Raised by the newspaper and the broadsheet, the pamphlet and the poem, the first American novelists were bound to the print culture of the late eighteenth century. Who can read Charles Brockden Brown or Susanna Haswell Rowson and not be reminded that Philadelphia, the young nation’s first great cultural center, was perched at the edge of a boundless forest whose mineral resources a royal decree had once prevented from being made into a printing press? And even after the fact, when a press was eventually permitted in Philadelphia, it was entrusted only to a Royalist named William Bradford, a man whose son was also a printer and later a rival to Benjamin Franklin. If Poor Richard freely gave advice, his type had come at no small risk or cost, as Franklin was forced to sail to England to purchase the machinery required to make books. Memory of the precarious and adversarial circumstances of the colonial press lingered until after the American War of Independence, and it underscores the cautionary tones of post-Revolutionary writers such as Brown and Rowson. Novelists suspected that should the public stop reading, a print culture won by the pen would be reclaimed by the sword.

The republic’s young novelists quickly encountered another and perhaps unexpected difficulty: a crowded literary market. Rowson confirms as much when in the preface to *Charlotte Temple: A Tale of Truth* (1794) she describes her awareness of being “a novel writer, at a time when such a variety of works are ushered into the world under that name.” Several decades would pass before the American literary novel would earn lasting critical prestige and a place at the fore of the cultural imaginary. In contrast to its precarious youth, the American novel’s history is so pervasive today that towns and cities have nearly become synonymous with certain novelists: Salem, Massachusetts; Hannibal, Missouri; Oxford, Mississippi; Salinas, California. The American novel also travels well: when Thomas Pynchon sets the majority of *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) in post–World War II Europe, we do not hesitate to call it an American novel. Conversely, when writers from other national traditions find success in the United States, we welcome their fiction with open arms. Nabokov, Pasternak, Lampedusa, Marquez, Lessing, Coetzee, Saramago, and
Pahmuk all recently enjoyed large readerships in America. When a novelist accused of having written a novel flees from persecution and death for having written it, as was the case for Solzhenitsyn and Rushdie, we provide them sanctuary, and we have done so despite (and perhaps to stir) the diplomatic trouble that such hospitality may entail. Even when much has changed, American readers and writers carry to this day a strong vestigial memory of the admonition and doubt that troubled our early novelists. We remember that a national literature must be defended; we remember how the rosebush concluding the first chapter of *The Scarlet Letter* blooms beside a prison.

We have also arrived at a time when influential critics and commentators acknowledge a decline in the novel’s cultural influence and prestige. Jonathan Arac described the matter in a 2009 essay when discussing Chang Rae Lee’s novel *Native Speaker* (1995): “I find the novel now a residual form, no longer dominant as it had once seemed some fifty years ago.” Arac nonetheless affirms that “the residual practice of the novel performs at least one essential cultural task. The novel stands up for the human, in an age that seems to find even more ways to erode humanity.” Arac denotes a specific century—from roughly 1850 to 1950—to mark the perimeter and depth of the novel’s ferment in the United States and beyond it. One would not dispute that countless readers across the world currently enjoy the labors of novelists and their publishers. Nonetheless there is considerable merit to the claim that the novel is closing a particularly American phase of its history, and not only in America. The possible causes are many. One might say the novel no longer satisfies the ambitions of a nation’s youth as it did during the Jazz Age, for the Popular Front, for veterans attending college on the G.I. Bill, or for the Beat generation. Nor is it the surrogate field upon which ideologies waged proxy battles during the Cold War. Blame computers if you will. Managed to respectability, the novel may no longer seem a daring form. That is to say it no longer seems daring if one finds human life, memory, politics, language, history, science, art, emotion, experience, or work to be unremarkable.

