

Mapping the New Reality

If the novel is, in Stendhal's words, a mirror moving along a highway, what is the fate of the novel in our time, when highways are turning "smart" and electronic gadgetry defines the fabric of human communities? Depicting our elusive reality may prove impossible, but Sven Birkerts here lauds the efforts of some of America's more daring novelists.

by Sven Birkerts

It has become a tiresome subject, and I feel more than a little perverse bringing it up. Still, there is more to be said—much more—so let me begin. American fiction, the genre, is in a muddle. I specify "genre" because the problem does not have to do so much with the individual works, which are various and often excellent, but with the form itself. And to contain the generalizing impulse, if only slightly, I will specify still further: It is the American *novel* that is in a state of muddle.

How can I say this? How can I at one and the same time suggest that there is no shortage of worthy works *and* express concern for the art? In the same way, I suppose, that one can point to the large numbers of affluent citizens in this country and still assert that the economy is in trouble. It is a question of the big picture, the center; it involves the disorientation that every serious novelist must feel when he or she tries to get a fix on the meaning or worth of the novelist's enterprise. Simply, there is a pervasive and anxiety-inducing sense of drift, an awareness on the part of reader and

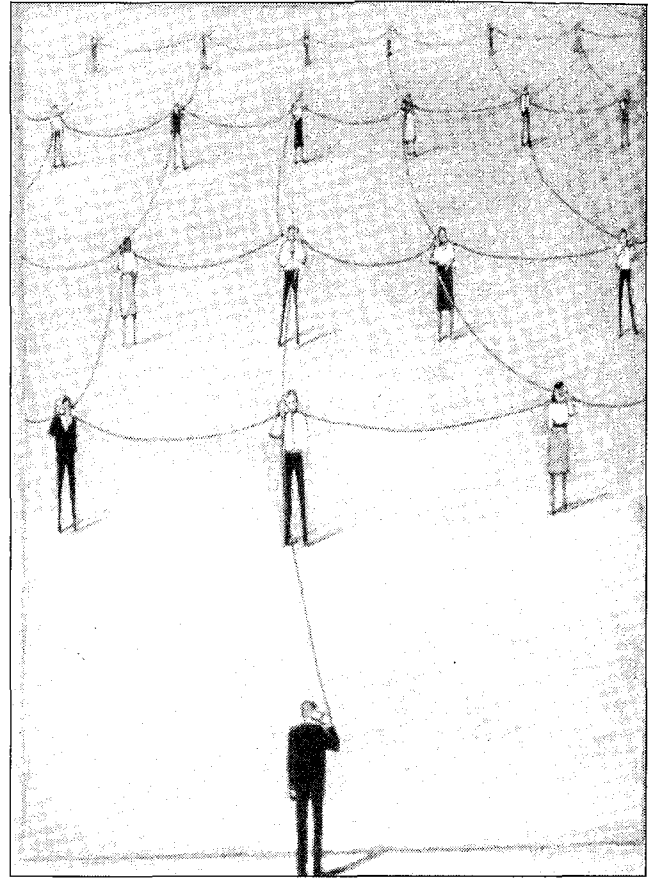
writer alike of an attenuating communication. The reader no longer expects to encounter a challenging vision of life as it is really experienced, and the writer is no longer sure how to present an encompassing and relevant picture of things as they are. The ink on the old contract is fading.

This is not a new or sudden development. My sense is that the current condition has been several decades in the making. As far back as the 1960s we heard laments that the American novel was exhausted, finished; that it had moved into minor and academic modes, had divorced itself from political and social realities, and so on. Indeed, these complaints came at a time when other literatures—Latin American and Eastern European, especially—were burgeoning. We heard the same song with slightly different words during the '70s and '80s, when minimalist modes became the fashion. In a famous 1976 essay, "Plastic Fiction," Gore Vidal lamented that novels had become mere "teaching-tools, artifacts stinking of formaldehyde in a classroom."

The culmination of this disaffection was reached two years ago, when Tom Wolfe

launched his widely discussed broadside, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel," in the pages of *Harper's*. Wolfe declared in no uncertain terms that American fiction writers—he mainly discussed novelists—had capitulated to reality, that the rough and rowdy facts of the world had driven them into submission, forcing a retreat into self-reflexive, self-indulgent, and generally self-defeating postures. Our writers had handed over their authority to journalists and other purveyors of the documentary—a major mistake. And Wolfe urged as a solution a return to the example of the 19th-century social novel. There he had found inspiration for his own colossally successful *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), and other writers could help themselves to the same well.

