CHAPTER 1

Trash and Literature

The stories that surround us in our daily lives are very similar to the great literature of the past. If you watch television, go to the movies, read popular magazines, and look at advertisements you are exposed to many of the same kinds of stories as someone who studies the great books of Western civilization. You have simply been encouraged to look at them differently. A tabloid newspaper such as *The National Enquirer* is a fragmented version of great dramatic tragedy—Euripides, Ibsen, or Strindberg made into celebrity gossip and sold at supermarket checkout counters next to the candy bars and the gum. The suffering and fall of the ancient nobility is now the suffering and fall of aging movie stars, and although they do not speak in the same dramatic language, they suffer and fall, and even learn about themselves, in much the same fashion. Similarly, the movie *Rambo: First Blood, Part II* is a contemporary variation on Homer's *Iliad*, with the long and horrible war in Vietnam in place of the long and horrible war in Troy, and a muscle-bound Sylvester Stallone playing a contemporary version of Achilles. *Star Trek* contains many of the same basic plot lines, character types, and overall thematic concerns of *Gulliver's Travels*, and although little of Jonathan Swift's harsh satire remains, new political realities are obviously in place: A whole team of heavily armed space voyagers now polices the universe in place of the lone and misanthropic Gulliver. *Cosmopolitan* is a glitzy, commercialized reworking of the central concerns of some

of the great women's coming-of-age novels of the last two hundred years, the successor to works such as *Sense and Sensibility, Madame Bovary*, and *The House of Mirth*. The problems faced by Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, Emma Bovary, and Lily Bart are the great subjects of the magazine.

All of this may be either good or bad, revolting or reassuring, depending on your tastes in literature, but the relationship between great books and popular entertainment is important and worth examining carefully. What really is the difference between trash culture and the great tradition? Why is *The National Enquirer* so bad and a tragedy by Euripides so good? For people with inquiring minds but short attention spans, our stories of suffering, fall, and recognition now come in short, easy-to-read fragments as a kind of fast-food tragedy-to-go, but the fragments themselves contain nearly all of the essential elements of dramatic tragedy. Do we demand completeness, a beginning, middle, and end, as Aristotle insisted twenty-five hundred years ago? Do we require a single author, intentionally creating the story? Some of the great avant-garde artists of the early twentieth century have ripped the art of the past into fragments, more recent apostles of postmodernism have lectured us about the fragmentary nature of experience, and some of our most distinguished cultural critics have argued that authors are irrelevant. If they are right, we ought to hail the *Enquirer* as ancient literature reworked according to the principles of the new and *Cosmopolitan* as a courtship novel subjected to this same kind of avant-garde revisionism. Or is this shift from Euripides to the *Enquirer*, from the novels of Jane Austen, Gustave Flaubert, and Edith Wharton to *Cosmopolitan*, just another sign of the decay of Western civilization?

Many of the differences between trash culture and high culture show only that storytelling adapts to changing economic, social, and political conditions. Sylvester Stallone is not a great actor, but the part he plays in *Rambo* is a diminished, inarticulate version of Achilles, for which his skills are quite appropriate. One of the major points of the movie is that military heroism is completely out of place in our world, and thus Stallone's character must appear lame, perhaps even lamer than he intended. If the shift from *The Iliad* to *Rambo* is to be taken as a sign of the decline of Western civilization, it is not the fault of the storytellers, who are only remaking the epic for new anti-epic realities. Similarly, Swift could only have written *Star Trek* if he had been on

antidepressants (*Prozac* would be a great name for a *Star Trek* character), but Gene Roddenberry's upbeat version of the fantastic journey story form has been wildly successful on television and in the movies, where audiences clearly prefer hope to despair, earnestness to satire. Does *Star Trek* tell us what we want to hear while *Gulliver's Travels* delivers what we need to hear? Perhaps. But it is also worth remembering that Swift wrote his savage denunciation of humanity in an age of optimism, but Roddenberry and his teams of writers deliver their message of hope in a far more despairing age. *Star Trek* may therefore be just as appropriate for us as *Gulliver's Travels* was for Swift's first readers.

