

Soviet policies hardly differed in its essentials from the Brezhnev line. Moscow had sent a "military contingent" to its neighbor "to help the government formed after the revolution . . . ward off aggression from the outside," acted only "after repeated requests by the Kabul government," and did nothing in violation of international law.

Some might think it unsporting to torment self-professed closet reformers like Arbatov by reminding the world of what they said in the bad old days before glasnost. After all, it's widely understood that a measure of dishonesty could not be avoided in the Soviet system, and even a stalwart supporter of perestroika like Alexander Yakovlev found it expedient to write things that today he would gratefully consign to the incinerator.

But where does expediency end and career advancement take over? Arbatov claims that behind the scenes he worked for peace, mutual understanding, and common sense. Yet this champion of détente was also perfectly willing to call America the most malign power on earth, or justify the persecution of dissidents, or defend the arming of Third World thugs, or blame the West for encouraging the movement for Jewish emigration.

Although describing himself as a partisan of democratic socialism, Arbatov no longer has much good to say about the old domestic order (unlike Mikhail Gorbachev and other prominent "reform Communists"). He provides some useful insights about the functioning of the system and especially about such shadowy Kremlin figures as Yuri Andropov, the late KGB chief and party secretary. To be sure, Arbatov speaks with respect of the man who brought him into the apparatus's higher ranks by naming him to the Central Committee staff during the regime of Nikita Khrushchev. And while he describes Andropov as incorruptible, this portrait does not correspond to the "godfather of perestroika" image that gained widespread circulation in the West. Arbatov laments Andropov's leading the KGB during the era of re-Stalinization (unfortunately, without providing details), and is particularly critical of Andropov's prominent role in several of the Soviet Union's major foreign policy blunders. Andropov was an enthusiastic supporter of the deployment of the SS-20 missiles in Eastern Europe, a measure that had the unforeseen effect of cementing the

Atlantic Alliance at a time when dividing Europe from America was a principal goal of Soviet policy. Arbatov also blames Andropov, along with Defense Minister Dmitri Ustinov, as principally responsible for the invasion of Afghanistan.

There are also worthwhile descriptions of the operation of the propaganda-censorship apparatus. For instance, the memoirs of Marshal Zhukov, the World War II hero, were rewritten to delete any reference to Stalin's purge of the Red Army High Command. Arbatov chillingly recounts how he himself was humiliated by the Red Army brass for voicing mild criticisms of some of the more blatant falsifications in a history of the Great Patriotic War. Would that there had been more material of this sort and less typically overblown Soviet rhetoric about peace and the fate of mankind and Arbatov's service on the Palme Commission on nuclear disarmament.

One also wishes he had elaborated on his views of America. Clearly, his grasp of the realities of American politics was distorted not simply by the limitations imposed by the Soviet political environment, but also by Arbatov's self-image as a

man of the international left. His recourse to phrases like "extreme right" and "military-industrial complex" seem out of place in the post-Cold War era, and suggest a genuine lack of understanding of the popular basis of anti-Communism. He is not, of course, alone in this failure; much the same charge could be leveled against the Western politicians and businessmen who served as Arbatov's informants about life in the real world. Arbatov's description of West German neutralist Egon Bahr as "one of the most outstanding political minds of our time" suggests that one reason the Soviets never understood America is that much of their information about America was provided by Westerners harboring strongly anti-American views.

The System has been awarded generally favorable reviews, not surprising given Arbatov's friendship with some of the reviewers. Few have seen fit to puzzle out the breathtaking flexibility Arbatov has exhibited while serving under such diverse leaders as Leonid Brezhnev, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Boris Yeltsin. They prefer to see Arbatov as an honest man doing his part in a dishonest system. Which is precisely as Arbatov would want it. □

AMERICAN ENERGIES: ESSAYS ON FICTION

Sven Birkerts

William Morrow / 413 pages / \$25

reviewed by M. D. CARNEGIE

In 1919, roughly a decade past the month she affixed as the moment the human character changed, Virginia Woolf published her essay "Modern Fiction," in which she averred that fiction writers, long hemmed in by the trivial stuff of the material, now stood before a horizon of limitless possibility: the human mind. She had been reading *Ulysses*, which was then appearing in installments in the *Little Review*. She

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found it wanting, and wondered rhetorically if it were not so that "in any effort of such originality it is much easier, for contemporaries especially, to feel what it lacks than to name what it gives." Nevertheless she marked what she had seen of it as cause to wax sanguine about the future of the novel, which now had the potential to be a total document of consciousness—to unwind the scroll of memory, to catch the sounds of time's pass. "Record the atoms as they fall upon the mind," Woolf exhorted her colleagues:

"The proper stuff of fiction" does not exist. Everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss. And if we can imagine the art of fiction come alive and standing in our midst, she would undoubtedly bid us break her and bully her, as well as honour and love her, for so her youth is renewed and her sovereignty assured.