Though he was wrong about the solution—and I hope my reasons for saying so will emerge shortly—Wolfe was, I think, right about the problem, which is a problem of representation. How to render in words a convincing picture of reality? The answer, alas, is not to call for more representation. It is reality that has changed. And the problem is that to this day the aesthetic identity of the American novel remains largely tethered to the basic premise of 19th-century realism. Though a few brave souls have made a go at incorporating modernist approaches—including fragmented or multiple narratives, inward monologues, ambitious referentiality, and the like—the majority have stayed with the staple orientations of realism. Whether this is owing to some peculiar warp in the collective creative disposition or is simply a reflection of the demands of the marketplace—give readers what they want or risk failure—is hard to say. But the fact remains that even now, in the early 1990s, our fiction is overwhelmingly realistic in approach. Whatever other ambition a novel may have, its principal means are a development of credibly rounded characters and a narrative that



would simulate a seemingly coherent exterior order.

This is not, in itself, a problem. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with the realist procedure, and in skilled hands the results can still be persuasive. The problem lies elsewhere. It lies in the fact that our common reality has gradually grown out of the reach of the realist's instruments. We live our late-century lives less and less in the four-square world of surfaces and bounded events that realism evolved to depict. Our business is increasingly with a new experiential hybrid. We live among signals and impulses and processes that our language has a hard time capturing. Our consciousness is mapped to a new field, and the contours of that field are determined by the way we spend our days. We don't talk over the fence but over the phone—worse, we leave messages on

machines and check in to see if our messages have been returned. Our professional lives are likewise shorn of clear boundaries—most of us interact more with buttons and digits than with people. We drive, park, drive again, surrounding ourselves during bubble time with a distracting environment of music or talk-show barking. Dinner? Often as not we nuke it in the microwave, before kicking back for a well-deserved night in front of the VCR.

If I present a caricature, it's to drive home a point: that the ambient drift of our dailiness is not exactly fodder for the novelist. We fight traffic, not duels. An accurate depiction of our doings would involve inordinately extensive descriptions of downtime—outwardly dull and routinized movements. And I don't know how much more dramatic interest a cut-away view of our inner lives would provide. The spread sheet, worries about the MASTERCARD bill, a bit of flirtation at the deli counter . . .

What I'm saying is not new or revolutionary, though I don't hear it verbalized all that often. Way back in 1963, in an essay entitled "Mass Society and Post-Modern Fiction," Irving Howe quoted the critic Stanley Kauffmann:

When Vittorio de Sica was asked why so many of his films deal with adultery, he is said to have replied, "But if you take adultery out of the lives of the bourgeoisie, what drama is left?" . . . It is the continuing problem of the contemporary writer who looks for great emotional issues to move him greatly. The anguish of the advertising executive struggling to keep his job is anguish indeed, but its possibilities in art are not large-scale. The writer who wants to "let go" has figuratively to leave the urban and suburban and either go abroad, go into the past, or go into those few pockets of elemental emotional life left in this country.

This was written nearly 30 years ago. Urbanization and suburbanization have been supplemented by the rampant incursions of labor-saving technologies and electronic communications. The problem of the

writer who would represent the world and do so with some artistic tension has become all but insurmountable. It will only intensify as we march deeper into late-modernity (or wherever it is that we are marching). Very few writers have the narrative gifts and perceptual resources to make readable fiction out of the real stuff of our daily experience. John Updike is one of the very few, and it is precisely for this that *Rabbit at Rest* (1990) is important: It is a kind of "limit text" for the contemporary realist.

And the others, those who lack Updike's special alchemizing gifts? Most of the rest have taken one of the available paths indicated by Kauffmann. They have steered to one side or another of the great challenge—to find a shape for the experiences and sensations of our historical moment—in order to find a way to tell a satisfying story. And while many have succeeded at this, it is fiction itself that has paid a price. Fiction is now just an adjunct to the cultural life, an entertainment or a private vice. It is no longer the powerful medium of exploration and reflection that it used to be. And this is a shame.

