



Many recent American novelists have experimented with typography that calls attention to their books' own artificiality. Clockwise from top: the epigraph to Thomas Pynchon's *V* signals the mystery of the novel's title. The "Frame-Tale" from John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* forms a Mobius strip, an infinitely repeated story of once upon a time. The shortest chapter from Nabokov's *Lolita* is both hymn and mockery of the narrator's love for the heroine. In *V*, again, Pynchon transforms World War II's Kilroy into a monster. Finally, the tombstone from Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* expresses its author's hopeful/cynical metaphysics.



The American Novel

Since the time of Fitzgerald and Hemingway, there have been bold changes in American fiction—as shown by the collage of styles on the page opposite. We have seen new influences in the Southern novel and the Jewish novel, the Academic novel, even the nonfiction novel. Here four scholars discuss the American writers—from Saul Bellow to Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.—who have gained prominence since World War II. Earl Rovit describes what these writers have in common. Jerome Klinkowitz explores their uses of humor. Melvin J. Friedman scans the entire postwar period. Tony Tanner, an Englishman, examines the major themes peculiar to the American novel. And some surprises crop up in a *Quarterly* survey of professors' choices of the "most important" novels published since 1945.



THE AMERICAN NOVELIST: A SEMI-SOCIOLOGICAL VIEW

by Earl Rovit

Although the serious novel is still respectable, there is no doubt that the last half century has witnessed its slow decline from a position of cultural supremacy. Television, the movies, the demise of magazine fiction, and the new show-and-tell illiteracy have significantly reduced the prestige of the novel and rendered it less appealing to a large audience. Yet for all the countless pious discussions about the failing health or the impending death of the novel, the plight of its practitioners is usually ignored.

It is blithely assumed, I suppose, that as with the laborers displaced by the invention of the internal combustion engine, novelists will adapt their skills to a more receptive occupation or simply surrender, become recycled, or apply for welfare. This assumption, of course, is grandly inept. First, the peculiar combination of energy and talent that leads a writer to the novel is

not readily transferrable to related literary activities—and especially not to the best-paying of them, the writing of screenplays. Second, the time lag between the writing of a novel and its distribution, coupled with the impossibility of predicting reader demand has historically defined the novelist's job as a full-time profession which is, paradoxically, a part-time occupation.

Only a very few novelists have ever been wholly self-supporting—and then only after their careers were fully launched. Although novelists certainly produce novels with profits in mind, it is also true that they will write their novels when the chances of financial reward and public fame are so poor as to be virtually negligible.

The 1976 edition of *A Directory of American Fiction Writers* (with its 1977 *Supplement*) lists about 1,000 men and women apparently not ashamed to be identified in public as novelists or short story writers. I'm not at all sure what that figure signifies. By way of comparison, there are 10 times as many fiction writers as there are active U.S. senators. On the other hand, there are roughly one-third as many novelists as there are neurosurgeons. To put it another way, we have about one novelist for every 220,000 Americans. It is generally conceded that fewer than a hundred of these novelists are able to live on the income from their fiction.

The period of apprenticeship preceding the publication of a first novel can be quite extensive. More frequently than not, "first" novels are, in reality, the writers' second or third novels. The financial payoff, if any, is also likely to be meager, since publishers are reluctant to dispense large advances to writers who have yet to demonstrate their appeal to buyers of sizable subsidiary rights (book clubs, paperback reprints, television and movie options, and foreign rights). Accordingly, we find that colleges and universities have become the prime supporters of our novelists, treating them not as pets or conversation pieces, but as full-fledged members of their instructional staffs.

To be sure, the university is not the sole option for the

Earl Rovit, 50, is professor of English at the City College of New York. Born in Boston, he received his B.A. from the University of Michigan (1950) and his M.A. and Ph. D. from Boston University (1957). He has taught at Bates College, the University of Louisville, Wesleyan University, and several European universities. He is the author of Herald to Chaos: The Novels of Elizabeth Madox Roberts (1960), Ernest Hemingway (1963), Saul Bellow (1967), and three novels: The Player King (1965), A Far Cry (1967), and Crossings (1973).

novelist. A magazine like the *New Yorker*, a wealthy, indulgent spouse or patron here and there, the erratic largesse of philanthropic foundations, catch-as-catch-can free-lancing, journalism, advertising agencies, public relations firms, and the movie and television industries present other sources of support. But these have tended to be, in differing ways, less secure, less accessible, and more time-consuming in their demands than college English departments—especially during the academic boom years of the 1960s.

Before we examine the implications of this recent maternal bond between the university and the novelist, it might be sensible to take a small sampling of the *Directory's* 1,000 names—an elite group of 30 of our more successful novelists. My selection is admittedly subjective, but I think most critics would agree that at least 20 of the 30 represent our best novelists to have emerged in the post-World War II period.

James Baldwin	John Gardner	Thomas Pynchon
John Barth	William H. Gass	Ishmael Reed
Donald Barthelme	John Hawkes	Philip Roth
Saul Bellow	Joseph Heller	J. D. Salinger
John Cheever	Norman Mailer	Jean Stafford
Robert Coover	Bernard Malamud	William Styron
J. P. Donleavy	Joyce Carol Oates	Peter Taylor
Stanley Elkin	Walker Percy	John Updike
Ralph Ellison	J. F. Powers	Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.
William Gaddis	James Purdy	Eudora Welty

Each has attracted a following of readers; each has been subjected to extensive literary-critical and cultural commentary. Their works have been reprinted in paperback, and, in many cases, movie and television options have been taken out on some of their books. They span about a generation and a half; the oldest of them (Eudora Welty) was born in 1909 and the youngest (Joyce Carol Oates) in 1938. Three are women, three are black, seven are Jewish, and there are possibly three Catholics and two homosexuals. Five of the writers are closely associated with the South; the rest are predominantly from the Northeast and Midwest. Except in a few instances, specific regional settings play minor roles in their fictional worlds.

As a group, they have received superior formal educations. Almost all of them have gained baccalaureate degrees (not necessarily majoring in literature) and many have done some postgraduate study. There are at least three who have earned Ph.D.s, and there is one M.D. (Walker Percy).

For the most part they have been warmly acclaimed. Seventeen of the 30 have been elected to the prestigious American Institute of Arts and Letters, one is a winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, and more than half have won or been in contention for National Book Awards and Pulitzer Prizes. Their popular success, it is true, has differed enormously, ranging from the avalanches of attention that thundered down on Salinger for *Catcher in the Rye* and on Heller for *Catch-22* to the relative commercial neglect of James Purdy. Their prolificity has varied, but in general they have achieved a respectable productivity over the years.

It seems, however, that even this well-favored group has not escaped financial worries. Twenty-one of them teach or have taught on a full- or part-time basis. Nineteen of the 30 have applied for and received Guggenheim Fellowships, in some cases more than once. I count 8 who have enjoyed an association with the *New Yorker* and 12 who regularly augment their incomes by giving readings. Almost all of them (except Salinger and Pynchon) perform some kind of public role in society; they appear at workshops and writing conferences such as Breadloaf and Aspen, and most of them earn some money reviewing books and writing "think pieces."

A Chastening Experience

The novelist is the long-distance runner among writers, and what he requires more than anything else is time—long stretches of concentrated, unimpeded time. Meeting classes, holding student conferences, grading papers, applying for grants, free-lancing, writing television scripts, editing, traveling the literary-lion circuit, etc., may, in some cases, be precisely the worst—and the most eagerly embraced—distractions that the novelist can suffer. In other cases, they may be sensible strategies for buying precious time. Even at its best, writing novels must be among the loneliest pursuits of man, and some responsible engagement with the social world is clearly necessary. But to determine the point at which the loss of momentum and concentration outweighs the gain of social sanity and perspective is a hazardous exercise in fine measurement.

For all of their differences, our novelists articulate a surprisingly homogeneous and moderate vision of the world. The regional, ethnic, racial, and sexual affiliations of these writers—and they seem to fall into the expected patterns of America's professional middle class—are far less divisive than they might conceivably be. Whether the writers are experimenting outrage-

"Writing a novel is a terrible experience, during which the hair often falls out and the teeth decay. I'm always highly irritated by people who imply that writing fiction is an escape from reality. It is a plunge into reality and it's very shocking to the system. If the novelist is not sustained by a hope of money, then he must be sustained by a hope of salvation, or he simply won't survive the ordeal."

—*Flannery O'Connor*

ously with literary conventions and styles (Hawkes, Barthelme), exploiting extravagantly the idiosyncracies of their personalities or backgrounds (Mailer, Reed), or fashioning relatively traditional stories (Cheever, Updike), the appeal of their fiction is grounded less in the social constituency that the writers represent than in the vitality and competence of their performances. They are frequently acerbic in their criticism of American bourgeois principles and they are far from Pollyannaish in their outrage and despair at the grossness that they find at the core of contemporary life; but I am unable to find any significantly *radical* thrust in their analyses of our social framework.

