

## After September 11, 2001

It's ten days after the destruction of the World Trade Center towers and the attack on the Pentagon. I'm writing a preface not only to this last installment of my history of the American cultural imaginary in the 1990s, *Memory's Orbit*, but to the previous three volumes: *Hauntings*, *Speeding to the Millennium*, and *Postmodern Journeys*. They each had a preface but now that both the decade and this writing project are over and the "cultural imaginaries" we live in as Americans have so drastically and suddenly been interrupted, I need to bridge millennia. Our Y2K, that cataclysmic millennial event we anticipated, has happened. A belated millennial metamorphosis. We're in a post-September 11th world now; it's different. There has been a cultural sea change in America.

I think we all surmise that regardless of how well we come to know the causes of the September 11th destruction of the World Trade Center towers and part of the Pentagon, or how closely we can see ourselves as our attackers do, their crime remains unmitigated. We can say we don't care about the whys; we only care about bringing them to justice, bringing justice to them. And we care about how we will be able to charter a safe passage through the troubled waters we are now in. We can say that it doesn't really matter what our peace of mind was before; what matters now is that it's gone and we must learn to live in a world where threatening dark shadows always follow our steps. It never made much of a difference to Americans that most of the rest of the world has always lived in such apprehension. This is new for this brave, new world. We don't know how brave we can be in a world where surgical strikes can strike everything but the cancer.



Whatever we imagined ourselves to be, whatever our 1990s psychic mind-set was, is now no longer. How to answer this question that has been raised again and again these past ten days?

Why this unspeakable, unthinkable, inconceivable act of terrorism against the United States, against a people who pride themselves on lending a hand all over the world, who provide more aid in every form than any other country in the world, against a people who welcome to their shores the downtrodden and oppressed, who impose no religious, racial, ethnic, gender, social, or political barriers on those who live in this country, who live in the most successful democracy of the modern world?

Are there reasons behind this attack or was it simply madness? What are the reasons? Who are our attackers? What do we look like through their eyes? What have we done to provoke this horrific response? How do we eradicate the evil of terrorism? Can our intelligence networks ever get to the root of this tragedy? Have we entered a new world of intermittent calm and madness, with a darkness never quite dispelled? How can our “love of freedom” vanquish this new devil, Osama bin Laden? Do we have the right team of problem solvers in Washington now? Do we have the best strategists at the Pentagon now? Or should we be looking to our corporate world and its brainstorming entrepreneurs to “creatively destroy” this recent threat to global capitalism?

The questions come out of different mind-sets, different reality-producing styles. The naïve realists deal in Cold War dualities, Boolean binaries of black and white, good and evil, true and false, right and wrong, just and unjust, win and lose, and so on. They don't ask the question that lurks behind this attack: Who are we? They already know. “We are the virtuous; reason, right, and God are on our side.” The problem solvers whip out the durable Enlightenment Project, apply a rigorous system's analysis, isolate fact from fiction, and come up with a solution. But the optimism of that approach has already and most recently in the United States been riddled by Viet Nam and Robert McNamara and General Westmoreland's unswerving application of the approach while the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong remained steadfastly resistant to it. That Nam world overspilled the approach.

The darkness of twentieth-century modernism continues to seep into our country, leaving its impression in the 1990s on the Clarence Thomas–Anita Hill hearings, the O. J. Simpson trial, the events surrounding David Koresh at Waco, the Rodney King riots, the fight over Elian, Clinton's impeachment, the 2000 presidential election, the Seattle riot, and now this, what CNN calls “The Attack on America.” The steady erosion of Enlightenment presumptions in the 1990s and our resulting sense of standing on shaky foundations run into that nationwide chatter of supreme confidence fabricated by Reagan's infectious nostalgia for an America that never existed. It did exist in Walt Disney's

mind and he gave it form in Disneyland; you might say Ronald Reagan's reality frame came out of his frequent visits to Disneyland. At least, from a postmodern perspective.

The angst-ridden vibe of twentieth-century Modernism also runs into rationality and realism's new spawn: the Third Revolution, the Computer Revolution, the digitalizing of time and space. After our dramatic loss of confidence in technology both in Viet Nam and in NASA, we are, thanks to the likes of Bill Gates and Microsoft, back on the road to progress through technology. The road ahead is filled with computer screens; people are even supposed to be wearing them on their sleeves. The new e-world has us dazzled. But there have been other signs. There have been throughout the 1990s clear signs that America is having a hard time dispensing justice in the courts and social justice in the streets; becoming more and more class divided; becoming more and more cynical and cold in regard to the plight of the "Losers"; scornful of the unionized working class; turning with the new Bush administration toward a global concern limited to return on investment; becoming more and more in the control of a limited and privileged discourse, and, tied to that, increasingly forgetful of powerful American narratives of value that had nothing to do with our "show me the Money!" attitude.