Don DeLillo is known primarily for the novels he has produced over the course of a writing career that now spans more than fifty years. Beginning with his first published story in 1960 (his first novel was published in 1971), he has written and regularly published literary fiction during the period of the modern American novel’s alleged decline. DeLillo has often visited the question of the novel’s status in his fiction and addressed the matter in interviews. He noted in a 1993 interview with Adam Begley: “The novel’s not dead, it’s not even seriously injured, but I do think we’re working at the margins, working in the shadow of the novel’s greatness and influence. There’s plenty of impressive talent around, and there’s strong evidence that younger writers
are moving into history, finding broader themes. But when we talk about the novel we have to consider the culture in which it operates. Everything in the culture argues against the novel, particularly the novel that tries to be equal to the complexities and excesses of the culture." DeLillo proceeds to name William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, Joan Didion, Cormac McCarthy, Robert Coover, Robert Stone, and other novelists as examples of the novel’s contemporary vitality, and then qualifies his point: “These books and writers show us that the novel is still spacious enough and brave enough to encompass enormous areas of experience. We have a rich literature. But sometimes it’s a literature too ready to be neutralized, to be incorporated into the ambient noise. This is why we need the writer in opposition, the novelist who writes against power, who writes against the corporation or the state or the whole apparatus of assimilation.” The latter comment would seem to align DeLillo with the oppositional spirit of the 1960s (and while he is not a baby boomer, the affiliation may stand). Considered more broadly, DeLillo’s comments on the novel’s status as a literary form remind us of that centuries-old habit of the American literary imaginary to regard literature as vulnerable, marginal, and besieged by monarchs or markets.

DeLillo’s comments on the novel’s status also dispel the frequently encountered notion that DeLillo is in some way an aloof, difficult, and pessimistic writer. Yes, his writing requires the reader’s commitment and intelligence. What art does not? Yes, he is reserved in conversation, particularly during interviews. Who is not uncomfortable when asked to speak of themselves in public? Surely, his novels do not offer generic satisfactions. Do we remember and praise great art for its predictability? If we dismiss these inherited notions of “difficult art” or caricatures of the writer as a mythic recluse, we might begin to regard DeLillo as an artist who consciously and carefully occupies a particular band along the wavelength of the modern literary novel, along which his interviews, fiction, and career often express a gregarious and forward-looking sense of the novel’s role and history. It is a sense grounded in the complexities of the present time; rather than offering utopian alternatives or dystopian scenarios, DeLillo works like the artist Klara Sax in his 1997 novel Underworld, making literary art—“found art”—from contemporary life. He works through culture, language, and the novel to dramatize, as Peter Knight has described it, “the problematic role of the artist in an age of boundless consumerism.” One would not call it a hopeful literature, but to call it hopeless would also be unfair.

One might instead look to DeLillo’s career as it embodies “the writer in opposition” and recognize in it strong evidence that the novel is instead passing through an exciting phase in both its American and worldly history. In
this view, Don DeLillo’s writing career affirms the art of the novel in the present time (and by implication, as a democratic institution with an individual as well as historical range). In a very important sense, his fiction and career dramatize the current plight of the novel as an art form as well as the general state of the artist and the arts. While that drama can seem tragic at times, it is never without comedy or optimism. For Don DeLillo the novel is a popular art form, what Bill Gray describes in Mao II as a “democratic shout” (159). When novelists write, they elaborate a vernacular truth against which propaganda, the demagogue, and the state cannot stand for long. This political view of DeLillo’s fiction has recently become a strong current in conversations about his work, and it is one of several views that appear in this book.

When I write that Don DeLillo is an American writer, I invite the reader to consider the triple significance of the phrase. First, DeLillo’s novels frequently assume the reader’s familiarity with history (if only to then make it strangely unfamiliar). The effect might be compared to visiting one’s birthplace after a long absence: we recognize it but something intangible has nonetheless changed. For example, the armored stretch limousine of a young financial wizard named Eric Packer navigates antiglobalization riots in the streets of New York City in DeLillo’s novel Cosmopolis (2003). The president of the United States is visiting the city, his motorcade blocking traffic. Everything in the novel seems contemporary with the presidency of William Jefferson Clinton, the financial “dot-com” crash of the late 1990s, and the antiglobalization protests that marked the turn of the century. Yet the president’s name is not Clinton (it is Midwood), and the rioters have adopted slogans and symbols that have no direct equivalent in history or the news. As a result, New York City itself assumes an otherworldly atmosphere. Is this an America parallel to our own, a place into which we cross in those rare moments when we let down our guard, dream, or read? The effect is as true for DeLillo’s Texas (a setting in several of his novels) as it is for DeLillo’s New York. In this sense of the phrase “American writer,” I assume that readers will recognize names, persons, places, terms, and events that shaped the twentieth century and also the young millennium, but also recognize them as occupying a narrative space on this side of DeLillo’s novels. If we understand the simple but powerful role that adjectives can play in transforming a noun, then it is a first step to understanding the care with which DeLillo uses words in his literary fiction and a first step across the threshold of his novels.