The much-maligned movement of minimalism may have been the first real signal of the crisis in the genre. What was, or is, distinctive about minimalism, apart from its fetishistic attention to the brand-name specifics of our social environment (as if these, properly decoded, might tell a story of their own) is the use of the gap. Minimalists such as Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, Frederick Barthelme, and Bobbie Ann Mason have a way of abruptly cutting from one rendered moment or situation to some completely different scene, in order to confer eloquence or suggestiveness to absent or unstated material. It seems clear now that this was a logical first response to the elusive and random-feeling materials of modern life. The plan was to hint at the presence of these great zones of the inchoate—the vacancies and anxious spells of distraction—without

Sven Birkerts is a critic whose essays appear in The Atlantic, Harper's, The New Republic, and The New York Times. He is the author of An Artificial Wilderness (1987), The Electric Life (1989), and the forthcoming American Energies: Essays on Fiction to be published by Morrow in June.

trying to pin them down. We should note, by the way, the difference between the vaporized minimalism of an Ann Beattie and the laconic repressions of a Hemingway. For the latter, the unstated was a solid presence, a specific emotion or complex of emotions to be avoided. He knew, and we know, what was being left out. For Beattie and her cohorts, however, minimalism became a way of not dealing with that which could not be dealt with—the thousand and one grades of anomie that may not have existed 50 or 100 years ago.

Minimalism, for all the excitement it generated in the workshop communities of the 1970s and 1980s, failed with readers. Although it did catch something of the “feel” of contemporary experience, it offered no purchase. It did not clarify life in the least but simply added its impressions of muddle to the muddle we already were living in.

At the opposite pole, we have the much-honored conclusion of the “Rabbit” tetralogy. Updike appeared to exult in the challenge he had set himself: to make the unremarkable materials of our cultural present resonate with significance. And to a remarkable degree, he succeeded, though the power and poignance of *Rabbit at Rest* arise less from his evocations of the present and much more from their constant, often implicit contrast to the way things used to be. Rabbit’s appetite for nostalgia is mighty; it is what makes him a poet:

Rabbit feels betrayed. He was reared in a world where war was not strange but change was: the world stood still so you could grow up in it. He knows when the bottom fell out. When they closed Kroll’s, Kroll’s that had stood in the center of Brewer all those years, bigger than a church, older than the courthouse, right at the head of Weiser Square there, with every Christmas those otherworldly displays of circling trains and nodding dolls and twinkling stars in the corner windows as if God Himself put them there to light the darkest time of the year.

The *now* has been annexed, but from an angle. We see it always against Rabbit’s private rue at what is gone: The present has not been carried, for its own sake, into the

arena of representation.

But by and large we are back with the options as set out by Stanley Kauffmann in the early 1960s. Most serious American novels fall into one (or several) of a very few categories. Of course, each category is vital in its own way, but each also represents a strategic way of avoiding head-on confrontation with the present, with the world as it has become. Now—and I jump in ahead of myself—I do *not* mean to suggest that rural or small-town settings are not part of the here and now or that family relations are not universally contemporary. But I do believe that there are other energies and currents that we all understand as more essentially of our moment. These intangible and elusive components of our Zeitgeist are what pose the problem. They have everything to do with our present situation and what is likely to arise from it. They are what is largely missing from the novels of our most distinguished writers.

As Kauffmann suggested, the menu of options is finally quite limited. Most of our best novelists are writing about either a) rural or smalltown life, b) the near past (the last 50 years, say), c) families, or d) the historical or mythologized past. Obviously the categories will combine and cross-fertilize, with family novels having rural settings, and so on.

Now consider this list of American novelists: Reynolds Price, Russell Banks, Annie Tyler, Toni Morrison, Wallace Stegner, Larry Woiwode, Joyce Carol Oates, Louise Erdrich, T. Coraghessan Boyle, E. L. Doctorow, Sue Miller, Andre Dubus, William Kennedy, John Barth, Saul Bellow, Marilynne Robinson, Alice Walker, Jane Smiley, Mona Simpson, Pete Dexter, John Casey, Peter Matthiessen, William Styron, James Salter, Evan S. Connell, Lynne Sharon Schwartz, Gail Godwin, David Bradley, Amy Tan, Joan Chase, David Leavitt . . .

