“[I]f one wishes to reflect upon some – the interesting minority – of the novels written in America during the late forties and fifties,” argued literary critic Irving Howe in 1959, “there is a decided advantage in regarding them as ‘postmodern,’ significantly different from the kind of writing we usually call modern.” Howe contrasted the modern novel, born from the work of Henry James and focused on the presentation of the world as filtered through the human mind, with the new postmodern novel, which sought to find literary means “to give shape to a world increasingly shapeless and an experience increasingly fluid” (198). Howe’s sense that the form and function of the novel had changed was reflected in the writings of numerous novelists in the 1950s such as William Gaddis, Vladimir Nabokov, John Hawkes, William S. Burroughs, and John Barth, all of whom, albeit in different ways, turned away from the traditional form of the novel. These writers abandoned the belief that the fictional world of their novels replicated either a particular slice of life from the real world, pace the nineteenth-century realist novel, or the true workings of human consciousness, pace the Modernist novel. Instead, they argued that the speed of technological and social changes in recent years necessitated a new type of novel to replace fictional conventions that had become worn out. In so doing, these novelists not only furthered the critique of realism that had emerged by the 1950s but presented a fundamental challenge to highbrow literary conventions in the postwar period.

Throughout the early postwar period in America, literary critics, led by the New York Intellectuals and the New Critics, and writers such as Ralph Ellison and Saul Bellow, argued that the nineteenth-century realist approach to the novel, concerned with the detailed representation of everyday life, was inadequate to convey the pressures facing humankind in an age of total war. In particular, these writers and literary critics rejected what they saw as the prominence of naturalism within American fiction in the first half of the twentieth century, criticizing the work of Theodore
Dreiser, Stephen Crane, Jack London, and others that had supposedly perverted the original goal of the novel, which was to reveal the complexity of life in a world of social and class hierarchies, into a cold, sterile analysis of a landscape governed by material forces. To contest this deterministic view, critics like Malcolm Cowley, Edmund Wilson, and F. O. Matthiessen championed the work of Henry James, William Faulkner, and others that challenged naturalism’s focus on the surface detail of life by concentrating instead on the inner life of literary characters, dramatizing the complex nature of experience as filtered through the human psyche. The result was a shift in American literature from a focus on external events to inner states, a new psychological realism found in novels such as Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March*.

In part, this literary shift was the result of the reorientation of American politics in the early Cold War. Fearful of radical political movements within the United States, many literary critics, ranging from Lionel Trilling to Allen Tate, Irving Howe, and Philip Rahv, rejected many forms of realism as much too wedded to politics, pointing to the fiction of John Steinbeck and others in the 1930s, which, by focusing exclusively on social and economic details, read more like sociology. In so doing, Trilling, for instance, dismissed the literature of the Popular Front of the 1930s, challenging the popularity of the so-called proletarian novel and the corresponding trend of documentary realism that focused on the social and economic conditions of the Great Depression. Refusing to make the novel subservient to politics, Trilling promoted a form of what he termed “moral realism,” a willingness to engage the psychological complexity of the human mind in tension with external reality. Moral realism, in contrast to traditional realism, examined how reality was refracted through individual consciousness without abandoning faith in what Trilling termed the “hardness” of that reality, that is, without collapsing into ideology (290). The novel, he believed, functioned to help maintain that tension.

Trilling worried, however, that the novel, despite the hopes he had placed upon it, was in a state of crisis, as novelists struggled to sustain the dialectic between external reality and the individual minds of their characters. Indeed, proclamations about the so-called death of the novel echoed throughout the decade. In 1955, for instance, the editors at *The American Scholar* held a symposium, attended by Ralph Ellison, William Styron, and others, titled “What’s Wrong with the American Novel?” Participants argued that the novel had declined in importance due to rapid social and economic changes that had revolutionized postwar society, erasing the early modern conditions that had given rise of the novel in the first place. Irving
Howe argued, for example, that the fabric of nineteenth-century society—
from distinct social classes to traditional centers of the authority like the
family—had been frayed by the rise of what he termed “mass society” or “a
relatively comfortable, half-welfare and half-garrison society in which the
population grows passive, indifferent, and atomized.” This new world,
characterized by rapid technological shifts, destructive forms of warfare,
large-scale economic and political organizations, and domineering forms
of mass media, was difficult, if not impossible, to translate into a literary
form based on verisimilitude. Many sounded the death knell for the novel
in what sociologist C. Wright Mills termed in 1959 a “postmodern” period. Believing
that the novel was in a state of dissolution, having fractured into
lyrical tales, travelogues, and other forms, Mary McCarthy argued that “the
novel, with its common sense, is of all forms the least adapted to encompass
the modern world, whose leading characteristic is irreality.”