In a similar fashion, the woman on the cover of *Cosmopolitan* may be a horribly sexist stereotype, but she can also be seen as Emma Bovary's younger, much more successful sister. Indeed, if Madame Bovary had only subscribed to *Cosmo* she would be alive and well today, so closely are her concerns addressed by the magazine. And wouldn't she be better off alive and happy? Or do we still insist that women who look for sexual satisfaction outside of marriage end up dead? Emma Bovary seeks happiness in materialism and in eroticism, risking everything in extramarital affairs, and then dies because of her behavior. The *Cosmo* woman seeks the same pleasures but avoids Emma's fate.

Cosmopolitan is not the same as *Madame Bovary* by any means, but it is very similar not only in its overall thematic preoccupations, but also in many of its specific story lines, plot conflicts, and character types. The same is true of the other pairings with which this book is concerned. The contemporary American shopping mall reworks many of the standard elements of the great European formal garden from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, adapting its statues, vistas, pathways, walls, and objects for enjoyment and contemplation to new commercial purposes. *Playboy* addresses many of the same problems as Baldazar Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, the great courtesy book of the Italian Renaissance, and proposes many of the same solutions. Plot lines and character types from the television soap opera *Days of Our Lives* are very similar to some of the great Jacobean revenge tragedies of the English Renaissance. The connections between high and low are extensive and systematic, and one of the purposes of this book is to demonstrate that trash culture replicates *all* of the major genres of literature. We are surrounded by stories that echo,

repeat, revise, and adapt the entire history of literature, something that is not only exciting in its own right, but also important for our understanding of literature, both high and low. All past literature, T. S. Eliot argues in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," is simultaneously present and available to us. In its contemporary variants, it is also the cultural environment in which we live.

In part, this is because writers for television and the movies imitate the classics, often in careful and meticulous detail, just as writers of poetry, drama, and the novel have always done. Sometimes they make this explicit, as Francis Ford Coppola does in *Apocalypse Now*, his remake of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, or Amy Heckerling does in *Clueless,* her remake of Jane Austen's *Emma*. But more often than not we are offered no indication that a particular television program or movie reworks an earlier work of literature except for the details of the story itself. Virtually everything that happens in the Jim Carey movie *Dumb and Dumber*, for example, repeats Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, from the basic concept of two really dumb goofs who go on the road to serve a beautiful woman, to the most important details of character and plot: that one is a confused idealist and the other, his sidekick, is a not-too-bright realist; that they ride in a van decked out to look like a shaggy animal; that they seek a woman who wants to have nothing to do with them; that they endure a series of comic pratfalls and misadventures, including a good number of toilet and bodily function jokes; and, in the central fantasy of the story, that they imagine the idealist pulling the heart out of a hated rival. *Dumb and Dumber* is a film version of *Don Quixote* for kids.

But not all of the similarities between contemporary entertainment and the great tradition can be explained as conscious imitation. Novels such as *Sense and Sensibility, Madame Bovary*, and *The House of Mirth* are similar to *Cosmopolitan* not because the editors of the magazine are avid readers of these novels (although that is possible), but because all of these writers and editors struggle with a common subject, the predicament of women in courtship, and all of them wish to appeal to readers with certain needs and interests. Austen, Flaubert, and Wharton, working through a real problem faced by real women of a certain age and class, and the editors of *Cosmopolitan*, working through a similar problem faced by women of a similar age and class, come up with similar stories. This should not be surprising. *Playboy* and *The Book of the Courtier* are similar not because the editors of

the magazine read Castiglione, but because both set about writing manuals for men on the brink of adulthood about the best ways of being a man, and both devote a great deal of attention to the best methods of seducing women. The needs of young men in sixteenth-century Italy and in contemporary America turn out to be remarkably similar, in many respects identical. And the needs of the audience clearly determine, at least in part, the nature of these works. Supermarket tabloids such as the *Enquirer* fill a need for stories about the suffering and fall of the rich and famous that was previously satisfied by the writers of dramatic tragedy.

