



TRANSGRESSIVE FICTION
THE NEW SATIRIC TRADITION

ROBIN MOOKERJEE



Transgressive Fiction

Also by Robin Mookerjee

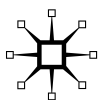
IDENTITY AND SOCIETY IN AMERICAN POETRY: The Romantic Tradition

Transgressive Fiction

The New Satiric Tradition

Robin Mookerjee

palgrave
macmillan



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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2013 978-0-230-29402-8

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First published 2013 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 978-1-349-33318-9 ISBN 978-1-137-34108-2 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9781137341082

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

For Lucy Daniel Anderson

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Acknowledgments

This book happened because Noah Isenberg, chair of Literature at Eugene Lang College in 2008, allowed me to teach a course entitled “Writers Behaving Badly.” Over a semester of teaching controversial contemporary fiction, I came to see that “transgressive” novels, as they were then beginning to be known, had striking coherence as a genre. I was impressed by my students’ instinctive understanding of the vitality of these books.

While seemingly unrelated to this genre, Louis Markos’s lectures on aesthetics helped me understand the continuity of two millennia of literary philosophy. Markos notes the similarity between typology and Northrop Frye’s archetypal approach. I don’t use either approach, but I wish to acknowledge a kinship with those who recognize and explore the connections between ancient, modern, and contemporary literature.

In locating my own understanding of relations between authors I was greatly helped by Alden Smith’s account of Ovid and Virgil. Carter Kaplan’s book on Menippean satire contained insights that led me to the philosophical core of transgression.

As for the development and writing of the book, I am grateful for the courtesy and patience of Paula Kennedy, my editor at Palgrave, as well as Palgrave’s readers, whose comments greatly influenced the book’s design. My partner Lucy was loving and supportive during my long days at the keyboard.

Introduction: Criminal Rehabilitation

The term “transgressive fiction” was coined in 1993 by Michael Silverblatt of the *Los Angeles Times* who recognized a “new” and essentially pernicious tendency in literature. Silverblatt’s original article, “Shock Appeal: Who Are These Writers, and Why Do They Want to Hurt Us?,” arrived late on the heels of Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*. Silverblatt characterized transgressive novelists as those who deliberately include unpleasant content – taboo sex, violence, and drug use – solely to provoke the reader. Silverblatt does acknowledge older transgressive figures like William Burroughs and Kathy Acker as the main influences on Ellis and Dennis Cooper and sees echoes of the imaginative libertinism of Sade in this disturbing new trend. He wonders why an author like Anne Rice, whose books feature violent sex, is widely appreciated while a figure like Ellis is vilified.

Seventeen years later Ellis’s reputation has grown and Rice has been replaced by similar, milder authors in the fantasy genre. It is impossible to predict long-term literary reputation, but the smart money would be on Ellis, whose book, while still controversial, is regarded as making a socially relevant statement. Rice would have seen this coming. In an interview published in 1996, she complained that fiction isn’t taken seriously “unless it has something to do with the middle class” (Riley 93). As a writer of imaginative fiction she was therefore at a disadvantage. In the same interviews she spoke frequently of her “florid” style. While her work received more respect than most fantasy fiction, it was the flat, clinical style of Ellis’s book that drew both praise and censorious attention. Rice’s work contains violent sex, the sexualization of children, and possibly negative or stereotyped portrayals of women and gays, but has never been regarded as dangerous – only trivial. The nearly successful effort to stop the publication of *American*

Psycho hinged on an argument that it would motivate rape and murder. No one has ever made this argument about a novel such as *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Rice even thinks the homoerotic elements in her works allow her greater freedom: "I can present a highly romantic relationship between two men, and the book isn't perceived as just a romance, but that's exactly what happens if one of the people is a woman ... But because it was two men, I was able to deal with the real essence of dominance and submission" (Riley 49).

Sexual domination is a stock in trade of the hugely popular romance genre, especially historical romance, the ubiquitous "bodice ripper" paperbacks. It also lends a controversial quality to literary fiction – authors like Kathy Acker and Mary Gaitskill – because it attracts strong opinions from every side of the political and cultural spectrum. Transgressive satirists treat flashpoint subjects without taking any kind of moral stand and treat bizarre behavior as if it were absolutely normal. Further, they maintain a sort of authorial anonymity that makes it difficult to extract some semblance of intent from the work to clarify its meaning as a gesture. The salient literary value of these works wins it an audience with those readers who avoid erotic romance or violent crime paperbacks: the chattering classes that evaluate and interpret literature. These are the essential elements of literary transgression as I define it: it achieves an audience among the cultural elites while maintaining neutrality, a refusal to take sides in the debates brought up by the subject matter of the work. This masterstroke forces the audience to face the subject matter of the work directly, rather than through the optic of a system or theory.