Novelists like Burroughs, Barth, and Gaddis, however, took up
McCarthy’s challenge to confront this irreality, giving rise to what Irving
Howe called the postmodern novel. These writers followed Trilling in arguing
that realism as a literary form was bankrupt, failing in the project to
present a sober reflection of the world, but they also challenged Trilling’s
belief that the true goal of the novel was to detail the hardness of reality that
resisted any form of representation. In other words, these novelists refused
to make the distinction that Trilling did between ideas, as malleable beliefs
about the world, and ideology, as a false representation of reality. Echoing
themes found in nonfiction works such as sociologist Erving Goffman’s
_The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life_ (1959), Vance Packard’s _The Hidden
Persuaders_ (1957), and Marshall McLuhan’s _The Mechanical Bride_ (1951),
these novelists argued instead that any sense of reality was always filtered
through a form of representation in limiting, often domineering, ways.
Living in a society driven by Cold War-generated technologies, a booming
Fordist system of economic production and distribution, and new forms of
media and advertising, they argued that the extension of the logic of capital-
ism, based on the reduction of all objects to monetary exchange, into
all spheres of life had made obsolete traditional Modernist notions such
as authenticity, depth, and artistic originality. Searching for a new literary
form, many returned to the roots of the novel in the eighteenth century,
prior to the crystallization of the form into realism, and appropriated more
experimental forms such as black comedies and picaresque narratives to
critique traditional notions of representation and commonplace assump-
tions about the transparency of language. Believing that reality had become
increasingly and disturbingly fictional, as Mary McCarthy explained, these
writers responded by drawing attention to the constructed nature of their narratives as well as the constructed nature of reality in general.

A World in Crisis

Despite Howe’s categorization, the work of these novelists did not represent the consolidation of a new genre but a deepening of the Modernist critique of realism. Burroughs, Barth, and others argued that the realist novel, with its coherent field of reference and stable plot, papered over an unstable reality. As Wyatt Gwyon, the main character in William Gaddis’s The Recognitions (1955), argues, “there isn’t any single perspective, like the camera eye, the one we all look through now and call it realism.”6 These novelists challenged any effort to present the “irreality” of the modern world with any epistemological certainty, choosing instead to create fictional worlds that dispelled the illusion of any stable, understandable world. To do so, they either unraveled their novels into an endless series of indeterminate plots with no unity or dispensed with plot altogether. John Hawkes, the author of The Cannibal (1949) and The Beetle Leg (1951), chose, for instance, the latter approach. Hawkes claimed that he “began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting, and theme.”7 Hawkes followed Modernist writers in their exploration of the psychic interior of humankind, not to convey some personal truth like Virginia Woolf had done, but to dredge up the horror lurking within. Hawkes challenged the long-standing Enlightenment belief that unimpeded technological expansion brought inevitable progress, arguing instead that the development of the atomic bomb had upended any blind faith in benign scientific advancement. The world, according to Hawkes, was not moving forward but declining into a state of disorder under an ever-present apocalyptic threat.