I could go on for at least a few more paragraphs, and with every writer I mention I could evoke for myself a particular density and richness of world: Russell Banks’s rough and flinty New Hampshire towns, Louise Erdrich’s myth-haunted upper Midwest, Toni Morrison’s small-town Ohio, and so on. But I have to say that

when I am disturbed and baffled by the alien structures I glimpse from the car window, or the picture of life I assemble from the evening news, these are not the writers I turn to for understanding. Each presents a world, but none—for me—presents the world as I sense it has become or is fast becoming. This latter is a world of screens and information vaults, with a population ever more distracted from its cultural roots, ever more alarmed about crime, disease, and security, and uncertain about the meaning of an individual existence in a future that promises to be ruled by the spirits of collectivism and bureaucracy.

In a very real sense, then, our fiction is in retreat, and we have every reason to wonder if authors can, or will, find ways to connect the reader with the dominant forces of the age, most of which threaten our public and private myths of coherence. So long as they do not—or do so only in small numbers—our literature must stand removed from the center of relevance; it must be counted minor.

•

But of course there are exceptions, which, when considered together, give us some warrant for imagining a different future for our fiction, a renewed connectedness. These are a number of writers who have taken the challenge of representing contemporary experience more to heart, and whose art points toward the future in ways that that of their no-less-gifted peers does not.

The problem, as I have suggested, is not to get the features of present-day reality onto the page—the minimalists accomplished that in their way—but to animate those features and give them some measure of dramatic necessity, to defeat the centrifugal tendency of our postindustrial order. The scatter and distraction of our age are such that even “the anguish of the advertising executive struggling to keep his job” begins to look like a viable subject (or at least one with clearly defined contours). The novelists I have in mind have adopted several different strategies for galvanizing the chaos around us. All are ambitious. And they can, with some flourishes of the crustean knife, be divided into two groups.

In the first grouping are the novelists I will call, with no pejorative intent, the “paranoids.” Paranoia, they used to say in the late 1960s, is just a heightened state of awareness. These writers find not only a propulsive energy but also a principle of connection, of organization, in their vision of a concealed and dangerous other order. They see behind the random shimmer of surfaces and events a set of vested interests who must advance their ends conspiratorially, through political and economic channels. They see the deeper exchanges of our body politic as controlled by the machinations of an elite; the web extends to, and at times embraces, the criminal subculture. And much of the tension in the work of these writers—I am thinking mainly of Robert Stone, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Norman Mailer—arises from the contrast between the banal drift of the ordinary and the operations of conspiracy.

To exploit this particular tension, these novelists must create protagonists who somehow encounter the hidden system (which is visualized differently by each writer). Thus Robert Stone, in *A Flag For Sunrise* (1981), has Frank Holliwell, at once an idle traveler and a reluctant operative, visit Tecan, a fictitious Latin American country that is the site of all the familiar sorts of covert intervention. DeLillo, in *Mao II* (1991), gives us Bill Gray, a reclusive writer who agrees to take part in a hostage-release effort, stirring up a nest of terrorist and antiterrorist intrigue. Pynchon's *Vineland* (1990) features a whole gallery of veterans from the counterculture wars of the 1960s who, working one side of the fence or the other, are still very much caught up in ideological struggles. And Mailer's *Harlot's Ghost* (1991), of course, has the whole CIA family tree shaking in the winds of recent history. Each of these writers, it would seem, has answered the problem of apparent disorder by pushing past the glut of surface signals to claim that whether we know it or not, our fates are significantly controlled by these networks which are, in a sense, the deeper reality of the present.

But these are, naturally, very different kinds of writers, with different aims and techniques. DeLillo's sense of conspiracy, for instance—except for *Libra* (1988), his rewriting of the Kennedy assassination—is

usually deployed more for impressionistic than investigative or didactic ends. In novels like *White Noise* (1985) and *Mao II*, two of his more realized works, the final connections are left dangling; the idea of a hidden order presided over by government cabals and mysteriously employed free lancers is there mainly to impart edgy ominousness to the narrative:

Then action, bodies moving through the night. Because just as she was beginning to doubt and fear and mind-wander, she stepped out of the van on a cloud-banded evening and three men detached themselves from a playground wall and approached, two strangers and her tank-top cousin Rick, a football player with a clean-shaven head except for one wavy lock right on top, dyed y'know like parrot-green. The other guys wore suits and showed a certain weary expertise.

DeLillo is so good at capturing a multiplex culture transected by obscurely meaningful signals ("a football player with a clean-shaven head except for one wavy lock on top . . ."), and so fascinated by its contemplation, that one begins to suspect that the conspiracy elements of the narrative may have been woven in mainly to shape what threatens to become a sprawl of quirkily pointed observations.

