Introduction
"A Snail of Language"

As a form of expression, literature has always offered writers a way of speaking out. But as an involuted and introspective form, the short story embodies the silent, unspoken quality that also characterizes literary writing. Describing it as a "snail of language," the Argentinian author Julio Cortázar noted that the short story had earned "a place of special importance" in Latin America "that it had never enjoyed" elsewhere.[1] In the case of the United States, however, the status of the short story is more of a paradox than Cortázar may have recognized. For the short story has proven commercially and popularly successful in the United States to the point where it is acknowledged as a kind of national art form. But from the mid-twentieth century onward, it has also been increasingly neglected, even marginalized, by critics and scholars, to the point where Robert Lamb characterized it in 2010 as "something of a bastard step-child" in the world of American letters.[2]

In critical terms, the American short story reached crisis point in 1950, at precisely the moment that more volumes of short fiction were being published than ever. The political narratives of the early Cold War pushed critics toward a celebration of novelistic prose, where they endorsed expansive, open-ended fiction as representative of democratic freedom, in opposition to the formal and thematic limitations associated with Soviet totalitarianism. This led, in turn, to a broad devaluing of the short story; critics insistently misread the aesthetics of its compressed, contained form in terms of limitation and disempowerment. At the same time, however, writers increasingly turned to the short story as a way to resist political coercion and conformity in ways that few critics were able to appreciate. Interrogating this contradiction, this book is concerned with the short story as both introspective and expressive. It looks at how American writers used the confined, unspoken aesthetics of the form as a way of speaking out about freedom and open expression.

In unpacking their stories, through close analysis of both their prose and its conceptualization, I trace the origins of the short story's critical exile, and its relationship to the kinds of political narratives that these authors sought to critique.

I focus on four particular writers, all of whom developed a public profile through publishing short fiction during the 1940s and 1950s. Born between 1909 and 1912, Mary McCarthy, Tennessee Williams, Paul Bowles, and Eudora Welty all chose to work within the specific confines of the short story at the start of their respective careers, using it to develop a kind of fiction that was immediately recognized as countercultural, running against the grain of contemporary expectations of literary and cultural narratives. While other writers certainly inflected their stories with an air of insurgency, the short stories of these authors stand out because of their relationship to highly developed aesthetic practices outside of written literature: Bowles's career as a composer, McCarthy's criticism and memoirs, Williams's theatrical work, and Welty's photography. This book would look quite different if its subjects were, say, Vladimir Nabokov, John Cheever, and Bernard Malamud, and it makes no claims toward totality. Instead, I hope to shift the critical discourse around midcentury American fiction and provide an alternative perspective on the silent eloquence of the short story.

Unlike the other authors on whom this study focuses, Mary McCarthy did not position herself outside the critical mainstream of midcentury America, whether through exile like Bowles or regionalist focus like Welty. Best known today for her 1963 *New York Times* best-selling novel, *The Group,* which served as the inspiration for the essays and television series *Sex and the City,* she was an active member of the politicized and critically influential *Partisan Review* circle and achieved as high a profile as critic and reviewer as she did as writer of fiction. Indeed, her marriage to Edmund Wilson and work for the *New Yorker* might suggest something of the conventional, and she maintained personal relationships with many of the critics who were responsible for the limited scope of the midcentury literary mainstream. Her fiction, however, insistently undermined the critical narratives that her milieu and publication venues would suggest—driven in part by the Irish-Catholic heritage which marked her as outsider, and her own deliberate deconstruction of the

boundaries between fiction and autobiography, novel and short story. It is this formal disruption, until now neglected by critics, with which I am initially concerned. Like the other authors in this study, her style is generically hybrid, moving sometimes uneasily between the formal tropes of fiction and nonfiction. Taking up McCarthy's claim that her novels were constructed as short stories but that her stories needed to be understood in the context of the larger works they inspired or were drawn from, I provide a reading of her work based on ideas of scale and representation. This needs to be measured against her own suggestion that her fictional works were divorced from the facts of her biography (but at the same time developed directly from her own experiences and beliefs). It is my contention that her writing used deliberately destabilizing formal structures as a way to critique culturally enforced normative identities and articulate an opposition to the social and political forces that demanded a rigid, nationally oriented set of beliefs. In a broader sense, with a focus on her short fiction and its relationship to her novels and criticism, I establish a way of considering her as a public intellectual, whose work is valuable beyond its biographical appeal, as an exemplar of countercultural writing.