Consequently, Hawkes eschewed reader expectations about plot structure and character development and presented in his novels a series of static images and still landscapes. In The Beetle Leg, for example, Hawkes painted a nightmarish vision of an entropic Western landscape full of death and isolation, reflecting in many ways his own experience as an ambulance driver during World War II. The novel centers on the lives of the inhabitants of two ghost towns in the American West, whose fortunes shifted dramatically when administrators from Government City, prior to the start of the novel, coordinated the construction of an enormous earthen dam, described as “a sarcophagus of mud,” to bring hope to the barren region.8 Originally a symbol of progress, the dam, however, is far from an
engineering marvel – hastily constructed and bringing little relief to the neighboring communities. Naively believing that the dam is stable, local inhabitants ignore the readings of seismographs, which signal that the dam is inching downstream, “a beetle’s leg each several anniversaries” (67). This inevitable apocalypse was foreshadowed during the construction of the dam when “the Great Slide” claimed the life of Mulge Lampson, one of the construction workers, whose body remains buried within the structure (17). Mulge’s death haunts the lives of everyone, a turning point in the history of this community symbolizing the brutality buried within the fantasy of humankind’s control over nature. The Beetle Leg progresses not through the mechanisms of its plot but through a series of grotesque images, such as the human fetus that Luke Lampson hooks while fishing in the reservoir, that challenges any dream of unlimited expansion.

Hawkes argued that any recourse to linear narrative, fictional or otherwise, made no sense in a world of entropic decay, a claim that was echoed by the Beat writer William S. Burroughs who explored similar themes in novels such as Queer (written 1953) and Naked Lunch (1959). Like Hawkes, Burroughs argued that the traditional novel had little contemporary relevance. As he expressed to Jack Kerouac in 1954 during the composition of Naked Lunch: “I tell you the novel form is completely inadequate to express what I have to say.” Consequently, Burroughs, like Hawkes, turned to the eighteenth-century picaresque tradition to present episodic tales about socially marginalized characters living in opaque worlds full of power brokers and criminals. Burroughs was inspired by Oswald Spengler’s The Decline of the West, which argued that Western society, due to its devotion to scientific-technological rationality, was in a state of inevitable collapse that paralleled the fall of Roman civilization. As the demands of the Cold War led to a dramatic increase in military research, Burroughs warned that the intermingling of science, technology, and government had paved the way to the eventual enslavement of humankind by the tools once envisioned as harbingers of a better future. Burroughs saw the forces of manipulation everywhere – from modern advertising practices to the hypnotic methods of mass media, the surveillance tools of the FBI, and the rhetoric of government officials and military leaders.

Burroughs expressed his paranoia about monopolistic systems of control most clearly in Naked Lunch. Lacking any coherent plot, the novel tells the story of William Lee’s escape from police detectives for drug possession into the nightmarish underworld of Interzone, his surrealist portrait of modern society. Full of carnivalesque episodes, Naked Lunch exposes, often in graphic detail, the workings of modern forms of power, reflected in the
three conspiratorial parties fighting for control: the Senders (representative of communist societies that subordinate all personal needs to the state), the Liquefactionists (representative of the fascist desire to eliminate individual differences), and the Divisionists (representative of the leveling tendencies of democratic states). Throughout, Lee seeks to undermine the parties of control by infiltrating their organizations. He discovers, however, numerous psychiatrists who have perfected forms of psychological manipulation that negate all efforts at liberation. The most famous is Dr. Benway, the director of the Reconditioning Center of Freeland, who is “an expert on all phases of interrogation, brainwashing, and control.” Benway argues that older forms of authority that rely exclusively on force are no longer efficient; instead, he promotes the use of behavioral conditioning that convinces “the subject” to believe “that he deserves any treatment he receives because there is something (never specified) horribly wrong with him” (21). In the dystopian world of Burroughs’s novel, scientific advancement goes hand-in-hand with the rational administration of everyday life, a key theme of this new type of novel.