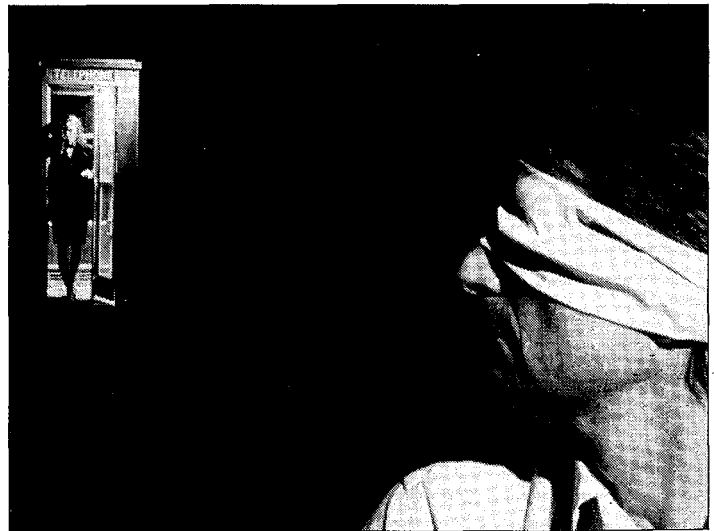
Pynchon, especially in *Vineland* (his first novel after a decade-and-a-half hiatus), is likewise mesmerized by the daily surrealism of our culture. But he is also, as much as or even more than DeLillo, gripped by a vision of the ultimate entwinement of capital, ideology, technology, and force. A true paranoid, one might say—but only if one had lived in blissful ignorance of the daily news. Interestingly, he does not, at least in *Vineland*, make conspiracy his central subject. He uses it, rather, to generate situations and to activate the subtly duplicitous interactions between his main players. But he is always ready to strike away from the dominant line of the plot and to insert

absurd, often truncated subplots that serve the function of Boschian detail: They augment the overall impression of reality held in check on the very edge of hallucination.

Moreover, Pynchon—again like DeLillo—is funny. Indeed, he is more willing than any of his cohorts to let a perfectly plausible scene make a sudden U-turn and become preposterous. We can call this a postmodern playfulness or an uncanny insight into the hidden "logic" of situations. This determination to have it both ways is Pynchon's trademark. Though his final ambition may well be to penetrate the underside of modernity and expose its darkest tendencies, he consistently breaks up his hyperrealistic scenarios with passages of comic-book excess:

He taught her the Chinese Three Ways, Dim Ching, Dim Hsuen, and Dim Mak, with its Nine Fatal Blows, as well as the Tenth and Eleventh, which are never spoken of. She learned how to give people heart attacks without even touching them, how to get them to fall from high places, and how through the Clouds of Guilt technique to make them commit *seppuku* and think it was their idea . . .

A curious amalgam, but it works. The reader is anchored in the known world through Pynchon's exquisite depictions of the late-modern (or postmodern) surface—the malls, the motels, and high-tech emporiums—and then pulled away into deep-



sea dives into the incredible, which is always rendered with just enough cool poise to give pause. The political double-dealing of his Brock Vond and Frenesi Gates are out at the limit of the credible, but on this side; his organization of death-loving Thanatoids, while not far away as the crow flies, is nonetheless on the other side of the border. The task of setting out the line belongs to the reader: It is an apprenticeship in cultural studies.

Stone and Mailer engage the hidden hierarchies of power more directly and via more straightforwardly realistic means. Both have a strong grip on the concrete particulars of bureaucratic process and a shrewd sense of how the individual functions psychologically when confused, compromised, or in some other way tested to the limit. Stone, I would say, is more intent upon revealing the evil insidiousness of power systems and in showing just how the hapless are victimized. Mailer, though known as an outspoken critic of recent administration policies, is nonetheless more ambivalent. He finds in the complex deceptions and infiltrations of the CIA a subject worthy of his favored "existential" themes, but time and again his fascination bleeds over into something akin to hero-worship. Nevertheless, like Stone, and unlike DeLillo and Pynchon, Mailer would appear to believe that some sort of ultimate sense can be derived from the whole business. As *Harlot's Ghost* ends with the words "TO BE CONTINUED," however, this assessment must remain provisional.