It would be foolhardy to categorize the social philosophy of 30 unusually volatile individuals, but I might suggest that each of them, in a sense, knows that he has achieved a measure of success within the system. And, as novelists, as long-distance runners, each shares the chastening experience of going to the typewriter day after day in a mood of mingled patience and hope, for out of no other mood can a novel be pushed to completion. (Here it is not entirely irrelevant to note the much higher incidence of suicide and nervous breakdown among our contemporary poets, sprinters rather than long-distance runners, than among our novelists.) The way the novelist has learned to cope with his own novel-in-progress—what the Freudians describe as the principle of delayed gratification—may be the same approach that he is likely to choose in coping with the psychosocial conditions that enmesh his life.

It has been argued that this middle-class conservatism is a complacent compromise, a consequence of the academic umbrella that shelters our novelists' lives. From the cradle to the grave it is possible for an American novelist to be rarely out of earshot of the sound of chalk scraping a blackboard; and even

with the upheavals of the late '60s, the Vales of Academe are hardly the places where the main action is.

One might speculate on whether the novelists' conceptions of power are drawn from university politics—the cyclic tension of confrontation and accommodation among the student body, the faculty, and the administration. It is possible that the relative failure of the contemporary novel to delineate the real sources and interrelationships of power rests with the campus's lack of two essential elements—a working class that produces basic goods and services and a nexus of control above and beyond the campus with final responsibility and authority. Any social institution is likely to mirror the values and practices of its society, but the academic setting may be more artificial, cloistered, and stifling than, say, a hospital, corporation, or factory.

One mitigating factor may be the interesting statistic that 22 of our 27 male novelists have served in the military. In fact, several saw active combat in World War II or the Korean War. Clearly the military table of organization and chain of command offer a crisp sociopolitical introduction to power relationships that can easily—too easily—be applied to the civilian world. Think of Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948).

The Human Predicament

Since Emerson's time, American artists have been told that the vitality of literary expression rests on prior authentic experience ("Life is our dictionary"). I suspect that this imperative does nag intermittently at our novelists' consciences, but the mysteries of creativity are profound and murky. Some critics contend that the true sources of an artist's work can only be found in his adolescent and pre-adolescent experiences. Even if this theory overstates the case, no one can seriously believe that it is necessary to sail before the mast or become a soldier of fortune in order to feel in full the pain, the contumely, the bewilderment, and the joy that constitute the human predicament.

What, then, do our contemporary novelists share? And how do they differ from their predecessors? First, they are generally nonregional and urban in their perspectives. Born, most of them, after World War I, their experiences with village and rural life are largely of a secondhand or artificial nature. They are habituated to a culture of technological mobility, standardization, and rootless anomie to a degree that the Faulkner-Hemingway generation would scarcely recognize, and this is amply reflected in their work. At least 24 of these writers

characteristically use urban or suburban settings for their fiction.

Second, the superior success of the motion picture camera in presenting "live" narrative has compelled our novelists to focus intensively on the medium of their craft—on *words* rather than story line. They are more concerned with creating a verbal artifice than in competing vainly with the dramatic action of film and television.

And third, they have tended to avoid large-scale realistic portraits of social life, restricting themselves deliberately to what they can analyze minutely or suggest symbolically.

The novel form always exists in an irreconcilable tension between the forces of coherence and those of dissolution. We have every reason to suppose that yet another generation of writers, those who came to maturity during the explosive 1960s—with the civil-rights movement, student rebellion, the Woman's Movement, the Vietnam ordeal and its aftermath—will soon be adding a different series of rhythms and colors to contemporary American fiction.



WORDS OF HUMOR

by Jerome Klinkowitz

A few years before he won the 1976 Nobel Prize for Literature, Saul Bellow was having a hard time of it as a guest at Northern Illinois University in De Kalb. The two English Department professors who were supposed to meet him for dinner hadn't shown up, so he stood by himself in the student union, watching a rerun of "Lost in Space" on the lounge TV while several hundred students milled around, wondering who he was. Two hours later, across town, a couple of graduate students thought they saw him at the Shamrock, finishing a beer and a radar-range sandwich and asking the bartender where University Hall might be.

We knew it was Bellow for sure when he stormed past the flustered professors, marched out on stage, and without a word of introduction opened a paperback of *Henderson the Rain King* (1959) and started reading.

"What made me take this trip to Africa?" he began, beet-red with anger but also weary with resignation. The combination made for a perfect voice. "... There is no quick explanation. Things got worse and worse and worse and pretty soon they were too complicated."

Within a few pages, Bellow had the audience in stitches and had begun laughing himself, although the story wasn't what you'd call *funny*. "When I came back from the war," he read to us, "it was with the thought of becoming a pig farmer, which maybe illustrates what I thought of life in general." Henderson, the character who fears that death will "annihilate" him, that "nothing will remain, and there will be nothing left but junk," plots a comic revenge on his family, on his Hudson River Valley estate, and on the world:

I took all the handsome old farm buildings, the carriage house with paneled stalls—in the old days a rich man's horses were handled like opera singers—and the fine old barn with the belvedere above the hayloft, a beautiful piece of architecture, and I filled them up with pigs, a pig kingdom, with pig houses on the lawn and in the

flower garden. The greenhouse, too—I let them root out the old bulbs. Statues from Florence and Salzburg were turned over. The place stank of swill and pigs and the mashes cooking, and dung. Furious, my neighbors got the health officer after me. I dared him to take me to law. "Hendersons have been on this property over two hundred years," I said to this man, a certain Dr. Bullock.

By my then wife, Frances, no word was said except, "Please keep them off the driveway."

"You'd better not hurt any of them," I said to her. "Those animals have become a part of me."

The comedy was in his voice—in Henderson's, and in Bellow's. "This is my most vocal novel," Bellow admitted during a break, after he'd cooled down and the audience had warmed up. "Because of distractions and disruptions I'd missed several deadlines in finishing the manuscript, and so my publisher sent out a stenographer to take down my dictation until the thing was done." From the clutter of drafts, notes, and fragments, Bellow had assembled this marvelous portrait of a man on the brink of despair fighting his way back to mental and moral stability by seeing how threats to them can be comically silly. As the hero of *Herzog* (1964) later tells himself, "For Christ's sake, don't cry, you idiot! Live or die, but don't poison everything!"

And so Bellow gives us the comedy of survival. Among his contemporaries, Philip Roth expresses it in a less overtly moral fashion, Bernard Malamud in more.

Roth shows us Neil Klugman fretting over life among the relatives. "Life was a throwing off for poor Aunt Gladys, her greatest joys were taking out the garbage, emptying her pantry, and making threadbare bundles for what she still referred to as the Poor Jews in Palestine," Neil admits early in *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959). "I only hope she dies with an empty refrigerator, otherwise she'll ruin eternity for everyone else, what with her Velveeta turning green, and her navel oranges growing fuzzy jackets down below."

Malamud sounds a deeper note of resignation as his grocer Morris Bober is felled by a robber's blow in *The Assistant* (1957). Running through his life of sadness as he hits the deck, Malamud concludes: "He fell without a cry. The end fitted the day. It was his luck, others had better." The music is either hilariously funny or comically bitter, but the instrument in each is the human voice, moving fiction closer toward its basic component, words.

The technique is not uniquely Jewish-American. In his own manner, John Updike presents characters just as sickened by the junk of life, yet able to find humor, style, and eventually meaning within it. In *Rabbit, Run* (1960) Updike's protagonist is sickened by his degrading job, drab apartment, and frumpy wife (who spends her afternoons with a bottle of bourbon and soap operas followed by "The Mickey Mouse Club") but responds comically to the same materials when he runs off with a girl friend. "They have gone bowling once and have seen four movies—*Gigi*; *Bell, Book and Candle*; *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*; and *The Shaggy Dog*," Updike recounts. "He saw so many snippets from *The Shaggy Dog* on the Mickey Mouse Club that he was curious to see the whole thing. It was like looking through a photograph album with about half familiar faces. The scene where the rocket goes through the roof and Fred MacMurray runs out with the coffee pot he knew as well as his own face."

The Materials at Hand

Updike loves trivia, as do most readers, and starting with his earliest *New Yorker* poems he has been able to take small instances of contemporary silliness and elevate them, by his lyric style, into funny, telling truths about our lives. Even Bellow likes to prompt his readers into chuckles of recognition; his novel *Humboldt's Gift* (1975) is a perfect mix of popular and intellectual mores of the past three decades.

Bellow, Malamud, Roth, and Updike use orderly plots, recognizable situations, and carefully drawn characters. Their humor—and their hopes—come from their characters who, in the manner of fictive artists, create a more acceptable world from the materials at hand.