The Vicissitudes of Modernity

Of course many Modernist writers in the early twentieth century had prefigured the themes of Burroughs and Hawkes, but what distinguished the latter was their loss of faith in any artistic refuge from the ravages of modernity. Unlike Modernists such as T. S. Eliot and Wyndham Lewis, who hoped their aesthetic practices would shield them from contamination by a decaying world, Burroughs and Hawkes argued that the profound historical changes of the twentieth century had exposed the futility of any Modernist retreat from the terror of the world, whether such a retreat entailed a personal exploration into the recesses of the human mind or the invocation of some prior historical or mythological golden age. In The Recognitions, William Gaddis followed them in eschewing hope in some artist-hero establishing some semblance of stability, aesthetic or otherwise, in the face of the sickness of twentieth-century society. Instead, Gaddis excavated the historical roots of the crisis of modernity to expose a world lacking any ontological grounding for selfhood, value, art, or representation. Intertwining themes of forgery and deception, The Recognitions reads like a Modernist novel, featuring allusions to works such as The Golden Bough and meditating on the function of art in the modern world. But the novel also subverts many Modernist practices, parodying, for instance, the stream-of-consciousness style developed by early-twentieth-century writers and deriding contemporary artists and art markets.
The Recognitions is a Bildungsroman about the career of Wyatt Gwyon, a technically gifted painter who escapes the puritanical household of his father, Reverend Gwyon, and flees to the bohemian enclaves of New York City. Refusing to paint his own works, a lesson taught to him by his aunt who railed against all hubristic attempts to create original artworks separate from the guiding hands of the Creator, Wyatt enters into a Faustian pact with Recktall Brown, a New York art dealer, to forge paintings by famous Flemish painters of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which Brown, with help from the unscrupulous art critic Basil Valentine, sells as newly discovered works. Isolated from his family, Wyatt is adrift in a world torn asunder by crass materialism, scientific rationality, and technological advances that have erased any support for religious faith. Wyatt’s admiration for the Flemish painters of the Middle Ages stems not only from his nostalgia for their devout spirituality but for the world to which they belonged, one prior to the rise of commercial capitalism. Wyatt revers what he sees as the integrated world of the Middle Ages in which all aspects of life were bound together by an overarching religious order. “There was nothing God did not watch over,” he explains, “nothing, and so this . . . and so in the painting every detail reflects . . . God’s concern with the most insignificant objects in life, with everything” (251). Emulating their painting techniques, Wyatt hopes to transcend the nightmarish landscape of modernity and return spiritually to this lost historical moment, a form of nostalgia also exhibited by high Modernists such as T. S. Eliot.

Wyatt’s search for purity is also reflected in his interest in alchemy, the arcane medieval process, developed prior to the advent of modern science, in which base lead was transformed into gold, seen as a way to redeem matter in the same manner as man had been redeemed by Christ. As Wyatt explains to Basil Valentine, “Thank God there was the gold to forge” (689). Wyatt, however, is eventually disabused of his lofty ambitions. A rational skeptic, Valentine challenges Wyatt’s belief that the late Middle Ages was devoid of the decadence that Wyatt sees in the contemporary world, arguing that fifteenth-century Flanders, the home of the painters Wyatt admires, was the center of commercial activity and was criticized, much like modern-day New York City, for its crass materialism. “Oh, this pious cult of the Middle Ages!” Valentine exclaims, “Being looked at by God! Is there a moment of faith in any of their work, in one centimeter of canvas? or is it vanity and fear, the same decadence that surrounds us now” (690). Unable to respond, Wyatt spirals into ontological uncertainty, prodding him to drastic action. Hoping to highlight the forgery ring, Wyatt collects paint fragments from one of his forgeries to expose the ruse during one of Brown’s cocktail parties, a plan that backfires and results in Wyatt stabbing
Valentine and fleeing New York City. Delirious, Wyatt seeks stability by returning to his father’s New England town, hoping to find immutability in the paternal order. His father, however, has abandoned his Christian faith for Mithraism, unable in his madness to answer his son’s one pressing question: “Am I the man for whom Christ died?” (440).