Of course, this does not make them equal to each other in terms of language, characterization, and plot. But very few people attend productions of Greek tragedies these days, and even in fifth-century B.C. Athens, tragedies were only presented once or twice a year. By contrast, the *Enquirer* makes a great wealth of tragic stories available every week at very little cost and claims "the largest circulation of any paper in America." Brevity, clarity, and accessibility are the principles of this new tragic form, and if dramatic tragedy is now reduced to its most fundamental elements, who is to say that this is necessarily bad? We know that a tabloid newspaper is tawdry entertainment and a Greek tragedy is great literature, of course, even if both deal with the same basic kinds of material, because one appeals to large numbers of people and the other to a small educated elite. This is a very old bias that has been hard for critics to move beyond. After all, we learn in school that literature is something that we must read very carefully (usually because we will be tested on it), and trash culture is escapist entertainment, rarely worth thinking about for very long. If our appreciation of Greek tragedy is a sign of our membership in the elect, then our interest in the *Enquirer* is a sign of our depravity and lack of education. What we miss is the opportunity to understand the similarities between trash culture and the great tradition.

Our bias against popular storytelling prevents us from considering it as carefully as we consider great literature because it effectively cuts trash culture off from the tradition of literature that critics have historically valued. It is against that tradition that we almost always read and evaluate stories, at least the stories that our teachers have asked us to study, respect, and interpret, but we evaluate popular entertainment against various nonliterary traditions, against newspapers, for example, or against a concept of mass entertainment that we assume

means simple content that is not worth the trouble of examining carefully. E. D. Hirsch puts it this way: "An interpreter's preliminary generic conception of a text is constitutive of everything that he subsequently understands and . . . this remains the case unless and until that generic conception is altered" (*Validity*, 74). In other words, we find what we expect to find.

We evaluate the *Enquirer* as a tawdry kind of newspaper because of its superficial resemblances to a newspaper, even though it is hardly filled with traditional news, and we dismiss it as trash because so much of its celebrity gossip is false or exaggerated. But when we evaluate the *Enquirer* against the tradition of made-up stories of suffering, fall, and self-recognition, its stories are immediately identifiable as tragedy in an age when tragedy is supposed to have died, transformations of one of the oldest and most beloved genres of literature into something lively and widely accessible. The *Enquirer* becomes quite interesting because we are reading the tragedy of our own time, and that calls for an attention to detail, a care with the text, that we would never have brought to a trashy newspaper. Nothing about the *Enquirer* has changed, only our attitude toward it.

Similarly, we identify *Rambo* as a typical, violent action-adventure story, and because it is full of gun battles, stars a muscle-bound Sylvester Stallone, and has one-dimensional characters we dismiss it as mindless entertainment or, worse yet, as propaganda because it makes no secret of its political stance toward the war in Vietnam. But when we evaluate *Rambo* against the tradition of stories of long, grim, but sometimes heroic warfare, it turns out to be very similar to the *Iliad*, the first great Western epic, now made accessible, even quite compelling, to millions of moviegoers. Immediately *Rambo* becomes much more interesting, no longer only mindless entertainment or propaganda, but evidence of changes in the epic form as we have tried to make sense of our own war. Achilles is at the very top of the social hierarchy in *The Iliad*, wealthy, respected, and articulate, but Stallone's character, John Rambo, is at the very bottom of the social hierarchy in *Rambo*, poor, scorned, and inarticulate. They face almost identical problems in almost identical situations but from opposite positions of power. *Rambo* is *The Iliad* adapted to new conditions, a story no longer for a small warrior aristocracy but for a large war-making democracy. *The Iliad* retains its great strength as a story for contemporary American movie audiences, even in greatly changed cir-

cumstances. The differences between *Rambo* and *The Iliad* reflect the differences between our own civilization and that of ancient Greece; the other pairs with which this book is concerned also refract universal human themes through different cultural prisms. John Rambo's powerlessness and his sense of futility, the loud sexuality and materialism of *Cosmopolitan*, the fragmentation and sensationalism of the stories in the *Enquirer*, and the upbeat cooperative ethic of *Star Trek* are all characteristics of current consumer society in the West, and thus are appropriate developments in the literary tradition.

