”

“No. But you've lived out the vision anyway.” (*Mao II* 97)

Gray's regret—that there isn't, in this image-based, media-driven culture, a real threat attached to the person of the writer—suggests the contemporary locus of such a threat. It is Brita, the photographer, who must travel under assumed names, who is in mortal danger; it is the terrorists who pose the threat to society that Gray feels should come from writers.

For some time now I've had the feeling that novelists and terrorists are playing a zero-sum game. . . . What terrorists gain, novelists lose. The degree to which they influence mass consciousness is the extent of our decline as shapers of sensibility and thought. The danger they represent equals our own failure to be dangerous. (156–57)

Gray, in his determination to “live out the vision,” to find a way of evening the score in this “zero-sum game,” seeks a place where writers are in danger, where he, as a writer, can ride forth and save one held captive by a fundamentalist sect determined to punish what it sees as blasphemy. We follow Gray on his delirious reenactment of the Quixotic quest, stepping into the light of day in

a world he has not lived in for thirty years, attempting to save a political prisoner, and the connections in our minds are almost laughably absurd: Thomas Pynchon riding to the rescue of Salman Rushdie.<sup>38</sup>

But ridiculous as this quest may sound, translated into the terms of our own literary figures, it appears to be the only way for Gray, and thus for the novelist as novelist, to reassert his own preeminence in the age of television. The need to engage with contemporary culture in *Mao II* is inextricably linked to a need for renewed masculine potency, for engagement with the threat of violence. This attempted return of the writer to action is also, for Bill, a return of the writer to writing. There is some ambiguity within the novel, at least at first, as to whether the passages that record the thoughts of the tortured poet-prisoner are in fact the novel's observations in free indirect discourse, or whether these are the creations of Bill Gray, the novelist. When finally we recognize that these passages are Gray's work, we discover the true purpose of his foray into this world; these passages represent the first new writing he has produced aside from his third novel, which he has worked and reworked for the last twenty-three years.<sup>39</sup> He is able to write again, able to be a writer, only by emerging from his solipsism and confronting the bomb makers and gunmen. "There was something at stake," he acknowledges, "in these sentences he wrote about the basement room. They held a pause, an anxious space he began to recognize. There's a danger in a sentence when it comes out right" (*MII* 167). As Hawthorne sought to masculinize the profession of writing by separating it from those "scribbling women," so Gray, in entering the world of terrorist violence, attempts to restore not just pertinence but danger to writing. While DeLillo arguably levels a critique at Gray via the novel's satire, this critical effect is minimized by the inevitable connections drawn by the reader between the writer *inside* and the writer *outside* the text; the glorification of one, struggling against his age, cannot help but reflect upon the other. Moreover, though this move is not tainted by the overt misogyny of Hawthorne's denunciation, by seeking the danger in writing, the text makes it once again part of the specifically masculine tradition of rugged individualism.

Gray succeeds only insofar as he is able, temporarily, to think writing dangerous again. Ultimately, however, Gray's literary helplessness in coping with the electronic, visual world leads him to his own destruction. Early on in his journey, in London, Gray marvels over the logic of the pavement signs on the street corners: "It was so perfectly damn sensible they ought to make it the law in every city, long-lettered words in white paint that tell you which way to look if you want to live." Later, in Athens, we realize that Gray's reliance upon

the word as a form of communication is near total, and deadly, as he is unable to interpret—does not even look for—the visual clues that would enable him on his own to keep from getting killed. He blithely walks off the unlabeled curb and is promptly hit by a car. He is helpless without the words to guide him, and even the words are not much help, when given visual, material form: He has to “[remind] himself” to read the signs when they do exist (*MII* 120).