It is a gesture that was perfected by the earliest satirists beginning with Petronius and the Menippean school in particular. Its rhetoric is exemplified by the earliest genius of satire, Publius Ovidius Naso. In Ovid we find the unique author–speaker–reader triangle so important to the Menippean mode, a formal means for complicating any identification of the author in the text while allowing him to linger outside of it as an implied presence. Ovid, Swift, and other satirists, as discussed in the first chapter, belong to a consistent "shadow" lineage of literature: the mock epic. Epic literature maintains the core beliefs of a society at a given time, and its unwelcome companion, mock epic, uses exaggeration, sarcasm, and humorous juxtapositions to undermine these beliefs. For this reason the views that may be gleaned from literary novels cause more unrest than those in manga comics, video games, popular fiction, or cable television. Literature serves as a holder for paradigms, whether old-fashioned or newfangled, held in common as the conceptual core

of society itself. Menippean satirists employ a negating or apophatic approach to undermine the systems and theories of their times, which I call “mythologies” or public ideas. In Bakhtinian terms, these mythologies and the monologic discourse in which they are expressed, exclude folk voices, the polyglot speech of those whose viewpoint lies outside the mainstream. Since virtually all satire is from a subjective, vernacular point of view, it generally issues from this folk voice and brings it into relationship with the public voice.

In Ovid’s time, the overarching mythology was that of Rome and Caesar as beautifully imagined in Virgil’s *Aeneid*. By contrast, contemporary satirists must contend with numerous beliefs and systems in a pluralistic culture. These public voices and paradigms are not only diverse but also maintained by a vast bulwark of media and cultural institutions. For the alienated postmodern speaker, the distance between ground-level “folk” experience and the public culture is irreconcilable. Furthermore, satirists trace their roots to a postwar tradition, associated with the anti-Stalinist left, who believed aesthetics and the artist’s prerogative were threatened by a society that increasingly divided itself into clashing sociological creeds. Drawing from the ironic aestheticism of Nabokov on the one hand and the violent anarchism of Burroughs on the other, a new generation of satirists defended the independence of the artist-observer against a public culture they found dogmatic and literal-minded.

With the growth of the “sociological” point of view that tended to view culture and literature from a global perspective, transgression became a means for this artist to stand out by defying the proscriptive tendencies that attend broad belief systems. The alienated postmodern writer, differentiated from the mainline postmodernist in the fourth chapter, has occupied two transgressive arenas. The sexual story directly presents the interactions of the body with “systems of belief” by which (as articulated by Kathy Acker) it is untouchable. The inexorable libido is depicted either ironically, through a screen of fancy verbal juxtapositions, after *Lolita*, or brazenly asserting itself in defiance of the world’s deeply ingrained systems of repression, after *Naked Lunch*. The second story type features a “rogue” speaker with an obsessive point of view expressed in a highly specific language culled from public discourse. This language ironically underwrites his/her misbehavior, through which a primal lust for physicality asserts itself. Often a mix of the cultured and lowbrow sensibilities, the transgressive antihero seeks closeness with death as a key to a lost vitality that thrives in the absence of ideation. The denial of death, in the transgressive vision, is the foundation of mass consciousness.

Given this tradition's antipathy to systems, it would be incongruous to use philosophers or theorists as heuristic tools. However, it may be worthwhile to point out a similarity between the Menippean worldview and Heidegger's *Being and Time*:

When tradition thus becomes master, it does so in such a way that what it "transmits" is made so inaccessible, proximally and for the most part, that it rather becomes concealed. Tradition takes what has come down to us and delivers it over to self-evidence; it blocks our access to those primordial "sources" from which the categories and concepts handed down to us have been in part quite genuinely drawn. Indeed it makes us forget that they have had such an origin, and makes us suppose that the necessity of going back to these sources is something which we need not even understand (43).

Heidegger's opposition between tradition and the primordial could be borrowed as an articulation of the grounding assumption of transgressive satire, along with his belief in the confrontation of death as a key to "authenticity." While the Menippean project is negative, Heidegger emphasizes that his wariness of tradition lays the groundwork for positive work to be carried out by philosophers: to "stake out the positive possibilities of that tradition, keeping it within its limits" (44).

It is more difficult to locate contemporary satire in a genre of political belief, or one with much currency. This ambiguity has caused some trouble for commentators, who often dismiss transgressive works as either a threat to the social order or a conservative backlash against the successes of progressivism. M. Keith Booker refers to the "remarkably traditional liberal humanism" (69) of some transgressive authors, and there is some justification for this. Karl Popper's liberal epistemology, framed against the dominance of "unfalsifiable" systems and the conceit of "historicism" – the philosopher's practice of identifying patterns that explain the past and predict the future – has something in common with the satiric perspective. Finally, however, contemporary satire finds its provenance in peculiarly literary sources, and some distinction between the indeterminacy of literary works and the airtight quality of philosophical frameworks should be maintained.