Our world has also been shifting from the uncertainty and nervousness and always-looming darkness of twentieth-century modernism into the aimless playfulness of the postmodern. A good part of that playfulness extends to whatever we've inherited along the lines of traditional values and meanings, firm foundations, and reachable eternal verities. The market has found its port here, jacking into an attitude that buries the old and has us rushing for the new. New realities require new fashions, new homes, new cars, and new looks. In this new postmodern world, nothing has lasting, intrinsic value; value is in the newest line, the most recent innovation, and the new technological advance. If you're not always shopping, you're losing hold of this new digital world. You're doomed to be remaindered, discontinued, obsolete, dead in the water, your mind yesterday's product. But just as there are counter-currents dispelling dark Modernism's darkness, there are postmodern countercurrents to what I've described here and what Fredric Jameson calls "Postmodernism," or, "the cultural logic of late capitalism" in his 1991 book of that title.

Here are the countercurrents, with varying voltage, as I think about them in a way—a post-September 11th way—that was not mine when I set out in 1997 to present, facetiously, "The Ten Basic Tenets of Postmodernity" in *A Primer to Postmodernity*. Here are the post-September 11th tenets:

1. No rendering of reality can justify its supremacy, therefore we must recognize the legitimacy of multiple renderings of reality, multiple reality frames.

*In his account of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, Perry Anderson points out that Churchill's "long-standing Zionism was based on racial rather than religious convictions." He quotes a chilling comment made by Churchill in 1937:*

*I do not agree that the dog in a manger has the final right to the manger, even though he may have lain there a very long time . . . I do not admit, for instance, that a great wrong has been done to the Red Indians of America, or the black people of Australia. I do not admit that a wrong has been done to these people by the fact that a stronger race, a higher grade race, a more worldly-wise race, to put it that way, has come in and taken their place. (Quoted in Perry Anderson, "Scurrying Towards Bethlehem," New Left Review 10 [July-August 2001], p. 3)*

2. No rendering of reality is safe from countering, since postmodernity denies a privileged foundation to any and all. We're closer to Whitman's camarado equality, his "we're all blades of grass" than the market's need to have us "celebrity worshipping."

*We're not safe. The post-September 11th resonating thought here. We're not safe. Terrorism is a form of countering? Weren't we receiving "Bomb-o-grams" from the Unabomber?*

3. Nothing grounds our preference for our own perspective; money and toys and the power that come with them cannot justify the superiority of one's observations, one's narrative of "truth and reality."

*Money, toys, and power. . . . Is this the "modernity" we say bin Laden has set himself against?*

4. We have no license to impose or project our own values and meanings on others.

*But do we need a "license" to fight for our survival?*

5. There's no external reference point which can validate one truth above another; there's no universally accepted universal moral arbiter: we look to our own cultural framing to see how we see.
6. We can't reason our way into the seeing of others; and yet, paradoxically, we can't ignore or negate the seeing of others; realities intersect and are interdependent.

7. It's conceivable that what we see as a just act may be seen as unjust from the perspective of other cultures. And vice versa.

*I can still see the TV news coverage of Islamic fundamentalists celebrating the destruction of the World Trade towers. It wasn't perceived as an atrocity but some deeply yearned for victory.*

8. At any given moment, we are living within a hierarchy of stories regarding who we are, what society is, what Nature is, what success is. We act relative to these mediations and make decisions relative to hierarchies in play at that time, in that place.

*Are we indeed caught in a way of seeing from which we can't break out?*

9. A metanarrative or master narrative is the story at the top; number one privileged story to which every action and thought and interpretation and valuing and meaning refer. We can live at a time when there is no Numero Uno Big Story but a lot of rivaling stories: 1960s is a good example; the Renaissance another; late eighteenth century and the last decade of the nineteenth are others. Prominent examples of master narrative with accompanying Master Voices: Third Reich in Germany, China under Mao, Soviets under Stalin, Europe under Roman Catholicism, Afghanistan under the Taliban.