Writing about these materials in 1960, Philip Roth complained "that the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality." The publicized atrocities of World War II, the frantic pace of life after the war,

Jerome Klinkowitz, 34, is professor of English at the University of Northern Iowa. Born in Milwaukee, he received his B.A. (1966) and M.A. (1967) from Marquette University and his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin—Madison (1970). He is the author of Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction (1975) and The Life of Fiction (1977), and coauthor, with John Somer, of The Vonnegut Statement (1973) and, with Donald Lawler, of Vonnegut in America (1977).

and the commercialization of culture and politics in the '50s, Roth despaired, were "a kind of embarrassment" to an author's "meager imagination." A long line of American writers—Ben Franklin, Washington Irving, A. B. Longstreet, George Washington Harris, Mark Twain, William Faulkner—could draw their humor from situations easily contained by the human imagination. Life could still follow art, and the most improbable tall tale or cock-and-bull story had a way of coming true, or at least of catching the spirit of what everyone sensed was true. But how does one exaggerate the fact of 6 million killed in death camps? Or tell a tale any taller than that of one man free to push a single button and destroy the Earth? With such things on one's mind, the world looks different, and contemporary writers can only chuckle about the pettiness of it all and find refuge elsewhere.

The social disorientation that climaxed later in the 1960s found two novels adequate to it at the very start of the decade: Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) and Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962). Both culled their subject matter from previous decades—bomber raids over Italy during World War II and repression in mental hospitals—yet both moved beyond "the same old stories" toward new stylistic expressions.

"The Texan turned out to be good-natured, generous and likable," Yossarian says in the first chapter of *Catch-22*. "In three days no one could stand him." Heller tells of a colonel in the sick ward who "dwelt in a vortex of specialists" unable to diagnose his illness:

There was a urologist for his urine, a lymphologist for his lymph, an endocrinologist for his endocrines, a psychologist for his psyche, a dermatologist for his derma; there was a pathologist for his pathos, a cystologist for his cysts, and a bald and pedantic cetologist from the zoology department at Harvard who had been shanghaied ruthlessly into the Medical Corps by a faulty anode in an I.B.M. machine and spent his sessions with the dying colonel trying to discuss *Moby Dick* with him.

The fighting itself gets far less attention than the bureaucracy, malingering, and profiteering of the 256th Bomber Squadron; and even those actions are less important, and less comic, than the fractured, disconnected syntax that tries to connect them. The wackiness of this little part of World War II is expressed in the very sentences Heller writes—contradictory statements that march together in a lock-step order of solemn foolery. Toward the end of his career, Mark Twain raged over a God who creates death and destruction; Yossarian, in the face of

death and destruction far beyond Twain's ken, keeps a sense of perspective and personal meaning only by exclaiming, "Good God, how much reverence can you have for a Supreme Being who finds it necessary to include such phenomena as phlegm and tooth decay in His divine system of creation?"

Exhaustion?

Kesey's Randall Patrick McMurphy is another stylist of the absurd who walks into the sterile, closely played world of a 1950's mental ward with the challenge, "Who's the bull goose loony here?" His swagger and bravado are revolutionary acts meant to restore the inmates' virile humanity. Looking back over his career, which has taken him from county jails to military stockades and prison workfarms, McMurphy shapes it into an all-American myth, expressed in properly vocal fashion: "I been a bull goose catskiner for every gyppo logging operation in the Northwest and bull goose gambler all the way from Korea, was even bull goose pea weeder on that pea farm at Pendleton—so I figure if I'm bound to be a loony, then I'm bound to be a stompdown dadgum good one."

McMurphy's antics and the larger world around him are described by the book's narrator, Chief "Broom" Bromden. He too has a special perception: of phone wires whistling in the walls, electric current roaring through conduits to the appliances surrounding him, fog machines deliberately obscuring the ward, and nuts-and-bolts technicians pulling spare parts in and out of the patients at will. The voice in which he tells his story is similarly charged. "I been silent so long now it's gonna roar out of me like floodwaters and you think the guy telling this is ranting and raving my *God*; you think this is too horrible to have really happened, this is too awful to be the truth! But, please," he begs, asking that we share his allegiance to imagination, "It's the truth even if it didn't happen."

It is this imaginative truth that has made Heller's and Kesey's novels endure while other books of the Black Humor phase in American fiction have been forgotten. James Purdy, J. P. Donleavy, Terry Southern, and Bruce Jay Friedman, who at the start of the '60s seemed so promising with their irreverent, offbeat humor (Southern once wrote a story about a new toy for little girls, the "Cathy Curse" doll), never found an appropriate style for their silliness. Limited to content alone, their humor dissipated into the sick jokes of social realism.

Three other writers who first earned the Black Humor tag—John Hawkes, Thomas Pynchon, and John Barth—have es-

caped it by going just the opposite route, into almost pure style. Predictably, their best audiences are the college professors and academic critics who relish Hawkes's pastiche of existential poses, Pynchon's farcical, labyrinthine systems of plot and character, and Barth's comedy of self-exhaustion. Barth, in fact, has argued that in terms of creative writing everything has already been done, and that this exhaustion of literary modes by centuries of use leaves his own generation with no possibilities. Today's novelists, he says, can only burlesque and parody the earlier models. Hence, his comedy takes such forms as the epic journey of a sperm cell in search of an ovum, the rewriting of an 18th-century British novel in contemporary America, or the spectacle of Barth himself cavorting with Dunyazade, Scheherazade, and other mythic personages who hold more reality for him than characters he might otherwise create.

"It seems a country-headed thing to say," William H. Gass wrote in *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (1970), "that literature is language, that stories and the places and the people in them are merely made of words as chairs are made of smoothed sticks and sometimes of cloth and metal tubes." Gass and writers as various as Donald Barthelme, Richard Brautigan, Robert Coover, and Kurt Vonnegut seem to share a common delight in "the ease with which we . . . pass clamorous pages into soundless dreams. That novels should be made out of words, and merely words, is shocking, really," Gass concludes. "It's as though you had discovered that your wife were made of rubber: the bliss of all those years, the fears . . . from sponge."

Imagine That

Barthelme & Company, unlike Barth and Pynchon, don't want to misplace this new intelligence, and certainly don't want to spoil the fun. They realize that there is enough magic in words to sustain a story. Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America* (1967) uses simply expressed comparisons to create fiction, as when "the rain, like a mechanic, began in the late autumn" or the trout "wait there like airplane tickets for us to come."

Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* (1967) adapts the fairy tale to LBJ's America. There, a prince wandering in off-cue from the Rapunzel story, fails to respond to "Snow White's hair initiative," and the ruler conducts "the President's war on poetry." Language is action. Language can also be character, to the extent of getting up and walking away. "I wanted to make a far-reaching reevaluation," one of the dwarfs in *Snow White* complains. "I had in mind launching a three-pronged assault, but

the prongs wandered off seduced by fires and clowns." In Gass's *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* (1968), footnotes finally chase the text of his story off the page.

These writers create fiction that believes in its own reality, beyond the parodies of Pynchon and Barth. In *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (1968), Robert Coover tells the story of a man who passes time by playing a cardtable baseball game of his own invention. Gradually the action in the novel drifts down to the artificial surface, where athletes play out their careers, debate the principles of earthly existence, and like death-of-God theologians ponder how there can be any meaning to life at all, as they gaze blindly into a sun emblazoned with the words "100 Watts."

Words—just words—can create entirely new realities. The funniest writer doing this is Kurt Vonnegut, and he makes fun of himself in the process. It is Vonnegut who, in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), gave us the imaginative machinery to end war: Take a war movie and run it backwards. Think of the imaginative possibilities, he says. As with the engineer who first thought up the heat pump, the technological hardware for it will follow.

Though the trauma of his own life dates from the World War II firebombing of Dresden (where he was a prisoner of war), Vonnegut's style finds its roots in what he considers to have been America's time of hardest adversity: the Great Depression of the 1930's, when the brilliant radio and film comedians mended broken spirits with the relief of humor.

Sitting with me in the Mona Lisa restaurant in New York City, sketching out his literary biography, Vonnegut is constitutionally unable to let anything go by without a joke. "The firebombing of Dresden," he ponders—a subject he doesn't like to think about—"one hundred and sixty thousand people killed, most of them civilians. The largest military massacre in European history. Think of that." It didn't end the war one second earlier, didn't save one American (or any other) life. The raid served no purpose whatsoever, and it agonized Vonnegut so to write about it that the only way he can face it now is with a grim joke. "Only one person profited by that raid," he says. "Me. I made three dollars for every man, woman, and child killed. Imagine that."



TO "MAKE IT NEW": THE AMERICAN NOVEL SINCE 1945

by Melvin J. Friedman

Ever since T. S. Eliot made his famous statement in 1923 that "the novel ended with Flaubert and with James," novelists have frequently been put on the defensive. In 1957, literary critic and novelist Granville Hicks invited 10 American writers to contribute to a collection of essays entitled *The Living Novel*, with a view to asserting the continuing vitality and importance of their craft. To give a boost to their argument, Hicks declared in his Foreword: "There is no substitute now available for the novel, and those who talk about the death of the novel are talking about the death of the imagination."