This is particularly true since the works I've picked as representative (and other works in the genre) place the emphasis on the "message," as defined in Ramon Jakobson's structure of communicative acts, rather than the speaker or addressee. This means that, as with poetry, the text is viewed objectively and not as a communiqué between writer and

audience. While, for Jakobson, the meaning of the message is ordinarily contingent on context, this relationship in contemporary satire is an indirect one. Put another way, satirists write as if they were unfamiliar with the philosophical and political background, the intellectual context, in which they are writing. John Stuart Mill's description of poetry as "eloquence overheard" also fits the detached and text-focused quality of satire. The sense of a listening but implicit presence found in many poems is analogous to the "anonymity" I ascribe to Menippean works, which places the emphasis on the language itself, not the meaning.

To do so is a powerful gesture but also a "foolish" one, and accounts for the likeness between transgressive satire and the "trickster" or "fool" concept ubiquitous in world folklore. This figure, discussed in this introduction and in the third chapter, is oblivious to common sense and yet stumbles on the truth seemingly without the aid of the intellect. Describing the main character in Amis's *Money* as a fool or trickster may be vague, but there may be no other way of pointing out his useful stupidity.

After considering this language in fictions organized around two general themes – sex and society – I would cautiously distill a "transgressive worldview." These writers are skeptical of abstract concepts, particularly those that view events in general terms, as explicable according to established theories and ethics pertaining to relations between groups. The language of these works exaggerates various tendencies of thought: the development of taxonomical distinctions; the specialized language of commerce, mechanics, advertising, technology, pornography, arts, etc. While a parody of a given vocabulary, such as the use of the language of mechanics in *Crash*, suggests to critics that the author is opposed to the field of endeavor to which the vocabulary belongs, the writer's protest is actually broader: against the state of language in general. Words within a specific sub-vocabulary are meaningful only by differentiation from related words, with the result that the speaker is trapped in a metalinguistic labyrinth that distances her from her own and other bodies. This skeptical view of language could be likened to nominalism, the belief that names of things describe epiphenomenal qualities but no essential identity as the thing. Transgressive fiction often highlights the tendency of languages created by consumer culture and specialized fields to focus on qualities – shapes that resemble other shapes; pornographic clichés intended to provoke a response; characteristics associated with beauty of value – to the point at which these traits overwhelm the identity of the things or people that possess them. A culture's focus on valued characteristics reflects a belief system, but, again, the satirist's interest is not

primarily in attacking the techno-centric perspective or the lightweight concerns of the consumer as much as in rescuing reality from beneath the wreckage of language. Playing with vocabularies culled from various genres of discourse, transgressors disrupt the consistency of “voice” in the usual sense and use explicit carnal imagery as a reminder of visceral reality. Their stories conjure perverse or warped situations dramatizing the incompatibility of base human instincts with “progress,” tradition, and convention.

The quintessential symbol of this incompatibility is the Ovidian transformation. This story is a key element in classic and contemporary satire, and suggests that only metamorphosis can bridge the gap between the life of the human body and the generalized conceits of the social body. In pure “metamorphosis” tales, as I will show, change is invariably accompanied by a revelation of the primal and nakedly physical. This exposure usually leads to a conflict between the now-visible animalistic self and the conventional exigencies of life. Transformation creates a fault line in the mimetic coherence of realistic fiction, which is otherwise likely to be read as an expression of conventional presumptions. But it also puts the emphasis on the body itself, which follows a set of rules having no intersection with big-picture ideas: it must take in food, eliminate waste, engage in sexual activity, and ultimately die. The story of a St. Petersburg man whose nose leaves his face and sets up shop without him belongs to the writer – not the doctor, political theorist, or bureaucrat. Such a story emphasizes the realities of the body by reimagining them.

Focusing on the remarkable consistencies between these novels and their literary ancestors, I distinguish them as a subgenre of postmodernism and treat them as consistent with satiric tradition. For this reason, I spend a good deal of time on the background, although my treatment of the literary provenance of contemporary satire is in no way comprehensive.¹ Since there is so much cross-breeding between the American and British traditions, I don’t make a strong distinction between the two countries, generally treated separately in surveys of contemporary literature. Nonetheless, distinctions exist, and, given the relative respectability of satire and dense prose in Britain, authors like Martin Amis and Angela Carter are more clearly Menippean, juxtaposing diction from diverse cultural genres. However, they owe much of their style to (European-influenced) American writers such as Nabokov, Bellow, and James. The American style is often more austere and, drawing from the punk sensibility of Burroughs, provokes the moralist through a seeming obliviousness to his or her point of view. The shared DNA

of these writers is in the details, so I don't attempt a thorough survey of transgressive fiction. Instead, I trace motifs and patterns through a program of key works, letting them build to a crescendo of ontological horror and compensatory *jouissance*.

