

PART III

*The Modern Synthesis*

The final paragraph of James D. Watson's autobiography, *The Double Helix* (1968), sounds a plangent note. It reverberates with the melancholy tones that close Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). Watson perhaps fancies himself as a late member of the Lost Generation, a Cold War descendant of those Americans in Paris, so disaffected, so alienated from their native land. Watson is spending a final day in Paris, taking a last look at the elegance of the Faubourg St. Honoré. Later that night he will celebrate his birthday. But now he wanders alone, "looking at the long-haired girls near St. Germain des Prés and knowing they were not for me" (131). The young man who has just published what many considered to be the greatest contribution to biology since Darwin can let himself savor a moment of self-pity. Unlike *Gatsby*, Watson knows his long-sought dream is already behind him, etched in the double-helix structure of DNA. So he laughs at himself in the book's final line: "I was twenty-five and too old to be unusual" (131).

When not invoking the Lost Generation, Watson's narrator gestures toward Huck Finn. With a knowing wink, Watson opens his book with the tale of a colleague greeting him on a hike with a sardonic question, "How's Honest Jim?" (7). Watson had once thought of titling his autobiography *Honest Jim*, and his colleague's mocking reference to the rumors that Watson had unscrupulously used Rosalind Franklin's crystallographic X-rays as the basis for his discovery, puts us on guard that this brash American narrator might, as Huck put it, "tell a few stretchers now and again." In any case, Watson establishes the kinship of his autobiography with several quintessential American fictions.

The relationship between autobiography and fiction – of a supposedly "factual" genre with the art of storytelling, in both senses of the word "story" – raises the kind of questions explored in the Chapter 4. Watson extends these questions into the practice of science. He has no doubt at all

about the *truth* of science. That is not his point . . . nor mine. But he does assert a bond between science and art. They are both “very human” endeavors, full of “the spirit of adventure”; and they are both shaped by “personalities and cultural traditions” (Watson 3). Watson is ardent about the beauty of scientific discoveries, and his research is guided “by the belief that the truth, once found, would be simple as well as pretty” (3). His stance in science is the same as his stance in literature.

The structure of DNA, which Watson and Crick discovered in 1953, may be seen as the highest achievement of what biologists call the modern synthesis. It is probably a coincidence that Watson reaches back to the Lost Generation of novelists in the 1920s when fashioning his narrator’s point of view, but that was the decade when a group of scientists in the Bloomsbury circle helped pioneer the modern synthesis of evolution and genetics. These scientists, like Watson after them, fashioned a “scientific point of view” closely aligned with that of a novelist, one of their fellow Bloomsbury writers, Aldous Huxley. This shared stance between a small circle of scientists and artists in the 1920s is the topic of Chapter 5. It would be interesting to delve into the resemblance between James Watson and the authors of the modern synthesis, but here let me simply say that we have been too willing to accept the notion that science and literature must remain in separate worlds. Watson did not accept that, and neither did some of the influential scientists who worked on the modern synthesis. There are ties that bind the process of scientific discovery to the larger culture, and it enriches our understanding of both when we trace the densely interwoven threads.