Twenty years later, we find some of the same assertions being expressed. A 1977 article by novelist-critic Raymond Federman, entitled "Death of the Novel or Another Alternative," reflects the concern of Hicks and his colleagues, although on somewhat different grounds: "The novel is not dead, it is being assassinated by the big publishers who have turned their businesses into supermarket activities."

The critics' rhetoric of impending doom is still with us, but so are encouraging signs that the novel will survive. Of the 10 contributors to Hicks's 1957 collection, three have come to occupy something of the same position in their generation as Faulkner, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald occupied earlier: Saul Bellow, the late Flannery O'Connor, and Ralph Ellison. At least three others have continued to write vital fiction: Herbert Gold, Mark Harris, and Wright Morris. Not a bad record for a dying species! One can echo Mark Twain and say that reports of the death of the novel are greatly exaggerated.

But what constitutes a novel today? The writers in *The Living Novel* were committed to the ways of modernism—to tidily finished, neatly patterned, mythically ordered texts along the lines of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* or Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. Another fictional persuasion has asserted itself in the

past decade or so, characterized by "disruption" and "self-conscious artistry"—by an extreme willingness to forsake the conventions of the traditional novel.* Postmodernism is the term most frequently used by academics to describe this new literary climate, which has brought with it an irreverence and uncertainty about even the function of print on the page.

Writing in the wake of new theories about consciousness and time by William James, Henri Bergson, and Sigmund Freud, the modernists produced an inward turning, personal fiction that accommodated the rough edges of the psyche and of "human time." The postmodernists seem to turn outward as they acknowledge the limits of a new technological world and its dehumanizing consequences.† Yet differences between modernism and postmodernism are always relative; it is impossible to say where one ends and the other begins, so much do they flow into each other.

An Accurate Barometer

One can perhaps illustrate this best by referring to the works of two contemporary novelists, John Hawkes and William Styron. Hawkes and Styron, both born in 1925, are as representative of the possibilities and concerns of the American fictional scene as any two writers of the last quarter century. Hawkes's first novel, *The Cannibal*, appeared in 1949, and Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness* followed two years later. Just as *Lie Down in Darkness* looks over its shoulder, sometimes uncomfortably, at Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and at Joyce's *Ulysses*, two of the great modernist novels, so *The Cannibal* looks ahead to the postmodern environment of John Barth, Donald Barthelme, William H. Gass, Robert Coover, Thomas Pynchon, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

Both first novels have in common a fascination with words and violence. The difference is that Styron in *Lie Down in Darkness* is something of an old-fashioned rhetorician, with his Faulknerian indulgences, and he deals with violence in comfortably mythical terms, while Hawkes seems to have broken down all classical distinctions between poetry and prose and forced his violence to retreat into the surreal and hallucinatory. Both Hawkes and Styron came out of creative writing programs; they

* See Jerome Klinkowitz, *Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975.

† See Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1971, and *Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975.

moved in quite different directions yet converged interestingly along the way.

Saul Bellow and Norman Mailer, as several critics have recently observed, offer another intriguing pair of alternatives. One can say that Bellow, rather like Styron, continues to honor tradition, especially as conceived by the modernist writers of the 1920s and early 1930s. In contrast, Mailer, more erratic than Hawkes, has moved with ease from antiwar novelist, to spokesman for American existentialism, to nonfiction novelist, to popular culturist—becoming the most accurate literary barometer we have.

Bellow has created a body of work that places him squarely in the center of everything literary in this country. All of his fiction is enviably finished, even the excessively lean *Dangling Man* (1944) and the rather bloated *Humboldt's Gift* (1975). His admirably trim *Seize the Day* (1956), perhaps his most successful effort, belongs among America's best novellas, such as Melville's *Billy Budd* and Faulkner's *The Bear*.

Mailer's career, on the other hand, has been jagged and irregular. Like the phoenix, he keeps rising rejuvenated from his own ashes, assuming an unending variety of masks. His early novels, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), *Barbary Shore* (1951), and *The Deer Park* (1955), are quite different from the quasi-journalistic *The Armies of the Night* (1968), *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1970), and *The Fight* (1975). The last three bear comparison with such recent hybrid works as E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975), Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976), and Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977), because all blur distinctions between history and myth, fact and fable.

Contemporary "Conduct Book"

At least three other novelists deserve mention in the front ranks of American fiction since World War II: Ralph Ellison; Vladimir Nabokov; and Flannery O'Connor, a Southern writer (see below). For various reasons, each is less central and repre-

Melvin J. Friedman, 49, is professor of Comparative Literature and English at the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee. Born in Brooklyn, he received his B.A. from Bard College (1949), his M.A. from Columbia (1951), and Ph.D. from Yale (1954). He has taught at the University of Maryland and at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. He is the editor of Samuel Beckett Now (1970, rev. 1975), author of William Styron (1974), and co-editor, with Rosette Lamont, of The Two Faces of Ionesco (1977). A longer, more detailed version of this article appeared in Studies in American Fiction, Spring 1977.

PROFESSORS' CHOICE

<i>Points</i>		<i>Cumulative Sales</i>
162	Invisible Man ,* Ralph Ellison	1952 50,313†
102	Lolita , Vladimir Nabokov	1955 3,633,467‡
84	Catch-22 ,* Joseph Heller	1961 6,113,000‡
73	Gravity's Rainbow , Thomas Pynchon	1973 487,490§
64	The Catcher in the Rye ,* J. D. Salinger	1951 5,985,626‡
63	Herzog , Saul Bellow	1964 1,338,773§
52	All the King's Men , Robert Penn Warren	1946 2,354,734§
44	The Naked and the Dead ,* Norman Mailer	1948 2,816,662‡
44	An American Dream , Norman Mailer	1965 1,002,100§
42	The Adventures of Augie March , Saul Bellow	1953 1,081,342§
33	The Sotweed Factor , John Barth	1960 359,313§
28	Second Skin , John Hawkes	1964 195,000§
28	Portnoy's Complaint , Philip Roth	1969 3,866,488‡
27	The Armies of the Night , Norman Mailer	1968 750,000**
25	Henderson the Rain King , Saul Bellow	1959 739,350§
24	The Naked Lunch , William Burroughs	1959 690,000§
24	V. ,* Thomas Pynchon	1963 537,000§
22	Rabbit, Run , John Updike	1960 1,469,000§
21	One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest ,* Ken Kesey	1962 6,717,693§
20	The Old Man and the Sea , Ernest Hemingway	1952 3,500,000§
20	The Assistant , Bernard Malamud	1957 1,190,000§

Note. None of the above figures include book club sales.

*Author's first novel.

†Random House and Modern Library editions only; NAL/Signet paperback sales figures not available.

‡All printings through 1975, according to *Publishers Weekly*.

§All printings to October 1977, from publishers.

**All printings to October 1977, exclusive of original hardback publisher's sales figures, which are no longer available.

sentative than Hawkes, Styron, Bellow, and Mailer.

Ellison has written just one novel, *Invisible Man* (1952). The story of a young black man's responses to southern education, New York radicalism, and the inability of whites to see or know blacks except on their own terms, it brought to Afro-American fiction the major elements of continental literature and thought from Dostoyevsky and Kierkegaard down to the French existentialists. *Invisible Man* is the closest thing we have to a "conduct book" for our time. Still, it cannot quite stand up to the exten-

The Wilson Quarterly asked 44 professors of American literature to name the 10 "most important" novels (in order of preference) published in the United States since World War II. Twenty-six professors responded, nominating a total of 88 books by 54 authors. Among first choices, **Invisible Man** led with seven, followed by **Lolita** with four. **Gravity's Rainbow**, **The Catcher in the Rye**, **Herzog**, and **All the King's Men** each had two nominations for first place.

We assigned points to each title on the basis of 10 for a first preference, 9 for a second preference, and so on. A list of the nominees receiving the 20 highest point scores appears at left.

Eight authors accounted for 31 of all the novels recommended by the academics. John Barth, Saul Bellow, and Bernard Malamud were each represented by five works; William Faulkner and Norman Mailer each by four; and John Hawkes, Vladimir Nabokov, and Thomas Pynchon each by three. Although **Invisible Man** received more points than all of Bellow's works combined (162 vs. 141), Bellow's novels actually received the greatest number of nominations (23 vs. Ellison's, and Mailer's, 22), suggesting that **Invisible Man**'s overwhelming lead may have been helped by the fact that it is Ellison's only published novel to date. Pynchon had 19 mentions, followed by Heller and Nabokov, each with 16.