My contention is that – whatever one feels about these novels – they should be understood in their proper context. Many studies use the umbrella of postmodernism as a way of highlighting characteristics – unreality, pastiche, caricature – found in novels that come from different philosophical estates. Ian Gregson's *Character and Satire in Postwar Fiction*, for instance, finds that many relatively recent novels employ caricature, a denial of the “depth” model of character found in realist fiction. Gregson rightly connects postmodern characterization with the satiric tradition, particularly Fielding and Sterne, in which we find the first iteration of most of the norms ascribed to the postmodern novel. And he sees caricature as having diverse uses: Toni Morrison opposes racist caricatures; Philip Roth indulges in “vulgar” self-caricature; Joyce Carol Oates's negative characterizations are fall guys in political arguments; and the transgressive novelists Martin Amis and Will Self promote *themselves* as caricatures. There is a good deal of truth in this perception of the curious presence/absence of Amis and Self, but it has nothing to do with caricature as a technique in the surface-obsessed postmodern novel.

Andrew Hock-Soon Ng's *Dimensions of Monstrosity in Contemporary Literature* similarly spins a motif – the monstrous – in multiple directions in precise and incisive prose. J. G. Ballard's *High-Rise* presents urban space as a monstrous, feminized invitation to the uncanny; Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* extends monstrosity to capitalism with a hero who applies the language of acquisition to every aspect of life; in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* it is the heroine's grotesque and mysterious body that is monstrous. This psychoanalytic treatment exposes the location of horribleness in transgressive texts, often finding them to be externalizations of a fear of the feminine or the capitalist mindset that institutionalizes such fear. This reading, unlike Gregson's of the uses of superficiality in postmodern fiction, sees characters and perhaps authors suffering a “psychotic break” or a “return of the repressed,” showing the depth of their pathology. However, Ng ignores the disturbing appeal of monstrosity in these texts, the charisma of the sleek monster Patrick Bateman, and the partial rejection of feminism in *Nights at the Circus*.

Gregson is certainly onto something when he highlights Roth's “vulgar” self-display and Amis's flamboyant extratextual authorial presence; Ng recognizes the recurrence and significance of “monstrosity.”

However, neither suspects that these two elements may be components of a well-established literary style. The “negative” character of this style is unfamiliar to most readers. Critics dealing with works that appear to represent some social trend often quote Terry Eagleton’s guidelines for Marxist critics. The content of the work, when taken as a reflection of society, is “too trimly symmetrical, unable to accommodate the dialectical conflicts and complexities, the unevenness and discontinuity, which characterize literature’s relation to society” (31–2). Understanding that the work is satire, however, one would hardly expect it to reflect society directly, given that satire employs exaggeration, hyperbole, mimicry, and other indirect methods. Knowing that it is Menippean satire, we would recognize the similarity between the effects of “false consciousness” on representation and the Menippean style which mocks the social delusion with unevenness and discontinuity, dialectical conflicts and complexities. The satirist’s disdain for “public reality” is very similar to the Marxist’s view of “ideology.” There is one very important difference: the satirist would group Marxism with every other type of “master narrative.” This uncompromising aversion to all formulae that organize experience puts transgressive fiction beyond the reach of critics steeped in Continental theory.

Due to his Bakhtinian approach, M. Keith Booker comes closest to identifying the anarchic spirit of transgressive fiction in *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection, and the Carnavalesque*. Booker uses Chaucer as a model of the polyphonic style Bakhtin opposes to institutional monologue, putting special stress on Chaucer’s poetics: his use of puns, double meanings, oppositions, and so on. While Booker doesn’t identify transgressive works as necessarily satiric, he finds the indeterminacy of modernist styles – such as that of Virginia Woolf – and postmodern writers like Pynchon and Rushdie to be consistent with the transgressive elements in those works. He also recognizes the importance of abjection, which undermines human agency and identity, to the transgressive mode. His treatment of Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* is instructive:

His fiction consistently embraces contradiction, privileging the plural over the singular, the polyphonic over the monologic. One of the clearest ways in which it does so is by carefully constructing dual oppositions, like the snakes and ladders of Sinai’s children’s game, only to deconstruct those oppositions by demonstrating that the apparent polar opposites are in fact interchangeable and mutually interdependent. This deconstruction of oppositions functions as a

transgression of the boundaries societies (especially authoritarian ones) maintain to define themselves. These boundaries exclude others; thus, transgressing them has highly political implications. (50)

Booker's comments on Rushdie's playful and sprawling novel underscore the rhetoric of transgression and its close relationship to modernism. Through the use of games that symbolize the language that maintains social distinctions, Rushdie undermines these boundaries. In fact, it is not the character of institutional beliefs that matters but their certainty and stability.