In the end, Wyatt recognizes that his search for some spiritual truth is hopeless and, equally disconcerting, that his nostalgia for some golden age is misguided. As the novel leaves him, Wyatt, on the brink of madness, retreats to a Spanish monastery where he restores old paintings by scraping off all of the paint with the same delicate hand with which he had originally made forgeries. Reducing these paintings to bare canvases, Wyatt exposes painting, once seen as a medium for some spiritual harmony, as another contrived frame through which the world is viewed. Gaddis suggests that any representation – including art – is counterfeit, a failed attempt to bring stability to a world in flux. As Wyatt secludes himself, other characters more attuned to this unstable landscape take his place, including Frank Sinisterra, a criminal counterfeiter and a devotee of The National Counterfeit Detector who dreams of perfecting a copy of the twenty-dollar bill. With no gold to forge and therefore no ontological security, the characters of The Recognitions are left with no guarantee of any solid basis for authenticity, value, or meaning. The Recognitions is a world of forgeries and counterfeits with no original source to be found anywhere.

Gaddis argued, as did Burroughs, that the origins of this crisis of representation rested with the historical development of capitalism, which not only overturned the power of the Church but had reduced everything, including human relationships, to monetary exchange. Both The Recognitions and Naked Lunch depict the extension of the logic of the market into all social relations. Burroughs, for instance, used his own experience with drug addiction to explain modern mechanisms of psychological control, what he refers to as junk. As Dr. Benway demonstrates in Naked Lunch, modern systems of control do not rely on overt force but create dependency through the fleeting pleasures offered. “A functioning police state,” he explains, “needs no police” (Naked Lunch 34). From the commodification of all forms of desire to the manipulation of all social relationships, modern institutions had invaded the human body, producing artificial desires through a media-saturated environment and making individuals libidinally tied to the forces of their own oppression. Burroughs refers to this addiction as “the Algebra of Need,” symbolized in Naked Lunch by “Fats” Terminal, a pusher whose “substance grew and grew filling plazas, restaurants and waiting rooms of the world with grey junk ooze” (187). Drug addiction,
Proto-postmodernism 203

according to Burroughs, was merely one form of commodity addiction foisted upon a passive public.

However, the ultimate form of junk, according to Burroughs, was language itself. He rejected the fundamental premise of realism – that language served as a neutral medium to depict the phenomenal world. Borrowing from the semantic theory of Alfred Korzybski and the self-help philosophy of L. Ron Hubbard, Burroughs argued that language served to dissect the world in preestablished ways through patterned associations of words and phrases. These associations were established by the institutions of control that used Pavlovian conditioning to create connections between words and things. Language, for Burroughs, was a virus that established control not only of speech but of bodily desires and movements. “Gentle Reader,” Burroughs warns in *Naked Lunch*, “The Word will leap on you with leopard man iron claws” (208). Burroughs’s fear of language was demonstrated in the structure of *Naked Lunch* itself. Recognizing that any direct statement about the function of language was a form of power itself, Burroughs tried to mitigate the effects of his writing by abandoning any coherent plot, creating instead a mosaic of absurd scenes that insinuated his message instead. “You can cut into *Naked Lunch* at any intersection point,” he explains; the novel for Burroughs is “a How-To Book” that “demands Silence from” The Reader” instead of more verbal chatter (203).

The Problem of Representation

This notion that any sense of reality was mediated by language served as the basis of the growing critique of realism and other conventions such as history that were based on mimesis. Exposing the machinations of power, Burroughs, Hawkes, and others argued that reality was shaped by language, ideology, and media, often in oppressive ways, and pointed in particular to contemporary uses of history to shape understandings of the world. As the Cold War drove US officials to rewrite American history as the progressive expansion of democracy and to tie the nation’s history to some larger divine plan, Burroughs and Hawkes worked to demonstrate the fictionality of any historical narrative. They argued that standard histories served a hegemonic purpose by legitimizing particular political and economic orders through widely circulated narratives about the nation’s past. In *The Beetle Leg*, for instance, Hawkes parodies the conventions of the American Western, found in countless novels and Hollywood films, and punctures the self-serving myth of the American frontier. Challenging the notion of the American West as the site of inevitable progress in which
rugged Americans transformed a desolate land into a modern civilization and thereby renewed American democracy, Hawkes portrays the settlement of the West as a moment of oppression and unmitigated violence.