*"-isms," like Postmodern-ism, are too complex for thirty-second TV news coverage. Without personalities fronting stories there are no stories now.*

10. The Number One story in the United States since Reagan has been free play of the global market, or global market capitalism. It's been opposed by stories on behalf of workers, consumer protection, the environment, and egalitarian democracy. Thus far "Show me the Money!" has trumped these counternarratives.

*The attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon are like Kaczynski's "Bomb-o-grams": actions against narrating itself and paradoxically narratives against which we can summon no narratives. The message is in the action; the response in the name of survival is preventing, both defensively and offensively, future actions. Survival is the truth and reality to be reached. And that metanarrative has now, after September 11, replaced all other metanarratives in the United States.*

If you adopt the postmodern perspective in regard to September 11, you do ask yourself, who could have been behind such a horror? But

you also ask yourself, who are we? Who are we in our own eyes? How many ways of seeing did we find at the moment the votes were being counted, and not being counted, in Florida as we awaited the result of the 2000 presidential election? What accounts are we getting of how we see ourselves as Americans? Are we represented in think tank polls? Do the numbers reveal what we see and how we see? Who are we in the eyes of the rest of the world, and most specifically, the eyes of the Islamic world?

We can sidestep or hurdle all these questions by simply saying we're the greatest nation in the world; we're the ones who represent freedom. We can thusly adopt the naïve realist attitude. We can also take the high ground with our analytical reason; or we can fall into a pit of fear and despair, vainly trying to bring all realities under the umbrella of one true reality. I get e-mails and phone messages that end with the mantra "One." I'm not on this road to Oneness; it's a road that implies we can find that one story that will fit and accommodate everyone. It's a vestige of the Enlightenment. I take the postmodern view: we have to review the dominating American cultural imaginary we are in, and the one that has taken us up to the moment of the disasters of September 11. I set out in *Memory's Orbit* to continue to write an account of how I, like you, have been in play within our American cultural imaginaries



For those interested in seeing a darkness that others see in us, for those who want to make an effort to understand and perhaps alter our attitudes, beliefs and policies, the "old" imaginary framing is now evidence, just as I find, at this moment of retirement, the "old" imaginary orbiting of my life stands as evidence as to what I am now. Both the cultural history and the ways I have inveigled myself into this cultural history I have been writing are from the "left," simply because market and cultural conservatives have established a master narrative on the "right." I'm committed as a postmodernist to finding the road not taken, the view from the margins, the view profit doesn't want to bring to the table, the view already declared extinct, the view left over after "creative destruction" has done its work, the nonhelpful, supplemental view, the view of the writer of a crank letter to the editor, the view taken when you don't take your *Brave New World* soma tablet, the view you don't have to "cost in," the view that sees "mutual aid" and not "self interest" at the bottom of our nature, the view, in short, of the fool. And, lest you think I should go back and revise everything I have written about the 1990s cultural imaginary in the light of September 11, I pre-

sent the view not updated, the view not revised to accommodate new facts, the view that stubbornly refuses to detach itself from the place and time of writing.

I wrote *Memory's Orbit* during the years 1999 and 2000; I put the place and date on each piece. This was a particular consciousness situated in a particular place at a particular time responding to this or that event. But the past perforated the present; pieces written in 1999 or 2000 are often of earlier dates as those earlier times filled a present consciousness. I followed through with what I had begun in the three previous books: I wasn't writing unchangeable truths and I wasn't pretending to be free of the mood of my own mind or what I saw and felt and thought to be the spirit of what I was attending to. But I did make every effort to show that my perceptions and my consciousness were interwoven into the fabric of that time and place, as well as of the past. Only the dead are truly passive voiced; the world is never neutral; the mind is never without its intentions, its disposition; no pass of the magic wand of reason can disperse and disband this incestuous relationship. We are always and forever in the arms of the world of which we are part. I could pretend to distance myself but deception has never been a game I could play. I only wish I had more spectacular and dramatic and absorbing accounts of this imbrication of self and world to impart; so much seems so transparently prefabricated.

My life is partially off the rack at the local Goodwill. But then again that's my point: we're all off the rack of socially and culturally prefabricated sale items. Some from Goodwill, some from Bergdorf. In a way, in the last decade I've not only been trying to describe the play of cultural imaginaries we live in as Americans, but also trying to find the "personal" in my own life. I do that after sorting through the ready-to-wear and the play of Chance. I also hope that I have added a freshened-up story to be put on by others. In truth, I can't say what I hold to be more important: working into a part of our American cultural imaginary that overflows the sound bite, or looking to find that personal, not prefabricated self, or, adding to our inventory a memorable and adoptable narrative and way of narrating.