These power systems, variously interpreted, bind together the often scattered scenarios of our "paranoid" novelists. While not identified too explicitly (the system's complexity and reach prohibit it), they nevertheless form the backdrop against which all subsidiary actions and interchanges take on relief. Whether this paranoia is justified or not—I for one believe it is—it fulfills an essential artistic function. It sponsors a literature that, if read seriously, cuts against our growing sense of social and political inconsequence. It may not cure that inconsequence, but it certainly helps to explain it.

The other promising trend—if it is a trend and not just a collocation of separate works by idiosyncratic talents—is com-

posed of those writers who do not so much seek to provide a picture of the present as to refract an understanding of it through the crystal of the intellect. They are our thinkers, our novelists of ideas, and what is remarkable is not that they should exist but that there should be so few of them in an age given over to abstract pursuits. The sad fact is that America, unlike Europe, has had a deep and abiding hostility to intellectuality, and that our serious arts reflect this no less than does our mass culture.

Our aesthetic climate notwithstanding, we can point toward a hardy group of novelists with a bent toward ideas; many of them, moreover, are fairly young. But where the so-called "paranoids" manifested certain commonalities, these writers are as diverse as can be in their interests as well as narrative strategies.

I need to make one other distinction, and that is that the novel of ideas can engage with the present without necessarily having ideas *about* it. Our thinking writers are thinking differently from, say, novelists like Saul Bellow and Walker Percy, who both orchestrated their best works around conceptual, even philosophical, investigations of how it is with us in America today. I see no writer who takes on the full contemporary agenda in quite the same way. What we find instead are a number of approaches, all of which are less frontal, less totalizing, but which nonetheless carry a high intellectual charge. The novels may not attempt to evoke the full spectrum-panorama of the age, as did, perhaps, the novels of Mann, Sartre, Broch, Beauvoir, or Malraux, but they have other vital uses. For one thing, they can keep the intelligence option alive, and they show how complex ideas and mental processes can still find a place in the novel. For another—and this is linked—they give proof that the novel can successfully escape the straitjacket of conventional plotting and take stock of diverse planes of reality, including the inward. They keep the genre open to the currents of serious discourse. The separate endeavors, while not all uniformly successful, may yet pave the way for the great synthesizing works of the future.

The oldest, and most anomalous, of these novelists is Paul West, a maximalist

modernist of great energy and verbal resource. West's intellectuality is not so much deployed in the creation of complex plots or cerebral characters. Rather, it has been put in the service of his novelistic imagination as a whole, which has carried him from Nazi Germany in *The Very Rich Hours of Count Von Stauffenberg* (1980), to post-war Paris in *Rat Man of Paris* (1986), to Victorian London in *The Women of Whitechapel and Jack the Ripper* (1991). His settings are not lightly garnished but are grasped and held from within. The *Jack the Ripper* novel, for example, is a trove of information about surgical practice, Victorian aesthetics, and prostitution.

While he is at ease with concepts, however, West's real intelligence is stylistic. He is one of a very few novelists committed to the project of translating the densities of consciousness into prose. In his way, West is keeping the Joycean tradition viable. He treats consciousness itself as a subject, and this straightaway makes his endeavor relevant to the present. Here, from *Jack the Ripper*, is West writing about the painter Walter Sickert, whose ambitions for artistic success appear to be somewhat at odds with his appetite for prostitutes:

For several years now, fired into emulation by hearing an Argentine guitarist speak to women after a performance, he had been polishing and practicing his skills at the *piropo*—the spontaneous and hyperbolic compliment men paid to women, perhaps uttered with some pragmatically lustful intent, but most often floated into the air to cause a surprised smile, a slight change in a woman's gait. His first one had been in a theater lobby, said more for practice than for anything else, although, being Sickert, he always expected the unexpected and was ready to profit by it.

And on and on he goes, not so much making thoughts as discriminations of behavior and intention, creating mental atmospheres, weather systems of language. West's verbal range and the demands placed upon our attention by syntax, as well as the cumulative pressure of sustained interiority, qualify him, loosely, for the category of an intellectual novelist.