But the postwar novelist who exposed most forcefully the blurry boundary between history and fiction was John Barth. He too saw the novel as an outmoded genre and returned to its origins in the eighteenth century, borrowing from Henry Fielding and Miguel de Cervantes to demonstrate that realism, despite claims to the contrary, did not innocently describe the world. Barth began his literary career exploring existentialist themes concerning authenticity and personal meaning in novels such as *The End of the Road* (1958), placing him in the company of Richard Wright and other Sartrean-inspired writers. But Barth soon tired of his beleaguered commitment to traditional forms of representation; as he explained, “One ought to know a lot about Reality before one writes realistic novels.”

Barth did reference the limits of realism in his first novel, *The Floating Opera* (1956), but he explored the larger epistemological questions related to realism in *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960). Barth argued that any straightforward representation of the world was in actuality an act of distortion that operated by leaving out essential elements or other perspectives. There was, according to Barth, no authoritative account of history and society and no single narrative pattern.

Set in the 1690s, *The Sot-Weed Factor* tells the story of Ebenezer Cooke, an aspiring poet and virgin, who decides to abandon his meandering life in England and settle at Malden, his father’s plantation in colonial Maryland, after he receives a commission from Lord Baltimore to write an epic poem about the new colony. Based on the real-life Cooke, an eighteenth-century poet and author of “The Sot-Weed Factor,” Barth’s tale satirizes the historical novel by upending myths about colonial expansion and, more importantly, demonstrating the impossibility of representing history in its totality. Refusing to reduce historical events to one single narrative pattern, Barth presents instead a series of twenty interpolated stories told by seventeen different narrators that give a weightlessness to the overall narrative, which often abruptly shifts directions and which is full of paper-thin characters blown along by events. Barth also takes liberties with the historical record of Maryland and establishes connections between events for which there is scant evidence. As he explained, “a certain kind of sensibility can be made very uncomfortable by the recognition of the arbitrariness of physical facts and the inability to accept their finality.”

Barth uses the tale of Cooke to recast the founding of the New World as a form of imperialism, drained of all sense of historical destiny that made up the American imagination.
Like Wyatt in *The Recognitions*, Cooke believes that the world of appearances is a false one, behind which stands some ontological security. As he argues, “the surest thing about Justice, Truth, and Beauty is that they live not in the world, but as transcendent entities, noumenal and pure.” Consequently, Cooke cherishes his virginity as a symbol of his commitment to refrain from the temptations of the world and remain in the pure realm of poetry. His tutor, Henry Burlingame, whose search for his family origins serves as one of the secondary plots in the novel, tries to disabuse Cooke of his Platonic notions, arguing that “the world’s indeed a flux, as Heraclitus declared” (126). Defiant, Cooke travels to Maryland, dreaming of an Edenic existence and basking in his identity as a poet and virgin. On his journey, however, he barely escapes misadventures aboard the *Poseidon* and harrowing encounters with pirates and prostitutes, all of which test his convictions. Even worse, Maryland, much to Cooke’s chagrin, is riddled with criminals and subjected peoples, a picaresque landscape that runs counter to Cooke’s dream of a prelapsarian world. Shortly upon arriving, moreover, Cooke ineptly loses Malden, which is turned into an opium den. Cooke’s story, in this sense, is “Adam’s story” in which he fails to remain unspoiled by the fallen world around him (401). In the end, Cooke, less than triumphantly, wins back Malden, marries a former prostitute who dies soon after, and spends the rest of his days with his sister. In *The Sot-Weed Factor*, conventional distinctions between good and evil do not exist, corruption and deceit are found everywhere, and plots and counterplots are always afoot.