"The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition," Walter Benjamin writes in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (223). But in popular art, Benjamin argues, "the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition" (221). Benjamin himself liked the idea of a popular art freed from its tradition because of the possibilities it held out for new political functions, but what he wished for a half century ago has not come to pass. Instead of liberated political art, we are faced with movies, television programs, advertisements, and other forms of trash or popular culture that effectively mask their traditions from us, thereby obscuring their meanings. The solution to this problem lies in using Benjamin's insight but in reversing the process. Thus, this book returns such mechanically and/or electronically reproduced popular stories back into the tradition of storytelling so that they can be more clearly understood.

Teaching Popular Culture and the Great Tradition

For most of the last thirty years I have taught courses in literature and popular culture at a number of different American universities. This book is the result of what I have learned from colleagues, students, and the stories themselves as I have moved back and forth between high and low. I have written it for an audience of students, colleagues, and readers outside of the university who I hope will be interested in what I have to say here: that the history of storytelling is full of rich and exciting connections between high and low.

I began in the late 1960s by linking rock and roll to poetry, hoping thereby to lead students from the lyrics they loved to the lyrics I wanted them to understand and appreciate, if not also to love. But the process only worked with rock and roll that was unusually verbal,

and it never allowed any way of taking the music into account. Later, in the 1970s I taught popular detective stories along with *Oedipus Rex* and Harlequin romances along with the novels of Jane Austen, trying to find a way of linking high and low, and in those classes I began to notice the different ways in which I presented the material to students. "This is very easy," I would say about an assignment to read a supermarket romance. "You can knock this off in an hour or two." But then when we got to Jane Austen, I would caution my students to expect more. "This is one of the great novels of courtship. You will have to spend a great deal more time and care with this one, and besides, this one will really be on the final." My students, ever alert to what their teacher wanted, responded appropriately and read one as if it was easy and the other as if it was hard.

Eventually I changed my tactic, and by the 1980s I was asking students to buy the current newsstand edition of *Cosmopolitan* (ideal because it totally eliminated the possibility of students turning in old papers from fraternity or sorority paper files) and then to read it as if it were a tough and complex work of literature. But to do that we had to read Jane Austen first, in order to learn careful reading and then to understand the ways in which a great novelist used the problems of courtship as the basis for a novel. I therefore changed the order of the pairings, beginning with the great book and then moving on to the popular story. No longer was I leading my students from the easy to the difficult, but rather from the older to the more recent, and no longer was I making a distinction about quality or complexity or meaning. This is different from what other critics of popular culture have done. "There are romances as elaborate and arcane as Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and as simple as the comic strip adventures of Superman and Batman," John Cawelti writes (*Six-Gun Mystique*, 70). But if you read *The Faerie Queene* first and then turn to Superman or Batman, you begin to see complexity in the popular form that you were unable to see before. Given my direction that *Cosmopolitan* was to be treated as a great work of literature, many of my students found complexity and paradox in it without much difficulty, and along with all that a great many parallels to Jane Austen (or Gustave Flaubert or Edith Wharton). *Cosmopolitan*, it turned out, is much closer to an Austen novel than to a Harlequin romance because it plays multiple stories off each other, sometimes quite seriously and at other times quite ironically, setting up contrasts that would do Austen proud. That

taught me an important lesson, that how a story is presented to a reader determines at least in part how the reader will respond to it. It changed me as a teacher. I began treating a variety of popular texts as if they were great works of literature to see what would happen. This book is the result.