Some time just before the beginning of the 1990s, I decided to bring my postmodern theoretical interests to bear on cataclysmic headline stories of the coming decade. I had been a fascinated student of the *fin de siècle* as it played out in England and in Europe. The decadence of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Huysmans, Swinburne, Wilde, and Dowson in

Europe and England and the Gilded Robber Baron Age of the United States had filled a dramatic last decade of the nineteenth century. I suppose I felt that the mystique of the *fin de siècle*—in totally different form and substance—would fill the 1990s.

Two presumptions: that I would be alive, fiery, and *compos mentis* for the whole decade and that culturally convulsive events would pop up. I also had some uncertainties: Would my postmodern bent provide me with a hold on this stuff worth reading? Could I, without original theses, well-researched arguments, faddish hooks, manifesto intentions, or a sterling English prose style dare to call my fractal meditations “books”? I got over both humps. What Reagan, followed by Bush the first, had done to what idealists like myself call our “egalitarian democracy”—I mean begin its conversion to oligarchy—would certainly produce a very dramatic decade.

I had bloody expectations on the eve of the new year, 1990. What lay ahead would certainly be a bit more social unrest, a bit more riot in the streets, a whole lot more problems with “labor,” a slow awakening of a seduced underclass, a sharp awakening of the middle class that they were working twice and three times as hard as their parents to keep up that suburban status, and an equally sharp awakening by college bound hopefuls that in this country education was now for the wealthy. Throw in my “silent spring” nightmares, surely to be realized in an America where le ROI—return on investment—meant playing fast and loose with the environment, and what you have, by my prophetic reckoning, was a coming decade full of sound and fury. And I was set up to say what it signified. Or, more precisely, set up to deconstruct what Washington and Madison Avenue and Hollywood *said* it signified. Or even more precisely, set up to overburden, overwhelm, overdetermine signification so that what the Dow Jones said was winning, success, happiness, progress, and just plain wonderful would be shadowed by darker thoughts.

Besides all the Have Not classes jumping up and pointing out the sham of Reagan's trickle-down nonsense, I anticipated Carter's malaise kicking into real psycho overdrive in all those same Have Not quarters. Could you conceivably put all the Disaffected now threatening the picket-fence worlds of the 1980s Yuppies in prisons? Could you hire enough private police officers to protect the newest upscale suburban housing tracts? Could you install enough electronic surveillance systems to really do the job? My thinking was Shakespearean: rot of Denmarkian proportions will produce personal pathologies. I was set up for serial killers, random slaughters, cultist escapades, teenybopper vandalism, post office shootouts, mass suicides, sociopathic drive-bys, urban “wildings,” celebrity kidnappings, headline terrorism, and neo-fascist rampages.

With a glass of champagne in hand that eve of 1990, I'm thinking eye-watering toxic planetary environment, every wage earner out on strike, every person of color on the march, every prison in a state of riot, every trailer park seething, every university student protesting, and every night time in the possession of the possessed.

Did the 1990s turn out like that? Not quite. Or sometimes, almost. Bill Clinton's two presidential terms did a typically Clintonesque kind of thing: they fractalized cause and effect, truth and consequences, action and reaction. What I mean is that he didn't remedy the damage Reagan had done; he didn't end our increasing desire to define democracy as whatever was good for corporate profits. He didn't lessen the gap between rich and poor, but it didn't expand as much as it would have, I think, if we had had another eight years of a corporate presidency. Global warming got worse, but not as bad as it could have gotten; unions still had a tough row to hoe, but not as tough as they could have had; welfare was supposedly ended in our time but as it turned out, only the checks to those on welfare ended; Clinton took us into places where there was no return on investment but he did so tardily; we continued to support despotic regimes for corporate reasons; blacks could feel a breath of fresh air after twelve years of "tough love" and a strong intent by the Haves not to "reward the bad behavior" of the Have Nots. In short, Clinton put a loose and permeable lid on the America I thought was ready to explode in the 1990s. But all this wasn't happening in 1990 when I began *Hauntings*.