But the novel does not merely shatter Cooke’s illusions about Malden as a Waldenesque paradise but also debunks romantic versions of colonial history. Like Cooke, Burlingame travels to the New World, where he discovers that his genealogy is intertwined with the story of Captain John Smith. Burlingame uncovers two historical documents concerning Smith’s adventures that provide more detail than the official historical record does about Smith’s celebrated encounter with Pocahontas. The first document, “A Secret Historie,” written by Smith, reveals the famed adventurer to be more interested in boasting of his virility than his explorations. The second document, “The Privie Journall of Sir Henry Burlingame,” written by a relative of Cooke’s tutor, treats the Smith-Pocahontas story as a farce. Burlingame describes an absurd sexual encounter between Smith and Pocahontas, deprived of all romantic connotations, in which Smith uses an eggplant to break the supposedly impenetrable hymen of the young woman. The line between history and fiction, according to Barth, is quite blurry, as the past is continuously rewritten. As Burlingame explains to Cooke, “we
all invent our pasts, more or less, as we go along, at the dictates of Whim and Interest” (743). Criticizing the myth of the New World as a primeval landscape settled by an American Adam and innocent of the class conflicts that plagued Europe, Barth revealed notions of American exceptionalism as bunk and demonstrated that any narrative, historical or otherwise, was distorting and incomplete.

In stressing the fictional quality of history, Barth also stressed the fictional quality of everyday life. Like Burroughs, Barth rejected the humanist assumptions of much postwar literature, which often pitted an anxious hero searching for authenticity in a heartless world, and argued instead that the world provided no security for any stable sense of self. Barth had little interest in Freudian explorations of the inner workings of human consciousness. Instead, he appropriated the work of sociologist Erving Goffman to argue that in a world of routinized forms of labor, leisure, and social interaction, the self was less a coherent being and more a mask or role derived from the mimetic practices of everyday life. In *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Henry Burlingame’s Heraclitean philosophy also extends to his notion of identity. Burlingame’s search for his father, depicted as a search for a paternal order that might withstand the flux of history, fails to provide him with any concrete sense of self. As Burlingame discovers, “all assertions of thee and me, e’en to oneself, are acts of faith, impossible to verify” (128). Consequently, Burlingame adopts role-playing instead, masquerading as an endless number of characters, including Lord Baltimore and John Coode, in an effort to advance his own cause. For Burlingame, survival in such a world is possible only by contesting one fiction by creating one. This lesson is one also learned by William Lee in Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* and by the many weightless figures in Gaddis’s *The Recognitions* such as Otto Pivner, a struggling playwright who morphs into one of his characters.

**Toward Metafiction**

This strategy was part and parcel of the larger undermining of realism by novelists like Barth, Burroughs, and Gaddis in the 1950s. Their goal was not to represent the world more accurately but to represent the discursive frames through which the world was viewed, exposing the workings of power in an increasingly media-saturated, information-driven world. This meant overturning the conventions of the realist novel and exposing the manufactured nature of any representation of reality. To do so, they often laid bare the artifices of their own fiction, shattering the worlds they created by intruding directly into them. In *The Recognitions*, Basil Valentine,
during a telephone conversation, discusses Gaddis’s writing of the novel he is in: “But you can tell your friend Willie that salvation is hardly the practical study it was then ... Yes. The what? The Recognitions? ... My, your friend is writing for a rather small audience, isn’t he?” (372–73). Probably the most popular work of this new tradition of metafiction was Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita (1955), which tells the story of literature professor Humbert Humbert’s seduction and rape of twelve-year-old Dolores Haze. Parodying the confessional tale, the psychoanalytic case history, and other genres that falsely claim to mirror reality, Nabokov mocks any literary form committed to verisimilitude. Nabokov continually draws attention to his own presence as author within Humbert’s narrated story, from using anagrams of his own name to pointing to his own interest in lepidoptery, all of which demonstrate that Humbert is his own creation. Even Humbert openly declares his own fictional status, telling the reader that “I shall not exist if you do not imagine me.” These metafictional qualities, which Nabokov further explored in later novels such as Pale Fire (1962), became more ubiquitous by the 1960s, as other novelists similarly questioned the efficacy of the realist tradition in a world in which the line between reality and irreality seemed increasingly blurred. As Burroughs began to dismantle his novels into assembled texts composed of writings by other individuals, and Barth explored a resolutely metafictional style in his later books, other novelists such as Thomas Pynchon and Donald Barthelme helped to map out the contours of this new postmodern novel, following Nabokov proclamation that “reality” is “one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes.”

NOTES