Most of my students have not been English majors, and although many of them have been extremely intelligent (and overworked), they come uneasily into literature classes that are required of them for graduation. The whole idea of literature or, worse yet, the great books, puts them off, but they love movies and television programs, and some of them have watched the same soap opera almost every day since they were in junior high school. I teach them some obscure classic such as John Webster's great Renaissance tragedy *The Duchess of Malfi*. They are not delighted, they have trouble with the poetry, they struggle to keep the names of the characters straight all the while that I am lecturing them on the finer points of the content. But then I turn on the television in the classroom and we watch ten minutes of *Days of Our Lives*. Half the class sits in rapt attention, suddenly comfortable, the other half much more dubiously, uneasy about the transition I am asking them to make. After we do ten minutes or so of soap-opera watching in every class meeting for a week or so, most of the other half of the class is also hooked. They want to keep watching! This is Jacobean revenge tragedy in modern dress, I tell my students at this point, and then I ask them to determine how much of what I have said about Webster remains true of *Days of Our Lives*. To challenges like this they have almost always responded enthusiastically, and many return to Webster with heightened interest.

Students who can remember what happened in *The Duchess of Malfi* only with the greatest of difficulty, usually under pain of failing the midterm, can lovingly recite the plot details of the last six months or six years of their favorite soap operas. When I point out how similar they are, the problem posed by my class changes and becomes one of discovering whether the playgoers of seventeenth-century England got a better revenge story than television viewers of the late twentieth century. A related question animates this book, since we cannot recover the experience of those earlier audiences: Who gets the better story, the people who watch the soap operas and the movies, or the people who read the great books in lit classes? This comparison between Jacobean revenge tragedy and contemporary soap opera is

meant to be representative of the process, for I have done this with almost all of the paired sets of texts on which this book is based. I have taught *Star Trek* in classes devoted solely to popular culture, and *Gulliver's Travels* in classes devoted solely to satire or to the literature of the eighteenth century, but neither story as successfully as when I have joined them together in classes on popular culture and the great tradition. The simple direction to compare the stories animated one class for two weeks, producing a spirited argument as to which was the better story and what constituted good literature. The presence in the classroom of several students who were devoted *Star Trek* fans was essential to the unit's success. Literature demands respect and deference from students, but contemporary movies and television programs do not. In Walter Benjamin's terms, the great books have aura. In practical terms what this means is that students hesitate to be critical of *The Iliad* or *Gulliver's Travels* but feel more than capable of making sense of *Rambo* or *Star Trek*, and that is why the combination works well in a classroom.

This book has many purposes, one of which is to present a method of teaching literature. I no longer wish to lure my students from the story they love to the story I want them to understand and appreciate, if not also to love. Now I want them to understand the differences between the literature of the past, which is taught and preserved by the university, and the literature of the present, which surrounds them. Often they go away sobered by the differences, but sometimes they are charmed, and in either case I have given them a new way to understand television, movies, and other forms of popular storytelling, and a new tool to assist in that understanding, literary criticism, which no longer is useful only for making sense of the classics. The very same questions asked about a novel by Jane Austen or Gustave Flaubert can be asked of *Cosmopolitan*, and the same kinds of analysis made of the *Iliad* can be made of *Rambo*.

"Cultural power," Stuart Hall argues, depends on drawing "the line, always in each period in a different place, as to what is to be incorporated into 'the great tradition' and what is not. Educational and cultural institutions, along with the many positive things they do, also help to discipline and police this boundary" ("Notes," 236). English professors have tampered constantly with this boundary in the last twenty-five years, and as a result much new material has been incorporated into the curriculum. My concern here, however, is much