The professors' selections covered a span of 38 years, but half of their choices were published during an 11-year period, 1959-69. Two novels from 1977 were named: Robert Coover's **The Public Burning** (3 points) and Joan Didion's **A Book of Common Prayer** (1 point); one from 1976: John L'Heureux's **Jessica Fayer** (3 points); but none from 1975.

Would the survey have produced different results had we phrased the question another way? One professor thought so: "You ask for the 'most important' novels. I take this to be distinct from the most popular (which are read and forgotten) and from the *best* (which are not always widely read and may lack any public import). In a list of 'best' novels I would [replace] Salinger, Vonnegut, and Heller with Hawkes, Barth, and Barthelme."

sive, wide-ranging body of work by Bellow or Hawkes.

In general, Nabokov's vast output, written over a 50-year period, cannot honestly be considered as purely "American" fiction. *Lolita* (1955) and *Pnin* (1957) are the exceptions. Most of his writing belongs in a Russian tradition that includes Pushkin, Gogol, and Goncharov.

There is always some difficulty with classifying American writers of the high order of those just discussed. Their fiction seems to resist neat cubbyholes. Lesser novelists, however, are

BUYERS' CHOICE

		<i>Cumulative sales</i>
1950	The Cardinal , Henry Morton Robinson	2,950,807*
1951	From Here to Eternity , James Jones	3,646,004*
1952	The Silver Chalice , Thomas B. Costain	2,236,004*
1953	The Robe , Lloyd C. Douglas	3,724,391*
1954	Not as a Stranger , Morton Thompson	2,667,977*
1955	Marjorie Morningstar , Herman Wouk	2,164,128†
1956	Don't Go Near the Water , William Brinkley	1,291,000†
1957	By Love Possessed , James Gould Cozzens	1,167,498‡
1958	Doctor Zhivago , Boris Pasternak	5,010,520*
1959	Exodus , Leon Uris	5,473,710*
1960	Advise and Consent , Allen Drury	2,456,718*
1961	The Agony and the Ecstasy , Irving Stone	2,866,718*
1962	Ship of Fools , Katherine Anne Porter	1,346,000†
1963	The Shoes of the Fisherman , Morris L. West	1,913,402†
1964	The Spy Who Came in from the Cold , John LeCarré	2,638,000†
1965	The Source , James A. Michener	2,687,734*
1966	Valley of the Dolls , Jacqueline Susann	9,500,000*
1967	The Arrangement , Elia Kazan	3,485,000*
1968	Airport , Arthur Hailey	5,474,949*
1969	Portnoy's Complaint , Philip Roth	3,866,488*
1970	Love Story , Erich Segal	9,905,627*
1971	Wheels , Arthur Hailey	2,604,614*
1972-73	Jonathan Livingston Seagull , Richard Bach	9,055,000*
1974	Centennial , James A. Michener	3,591,763*
1975	Ragtime , E. L. Doctorow	2,855,667†
1976	Trinity , Leon Uris	3,178,886†

Note: None of the above figures include book club sales.

*All printings, through 1975, according to *Publishers Weekly*.

†All printings, to October, 1977, from publishers.

‡All printings, to October, 1977, exclusive of original hardback publisher's sales, which are no longer available.

more readily grouped. Thus we can observe three kinds of novels written since World War II, distinguished as much (if not more) by subject matter as by technique: the Southern novel, the college or academic novel, and the Jewish American novel. (One might also think of the "Beat" novel with its many variations, given a certain respectability by Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, 1957, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *Her*, 1960.)

Southern writing is predominantly rural in setting. From Faulkner through the latest novels of Reynolds Price (*The Sur-*

Since 1950, only one novel from the Top Twenty* selected by professors of literature for *The Wilson Quarterly* has led any of the annual best-seller lists compiled by *Publishers Weekly*, the voice of the book trade. (See facing page.) It is **Portnoy's Complaint**. Only five have placed on any of the annual lists of the Top Ten compiled by *PW* or its predecessor, *The Bookman*: **The Naked and the Dead** (1948), **The Old Man and the Sea** (1952), **Lolita** (1958 and 1959), **Herzog** (1964 and 1965), and **Portnoy's Complaint** (1969). Five appear on the list of all-time best sellers (defined as books that sold over 2 million copies) in *80 Years of Best Sellers, 1895-1975*, edited by Alice Payne Hackett and James Henry Burke: **Catch-22**, **The Catcher in the Rye**, **Portnoy's Complaint**, **Lolita**, and **The Naked and the Dead**.

Of the 67 also-ran "Professors' Choice" novels, only eight have placed on any annual best-seller list: **The Wall**, by John Hersey (1950), **East of Eden** by John Steinbeck (1952), **Ten North Frederick** by John O'Hara (1955), **Ship of Fools** by Katherine Anne Porter (1962), **The Confessions of Nat Turner** by William Styron (1967), **The Fixer** by Bernard Malamud (1966), **In Cold Blood**† by Truman Capote (1966), and **Peyton Place** by Grace Metalious (1956 and 1957). **Deliverance** by James Dickey (1970), **In Cold Blood**, and **Peyton Place** appear on the list of all-time best sellers. In the combined fiction and nonfiction category, **Peyton Place** was the no. 10 title, topping *Roget's Thesaurus* and *Webster's New College Dictionary* (but trailing Dr. Spock's baby book, the all-time no. 1).

Before 1895, Charles Dickens had seven U.S. best sellers. American novelists with best sellers included Louisa May Alcott, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Mark Twain.

In 1976, the paperback Harlequin romances (e.g., *Love in a Stranger's Arms*, *The Honey Is Bitter*) published in Toronto, sold 50 million copies in the United States. Written by 140 women authors according to a standard formula (no premarital sex, no violence, no politics, no unspoken gothic threats, and a wedding at the end), these romances accounted for an estimated 14 percent of total U.S. fiction sales.

*Actually 21 titles, with two books tied for 20th place.

†Listed by *PW* as nonfiction but considered fiction by the professor who nominated it.

face of Earth, 1975) and Madison Jones (*A Cry of Absence*, 1971), there is a very precise feeling for landscape and terrain. Carson McCullers of Georgia and Eudora Welty of Mississippi appeared almost simultaneously on the literary scene in the early 1940s. It became clear that the female sensibility was to be a major force in Southern letters when another Georgian, Flannery O'Connor, published her first novel, *Wise Blood*, in 1952. (Her second, and last, novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, appeared in 1960.)

O'Connor is probably the best of the Southern writers after

Faulkner. Yet she falls short of being a major figure because of the sameness of her themes and techniques and the limitations of her vision and sensibility. She stands apart from most of her regional contemporaries by virtue of her Catholic background. Her characters may be Bible Belt fundamentalists, but they seem imbued with a Catholic sense of sin and redemption.

The most typical of the gifted Southern novelists in the period after Faulkner are probably the late Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty, Walker Percy, and Truman Capote. While the first two devoutly tilled the Southern literary soil through most of their careers, Percy and Capote have reached beyond their rather undaring fictional beginnings toward postmodern forms. Percy's *Love in the Ruins* (1971), for example, flirts with the conventions of science fiction as it reveals an uneasiness about current technology. Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965), which the author called a "nonfiction novel," launched the new hybrid form that Mailer, Doctorow, Haley, and so many others have favored in the past decade. It is interesting to note, however, that even though the setting for *In Cold Blood* is western Kansas, Capote reminds us that "one is still within the Bible Belt borders." His own fictional beginnings in the rural South, first in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948), then in *The Grass Harp* (1951), appear not to have been forgotten.

Surprising Ambiguities

College fiction thrived in the 1950s. One of the most successful and typical of the species is Robie Macauley's *The Disguises of Love* (1952). Set in an American university during the 1940s, the plot centers around a clandestine love affair between a strait-laced college professor and a co-ed. In technique, it bears a close and sympathetic relationship to the best modernist novels.

Similar concerns and techniques are evident in other academic fiction of the period—Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* (1952), Randall Jarrell's *Pictures from an Institution* (1954), and, in a far more serious vein, May Sarton's *Faithful Are the Wounds* (1955). The genre continued into the early 1960s, sometimes with a nod to the Angry Young Man motif imported from England, in such novels as John Barth's *The End of the Road* (1958), Mark Harris's *Wake Up, Stupid* (1959), and Bernard Malamud's *A New Life* (1961).

The End of the Road is the most intriguing and curious of these because Barth seems to acknowledge modernist practices and concerns while remaining steadfastly uneasy with them.

Each chapter is dutifully summarized before the chapter proper begins, but in the mocking, irreverent way that Pynchon later employed in *V.* and Vonnegut in *Cat's Cradle* (both of which appeared in 1963). The opening chapter, for example, bears the heading "In a Sense, I Am Jacob Horner," laying a foundation of surprising ambiguity for its first-person narration. In this story of a college teacher who has an affair with a colleague's wife, the furnishings may be familiar but the twists and turns they are subjected to are not.