Booker correctly understands the rhetoric and purpose of transgressive fiction, but critics who take it on as a genre generally regard it as trivial, sensationalist, or destructive. In "A Downpour of Literary Republicanism," Joe David Bellamy decries the new minimalist authors, including Bret Easton Ellis, Tom Wolfe, and Jay McInerney as conservatives, because their spare style is anti-intellectual. A similarly dismissive review by Jonathan Dee of new works by Will Self, Dennis Cooper, Chuck Palahniuk, and A. M. Homes was called "Readymade Rebellion: the Empty Tropes of Transgressive Fiction":

One of contemporary fiction's most frustrating tropes, however, holds that even the most shocking transgression is made psychologically credible when a character carries it out not for exotic or obscure reasons but for no reason whatsoever. The technique itself is less startling than its rate of critical success, for the credibility of such inventions depends on accepting the proposition that they are not inventions at all but something more profound, more authentic, than mere art.

Dee is concerned about the apparent nihilism of transgressive fiction, which uses depictions of shocking carnal acts as the cheapest and easiest form of rebellion. Dee acknowledges that writers in the classic satiric tradition also pushed boundaries; but their works had an intention beyond mere sensation. Transgressive fiction, according to Dee, is typical of a culture bored with the subtleties of art and considers subject matter most artists tactfully avoided as realistic and therefore cool.

While individual authors have always endured ad hominem attacks and outraged reviews, the emergence of transgressive fiction as a trend has elicited a sort of alarmism. In *National Review* James Gardner defined transgressive fiction as a "literature of self-defined immorality, anguish, and degradation [that] is constantly waxing and waning in our culture"

(54) and which features “graphic scenes of child molestation, sodomy, and murder” (55). In an early article on the politics of transgression in fiction, Allon White implied that Bakhtin’s arguments could no longer be used to dignify this emergence of the “low”:

Terrible things happen when the traditional carnivalesque body, public and social, animated by a communal spirit, becomes privatized and fragmented in its encounter with the emergent formation of bourgeois individualism. ... Enclosed within its airless linguistic spaces, the carnivalesque will increasingly turn inward on itself, transgressing its own transgressions, accelerating and escalating its formal and stylistic infractions. ... [the images of carnival] become largely negative elements, often indistinguishable from nightmare and sickness. (61)

However misled these attacks may be, they are based on valid observations about the mysterious new form. In a certain sense, in spite of its sophistication, transgressive fiction is anti-intellectual, but it is not, by virtue of this, conservative. By observing that this “immoral” fiction has always “waxed and waned” in literary history, conservative critic James Gardner is acknowledging that the new satire rehabilitates a perennial literary tradition, which cannot be said about most postmodern fiction. Allon White seeks to deny the positive aspects of the carnivalesque mode seen by Bakhtin as an opportunity for the disenfranchised to celebrate their admittedly carnal and crude sensibility. In the hands of the bourgeoisie, this once-healthy outlet will reach new depths of extravagant “stylistic infractions,” and the celebratory carnival will become a negative thing. Again, White is partly correct about the imaginative heights to which authors ascend, along with formal excesses. But along with other critics, he neglects the true purpose behind “shocking” writing.

In an article called “Abjection/Abjectivism,” Allan Lloyd Smith begins to grasp the positive purpose behind destruction: “The concept of the abject extends understanding, because what these works share is a refusal to engage with the recuperated articulations of the dominant culture. They are mute, insulting, affronts to the empire of the sign, representatives of what must be abjected, in the Myra Hindley realm of the altogether not-acceptable ... The body under the skin ... excrement ...” (5). This rich description points to the transgressive artist’s penchant for revealing what is true but not ordinarily visible. In what follows, I sometimes refer to satirists as “truth-tellers” in spite of their often unreal stories.

They are “mute” when insulting the sign system that constitutes the dominant culture, which is often capitalism but includes all intellectual pieties, and create texts that serve as a sort of reliquary for the profane. “The body under the skin” and the “Swiftian excremental vision,” both continually forced on readers of contemporary satire, act as an instant rebuttal of whatever is widely prescribed as sacred, beneficial, or moral.

