

# The State of the Novel in the Seventies

Everyone pontificates about the health of the novel: it's dying, they say, or it's dead, it's totally original or entirely derived, it's never been better, it's never been so bad. While it is clear that the announcement of its death has been premature, it's not so clear what if anything is keeping it alive, what kind of life-support systems are working for it. Tap one critic on his shoulder and he will spin around and give you some unadulterated scorn for its present shape ("I remember when fiction told a story," said one getting-on fellow to me recently. "Why did that characteristic go out of style, do you think?").

Among the young, one hears absolute derision for the novel's storytelling past, the Dickensian decades—and unbounded admiration for the non-narrations of Thomas Pynchon, the anti-romans of Robbe-Grillet, Natalie Sarraute, and Monique Wittig. One young man told me: "It's precisely where the old shibboleths of character, setting, dialogue, and plot disappear that the novel is reborn."

I like to gain some perspective about what is happening now by looking back to what eminent critics thought was happening thirty years ago, and then deciding how close we can come to properly estimating our own moment. Take for example then-75-year-old André Gide's *Imaginary Conversations* (translated from the French by Malcolm Cowley and published here by Knopf in 1944). Number 16 of Gide's talks with himself concerns "The New American Novelists." Who were the ones worthy of consideration then? Well, he mentions Faulkner, Steinbeck, John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, Erskine Caldwell, and, in the same breath, Dashiell Hammett.

Gide confesses that he found Faulkner very hard "to become acclimated to" but that he now regards him as the most important of the lot. *Touché*. On the other hand he extols Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle*, a now almost-forgotten proletarian novel about a strike, and his short stories in *The Long Valley* as far superior to *The Grapes of Wrath*. In fact, the stories, he rhapsodizes, "equal or surpass the best stories of Chekhov." There is no author he would rather read, he goes on, than the author of *A Farewell to Arms*, but he is not captivated by John Dos Passos' "formula" writing: his "intrepid modernism is the sort that seems old before its time." *Touché, encore*.

Gide is appalled by the "pain and horror," the "strangeness" of American fiction, by the way it has plunged into the abyss of sin and suffering; he points to Faulkner and Caldwell especially: "If one believes what they are saying, the American cities and countryside must offer a foretaste of Hell."

Gide was right about Faulkner: his

shadow still falls heavily upon the seventies, particularly upon regional, Southern writing. But Gide was seriously mistaken, it would seem, in his high regard for Caldwell—no one seems seriously aware of him now. He was wrong about Steinbeck, whose social-protest novels have disappeared from public consciousness and seem to have made no influential waves toward our time, and whose stories are read mainly by American high school students in issues of *Scholastic*. His admiration for Dashiell Hammett's novel, *Red Harvest*, and for *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Thin Man* is not shared by most of us, except in studies of pop culture and in the memoirs of Lillian Hellman.

Gide's example is instructive: he won a few, lost a good many. It is, clearly, almost impossible to see one's own age properly. The judgment of the present lacks distance, naturally, but more than that, it suffers from instant and momentary enthusiasms engendered by the craft of reviewing. The reviewer reads so much, so much of it worthless, that his delight knows no bounds when he comes upon something which appears to be original and good. E.L. Doctorow is an example. Everyone, including this reviewer, went wild this winter about his *Ragtime*. He appears to be a distinctive voice on the American scene, a view strengthened by a re-reading of his earlier novel, *The Book of Daniel*.

But, of course, we can be sure that there is now in some obscure city (probably not in New York, if history tells us anything) a young man or woman just starting out, with a strong parochial sense, and a sense of place and its people, who will define this age as Faulkner defined his, as D.H. Lawrence did his, and Henry James and yes, Charles Dickens. Of him we now know nothing, and even if he has begun to write, his work is still obscured by the bejeweled and moneyed, the rocket-launched careers of the Michael Crichtons, the Irving Wallaces, the Jacqueline Susanns, the Herman Wouks, the horde of ladies producing Gothic novels for other ladies, the suspense and mystery writers, all the children of the fictional mire.