A novel published four years after *The End of the Road*, Philip Roth's *Letting Go*, has much in common with it. Roth's Gabe Wallach, another self-conscious narrator, is a more aggressive Jacob Horner who settles uncomfortably into academic life and gets involved with a married couple. The major difference between the two is that *Letting Go* attends to the idiosyncrasies not only of university faculties and ill-suited love relationships, but of an urban Jewish way of life.

Roth's example may be partly responsible for a shifting of ground by older Jewish writers. The old-world values of Malamud's early novels and stories have given way to the preoccupations of dislocated modern urban Jews in *Pictures of Fidelman* (1969). Isaac Bashevis Singer, who has devoted the larger part of his writing to Polish ghetto subjects, set his latest novel, *Enemies, A Love Story* (1972), in New York City—with the Holocaust as backdrop.

The "Disruptionists"

Jewish subjects have proved intriguing to non-Jewish writers as well. John Updike entered the arena with *Bech: A Book* (1970), and Styron is working on a novel tentatively entitled *Sophie's Choice*, which has strong Jewish preoccupations. In fact, urban Jewish subjects now seem as irresistible as the dilemma of the American innocent abroad once did to such writers as Henry James, Mark Twain, and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

A word must be said about another group of novelists who do not fit any of the above categories. Their work is more usefully discussed in terms of technique and stylistic devices than ethnic or regional themes. Jerome Klinkowitz sees the 1967-68 publishing season as the first flowering of this group of "literary disruptionists," which includes Jerzy Kosinski, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., William H. Gass, Ronald Sukenick, and Raymond Federman, among others.

At one end of the spectrum is Kosinski, who seems to be writing fairly conventional prose in *The Painted Bird* (1965) and

Steps (1968)—at least on the surface. His syntax is regular. His pages are visually orthodox enough to offer the printer no particular problems.

Sukenick and Federman, at the other extreme, completely alter the face and possibilities of fiction. Federman's two novels in English (he also writes in French), *Double or Nothing* (1971) and *Take It or Leave It* (1976), are typesetters' nightmares. Each page is a discrete visual entity and calls on the unflagging attention and dedication of the printer. *Take It or Leave It* is not even paginated. As Federman explains: "all sections in this tale are interchangeable therefore page numbers being useless they have been removed at the discretion of the author."

Gass falls somewhere in the middle. He can be as deceptively traditional as Kosinski, yet takes many experimental risks. His first novel, *Omensetter's Luck* (1966), belongs to a language-intoxicated tradition in American literature that started with Melville and includes Faulkner. A comparison between *Omensetter's Luck* and Faulkner's *Light in August*, which it occasionally resembles, reveals, however, the extent to which Gass has passed beyond modernist technique and into post-modernism.

The experiments of recent American fiction writers seem endless—always a healthy sign for a supposedly vanishing species. One has every reason to feel more comfortable about the fate of the American novel now than did the contributors to *The Living Novel* in 1957.



PARANOIA, ENERGY, AND DISPLACEMENT

by Tony Tanner

"What's your idea of who runs things?"

The words are from Saul Bellow's *The Victim* (1947), but the question is one that in many different forms runs through American fiction of the last 30 years.

One of the most important writers who has endeavored to give some sort of fictional outline and metaphorical definition to power and its modes of operation is Norman Mailer. This has taken him from actual political conventions and demonstrations to the technology of moon rockets, the significance of such star-victims of American culture as Marilyn Monroe, the operations of the CIA, the problem of *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (not the ostensible reasons but the deeper psychic ones), and on to more all-embracing metaphysical speculations where God and the Devil square up, as if for some great cosmic boxing match. Mailer has traveled far beyond realism to explore the violence and distorted aggressions he feels are at work in America, the plots and mysteries he feels are swirling in the air. In his *An American Dream* (1965) the protagonist Rojack, a World War II hero and former U.S. congressman, says he has come to believe in "spirits and demons, in devils, warlocks, omens, wizards and fiends, in incubi and succubi." Rojack has a vague sense of being involved in plots that defy definition:

I did not know if it was a hard precise mystery with a detailed solution, or a mystery fathered by the collision of larger mysteries, something so hopeless to determine as the edge of a cloud, or could it be, was it a mystery even worse, something between the two, some hopeless no-man's-land from which nothing could return but exhaustion?

These words could lead us on to many other writers, but perhaps the most obvious one is Thomas Pynchon.

Pynchon's brilliant, difficult, and highly erudite work organizes itself around two feelings. One is paranoia, defined as "nothing less than the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that *everything is connected*." The other is what he calls anti-paranoia, "a condition not many of us can bear for long." Instead of suspecting the existence of plots at work everywhere, the characters have to live with a sense that nothing is connected to anything, in a state of volitionless rambling, with no clues to follow.

"This is some kind of plot, right?" Slothrop sucking saliva from velvet pile.

"*Everything* is some kind of plot, man," Bodine laughing.

"And yes but, the arrows are pointing all different ways."*

With this oscillating sense of too little hidden meaning or too much, traditional concepts of society, character, and narrative plot dissolve.

Pynchon's fiction draws on skills and discourses not usually found in the novel—information theory, probability theory, geometry, and calculus, as well as an encyclopedic knowledge of esoteric areas of learning and history. The result is not only a completely revised sense of the self and modern society, but a new kind of reading experience that forces one to revise one's sense of what a text is and what it *does*.

It was Pynchon who first made serious use of the idea of entropy† in fiction, an idea that has become so common that even a comparatively traditional writer like John Updike, who sets out to explore what he calls "'middleness' or the quality of things at rest," has made fleeting use of it. With Pynchon, it is part of a serious vision of things—and people—running down. Both his writing and our reading of his texts are a constant

**Gravity's Rainbow*, New York: Viking, 1973.

† In physics, the measurement of randomness, disorder, or chaos.

Tony Tanner, 42, is a Fellow of King's College and University Lecturer at Cambridge. Born in Richmond, Surrey, he took a double first in English at Cambridge (1958), and received his Ph.D. from Cambridge in 1964. He is the author of Conrad: Lord Jim (1963), Saul Bellow (1965), The Reign of Wonder: Naivety and Reality in American Literature (1965), and City of Words: American Fiction, 1950–1970 (1970).

struggle between the deterioration of meaning and the counter-entropic creation of new ways of fictionalizing the world.

One result of this is an extreme dissolution of the individual. Although there is an excessive proliferation of *names* in Pynchon's work, there is a concomitant disappearance of *selves*. Just as he renames all of postwar Europe "the Zone," so individuals begin to blur as they try to work with, and live through, the new uncertain categories of the contemporary world. Even the hero—or central name—in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Slothrop, begins to "scatter" by the end. His "sense of Now" or "temporal bandwidth" gets narrower and narrower, and by the end there is a feeling that he is so lost and isolated and unconnected that he is vaporizing out of time altogether.

None of this is easy on the reader. Traditional novels tend to focus on what might be called the gradual assembling of a character, often starting from a near-zero identity—Tom Jones, David Copperfield, Jane Eyre, Stephen Dedalus. In Pynchon we are more likely to find a study of not just failure and loss, but the radical disassembling of character. His approaches to this process have produced perhaps the most important American fiction of our time—books that are as intricately assembled as anything since Joyce.

Saul Bellow would not be sympathetic to much of this. While his characters encounter many of the "new Uncertainties," and he has explored some aspects of "the disintegrating outline of the Self," he has in the latter part of his career written against those who overemphasize "the disintegrated assurances." Whatever miseries and doubts and bruising they have to endure, his characters Augie March, Henderson, Herzog, Mr. Sammler, and Charlie Citrine are still very much themselves at the end of their stories—not scattered and dissolved, but wiser, if sometimes sadder individuals.

Bellow was one of the first postwar writers to challenge the agreed-on "reality pictures" of the modern world. Having done that, he must face the problem of discovering new explanations and integrations (a dilemma experienced by other American writers as well). Thus, in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970):

Existence was not accountable to him. Indeed not. Nor would he ever put together the inorganic, organic, natural, bestial, human, and superhuman in any dependable arrangement but, however fascinating and original his genius, only idiosyncratically, a shaky scheme, mainly decorative or ingenious.

Yet note the ending of the book, set though it is (and not for the first time in Bellow's work) at a scene of death:

He was aware that he must meet, and he did meet—through all the confusion and degraded clowning of this life through which we are speeding—he did meet the terms of his contract. The terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows. As I know mine. As all know. For that is the truth of it—that we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know, we know.

I can think of few other contemporary American writers (Bernard Malamud would be one) who would conclude a book, which contains so much pessimism about the modern world, on a note of absolute assurance about some certain knowledge that we all share. As he has reiterated in many interviews and articles, Bellow still believes in the old values and truths and sees nothing very original in other contemporary fiction.