In light of this predilection for carnality, it is necessary to distinguish between the primitivism apparent in these texts and nineteenth-century Romanticism, which idealizes innocence and pre-Christian nature worship. The heroic story, from its epic version to its constant retelling in the fantasy genre, guides a hero or heroine away from the known and into a dark place associated with death. This journey, once the protagonist emerges from the underworld, has redeeming effects for the hero and the society he or she ultimately rejoins. Some high modernists – Eliot, Pound, and Joyce – saw this story as instructive for a benighted industrial world. The new satirists have much in common with modernists, but have a different relationship to the trope of darkness. Transgressive writers in the tradition of Rabelais, Sade, Nabokov, and Burroughs integrate the subterranean and the aboveground, often using sexuality or carnality as a meeting place between the two. Complex Nabokovian language, drawn from high, low, and specialized discourses, integrates dark and foreign elements with everyday speech, resulting in an ironic distance that distracts the reader from the dissonance of these incompatible elements. Burroughs’ *Junky* evokes a visceral Hobbesian nightmare through the altered or corrected vision of heroin, no less paranoid than Kafka’s *The Trial* or Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading*. If such literature suggests the existence of the prior natural order invoked by the Romantics, it more closely resembles the primordial ooze that repeatedly appears in *Naked Lunch* than the harmonious natural existence evoked in Wordsworth’s “Michael”; it is a state of affairs prior to any sort of order.

This buried, chaotic consciousness concealed by the lexicon of middle-class normalcy and revealed by subversion is Bakhtin’s ever-present folk culture. While “folk” for Bakhtin means the unrepresented masses, the “plebeians” in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, its culture is also consistent with folklore in the original sense. Folktales, composed and told outside of social institutions, dwelt on the line between civilization and a hostile, changeable natural world. While “folklore” and “myth” can be used interchangeably, socially sanctioned mythology can be called Apollonian, and illicit folklore (not Dionysian, but) Hermetic. In *Trickster Makes This World*, Lewis Hyde writes: “Hermes begins by

setting himself against Apollo, and tricksters in general begin by muddying high gods. Returning to such lowliness shifts the work away from idealist or Apollonian artistry (and its effort) and toward some trickster artistry (and its playfulness)" (90).

It may be interesting that trickster and fool stories are most famous in their Native American, West African, South Asian, and Slavic traditions, but are not often associated with Western Europe. Unlike most stories, they humorously depict irrational responses to situations, and illustrate the wisdom of stupidity (although the trickster does not always succeed in his designs). They embody an attitude and a cognitive style, and so can be retold in a modern idiom. The edifying qualities of the "excremental vision" are discernible when we acknowledge that this vision has the rebellious humor of a trickster story: the trickster muddies high gods. Is it for a good purpose? Hermes' trip to the land of the dead was dissimilar to that of Achilles or Aeneas who went looking for prophecies (or Dante's pilgrim, who goes there to understand his own sinfulness). All of these heroes made the journey downward and came back with diamonds from the mine of Hades. Hyde distinguishes the antiheroic trickster:

After his trip to the Land of the Dead, Coyote is left alone and weeping, but his wider story does not end on that note. In fact, it may be exactly because these stories do not wish away or deny what seems low, dirty, and imperfect that their hero otherwise enjoys such playful freedom ... There is no healing for death. (91)

After the near-death experience in *Crash*, "James Ballard" does not seek to heal or learn the lessons of death before returning to a productive existence. He finds a meeting point between the libido and death. The libidinous, shape-shifting trickster never crosses the line between the clean and the excremental, between life and death, but dwells in that line. While the relocation of carnival misbehavior in the world of "bourgeois liberalism" may seem negative to some critics, it is actually more radical than the traditional carnival. These transgressive celebrations, enshrined in Renaissance literature and lingering in Fat Tuesday rituals, are a safety valve for the proletarians and peasants, after which the accustomed power structure slips back into place. Tricksterish narratives, equally unsettling to the reforming and ruling classes, create a mash-up that crosses all kinds of boundaries: posh and common, fair and foul, sane and insane, civilized and untutored, living and dead. Here it departs from Romantic spirituality, in spite of frequent

depictions of the intrusion of primal urges into the lives of socially integrated persons. This liminal space is a no-man's-land for anyone whose belief system depends on clear distinctions dividing the desirable from the undesirable. To underscore this failure to understand an old dictum – “I set before you life and death; therefore choose life” – satire offers us characters who can't, or won't, act in their own best interests.