Conversely, the noun in the phrase “American writer” inflects the adjective. DeLillo seemingly holds to the belief that art and artists, and novelists in particular, play an important role in shaping the republic of the United States of America. DeLillo’s depiction of artists and his own public appearances
underscore this belief. The latter do not resemble conventional book-tour “readings” so much as artistic performances. (Their somber, meditative intonations offer something unlike a conventional spectacle.) DeLillo will read fiction at public appearances, most often a work whose relationship to the occasion seems circumspect, even suspicious, but which over time appears relevant, forceful, and even cathartic. I have attended these readings on several occasions over the course of three decades, and they never cease to surprise. He reads at a library for a gathering in defense of human rights, on the occasion of a friend’s retirement, at a memorial service for a fellow writer, in a school or theater or the hall of a YMCA building. These appearances embody a determined loyalty to the ideal of what the role of public art in a republic can and might be, an ideal that takes a tangible, physical form as art moving through public spaces, individuals, and crowds. Many readers cling to a false notion that DeLillo is a sort of hermit, aloof and remote. He is certainly a private, guarded individual, but as noted above, it may be more useful to recognize in the democratic spirit of his public literary interventions and published works the thoughtful, artful performances of an “American writer.” In this second sense, the public connotations of the noun complicate the adjective in unexpected ways. It also may serve to help readers appreciate the artists who appear as characters in much of his fiction.

There is a third sense of “American writer” that I ask the reader to entertain. It places the phrase along a historical spectrum. At one end there is the marketplace; at the other, the institution of the novel as one cornerstone of the American’s writer’s craft. As for the market, in a series of brilliant essays and books that he published in the 1940s and 1950s, the Ohio State University professor William Charvat documented how “authorship” became a respected practice in the nineteenth-century United States. In material terms that profession stimulated a new scale for affiliated industries (publishing houses, periodicals, and the papermaking, printing, and binding manufactories, not to mention retailers such as stationers and booksellers). In demographic and cultural terms, the new economy of the American writer amplified the instruction and entertainment of an ever-widening audience of readers. Beginning with the New York writers of the Hudson Valley (Irving, Paulding, Cooper) and extending through the New England of Longfellow, Fuller, Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson, and Thoreau (with Poe as a critical southern outlier), Charvat uses empirical evidence such as publisher’s ledgers, advertisements, and other historical sources to describe, as the title of one of his posthumously published books calls it, *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800–1870*. Economics and literary business in general is a recurrent theme in DeLillo’s novels. While writing this book, I found it useful to
consider DeLillo’s career in terms of how his writings have engaged, commented upon, and depicted what it meant to be a writer when he began his career in the age of mass media and printed books, as well as today in an age when the old print media have welcomed a digital sibling. I believe that view illuminates DeLillo’s career as well as his writings about mass media or the role of the artist in society. In one sense this view also asks readers to consider DeLillo’s own iteration of that playful postmodern habit of writing books that frustrate readers and resist easy commodification, thereby clarifying to some degree DeLillo’s phrase about “the writer in opposition.”