At the end of *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), once again set by a grave and heavy with the finality of death, we find Charlie and Menasha looking at some spring flowers. In their way, the flowers contest the dread misery of the city experience that the book transcribes. Refusing to blink at any of the miseries of modern life, indeed portraying them with considerable intensity, Bellow contrives to convey a flicker of optimism, of the ongoing possibilities of life, in his work. A quotation from Tocqueville comes to mind:

Nothing conceivable is so petty, so insipid, so crowded with paltry interests—in one word, so anti-poetic—as the life of a man in the United States. But among the thoughts which it suggests, there is always one that is full of poetry, and this is the hidden nerve which gives vigor to the whole frame.

Bellow is the contemporary American writer most interested in detecting and revealing in the texture of his work that "hidden nerve" without which his portrayals of American life would be grim indeed.

There are, of course, other seemingly neo-realist writers still working to project the American scene in a relatively undistorted way. Joseph Heller's latest book, *Something Happened* (1974), seems to have left behind the arresting absurdities of *Catch-22* (1961) to concentrate on the straightforward miseries of growing old, or older, in contemporary America. The hero, Bob Slocum, is obsessed with omens of death—"I dream about

death and weave ornate fantasies about death endlessly and ironically." Like some American writers he has that entropic sense that "the world is winding down." But when we try to find out what exactly it was that "happened" we turn up only a vague and unspecific resentment against the aging process.

Somebody pushed me. Somebody must have set me off in this direction, and clusters of other hands must have touched themselves to the controls at various times, for I would not have picked this way for the world. He has never been found. Lost: one child, age unknown, goes by the name of me.

The book in fact represents an enormous anthology of the dreads, disquiets, desolations and isolations, fears and tremblings of contemporary America, just as it serves a bitter indictment of the success-ethics by which Slocum helplessly measures himself. "When I grow up I want to be a little boy"—shades of Huck Finn. But for all its vivid misery, *Something Happened* does not release, or force us into, new and energizing ways of construing reality. Instead the novel is similar to Bob Slocum's bouts of insomnia, "those buffeting cataracts of fantasy, fury, reminiscence, and speculation—all of it inconsequential." Heller can indeed portray the miseries of contemporary American life, but cannot find "the hidden nerve."

Another American writer who feels obliged to stay close to the pains and pangs of ordinary people (though not without experimenting in prolific forms of realism) is Joyce Carol Oates. She seeks to give us a world "defantasized" and to that end she writes novels that, in one of her own phrases, project "The Nightmare of Naturalism." Not that she is an old-fashioned Naturalist; she explores all kinds of current transformations and inchoate changes in contemporary personality and attempts to analyse what America is becoming. *Wonderland* (1971) is a good example of all her fictional concerns.

One of Oates's most revealing remarks, about a novel by Harriet Arnow, indicates where her main interests lie:

Sunk helplessly in flesh, as in the turbulent uncontrollable mystery of the "economy," the human being with spiritual yearnings becomes tragic when these yearnings are defeated or mocked or, as in *The Dollmaker*, by Harriet Arnow, brutally transformed into a part of the social machine. . . . It is a depressing work, like most extraordinary works. Its power lies in its insistence upon the barrenness of life.

There are plenty of assumptions in Oates's work that many American writers would contest, as when she quotes approvingly the Wallace Stevens line "We keep coming back and coming back to the real." Fair enough, many would say, but what exactly is "the real" these days, and where do you find it? Is it really given or does it have to be made or re-made? But at least she tries to present us with depictions of contemporary society, whereas Heller and Philip Roth (in *My Life as a Man*, 1974), narcissistically give us portraits only of their own suffering selves, with the rest of society negated and desocialized into a series of more or less irritating external phenomena.

The Fractured Picture

If Joyce Carol Oates seeks to give us a world defantasized, Donald Barthelme gives us the world enigmatized. It is a world deprived of narrative, with fading grammar and deteriorating syntax; a world where the vocabularies, terminologies, and discourses that proliferate in modern life contest each other in surreal conjunctions. When he writes about *City Life* (1970), we find that the city has become a quite different kind of fictional space from that of Theodore Dreiser, say, or Saul Bellow. Thus, in one city there are prizes for those who produce "the best pastiche of the emotions." There is a prevalence of "white noise" and "white space," both of which can be purchased. Every surface is smoothed down; everyone has the same fingerprints. Imprecise sentences lessen the strain of close tolerances, and inhabitants "go forward avoiding the final explanation. . . . Creative misunderstanding is crucial." And is precisely the state of mind that Barthelme's innumerable stories seek to induce.

Rather than tease us with "creative misunderstanding," John Hawkes seeks to impose on us a series of dreamlike or nightmarish landscapes composed as a series of darkly lyrical tableaux (because he too has renounced the authority of traditional plot and character). Some of his novels have an almost claustrophobic horror. For a really tight, darkly arresting and encapturing style, there is perhaps no other contemporary American writer to compare with him, and we may take the following as a definition of what Hawkes admires and searches after in fiction:

a quality of coldness, detachment, ruthless determination to face up to the enormities of ugliness and potential failure within ourselves and in the world around us, and to bring to this exposure a savage or saving comic

spirit and the saving beauties of language. The need is to maintain the truth of the fractured picture; to expose, ridicule, attack, but always to create and to throw into new light our potential for violence and absurdity as well as for graceful action.

Given the agitation, sense of malaise, and even outrage felt by some American writers at society (not to say the world) around them, it is surprising that they shun overt political writing. Yet dating back to the first American novelist, Brockden Brown,* the interests of American fiction have generally been more psychological than political, just as there has been more interest in Freud than in Marx in the United States.

Some of this may be due to the great sense of loneliness and lack of community that is felt by so many Americans and constantly referred to in, for example, Vonnegut's *Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloon* (*Opinions*) (1974). The fact remains that the primary interest of American novelists seems to be in the private—often brilliant—manipulation of new forms of fiction, rather than in attempts to construct a more totalistic vision of society. The feeling is that if society seems to threaten and distract, in fiction one is free.

Old Stories

What we have instead of political writing is satire and a renewed interest in myth. Many writers would be happy to talk about constructing or reconstructing myths, while they shy away from the relation of politics to writing. John Barth, for instance, is not much interested in those writers who apply themselves to "reporting the secular news" (a phrase of John Locke), yet he is excited by the idea that his own work contains various mythic patterns.

"Myth" no longer refers to the kind of communal wisdom and narratives that are traditionally associated with the word. There is, to be sure, a highly developed awareness of the old stories among American writers, but the stories are transformed in all sorts of idiosyncratic ways. One particularly innovative writer is Robert Coover, who has made clear his interest in "mythic residue" and in the ways that very old narratives—including the Bible—can be made to yield new relevancies for our times. He uses myths not to reveal any hidden ideal order in

* Charles Brockden Brown (1771–1810) is cited by *The Dictionary of American Biography* as the "first American who tried to live by his pen." His major novels include *Wieland* (1798), based on the life of a religious fanatic, and *Edgar Huntly* (1799).

society but for the ironic possibilities that can emerge in the course of their systematic deformation, transformation, or hyperbolization. To use Coover's own words:

Our old faith—one might better say our old sense of constructs derived from myths, legends, philosophies, fairy stories, histories and other fictions which help to explain what happens to us from day to day, why our governments are the way they are, why our institutions have the character they have, why the world turns as it does—has lost its efficacy. . . . The world itself being a construct of fictions, I believe the fiction maker's function is to furnish better fictions with which we can reform our notions of things.

Thus, in such highly original works as *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966), *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (1968), and *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969), Coover encodes a large number of not always detectable mythic and religious references, in a new series of fictions or "constructs" that probe deeply into modern problems and concerns.

There are many other writers I could have mentioned in this brief piece; for instance, William Gaddis, whose *The Recognitions* (1955) has certainly been an influence on younger writers; the brilliantly original James Purdy; William H. Gass, one of the great contemporary masters of words; the richly experimental Joseph McElroy; and Stanley Elkin, who writes the most extraordinary monologues but who remains one of the most underrated writers in the country. But I will conclude with a final observation from Tocqueville, which has perhaps more relevance today than when he wrote it in the 1830s.

Thus not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever on himself alone and threatens in the end to confine him . . . within the solitude of his own heart.

Despite a certain amount of organized coming together of contemporary American writers, Tocqueville's words point to a deep truth: What is most amazing is the richness and variety of fictional forms that have been generated in privacy and solitude by the American novelists of the last 30 years.



BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE AMERICAN NOVEL

In 1923, D. H. Lawrence rebuked his fellow intellectuals. "American art-speech contains an alien quality, which belongs to the American continent and to nowhere else," the British novelist-critic wrote. "But, of course, so long as we insist on reading the books as children's tales, we miss all that."