In contrast, thanks to his critically and commercially lauded theatrical works, Tennessee Williams has occupied a central place within the American literary canon for decades. In much the same way that any critical attention on McCarthy's short stories has been subordinated to her novelistic works and memoirs, however, Williams's impressive body of short fiction has been either willfully ignored or read with constraint as a prototype for his plays. With the rise of queer studies, moreover, critics have increasingly expressed disquiet at the lack of explicit cultural critique in his stage pieces, given his profile as one of the most notoriously unorthodox and insurrectionary figures in midcentury America. By looking at his first collection of short fiction, *One Arm and Other Stories* (1948), I show how it was through his short stories, rather than plays, that Williams engaged in a structural and thematic attack on the normalizing politics of conformity and consensus. Taking up his own contention that his short fiction offered a private literary space in which he could openly articulate his own opposition to cultural narratives he saw as constraining, this chapter reads his short fiction as oppositional in terms of its

compressed aesthetics and often lurid or sensational content. I also draw on Williams's abortive concept of starting a literary movement, the "New School of Decadence," reading his countercultural approach in terms of collapse and decay. In doing so, I reposition an author traditionally understood as working within a national, or sometimes regionalist, tradition, within an expanded, transnational context, suggesting links to both Oscar Wilde and the French symbolist poets. Its critical contribution is to map out the destabilizing orbit these short stories occupy around Williams's plays, as well as the heteronormative values implicit within postwar cultural criticism.

As a writer who clearly prioritized his short fiction and who consciously drew on aesthetic traditions from outside American literature in order to shape an alternative model of writing, the composer and longtime exile Paul Bowles offers the best test-case for this book's concept of countercultural fiction. Despite a popular belief that he was reticent to comment on his own work, across letters and interviews Bowles succinctly articulated the unsettling and deliberately destabilizing effect that he hoped his writing would have. I begin by sketching the terms in which Bowles's short fiction was originally received, reading this against the much more positive reception of his debut novel, *The Sheltering Sky* (1949). Departing from the traditional readings of his work, which have framed him in terms of his residence in Tangier and involvement in North African culture, I instead turn to his largely neglected involvement with the French surrealists, exploring the influence of surreal aesthetics on his first volume of stories, *The Delicate Prey* (1950). I consider this in conjunction with Bowles's prominent career as a classical composer, in order to account for the uniquely patterned aesthetic of his short stories. Bowles's short fiction explicitly sought to undermine political narratives of progress and freedom through a model of writing that drew on alternative aesthetic traditions to offer an oppositional perspective, guided by closure and claustrophobia. By sidestepping his novels and later reputation as a reclusive guru and instead considering the stylistic and political nexus that underpinned his early work with short fiction, I hope to recuperate the earlier, aggressively countercultural writer.

Where Bowles, Williams, and McCarthy were all attacked for their use of the short story and encouraged by critics to turn to longer, more

socially responsible genres of writing, Eudora Welty was celebrated for cultivating a crisp and contained style. Her success as a dedicated short story writer provides an intriguing counterpoint to the politically motivated critiques of works like *One Arm* and *The Delicate Prey*, particularly given that Welty's fiction relies on a compression that is commensurate with the most tightly controlled prose of these other authors. As a reclusive southern woman, Welty has tended to be read as a regionalist writer, whose work, while precise or even beautiful, is predicated upon a fundamentally conservative southern ideology. Certainly texts like Mark McGurl's *Program Era* have read her work as a cipher for literary conservatism, within a larger configuration that understands the short story as inherently static. Welty's fiction, however, draws on a cultural and aesthetic register that extends far beyond the limitations that such a characterization suggests. Reading her short fiction through her photographic practice, I close this study by arguing that her approach to the short story approximates the process of the photographic crop, unsettling macronarratives by focusing on small details. In general terms, the contemporary critical discourse around midcentury fiction in the United States tended to align the novel with plot, movement, development, and growth, and the short story with description, stasis, and stagnation. By moving beyond such a reductive dichotomy, I suggest that Welty's decision to work within the structure of the photograph is part of an aesthetic program that uses order and compression to interrogate totalizing narratives that, on the one hand, reduce individual moments to part of a sequence, and on the other, smooth out difference while valorizing the individual. Welty's success at using the short story, despite its critical disfavor, reveals the cultural logic that led critics to ignore the social and political implications of McCarthy's, Williams's, and Bowles's attempts to speak out.