One positive summary judgment can be made about the first half of the seventies. There have arisen no visible giants and no uniquely original shape for the novel. It is a time of many imitators and no master, that paradoxical state in which one feels a model lurking behind the followers but the model is either too far back or too much of a combination of many to be singly named. It is, further, a time when every possible style is being used because the age has settled on no one or acknowledged no one as definitive for itself. Some of the promised giants have, to my mind, turned into capable but none-

theless unimpressive dwarfs; others have not grown appreciably. Saul Bellow has just published his eighth novel, *Humboldt's Gift*. It turns out to be long, impressively philosophical, but less interesting than a number of his earlier books, so one wonders about his ultimate standing in the pantheon. John Updike's seventh novel appeared this year. *A Month of Sundays* is written in his fine, fanciful prose, but it fails to fill the promise we have been holding out for him ever since *Poorhouse Fair*, and it seems safe to say now that he will forever dwell critically among the more distinguished pygmies.

There he will be companioned (I solemnly predict) by such now-acclaimed writers as Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., John Barth, James Dickey (whose best-seller *Deliverance* may well fall out of literary consciousness in direct proportion to its meteoric rise a few years ago), Joyce Carol Oates (a novelist so prolific that her reputation may well sink under the weight of over-production), James Baldwin (a meteoric rise and a descent almost as steep, at least thus far), Ralph Ellison (acclaimed for his first and only novel, *Invisible Man*, and seemingly stymied about ever writing another). The tendency among the novelists of the sixties and seventies seems to be to crest too soon. They are early over-achievers. There is very little evidence that the majority of them have maintained the first fine bloom, the protuberant promise their first work showed.

Perhaps because it is so deeply rooted in a sense of tradition and place, the literature of the American South, particularly its fictional prose, is still vigorous. Walker Percy, Eudora Welty, Reynolds Price, Ellen Douglas, Willie Morris, still write with what Alfred Kazin has called a characteristic fluency. The patriarch of American critics, Allen Tate, is still alive and publishing (his latest collection of essays is *Memoirs and Opinions*). His enduring reputation suggests a parallel longevity for the rich and fertile strain of regional writing, from Mark Twain, to Faulkner, to Flannery O'Connor, and into the present.

There is of course the continuing phenomenon of Norman Mailer. By virtue of the strength of his masculine self-assertion, his literary *machismo*, he has endured into the seventies, ever since the fine first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, he wrote after World War II. He is a good, strong writer, of that there can be no question, but my doubts cluster about his inability to find, after that first novel, a subject for his skills. Recently, he has, like Truman Capote, abandoned the arena of the imagination and formed "fiction" over the catafalques of current events, Presidential conventions, the

1967 peace march on Washington (he called *The Armies of the Night* both History as a Novel and The Novel as History), the flight to the moon, New York City's graffiti, and Muhammad Ali (*The Fight*). Such ephemera will last, as social commentary and history. As fiction? I doubt it.

Two names remain on this hit-or-miss list: John Gardner and Vladimir Nabokov. They are both inventive and playful writers, with extraordinary suppleness of mind and craft, writers whose production is as constant as the novelists of the nineteenth century and whose interest in experimentation never flags. They "bring it off," however, in contrast to the long list of experimental writers—the surfictionists, as Raymond Federman calls them: John Hawkes, Ronald Sukenick, Donald Barthelme, Jerzy Kosinski, who bring it off brilliantly only on occasion. Gardner, to my mind, has never equaled his first brilliant literary switch, *Grendel*, a poetic retelling of the Beowulf epic, even in his acclaimed *Sunlight Dialogues*, but it is his willingness, indeed eagerness, to make the method of narration suit his *donnée* that marks his work as somehow special. If I were going to place odds on survival of reputations into the next century I would think seriously about Gard-

ner. And Nabokov? His chameleon-like ingenuity has intrigued and interested us all. He is perhaps the most *interesting* writer of fiction in our time, but I am loath to bet on his interest for the next century. It comes down to preference: I would now rather read a minor work by Nabokov than any highly-touted major work by anyone else. Pure, egocentric taste.