His **STUDIES IN CLASSIC AMERICAN LITERATURE** (Seltzer, 1923; Penguin, 1977, paper), which zigs and zags through the works of Fenimore Cooper (Lawrence's use of the name), Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, and others, created something of a sensation. Lawrence found psychological elements in *The Scarlet Letter* ("on the top ... as nice as pie, goody-goody, and lovey-dovey"), in the Leatherstocking tales, in *Moby Dick*, in Edgar Allan Poe's *Ligeia* and *The Fall of the House of Usher*, which were to suggest to many later critics some previously unperceived connections between 19th-century American writing and the concerns of modern fiction.

His timeless reminder to critics—and ordinary readers: "It is hard to hear a new voice, as hard as it is to listen to an unknown language. We just don't listen. There is a new voice in the old American classics. The world has declined to hear it. ... Why?—Out of fear. The world fears a new experience more than it fears anything ... [more than] a new idea. ... It can't pigeon-hole a real new experience."

Numerous scholars have by now examined the American novel, past and present, in terms of successive waves of fictional response to new experiences, beginning where Lawrence did, with the opening up of the American continent. Harvard's F. O. Matthiessen was the first to give academic respectability to Law-

rence's intuitions. In **AMERICAN RENAISSANCE** (Oxford, 1941, cloth; 1968, paper), he describes the astonishing five-year burst of "new" writing that saw the appearance not only of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *The House of Seven Gables* (1851), Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) and *Pierre* (1852), but also of Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855), and works by Whittier, Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes, and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

To Emerson, Matthiessen applies the master transcendentalist's own words about Goethe: "He was the cow from which the rest drew their milk." Emerson's little-known *Representative Men* (1850) is one of the five works—Hawthorne's and Melville's novels, above, are the others—that Matthiessen examines most closely.

Alfred Kazin's **ON NATIVE GROUNDS** (Reynal & Hitchcock, 1942; Harcourt, 1972, paper) followed shortly after Matthiessen. Scanning the American literary periods that he labels "The Search for Reality (1890–1917)," "The Great Liberation (1918–1929)," and "The Literature of Crisis (1930–1940)," Kazin provides a highly readable cultural-historical-biographical treatment.

His cast of characters is sizable: William Dean Howells, Theodore Dreiser, Edith Wharton, Jack London, Upton Sinclair, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, Willa Cather, Ellen Glasgow, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos, William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe—not to mention their predecessors (especially Mark Twain and Henry James).

In **AFTER THE LOST GENERATION: A Critical Study of the Writers of Two**

Wars (McGraw-Hill, 1951; Books for Libraries Press, 1971), John W. Aldridge describes the '40s novelists and their ties to Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Dos Passos. Many of his "new writers" have faded from the scene; others survived to produce best sellers (Gore Vidal, Irwin Shaw, Norman Mailer). As Aldridge saw them in 1951, the neo-Hemingways and others "whose small, confused, and misguided talents concern us now" lacked "the basic requirement of the healthy artist—a dogmatic belief in his supreme power as an individual and a complete contempt for everything which stands in the way of its exercise."

Hemingway's need to impose order on the chaos of life is discussed in a later work by Alfred Kazin, **BRIGHT BOOK OF LIFE: American Novelists and Storytellers from Hemingway to Mailer** (Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1973, cloth; Dell/Delta, 1974, paper). "Hemingway died of Faulkner as much as he died of Hemingway," Kazin writes. "In [his] last years it was Faulkner, coming up after having been ignored so long, who was to be a constant shock and bewilderment to Hemingway in the new age of ambiguity. Faulkner was another name for a world—for history—that could not be reduced to a style." Kazin sees Norman Mailer, like Truman Capote, as a novelist turning to reportage out of a sense of being "ridden down by history" and wanting to do something about it.

The landmark **LITERARY HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES**, edited by Robert E. Spiller, Willard Thorp, Thomas H. Johnson, and Henry S. Canby (Macmillan, 4th ed., 1974, cloth & paper), first appeared in 1948. Part anthology, part critical overview, several times updated, it remains a basic three-volume text for students of the American novel and other literary forms, including criticism. Its chief editor, Spiller, recently put together his recollections of the making of the LHUS with some of his own early reviews

under the title **MILESTONES IN AMERICAN LITERARY HISTORY** (Greenwood, 1977).

In a foreword to this collage, Robert H. Walker notes the assertion in the first edition of the LHUS that "each generation should produce at least one literary history of the United States, for each generation must define the past in its own terms. Where," Walker goes on to ask, "as we slide toward the 1980s . . . is the new literary statement for that generation which has seemed so exceptionally committed to throwing out the past and trusting no one born before 1948?"

Indeed, no major new histories of American literature have been forthcoming. But since the 1950s the critics have been busy on narrower fronts—producing full-scale biographies of major figures that add to the understanding of their work; analyzing ethnic or regional groups of writers and those especially affected by such upheavals as the Great Depression; linking the newest experimental novelists to the American past.

In the people-and-gossip-oriented 1970s, semifictional profiles of the 20th century's more glamorous writers abound. Frank but less titillating serious biographies include: Arthur Mizener's **THE FAR SIDE OF PARADISE: A Biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald** (Houghton Mifflin, 1951, cloth; Avon, 1974, paper); Cleanth Brooks' **WILLIAM FAULKNER: The Yoknapatawpha Country** (Yale, 1963, cloth & paper); Carlos Baker's **ERNEST HEMINGWAY: A Life Story** (Scribner, 1969, cloth; 1970, paper); and **A FEAST OF WORDS: The Triumph of Edith Wharton** by Cynthia Griffin Wolff (Oxford, 1977). A short critical study worthy of note is Sarah Cohen's **SAUL BELLOW'S ENIGMATIC LAUGHTER** (Univ. of Ill., 1974).

THE AMERICAN WRITER AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION, edited by Harvey Swados (Bobbs-Merrill, 1966, cloth & paper), is a solid critical anthology with

selections from James Agee, Erskine Caldwell, James T. Farrell, Nelson Algren, and others now forgotten. It reminds us of the politically radicalized fictional response in the 1930s and 1940s to hard times. **BLACK FICTION**, by Roger Rosenblatt (Harvard, 1974, cloth & paper) is a brief, sharply written study ("Hell, then, is where *Native Son* is located"). Rosenblatt covers not only Richard Wright and other major figures such as Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, but also several relatively obscure black writers.

In **A WORLD ELSEWHERE: The Place of Style in American Literature** (Oxford, 1966, cloth & paper), Richard Poirier explores the formal stylistic achievements of the whole range of American literature and links many early works in surprising ways to later U.S. and European literary creations; he connects *Walden*, for instance, with its "fantasia of punning," to James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*.

And Leslie Fiedler in two books, **LOVE AND DEATH IN THE AMERICAN NOVEL** (Stein & Day, cloth, 1960; 1975, paper) and **WAITING FOR THE END** (Stein & Day, 1964, cloth; 1970, paper), sees the major works of American fiction, from the last century to our own, as a continuum with complex psychological, sexual, and political overtones. He suggests that "the new audience no longer hated literature *per se*, as had many of their parents and grandparents; they only feared madness and unrestraint (though they had read Freud), like their spiritual ancestors."

Among critical studies of the newest "new American novel," Robert Scholes' **THE FABULATORS** (Oxford, 1967) is no-

table for early attention to the so-called black humorists—who include, in Scholes' view, Pynchon and Vonnegut. Robert Martin Adams's **AFTERJOYCE: Studies in Fiction After Ulysses** (Oxford, 1977) is based on the thesis that contemporary fiction is the exhausted, final legacy of the Joyce school of writing. Adams has some witty points to make, but his study is less significant than Frank Kermode's incisive interpretation of what is now called "postmodern writing." In **THE SENSE OF AN ENDING: Studies in the Theory of Fiction** (Oxford, 1967, cloth; 1968, paper), Kermode examines, among other things, how European and American writers since World War II have dealt with the vision of apocalypse.

CITY OF WORDS: American Fiction, 1950–1970 (Harper, 1971, cloth & paper) by Tony Tanner (see page 144) is considered by many scholars the best work to date on contemporary American fiction—and one that explains its ties to the earlier national literary tradition.

"Melville started *Moby Dick* with etymology," Tanner observes. "[Richard] Brautigan ends *Trout Fishing in America* [1967] with references to the history of language and some sport with words. . . . Both writers have a wondering sense of the ultimate elusiveness of the mysterious reality or spirit of America . . . [and of] the preserving and consoling fantasies and play which are possible in the City of Words, though both have that American wariness about accepting any fantasy . . . as the true reality. Both operate from a sense of the radical disjunction between words and things. . . . I believe these to be the characteristic attributes of a large number of American writers."

EDITOR'S NOTE. *The principal adviser for this review essay was Wilson Center Fellow Frank D. McConnell, assistant professor of English at Northwestern University and author of a new study of four contemporary American novelists (see page 167).*