At the other end of that spectrum, DeLillo’s writings also belong to the tradition of the modern novel and the American novel within that tradition. The “institution of the novel” is a phrase with a rich and varied history, but it is first and foremost a metaphor that signals the literary novel’s uncanny capacity for shaping and inventing reality (and vice versa). Simultaneous with Charvat’s studies, mid-twentieth-century American intellectuals, and particularly the Harvard scholar Harry Levin, proposed another story of how the institution of the novel took its American form during the nineteenth century. In the version of literary history told by intellectuals who later elaborated Levin’s argument, the novel attained a privileged position in American culture. (We hear a version of that argument in the above quotations from Jonathan Arac.) In their view, the novel’s unique generative properties brought a national culture into existence. In this sense the “institution” of the novel was not only the effect of material causes (for example, the rise of industries and readerships), but it was also a cause of material effects (the rise of industries and readerships). In generating a national culture, the American novel also conversed with other national literary traditions. From the romances of the Scottish writer Sir Walter Scott, Cooper found a model for telling the story of the American frontier. In the French realists of the nineteenth century, Hawthorne recognized a certain kinship for his contemporary novels. For mid-twentieth-century writers (including DeLillo) who read Kafka, Joyce, Woolf, and Camus, modern European literatures offered new possibilities for writing American fiction after the Second World War. In English we translate Goethe’s term Weltliteratur as “World Literature” and often understand the first word to be an adjective. In the German, however, both words are nouns, things that are conjoined. In the institutional view of the novel, America and the novel have enjoyed a similar relationship.

America, the novel, the novelist, and the world: they are the works of readers and writers. In American history we came to privilege the writer, and particularly the novelist, and we continue that tradition to this day. We privilege those writers because we regard them as biographers of the republic’s
early years. We think of novelists as reflecting that biography in a miniature form, from the “early” writings of Rowson and Brown, Paulding, Irving, and Cooper, to a metaphorical maturity that begins with Hawthorne and Melville and continues through James and Wharton, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Hemingway, and finally to the present time. If we follow the biographical conceit, we may think that we have arrived at the national equivalent of what Edward W. Said defined as a “late style.” But is that late style typified by what he calls “wise resignation” or that of “a renewed, almost youthful energy?”

The former sense is that by which some regard the phrase “American writer” in the present time, as a phrase suggesting a republic’s venerable senescence: the novel as an institution in ruin, its pieces like stones fallen about a temple in a Romantic painting. Some even regard DeLillo in this way, as a writer past his prime.

I admit that DeLillo’s career took an entirely unexpected turn since we entered the new century, and one that might resemble the taciturn grumpiness that Said described so well in his study of the late works of Ibsen, Lampedusa, Mann, and Genet. But I would point also to a renewed sense of innovation in DeLillo’s recent fiction, a heightened sense of the beautiful to match the incomparable terrors that were a trademark of his twentieth-century works. This book tries to strike a balance between the two, but when writing about DeLillo as an American writer, I have avoided the temptation to suggest that DeLillo’s recent work is in some way indicative of a decline. The notion is utterly false so far as I am concerned, and it does not apply to DeLillo or other talented writers working in the present day, be they young or old. My stated position does not appeal to any vapid patriotism or exceptionalism with respect to the American novel’s status. It appeals instead to a philosophical premise that DeLillo’s fiction shares with much of the critical writing about it, not to mention common sense: it is the philosophical notion that we are sure to be wrong when we bracket history and prophesy to declare its end. More important, in doing so we would thereby obstruct that line of creative flight along which we may encounter what we may yet become—if it is not already too late.

But there is also a more practical reason why I avoid the bleakest connotations of “late style” insofar as the phrase would draw a relationship between DeLillo’s career and the decline of the American novel. It is because regardless of the framework we use to explain it, DeLillo’s career and his novels do not fit in any neat way into the narratives we tell about the American novel. One might say this of any important novelist, but DeLillo’s writings of the twenty-first century openly defy the notion that novelists have exhausted the aesthetic potential of the form in which they work, and furthermore his recent
achievements refute the idea that the novel has entered a historical twilight (in America or elsewhere). It is impossible to ignore the differences in character, rhetoric, narration, mood, or timing when comparing DeLillo’s twentieth-century writings to those of the twenty-first century. As a result, their biographies are simply not continuous. At times the developmental arc of DeLillo’s fiction, working from his earliest novels to the most recent, nearly seems the work of two different writers.

This book is organized to reflect this notion in some way, but also to trace lines of continuity that will help the reader appreciate DeLillo’s literary fiction. In sum, this is a book about a novelist who makes a strong case for the institution of the novel as a form of symbolic communication in the world—an “American writer” and all that the phrase might and does entail.