Norman Rush fills his pages with a far

greater density of references for the intellectually au courant to register with a shock of knowing familiarity. His grand courtship comedy, *Mating* (1991), features an unnamed narrator with impressive strategies of bringing her wit and learning to bear on her narrative. Her idiom is itself a kind of museum of late modernity, with its references, asides, and incessantly modulating ironies. Cohabiting with her lover in an experimental village in Botswana, she is apt to put forth her observations thus:

There was also the matter of our both being pretty much on the sendero leguminoso, dietarily, as he put it, so that there was some flatulence to deal with, simple flatulence . . . We developed a fairly decent modus, I thought. He might say, when I was the author, Also sprach Zarathustra, or Ah, a report from the interior, as though he were an ambassador or proconsul.

Mating is a grand and roomy novel. Though its setting is Africa, and its intellectual debates about Marxism and utopian collectivism are not central to our situation in the 1990s in America, the idiom itself is a revelation. It shows just how our latter-day intellectual movements have imprinted sensibility. The narrator filters the world through a scrim of post-Freudian, post-Marxist, and postfeminist categories and wears her ironic consciousness like a prophylactic.

We find a similar focus upon love among the brainy in the novels of Rebecca Goldstein—*The Mind-Body Problem* (1983) and *The Late-Summer Passion of a Woman of Mind* (1989). Goldstein is a philosopher by training and vocation, as are her female protagonists. Long passages are larded with discussions of language philosophy or Spinoza scholarship. But Goldstein has a way of linking her more scholarly debates with the unfolding crises of feeling in the lives of her characters, so that the novels become pertinent probings into the affective underside of the intellectual class. She investigates the ways in which mental aggression is linked to repression and studies how philosophy can be understood as a compensation for paralyzed emotional drives. The tensions in her

celebrating characters are strong enough to support the "gray matter" rhapsodies, and the result shows that it is possible for lofty, even abstruse thought to elbow its way into fiction.

A more demanding integration of scholarship and narrative is found in Richard Powers's novel, *The Gold Bug Variations* (1991), where the author not only gives the reader a crash course in genetics and microbiology but flies, as it were, a reconnaissance mission over the moving fringe of experimental science, a heroic effort to locate the terms of its larger general relevance, its place in the psyche's scheme of reference. For all of Powers's brio, however, and despite his inventive ways of making his data reader-friendly, passage after passage is bound to stump the noninitiate. The narrator's musing might typically run as follows: "Might certain codons chemically *fit* their amino acid assignments? How literally should I take the tape analogy? Which half of the double helix is transcribed for reading? Can the tape play in both directions?" When she adds in the next breath, "I am a rookie, a greenhorn, a tenderfoot in this new country," we know how she feels—and then some.

The reader may have difficulties with the layers of scientific speculation and with the mental reflexes of the characters. They think differently from, and more strenuously than, most characters we are apt to have encountered. This reveals, as starkly as any other exposure, how poorly our basic liberal humanism serves us when we come up against the concept-world of the sciences (a world that we will increasingly occupy in the future). The *Variations* thus raises once again the question that was at the heart of the C. P. Snow–F. R. Leavis debate some decades ago: Is there now an unbridgeable abyss between the learning of the humanities and that of the sciences? Powers would appear to find a meeting

ground in the idea of structure itself, and the novel abounds in metaphorical suggestions that sciences and arts, no less than intellections and affections, all ultimately derive from the wizardry within the pattern-making cells. And from the right perspective the breakthroughs in gene-mapping are as much art as science, while Glenn Gould playing the "Goldberg Variations" is as much science as art.

•

Paranoids" and "Intellectuals"—the pie is crudely cut. The categories are obviously provisional and selective (I lack space to discuss Leslie Marmon Silko, John Wideman, Bruce Duffy, Paul Auster, Nicholson Baker, and others) and are certain to irritate some portion of the public of independent-minded readers. Nor am I even sure that the game of labels and trends has any uses, except to provoke or incite. But maybe it does. Maybe an effort to map the game can in some way affect the game itself, redirecting certain readers, offering a slight encouragement to some isolated writer. I would like to think that could happen. For I am convinced that we are, as a culture, what we believe ourselves to be. And our beliefs are in crucial ways shaped by images and representations. So long as these are mainly domestic or backward looking, we risk a flawed connection to the life of our times. The reader may sometimes feel—I often do—that our present is not adequately plumbed by either the Paranoids or Intellectuals. But they make a beginning. It is vital that we have these markers planted in different parts of the field. In time, we can hope, other writers will venture to set down this or that part of the picture, and the spaces between will slowly be colonized. Perhaps one day we will be able to look to the novel again in order to see ourselves.