Then again, after the accident, his reliance upon the literary and his inability to interpret visual clues worsen the situation; the outward signs of his injury are slight, so he assumes no damage has been done. Finally, in Cyprus, he is able to discover the true extent of his injuries only by approaching a group of British veterinarians with a textual question: “See, I’m doing a passage in a book that requires specialized medical knowledge and as I need a little guidance I wonder if I could trouble you for a minute or two” (*MII* 205). The veterinarians, a bit puzzled at first by the human/animal category mistake that Gray has apparently made, nonetheless comply, finding the entire thing somewhat amusing. Gray, for his part, must lead them through the events of his accident and his subsequent symptoms, but must treat his symptoms as textual choices that he, as writer, has made, thus attributing to himself a much greater degree of agency than the situation—or the age—would warrant.

“But the spleen is on the left side,” Bill said. “My character feels pain on the right side.”

“Did you tell us this?” the woman said.

“Maybe I forgot.”

“Why not change it to the left side and do the spleen?” the bearded vet said. “It would actually bleed nonstop, I expect. Might be a nice little bit you could do with that.”

The waiter came with the brandy and Bill held up a hand to request a formal pause while he drank the thing down.

“But, see, I need the right side. It’s essential to my theme.”

He sensed they were pausing to take this in.

“Can it be the upper right side?” the second man said.

“I think we can do that.”

“Can we give him some pain when he takes a deep breath?”

“Pain on breathing. Don’t see why not.”

“Can we make his right shoulder hurt?”

“Yes, I think we can.”

“Then it’s absolutely solved,” the woman said.

The bearded vet poured the wine.  
 “Lacerated liver.”  
 “Hematoma.”  
 “Local swelling filled with blood.”  
 “Doesn’t show externally.” (208)

Gray, the obstinate writer, still awash in the belief in his own omnipotence in a world he stubbornly insists on imagining to be text based, ignores the advice of the veterinarians to get his character to a doctor and instead sails for Lebanon, convinced that he can create for himself a new ending. Instead, in his last moments, he comes to realize that “it was writing that caused his life to disappear” (215). Doomed by his inability to view the world or his life outside the boundaries of the textual, doomed by his attempts to become a writer who writes, rather than a writer famous for not writing, Bill Gray dies alone in a cabin on the boat, his passport and identification stolen, his disappearance from the world complete. No one will ever be certain whether he is really dead.

DeLillo’s vision of the doomed writer coupled with Pynchon’s portrait of the novelist as the marginalized voice of reason forms the backbone of the anxiety of obsolescence. For both Pynchon and DeLillo, the most apparent strategy for contending with this anxiety is its novelistic reproduction, thematizing the anxiety in the very works in which the electronic media seem to have destroyed their faith. Each rejoices in his putative marginality, claiming that, contrary to our expectations, “the writer is working against the age . . . and so he feels some satisfaction in not being widely read. He is diminished by an audience” (DeLillo, qtd. in Aaron 73). There is, of course, a level of disingenuousness to this depiction of the novelist’s joy in being ignored, much less in his inevitable demise; Pynchon’s and DeLillo’s very successes give the lie to that death.<sup>40</sup> But perhaps the novel, in thematizing this anxiety, serves a talismanic purpose, magical thinking that both valorizes the novelist’s marginalization and creates the conditions for his return to the center. Or, as Bill Gray tells Brita during their photo session,

It’s the self-important fool that keeps the writer going. I exaggerate the pain of writing, the pain of solitude, the failure, the rage, the confusion, the helplessness, the fear, the humiliation. The narrower the boundaries of my life, the more I exaggerate myself. If the pain is real, why do I inflate it? Maybe this is the only pleasure I’m allowed. (*MII* 37)

Thus, as John Barth suggested, writing about the novel's end paves the way for a new beginning. But while Paul Mann argues that "death-theory" is used within the avant-garde to "terrorize" writers into finding the new within the conditions of its own impossibility, the novel of obsolescence's manipulations of "the pain of writing" seem to indicate a certain joy in anxiety, made possible by the knowledge of a much deeper safety.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps an exaggeration of the novelist's anxieties, the depiction of a world in which we all have much to fear from the writer's cultural displacement is indeed one of his last pleasures, and one that makes it safe for him to keep writing.