I BEGAN WORKING on this book project some thirty years ago after noticing how the tropes and techniques intimately associated with modernism—irony, parody, unreliable point of view—while still present and active in certain “big” or important novels of the post-war period no longer determined the way to read them. The three “classics” or canonical novels of this kind, all fictional memoirs—not just as it turns out—are *Doctor Faustus* (1947), *Lolita* (1955), and *Naked Lunch* (1959), the subjects of my readings here. Two of these became iconic for post-war American culture, and the third definitively identified Nazism with the Devil. An old cultural icon resuscitated then, and two newly minted ones. Teaching and researching these novels, transformative of the idea of genius, of culture, of the literary, over this long period finally let me feel comfortable writing about them.

Because I grew up during the time now-dubbed mid-century modern, my first idea, many offshoots of which still remain, was to focus on what the epigraphic poem of mine calls “Brand X culture.” Kitsch and classic merge to become all one incredibly vulgar pop culture that we like, perversely enough, because we can play with it and customize it to our liking. Certainly, the “progress” in this direction can be read in my selection of iconic texts, *Naked Lunch* being a collective product if ever there was one.
But there were those nagging questions of point of view, of irony, of parody, of pastiche, of modernism and postmodernism. And then it hit me: these three influential novels, the first a perfected model for how to do the great novel as a fictional memoir, the other two presenting new models of what counts as “normally” human as narrated by the excluded themselves, always sounded in their key moments entirely sincere. This is not to claim that there are no previous examples of such things. Frankenstein and The Confessions of an Opium Eater come immediately to mind. But the latter, neither in its time nor in ours, became a widespread permanent cultural icon, and the former did so in our time only because of its film adaptations.

The more I thought about my select group of novels, the more I focused on the culture of genius they instantiated and sought to revise. The other side of Brand X culture is the worship of genius, of the Zenith TV set over the Dumont. During the first half of the Cold War, for all the obvious historical reasons, U.S. culture aimed to produce geniuses in all fields. As the Nobel Prizes piled up for America, especially in literature—Buck (1936), O’Neill (1938), Eliot (1948), Faulkner (1950), Hemmingway (1954), Steinbeck (1962)—writers competed to be recognized as a genius even as the idea lost its remaining intellectual substance in Brand X culture. So why, then, did the writers of the time choose to narrate the fictional lives of such characters as a somewhat reluctant Satan worshipper (Adrian Leverkuhn) who deliberately contracts syphilis to force his diseased brain into the state of genius; a psychopathic pedophilic kidnapper (Humbert Humbert), who claims that Lolita is a demonic nymphet and he himself is a hapless genius seduced by her; and a homicidal/suicidal-gay-drug-addict-part-time detective (William Lee)? They did so because the international culture of genius they were hardwired by was turbocharged—to mix metaphors appropriately—by America (Mann lived in LA while composing Doctor Faustus) which celebrated and catered to genius, and they were driven to try to blow up that culture from within by including in their fictional memoirs the very kinds of characters America defined as aberrant and dangerous. Genius itself was aberrant and dangerous, not to mention the tendencies and experiences they themselves may have known all too well. The cost of genius, if it exists, they knew by their rueful pursuit of it, was high.

The theory of the great writer and the masterpiece, of the imagina-
tive genius, that dominated the period is best summarized by Lionel Trilling, as I present it in the introductory first chapter. Essentially, it is that the great writer both in himself and in his masterpiece—yes, it is an all-male affair, I’m afraid—contain a greater portion, a more intense concentrate, of the culture’s oppositions and conflicts and represent them as such: the great Yes and the great No, of the writer’s historical moment. How the great writer or genius resolves or reconciles these conflicts and oppositions is in an imaginative dialectical synthesis, a kind of noblesse oblige on the part of the genius. In his masterpiece, he gives to us a perfected expression of usually tragic insight into the human condition via his identification with his less-than-adequate modern hero. Joyce is the model for this action, as Trilling sees it, but we certainly can think of many other examples. What better way for Mann, Nabokov, and Burroughs to explode this culture of genius from within than to make their eloquently self-destructive “heroes” the criminally insane?

But what about a positive view of genius to replace Trilling’s and the culture’s? For that, I have turned to Spinoza. Yes, I know: Spinoza? Really? I had read Spinoza first nearly fifty years ago in college, then again during the late 1980s and early 1990s when there was a Spinoza boomlet largely due to Deleuze’s influence, and recently in a reading group setting with colleagues and graduate students. I remembered this time around the great book by Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheistic Tradition* (1969), which I read in graduate school. What struck me this time around with Spinoza was how much the *Ethics*, despite its geometrical method and rationalist goals, read like a romantic heterocosm, that would-be textual whole that is really a fragment of the literary system or absolute analyzed so well by Lacouthe-Labarthes and Nancy. It was Spinoza’s cosmology of the literary universe, as it were, except that Spinoza thought it was less a cosmology than an instance of the cosmos and its God at work that the *Ethics* proposes. But to me, a confirmed Nietzschean, every text is a would-be heterocosm, an other-world with its own “god” or genius permeated throughout it and the expression of the highest power-state known to the writer in question. Such being the case, then, every word of that textual world is meant as part of that world, especially as the idea of transcendence fades and that of immanence grows. Horizontal relations of all kinds replace vertical hierarchies with a vengeance, globally. Rather than each text, certainly each masterpiece, composing differences into
hierarchical structures of binary oppositions atop which sits the author-figure projected by the text like a vision of the traditional creator-god over his world, we now have, as Spinoza puts apropos his metaphysics their identification, *Deus sive Natura*. All the distinctions existing in previous hierarchies reappear as versions of activity (*Natura naturans*) and passivity (*Natura naturata*) within an ever-spreading field of power, pleasure, and potential blessedness via greater knowledge of the field. However bizarre it may sound, I saw that the last two novels here especially instantiate such a vision, and the first novel, while closing down the last modernist vision of hierarchy, also opens up the new vista. The reason why I only begin putting Spinoza explicitly to work with *Lolita* and *Naked Lunch*, and not with *Doctor Faustus*, lies here. Whether we think of these texts as new stars in the firmament or as new black holes, there they are: to be read as best we can.