

ARTS & LETTERS

Writing on the Brain

THE SOURCE: "The Rise of the Neuro-novel" by Marco Roth, in *n+1*, Fall 2009.

THE OBSESSION WITH DESCRIBING human personalities in the cold language of neuroscience has reached beyond the pages of the popular press and such influential books as Daniel Dennett's *Consciousness Explained* (1991). It's now the stuff of fiction, writes Marco Roth, a founding editor of *n+1*. Behold, the neuronovel.

This literary breed was memorably inaugurated by Ian McEwan's 1997 novel *Enduring Love*, in which a science journalist is stalked by a man with de Clérambault's syndrome, a condition in which the sufferer believes that another person is secretly in love with him. Other examples include Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999), in which the protagonist has Tourette's syndrome; Mark Haddon's *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), narrated by an autistic teenager; and Rivka Galchen's *Atmospheric Disturbances* (2008), about a man who suffers from Capgras syndrome and stops recognizing his wife.

By the early 1990s, Roth writes, psychoanalysis was regarded as "bankrupt"—and Prozac was in. A "new reductionism . . . explained proximate causes of mental function in terms of neurochemistry, and

ultimate causes in terms of evolution and heredity." A comprehensive explanation of consciousness has yet to emerge, but even so, novelists, whose stock in trade has been the same as Freud's—"introspection of the self and observation of others"—are struggling for traction.

Neuronovelists are engaged in a perilous exercise, Roth suggests. In many neuronovels, the author indulges in "fancy language or rare perceptions, and then hastens to explain why, on medical grounds, this is allowed." This, Roth observes, is the opposite of the modernist project, which proposed stylistic novelty and profound interiority as new ways of describing everyone. But if "modernism is just the language of the crazy, then real men must speak like [thriller writer] Lee Child." Furthermore, the "pathological premise" of most neuronovels forecloses the necessary "interpretative leap" that fiction readers make as they discern metaphors for the universal human condition: "Mere biological contingency has a way of repelling meaning."

Why have novelists taken this wrong turn? One reason, Roth speculates, is that in the neurological anomalies they describe, they see a reflection of their own circumstances. In this "new medical-materialist world," novelists are special cases who suffer from an

"inexplicable compulsion" to write, need their own special institutions (MFA programs), and require families that accommodate their strange habits.

Even when 20th-century writers could no longer take society or religion for granted as novelistic frameworks, Roth says, they could still fall back on the subject matter of the self. Now even the self is "an object whose intricacies can only be described by future science." The rise of the neuronovel "appears as another sign of the novel's diminishing purview."

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Boogie On!

THE SOURCE: "When I Say Get It: A Brief History of the Boogie" by Burgin Mathews, in *Southern Cultures*, Fall 2009.

THE BOOGIE IS EVERYWHERE. We say "Let's boogie" to mean "Let's get going." Madonna sings its praises. Country's Johnny Cash, rock 'n' roll's Chuck Berry, the blues' John Lee Hooker, and countless others rode its distinctive propulsive rhythm. Though the word once referred to a very particular musical style, diffusion throughout American culture means that it has come to represent much more than a kind of music. It's all about a certain feeling—and that feeling's a good one, says Burgin Mathews, a writer living in Birmingham, Alabama.

The boogie emerged at the turn of the 20th century and for a time went by a variety of names—barrelhouse, walking the basses, the sixteen, the fives, western rolling