"What were you haunted by?" a no-nonsense, laconic Midwesterner asked me when the book first came out. By my own past. What was I taking into the 1990s with me? What baggage, what issues did the 1990s inherit? And since I held that the legacy of the previous decade was a darkening legacy, I felt that the 1990s would be haunted by the 1980s. The 1980s were a psychic retreat from Vietnam, a retreat turned into an advance once the presidency, with the help of the Congress, put all the gathered fruits of our two-hundred-year-old democracy at the disposal of the Viet Nam profiteers. While one-third of my working-class Bensonhurst neighborhood buddies were destroyed one way or another by Viet Nam—as were one-third of the working-class youth of every American neighborhood—the "elite entrepreneurs" with every variety of wartime contract were starting Swiss bank accounts until the "investment climate" of the United States improved. And improve it Reagan did. For the top 1 percent of the population. Trickle down occurred

when that 1 percent then paid fees and commissions to brokers, lawyers, financial consultants, bankers, accountants, agents, managers, doctors, shrinks, architects, interior designers, and others in the professional classes. I was haunted by that; we were all haunted by that. I remained haunted but once the Soviet Union collapsed in 1989, most Americans were looking forward to the beginning of something new, something beyond the Cold War. My attention was drawn to the murder of Yusef Hawkins in my old Bensonhurst neighborhood. I watched the Rev. Al Sharpton march through Bensonhurst, determined to show the whole world how racist this neighborhood was. My old neighborhood, the place I had been brought up. The past had a hold on me. And as we all sat and watched the Rodney King beating, our American racist past showed that it still had a hold on us.

At the outset I was haunted; the next three years only justified that feeling. I went to the movies to see our cultural fears played out; everyone else was there for the entertainment. They could do the popcorn-and-Coke-we're-at-the-movies thing and then go home and get "back to reality." My mind was crisscrossing headlines, digging up the past, running by a film's own defenses, finding the fear at the heart of everything. Eros and Thanatos were now brought closer together by AIDS; Hannibal Lecter's real world counterpart, Jeffrey Dahmer, was scarier than Lecter; the moral insensibility of the young in *The River's Edge* was just a premonition of what was to come in this decade; the Wall Street message that "Greed is Good!" was the haunting legacy of the 1980s; watching the Rodney King tape over and over again evoked yet again that birth defect we Americans couldn't seem to erase from our conscience: the life of blacks in America. Of course, the very fact that our national "conscience" had also dwindled to cold unconcern for Losers—not fellow Americans, or fellow human beings, or fellow citizens, just Losers—was like a solar eclipse. The surround of *Hauntings* was notable: Saddam's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the Persian Gulf War in 1991 (a war that left a residue that would continue to haunt the 1990s), and the south central Los Angeles riot and revolt in 1992. I ended *Hauntings* with Bill Clinton's election in 1992. For me his election meant that a man who understood we were in a postmodern world and who would therefore act within the new premises of that world was in the White House. While George Bush the First knew clearly that he was not to do anything as president that would hamper return on investment, Clinton was a mess of utopian intentions with a too flexible conscience, an erratic hardball strategist, a truly divided man filled with his own hauntings, hauntings which were eventually to lead to an impeachment trial. And yet a man of his times, a man who clearly represented

the deep division in American culture: let the market rule and damn the losers or let us try through governmental adjustments and interventions to equalize the winnings, correct the abuses of social justice in the wake of market rule, and maintain necessary political equality by keeping America from becoming another Brazil, with rule and power in the hands of the Haves and the bulk of the population disenfranchised Have Nots. Clinton went back and forth across this divide; so did every American not deaf to stories other than their own.



In 1993 I began to write the second volume in this cultural history, a book that had the working title *Speeding to the Millennium*. Although the book would only go up to 1995, I felt the tremors of the coming millennium. Once again the headlines in the next three years seemed to respond. Most notable were the bombing of the World Trade Center and the FBI stand at the Branch Davidian compound in 1993, the beginning of the interminable Whitewater investigation in 1994, the Oklahoma bombing, the O. J. Simpson trial, and American peacekeeping troops in Bosnia in 1995. In my view, Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America" mapped our journey to the new millennium: we were to avoid wrong turns such as we had made in the countercultural 1960s and renew America by downsizing government and allowing transnational market principles to run our democracy. I saw the clash of mind-sets played out in the films *Forrest Gump* and *Pulp Fiction*, the former rewriting American history the way Gingrich wanted it to be told in the classroom, and the latter demonstrating how we in the postmodern world tell our tales and live out our histories within multiple, intersecting realities, with time and meaning narrated by those realities.