The few studies that label these works as a genre view them as perversely given to unpleasantness, and seek to explain or defend this disposition. James Annesley's *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture, and the Contemporary American Novel* sees the “increasing emphasis on violence, sexual experimentation, drug use, and urban despair” (2) in the American novel as consistent with a generally lurid culture whose excesses are apparent in rap music, confessional autobiographies, and movies like Larry Clark's *Kids*. Furthermore, the American school that includes Donna Tartt, Bret Easton Ellis, and Jay McInerney reflects the “spirit of the age” (5), the overstimulation that is part and parcel of the “logic of late capitalism” as described by Fredric Jameson, and which leads to “intensifying levels of commodification” (74). While their obsession with consumer products may be a reflection of the option fatigue experienced by a shopper at a super-mall, their literary style is generally spare: “Instead of the dense plots, elaborate styles, and political subjects that provide the material for writers like Toni Morrison, Thomas Pynchon, and Norman Mailer, these fictions seem determined to adopt a looser approach. They prefer blank, atonal perspectives, and fragile, glossy visions” (2). Annesley's description is for the most part correct; “blank” writers have dispensed with the political message making of his unlikely threesome of older writers. The detachment of the new crowd, for Annesley, expresses a deer-in-headlights reaction to the blinding spectacle of a culture in decline. By describing these writers as a predictable sociocultural event, Annesley dampens the derision that greeted the “Brat Pack” writers he mentions as well as the controversy that attended works like *American Psycho*. In my view, however, his social focus misses the aggressiveness, humor, and subtlety of these works, whose blankness arises not from narcissistic apathy but from the old pretender's trick of affecting not to know what everybody knows: that bad behavior is bad.

Kathryn Hume's recent *Aggressive Fictions: Reading the Contemporary American Novel* is an ambitious reader's guide, covering a broad range of works and arranging them by their rhetorical style. While she discusses some of the same authors as Annesley, she views them as anything

but restrained. On the contrary, contemporary American writers are so boorish they are likely to put many readers off:

Since I shall be talking a lot about “aggressive” fiction and “attacking the reader,” I should define what I mean by those words. Aggressive fiction tramples reader sensibilities, offends and upsets willfully and deliberately. The authors discussed may partly address themselves to a coterie audience of kindred spirits who revel in the subject matter and stylistic extremism. Most writers, though, also hope their novels will be read by a wider public, many of whose members will be upset by this sort of fiction. (8)

By focusing on extreme style as well aggressive content as and endeavoring to explain its function, Hume takes an interesting approach. Many of the books she discusses – *Portnoy’s Complaint*, *Fight Club*, *American Psycho* – were bestsellers that certainly reached a wide public, not comparable, however, to bestselling genre fiction. Hume’s assumption that unruly authors “attack” the reader is contrary to the common assumption about these books: that they employ sensationalism as a facile way of attracting readers and attention. It differs in a different way from my own assumption: that writers like Kathy Acker or Dennis Cooper (discussed at length by Hume) frame their extremism in such a way that it hardly seems like extremism at all. While their obliviousness to the sensibilities of the “wider public” seems to leave John Q. Reader out of the equation, there is an element of confrontation to these works. The content of the book becomes like an object the reader must hold and then perhaps drop if s/he finds it hot.

While the title of this book and labels like “aggressive” or “blank” may seem like variations on a theme, my approach is fundamentally different. What follows is an intellectual history that begins with a short survey of the “epic” and mock epic, analyzes some classic Menippean examples and modern works that led to the transgressive style, and discusses that mode as a contemporary version of the classic satiric gesture. Like Annesley, I see the new satire as in some ways a product of the intellectual climate from the 1970s to the 1990s, briefly surveyed in the fourth chapter. Like Hume, I see these writers’ stylistic oddities as deeply purposeful and in no way devised as the literary equivalent of a 1970s B-movie. I believe transgressive fiction is the most significant literary movement of our time.

1

Enemies of the State: The Atavistic Mock Epic

“Transgressive” as a label applied to literature or other media is a comment on the content’s reception which is very much a function of the atmosphere of the time. It is therefore implausible that contemporary transgressive novels have much in common, as I contend in this chapter, with classical mock epic such as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and the claim that they belong to a single “genre” is equally dubious. If I were Northrop Frye I would be implying not only a family resemblance but a case of *literal* propinquity, as if fictional stories centuries apart reflected a deeply embedded but universal human persuasion.

I make no such claim. While the transgression that is the primary subject of this book is a contemporary (post-1975) phenomenon, the emphasis in this chapter is on a longstanding literary gesture. *Metamorphoses*, Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, Roth’s *The Breast*, the 1960s film *The Watermelon Man*, and Will Self’s *Cock and Bull* all dramatize dramatic, inexplicable transformations and their aftermath. This only means that the tale of transformation (physical and psychological) is a common story type, just as the epic tale of the election of an unlikely hero for a mission, a resultant journey, an educative process, encounter with monsters and wise old men is common and remains popular. This latter story type, every time it resurfaces, is to some extent a *retelling*, while the satiric vision takes any prescriptive or proscriptive belief system as its starting place, and presents a story as we would tell it if that belief were not dominant, revealing an unlovely vision of common humanity. There is more consistency to this antediluvian vision than to the changing propositional morality of the epic or establishment tradition. That is where we begin.

