Postscript

I state somewhat facetiously at the end of my first chapter that the logical question with which to end this study involves some understanding of the concept of non-marked characters in American fiction. To phrase the question another way would be to conclude a study of social stigma with a study of the similarities that connect nonstigmatized individuals in American fictional communities. If American writers could make fictions without marking, in the special sense in which I have defined the term, then our literature would not reflect the way the Puritans conceived our world and the way the transcendental imagination retains their habit of mind. Analogously, if we could get at the ways in which we are alike without assigning stigma, then we would become a different culture and we would have a different literature.

Marking in my own approach to American literature is both an interpretative epistemology and a focus or vehicle, a "mantra" of sorts, for which I have examined these classic works of American fiction. I have read the works in this study by marking their significance, and in every case, what has pointed the significance of the work is, itself, a mark of some kind. Therefore I have marked or noticed what it is in these novels that the narratives themselves mark or notice about the world they portray. I believe that in the self-conscious application of the very principle of Puritan inner scrutiny to literary works, I have been able to show how Hawthorne, Melville, Faulkner, and Ellison, in spite of their Puritan heritage, demonstrate a way of seeing that Puritanism obscured.

As Charles Feidelson writes of the Puritans, "the symbolizing process was constantly at work in their minds. . . . Every passage of life, enmeshed in the vast context of God's plan, possessed a delegated meaning." Since it was the very intention of Puritan medita-
tion to make things manifest, perhaps we might conclude that America's "manifest destiny" has covered over vital aspects of our culture. However, as the four authors in my study indicate in their work, in spite of this fact, or perhaps because of it, the destiny of American fiction has become the necessity to reveal those nonmanifest mysteries that symbolize the essence of who we are. The act of marking or stigmatizing, which our history has shown to be so destructive in our social behavior, is constructive in fiction because it throws into relief the existence of those mysteries. American fiction points the meaning of our nonmanifest destiny.

It is understandable that the four authors whose works have been the subject of this book should characterize so large a movement in our literature. The experience of living outside a community one has drawn his identity from creates a sense of dislocation, leads to Goffman's discredibility. And the single central fact in each of these men's lives is social exclusion, whether by chance or by choice. Hawthorne was indeed "guillotined" as Surveyor of the Customs; Melville did test his own "landlessness" before he became a fiction writer; Faulkner inhabited a region that had marked itself in civil war and was an eccentric within that region; and Ellison has experienced what it means to be black in America. The fact that eccentrics or members of one minority group or another have created our best fiction suggests a truth that the Puritans did not know, namely, that social exclusion, more than strengthening the identity of the group, gives the scapegoat vision. At the same time, ironically, it is the very process of exclusion that defines what is American. The Puritans therefore, like Faulkner's Indians in "Red Leaves," taught us how to define ourselves by the things we are not. Feidelson writes, "The intellectual stance of the conscious artist in American literature has been determined very largely by problems inherent in the method of the Puritans. The isolation of the American artist in society, so often lamented, is actually parallel to the furtive and unacknowledged role of artistic method in the American mind; both factors began in the seventeenth century with the establishment of Puritan philosophy and of a society that tried to live by it."2

What Feidelson terms the "symbolistic imagination" and what I have described as the process of marking that characterizes the "transcendental imagination" are analogous ideas. Certainly symbol making involves marking, and what a fiction writer marks in his narrative easily becomes symbolic. What the concept of marking further demonstrates is the congruence of seemingly different but actually related mental acts, all of which form a series of analogies by which our fiction writers portray the American experience. The
Puritan meditation of inner scrutiny, their practice of social exclusion, the transcendentalists' metaphysics, Calvinist theology, the lynching of Negroes in the South, and the literary method of our classic fiction writers all share a common epistemology. Marking does more than reflect the resonances of a symbol within a literary work or a culture; it is not metaphor but methodology that links American literature and society.

Ralph Ellison sums it all up neatly in his "Conversation" with Ishmael Reed:

The people who won their revolution by throwing the British off their backs and who declared that they were rejecting the hierarchical divisions of the past in the name of democracy began their experiment loaded down with hypocrisy and wrapped up to their wigs in facile self-righteousness.

They declared themselves the new national identity, "American," but, as social beings, they were still locked in the continuum of history, and as language-users they were still given to the ceaseless classifying and grading of everything from stars and doodle bugs to tints of skin and crinks of hair, they had to have a standard by which they could gauge the extent to which their theories of democracy were being made manifest, both in the structure of the new society and in the lives of its citizens.

Theoretically, theirs was a "classless" society, so what better (or easier) way of establishing such a standard than to say, "Well, now here we have all these easily identifiable blacks who're already below the threshold of social mobility—why not use them? They're not even human by our standards, so why not exploit them as the zero point on our scale of social possibility? Why not designate to them the negative ground upon which our society shall realize its goals? . . ."

This is to telescope a hell of a lot of history and sociology, but you can see what I'm driving at. . . .

In this study of social stigma, I have tried to do the same, to telescope (literary) history and sociology. In the process I have articulated one model of American thought. If at times my model interferes with the reader's appreciation of the literary work, I can only claim the good intention of trying to elucidate familiar literature in a way that will encourage yet another rereading. With the discipline of a meditator, I have tried to return again and again to my focus on the mark with only one goal in mind: that I, like Hawthorne, Melville, Faulkner, and Ellison, might transcend my own finite ability to look for America, might allow these great artists, as Doc Hines prophesies God will do for Joe Christmas, to "put on" their knowledge and share their vision of our "non-manifest" destiny.
Notes

2. Ibid., p. 89.