It didn't seem to me enough to draw upon my own experiences in order to mark our never-ending mediation of the world. Millennial enthusiasm and fears were in lives all around me. In order to give some sense of the way we were imagining ourselves and the world in these years I interspersed fictional vignettes between my headline/film/theory pieces. Discursive explorations took me only so far; I needed to create characters and plots and dialogue—fictional life-worlds—that were immersed in the feelings and fabrications of these years. I'm sure it looks like a strange book, with its long, monologic political rants, its sudden dips into arcane theory, its conversational wanderings into movies just seen, its fractal attentiveness, and, finally, these seemingly disconnected fictional pieces that don't follow the protocols of "the well-made story." My defense? I was after an allusive quarry: the divagations of the American cultural psyche in those

years. I couldn't bring out what Blake called "weights & measures" or even what my dissertational advisor so long ago had called "a pointed argument, well-laced with examples, authoritative footnoting, and driving with the force of John Henry's hammer to closure." Instead, I had the reader entrapped within a mazelike world of too many exits too like just as many entrances.

The third volume, *Postmodern Journeys: Film and Culture 1996–1998*, found its structure in the real life and dream journeys I found myself on as I headed toward my "double nickel" birthday. In the middle of life's journey I suddenly found myself in a dark wood. In this country. My travels to Europe with a different group of students every year had made it clear to me that unless I journeyed away from the cold devastations of America's "profit to shareholders" priorities my "edge," that slight edge of anger that pushed my writing and my teaching, would turn into bitterness and cynicism. Not exactly the spirit you want to be in when you reach the age of fifty-five. And besides, Elaine didn't want to hang around "negativity." But there was nothing astoundingly personal about this. The whole country desperately needed to journey away from its own cynicism and meanspiritedness, inspired, if that's the right word, by a philosophy of short-term investment and huge returns. I needed to go on one of those aboriginal walkabouts, the kind of journey that's not planned, that has no goal, that seems totally disconnected from what you're doing at the very moment you walk away. America needed to do the same thing. And at the very moment the Dow Jones was breaking ten thousand, apparently realizing the American Dream in its finest form. The call to go on a postmodern journey was a call to walk away from all our toys and toward . . . what? What we had left behind along the way, which in my view was considerable. It was everything you couldn't put a price tag on, which meant nothing in the eyes of those born into a culture that had already stopped giving airtime to "everything you couldn't put a price tag on." What are you missing when you've never had it or known it? But I believe our forebears had it and knew it.

The surround for that book was Clinton's against-all-odds re-election and a welfare reform that ended guaranteed federal subsidies to poor people with children in 1996, the Heaven's Gate mass suicide, the death of Princess Di and the conviction of Terry Nichols and Timothy McVeigh in 1997, and the capturing of Ted Kaczynski—the Unabomber—Monicagate, and the impeachment trial of Clinton in 1998. The decade and the century were not ending well.

In *Memory's Orbit: Film and Culture 1999–2000*, I traded the journey forward for the journey back, and once again I returned to stories

and their times and places that haunted me and in some way revealed the circling orbit of our own cultural memory. I went back to my working-class neighborhood in Brooklyn, to memories of a neighborhood where Italian was spoken as much as English, to a time when the road to becoming a full unhyphenated American was the road of education, of degrees. I orbited back to a world where there were working-class heroes and bad guys wore black hats, the Mafia style in all things ruled, and indeed the farthest you could travel in the world was the last exit on the BMT Subway. I saw again a time when Viet Nam set the mood of the country, where I was when JFK was assassinated, confessing eye to eye to a Jesuit, sitting awkwardly at a “literary tea” in Brooklyn Heights, a Thanksgiving dinner fifty years ago with my grandfather Benjamin at the head of the table, the years on my West Virginia farm when I tried out my Thoreau, my stay in a naval hospital under observation for the draft, my faculty unionizing and the consequent termination at the very beginning of my academic “career.” And other memories, all keyed by headlines in these two years, 1999 and 2000. My cousin Billy’s long, hard death triggers my Viet Nam memories; JFK Jr.’s death triggers my 1963 memory; an invitation to speak at an Indiana college triggers my Brooklyn Heights memories; and it doesn’t take much to put me into the orbit of my Oxley Hollow days. Perhaps it’s because I’m so far now from what I was then.

I know it’s the early retirement offer made to me that has me thinking of where my “home” might be. It doesn’t take much to bring Brooklyn back to me; it’s where I was young. It only takes a trip to southern California to see my parents who are in their late eighties, for me to both wonder where our “home” is and wonder about that place where we were altogether living in a way that even Hollywood cannot restage. And not for a moment do I lose the sense that right at the moment when the year 2000 ends, and we are in a new millennium, that all of America is caught between forging ahead and returning to the orbits of our own past.