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**RESOURCES & ENVIRONMENT**


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been delayed or scrapped." Without clarification and some relaxation of standards, Mosher concludes, the economy will suffer.

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**ARTS & LETTERS**


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### *The Novel as Victim*

"The World in a Mirror: Problems of Distance in Recent American Fiction" by Morris Dickstein, in *Sewanee Review* (July-Sept. 1981), University of the South, Sewanee, Tenn. 37375.

Writer's block, book reviews, and negotiations with publishers—these matters have long concerned novelists. But, until recently, serious American authors, following the lead of Henry James and T. S. Eliot, kept them separate from their work. Now, however, writers like William Styron, Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, and John Irving are relying on such details from their own lives for the meat of their novels. Dickstein, professor of English at Queens College (N.Y.), objects.

These novelists have a kinship with the "confessional" writers of the late 1950s and '60s—e.g., poets Robert Lowell and Allen Ginsberg and novelists Norman Mailer and Saul Bellow. The latter two sought to free the novel from formalism and give it more immediacy and intimacy. Unfortunately, says Dickstein, Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, Roth's *The Ghost Writer*, Malamud's *Dubin's Lives* (all published in 1979), and Irving's *The World according to Garp* (1978) reduce such innovations to "lazy convention."

By closely modeling his protagonist on himself, an author limits his "perspective" to highly subjective retrospection; he loses the ability to make balanced judgments about his characters. Thus, his hero becomes a "confessional victim"—sinned against but rarely sinning. In *Ghost Writer*, an associate lamely characterizes Nathan Zuckerman (really, Roth), an aspiring Jewish novelist, as having "the most compelling voice I've encountered in years." Other characters are likely to lose definition, becoming mere satellites of the protagonist.

Styron, Roth, and Malamud have tried to counter their self-absorption by filling their stories with great events and historic personages (the Holocaust, Anne Frank, D. H. Lawrence, respectively). But because such subjects are mere settings or props for their personae, their efforts amount to a "kidnapping" of history, writes Dickstein.

James Joyce mined his own life as a writer to explore the nature of art and the creative process. All novelists are forced to work from a limited stock of personal feelings and experiences. But they must add keen observation of how others live, Dickstein argues. Styron & Co. never even tell us what it is like to hold down a job, or reveal very much about the broader society that their characters inhabit.