Vitiated and attenuated, I believe, is the once-vigorous and gifted school of Jewish writers: Wiesel, Malamud, Roth, Herbert Gold, Salinger, grouped here not (it would be vulgar) because they are Jews, but because their subject-matter often is Jewish. The vein has worn thin and finally almost out. Its miners are men of talent, but the subject-matter begins to be repeated, and is now in a stage at which it becomes ripe for caricature.

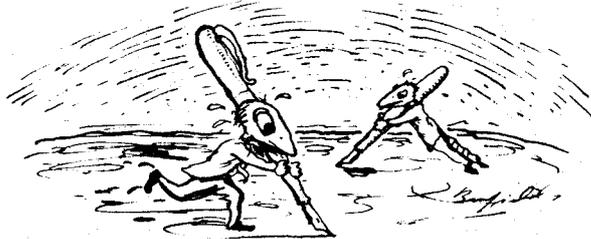
We have no giants, I have said, no himalayas, but more climbers from the base camps than ever in the history of the novel. What we seem to be short on is the kind of interior vision, the inside knowledge of oneself and the informed guesses about others which E.M. Forster saw as necessary to the creation of character. We are short of writers like Henry James, Marcel Proust and, after them, Lawrence, Woolf, and Joyce, who propelled their highly individual, introspective

views of the world and themselves deep into us.

We instead resort to the topical, hoping *that* will catch the reader—all the "Washington novels" of Allen Drury, Ward Just, and George O'Higgins, all the current-event novels like Judith Rossner's *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* and Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*—forgetting that the topical will hold only for the moment but no longer, but the exploration of the interior human landscape never becomes outmoded because the interior human landscape persists.

Gide wrote in 1944: "All these new American novelists are seized and held like children by the present moment, by the here and now." True then; truer now. And when the moment passes, where will the American novel have gone? Like the epic will it have exhausted itself, only this time in multiplicity and the strivings of too many minor practitioners? Has its tendency to meander rather than form one strong main stream diminished it? Will the glowing, technicolored screen (movie or TV) displace the scenic art, as Henry James called the art of fiction, the "director" the novelist, the bland eyes of the watcher the eager reader? Choose one, or more, and mark in the appropriate blank space. □

Among  
the  
Intellectualoids



by J.  
Whitney  
Stillman

### A Tale of Two Species

Norma Maine is the name of a beautiful, lovely, and perhaps fictitious young actress. I first met her in 1972, during the McGovern-Eagleton Presidential campaign. At the time I was managing the whole Eagleton operation, somewhat by default. Senator Eagleton had dropped out of the race, for personal reasons, several weeks before, and most of the staff had followed him. I stayed in the campaign because I don't believe that mental instability should be any barrier to high office in this country.

Norma Maine (her mother was the late Mrs. Norman Maine) made her reputation as a film actress with her sensitive interpretation of the role of the young prostitute with a heart of gold. Norma worked in the McGovern campaign for the same reason as pretty much everyone else: she cared about people. When, as a result of President Nixon's "Dirty Tricks," Senator McGovern lost the elec-

tion, Norma began to grow bitter—toward the American way of life generally and universal suffrage in particular.

One morning, several months after the campaign was over, I found a letter from her in my mailbox. At first I couldn't find anything to open it with. I tried everything—but nothing seemed to work. Finally I smeared Vicks VapoRub on the back and steamed it open. The letter read as follows:

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Yes, I remember you. You're the one who wore the Eagleton buttons.

Thank you for your comments on my films. I'm sorry but it seems I have already made plans for the 25th, and all the Saturday evenings this year.

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I shot back a prompt reply to this correspondence. Her letter sounded de-

pressed, and it is terribly important that a depressed individual not be left alone with his or her own morbid thoughts. I gained a familiarity with this in the Eagleton campaign. Sometimes I had the feeling the Senator had seen the dark side of the moon.

Before long Norma Maine was writing me this way:

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The most important thing for me now is to be a woman. I have begun work on a film, loosely based on Camus' novel *La Peste*, about a plague of rats that overruns the city of La Jolla, California. In this film I have been given the opportunity to play the role of a woman. I am not yet sure how I will interpret the part.

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Never before did I realize how beautiful La Jolla could be. Last night I watched