broader, not with what is to be incorporated into the great tradition and what is not, but with the whole concept of the boundary. Following Hall, Andrew Ross writes that "cultural power does not inhere in the contents of categories of taste. On the contrary, it is exercised through the capacity to draw the line between and around categories of taste; it is the power to define where each relational category begins and ends, and the power to determine what it contains at any one time" (*No Respect*, 61). This is what my students have explored. The process itself is empowering because it is not only a study of line drawing, but an invitation to draw the line on one's own or to refuse to draw the line at all. Ross calls for "a thoroughgoing classroom critique of taste" that will "explode the 'objective' canons of aesthetic taste rather than simply reinforcing or expanding them by appropriating, as a new colony of legitimate attention, cultural terrain that was hitherto off-limits. . . . This means challenging the categorical function of canons rather than simply changing the nature of their contents" (212). This is what I have attempted to do here and what I have done in my classroom. Suggesting that *Rambo* and *The Iliad* are comparable works, I could hardly do otherwise.

"*Rambo* is just as good as *The Iliad*," I tell my students one day when we finish with both. "No, no," all of them reply, "*The Iliad* is many times better." "Well then," I say, "which would you rather spend time on, *Rambo* or *The Iliad*?" "*Rambo*," they reply in unison and without a moment's hesitation. For a while the room is silent while they face the meaning of their choice. But the problem of value judgment remains. On the one hand, there are arguments like those put forward by Pierre Bourdieu that "all cultural practices (museum visits, concert-going, reading, etc.), and preferences in literature, painting, and music, are closely linked to educational level . . . and secondarily to social origin" (*Distinction*, 1). We can trace this line all the way back to *The Elements of Criticism* in 1762, where Lord Kames wrote, "Those who depend for food on bodily labor are totally devoid of taste" (quoted in Wellek, *Attack*, 34). On the other hand, there are arguments such as those put forward by Neil Postman that "the decline of a print-based epistemology and the accompanying rise of a television-based epistemology has had grave consequences for public life, that we are getting sillier by the minute" (*Amusing Ourselves*, 24). These points of view are not easy to reconcile. Professors of literature are either imposing their own class-based and education-based

values on students or they are rescuing students from the sloth and trivia that is engulfing them. My solution has been to ask students to move back and forth between trash culture and the great books, and to come to their own conclusions. The Greeks had *The Iliad* and the tragedies of Euripides, whereas we have *Rambo* and *The National Enquirer*. Did we get shortchanged? It is a question worth thinking about carefully.

The Organization of the Book

The chapters that follow are arranged in order of increasing complexity. After a discussion of the critical context for understanding this book (chapter 2), I present a section of case studies designed to make the case as best I can that a wide variety of popular entertainment is extremely similar to the great literature of the past: that *Star Wars* replicates *The Faerie Queene* (chapter 3); that the trash TV talk show is a synthesis of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (chapter 4); that sitcoms and soap operas like *Friends, Seinfeld*, and *Days of Our Lives* are part of a much larger reworking of the history of drama on commercial television (chapter 5); and that supermarket tabloids and celebrity gossip magazines not only are very similar to the great dramatic tragedy of the past, but they meet many of the most important critical definitions of tragedy set up by scholars and philosophers (chapter 6).

In the second section of the book I introduce the problem of value, the problem that as contemporary storytellers rewrite the great tradition of literature they change what we are told should matter most to us: that advertising takes up and subverts the tradition of utopia in the interests of consumer society (chapter 7); that the shopping mall similarly adapts the tradition of formal gardens to the needs of a consumer society (chapter 8); that *Playboy* is a *Book of the Courtier* for an age of mechanical reproduction and rampant consumerism (chapter 9); and that *Cosmopolitan* reworks the tradition of the woman's coming-of-age novel for new social and economic realities (chapter 10).

In the third section of the book I discuss the problem of politics and history: that *Star Trek*, like *Gulliver's Travels* before it, is deeply involved in the politics and history of its own time and place (chapter 11); and, finally, that all of the major movies made about the war in

Vietnam from *Star Wars* in 1977 to *Born on the Fourth of July* in 1989 are reworkings of the great literature of the past, and that what passed for portrayals of Vietnam were really imaginative stories about what might have happened in other times and in other places (chapter 12). I conclude with a brief discussion of the issues presented in the book (chapter 13).