When seen from a long-term perspective, literature is valued less for formal complexity or other aesthetic virtues than the extent to which

it is seen to mirror or social or cultural progress. And this contribution to “progress” may be recognized in two ways: through a work’s illustration of social, behavioral, or psychological norms beneficial to the group (and therefore likely to characterize the group); or by the extent to which a work is consistent with a theory that describes the mechanism or process that purports to shed light on the future. Foundational texts predict the ascendancy of the Hebrews in Palestine, the destiny of Rome as the world’s central city, or the progress from late-stage capitalism to socialism. Anti-epic or anti-foundational texts lack these socially redeeming qualities, and are viewed with amusement or curiosity, appealing to a popular audience and acknowledged in retrospect to have had enormous influence.¹ The recent resurgence of the satiric tradition, little needed at the height of nineteenth-century realism, revives this hostility to treasured moralities and the verbal habits that maintain them. In so doing, it is both apophatic, asserting its innocence of prescribed beliefs, and, in an elemental way, mimetic.

In *Critical Synoptics: Menippean Satire and the Analysis of Intellectual Mythology*, Carter Kaplan helps draw a connection between the satirist’s roles as anatomist and philologist. He does this by noting a philosophical kinship between the satirist and the logical positivist Wittgenstein. For Kaplan, Menippean satire embodies the core ideas from the *Tractatus*: that the world is divided into facts that may or may not be the case; that states of affairs are essentially independent from each other and unrelated by cause; that we cannot know future events by inference from events in the present, etc. (23) As a key to understanding satire, this is significant in two ways. Firstly, it implies that satire eschews the Aristotelian mechanics of fiction. Secondly, it suggests that satire proposes a sort of “negative theology,” a philosophy that defines itself through its absence of and hostility to theories and propositions. This is not a paradox: Menippean and transgressive fiction may be seen as regressive, but its authors view it as revelatory of a truth that emerges in the absence of frameworks, theories, ideologies, and formulaic beliefs.

“Transgressive” and “progressive” are difficult terms, rich in unexplained assumptions. Since transgression literally means to cross lines or boundaries, it may be understood differently depending on one’s sense of the social norms violated. “Progressive” relies similarly on speculation that a given idea occupies a place in a timeline of ideas and will lead to the next development in a philosophical sequence due to its practical or moral advantages.² For instance, the concern with hygiene, burial practices, and codes of politeness in oral tradition epic was progressive; explications of the nature of sin in its relationship with

repentance in Dante's *Commedia* were also putatively progressive. Satire, of course, questions beliefs that have achieved some level of currency as established beliefs, not those that are marginal or heterodox. A particular irony associated with satire being labeled "transgressive" in America and the UK is that in pluralistic societies it is difficult to know which beliefs are normative. Chris Jenks comments on this fluxious state of affairs in his book *Transgression*: "This present state of uncertainty and flux within our culture raises fundamental questions concerning the categories of the normal and the pathological when applied to action or social institutions. Such periods of instability, as we are now experiencing, tend to test and force issues of authority and tradition – truth and surety are up for question" (5).

Satire flourishes in transitional times such as the reign of Augustus Caesar, those when fairly new ideas make an aggressive claim to legitimacy and older notions about behavioral norms, social hierarchies, or values are believed to be in abeyance. Menippean satire promotes a "regressive" worldview as a response to positions or paradigms presented by cultural or political establishments as "progress." Transgression, however, is an aggressive form that arises in times perceived as permanently unstable: the post-Restoration era of Rochester and Swift; the French Renaissance of Montaigne and Rabelais; mid-nineteenth-century France, from Sade to Baudelaire; and the postmodern era beginning in the 1970s–1980s. The quintessential symbol of instability is the plasticity of the human body depicted in Ovid. Transformative incidents, whether they occur in ancient, modern, or contemporary literature, are generally associated with the return to a primordial state of human affairs. They reflect an anti-evolutionary vision of culture.³

Depending on one's perspective, this makes Menippean satire either more dangerous or more relevant than heretofore thought since it undermines the paradigm-setting function of literature. The epic tradition contains beliefs that are foundational far past the time in which they are widely held to be true, since they give way to new beliefs through a process of imitation, criticism, repudiation, and revival.⁴ Its works, if they follow Horatian aesthetics, are sententious, decorous, serious in subject matter, formal and consistent in design. Works in the epic tradition are likely to be consistent with the beliefs of the culture in which they were produced and patronized. They are usually understood to be more serious and important than their satiric counterparts: Virgil is more serious than Ovid; Lucan than Petronius; Dante than Boccaccio; Dr. Johnson than Swift; Coleridge than Byron. Along with Milton, Spenser and others, these poets are the backbone of the corpus