It is not only at three-quarters of a century's distance that the rhetoric seems hypertrophied. T.S. Eliot believed the novel had died with Flaubert and Henry James, and said so. Ortega y Gasset maintained that the genre's subject matter had been mined well beyond the point of fruitful yield. As the novelty of earlier subjects diminished, readers' tastes grew more rarified: there was an ineluctable evolution toward audience boredom and implacability. It was not for nothing, Ortega quipped, that the novel was called "novel."

In his first book, *An Artificial Wilderness* (1987), Sven Birkerts maintained that, contrary to the corner's reports, fiction was alive and well and living in—well, living virtually everywhere except the United States. Literature worthy of the name was still being forged abroad, emanating from "cultures that feel, or have recently felt, the sharp pressure of history." Birkerts held that writers little-known in this country—like Thomas Bernhard and Michel Tournier—were crafting solid works from the old materials and on the grand themes: want, terror, the ubiquity of evil. In contradistinction to their gravity, the native product was so much unbearable lightness: John Barth was a purveyor of "self-consuming metafiction," Raymond Carver of a "numb affectlessness," Mailer and Capote of "docu-fiction."

American Energies is a less satisfying collection, not least because, as the title implies, Birkerts attempts a volte-face. After having given us, in *An Artificial Wilderness*, a rough map of the world's literature on which his countrymen populated only the narrowest and most desolate islands, he is hard pressed to convince that the recent years of our nation's fictioneering are indicative of anything remotely like "energy." (If Barth and Mailer are ultimately disappointing, what's to be made of J. California

Cooper?) The preface tries bravely to patch over the inconsistencies—Birkerts tells us the manuscript was for a time called "The Death of the American Novel"—but apostasy is likely as not to be an embarrassing spectacle, and by the end of it we find ourselves reading that the present book is best thought of not as a diptych, but as a funnel. The moment, shall we say, is Spinal Tap—ean.

In "Backgrounds," the book's first section, the twaddle becomes a source of real irony. For just as Birkerts forsakes the metaphor of the diptych for the funnel, or the artistic for the merely utilitarian, he begins this collection of essays on fiction with a group of pieces on non-fiction. It is a mistake. Birkerts's obvious knack for tracing the veins of the essential in a novel stalls in the three-dimensional world, and at times he keels over into puffery and bathos. Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature* is an elegy for "everyone." *USA Today*, as if life imitated art theory, is upgraded from newspaper to "postmodern collage of the world." And in a review of Terry Teachout's *Beyond the Boom*, Birkerts seems to find no evidence that a group of young conserva-

tives might perchance be exercising proper, or even independent, judgment:

Was the Aquarian project of social liberation—misguided as it was in some ways—so offensive, so terrifying to the generation just coming up? If so, then we older boomers ended up destroying our deepest ideals. We chased away all spirit, spontaneity, enthusiasm, and experiment, and left in our wake a new way of being young—a way that formerly belonged just to the embittered old.

Lament for the Aquarian informs the book's second section and center of gravity, "American Fiction." Here Birkerts dives into the fray surrounding the novel's future and emerges somewhat wet. Two major essays use as a springboard Tom Wolfe's broadside, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel." Wolfe, like his homophonous colleague in the department of manifesto, is wise to the game of self-declaration. We find him advocating a new kind of novel much like the kind of novel he has recently penned. The essay, published in *Harper's* a couple of years ago and oft-

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discussed since, chastised writers for leaving reality to the journalists and rebutted recent laments, like Philip Roth's, that the real world had become hyperreal, daily discharging in the news figures that dwarf those born of the novelistic imagination. Nonsense, cried Wolfe, the world of the real was ready and waiting to be novelized, if only there could be mustered sufficient notebook-toting Zolas for the task.

Birkerts disagrees, in part because he believes Roth's claim extends beyond the extraordinary characters in the news to include a "shattering of the context that might explain them":

The real has become surreal. Some bonding element in the social order has crumbled away, shivering our picture of public life into fragments. Watergate long ago proved that the social contract was a tissue of lies and evasions, and that government ran on fear and self-interest; assassinations pointed to the retributive violence alive in the American heart. All heroism leaked out of political life, and with it all confidence in solid goals and purposes. The strain of counter-culture solidarity that had run through the liberal-democratic part of the culture gave way to narcissistic self-protection.

Literary criticism has become surreal, perhaps, when the Trickster is held culpable for the crappy novels coming over the transom.

As is often the case in the compassionate soul, individual failures of achievement are blamed on everyone and everything but the individual. Instead of bad novelists we have bad conditions for the novel. It is not a document of reality we need, Birkerts avers, but rather novels that have in their vision a loss of confidence in reality, the vague dread he believes endemic to our age. He adjudges only Pynchon, DeLillo, and Robert Stone as successes in this regard, because they are "paranoids" who have rendered the modern American soul in chiaroscuro. The future of the novel rests in uncovering "the black hole at the heart of the contemporary."

When he trades the spray-paint can of manifesto for the ball-point of reflection, however, Birkerts is one of the better critics. His genealogy of the larger trends

may be a little screwy, but his readings of particular books and authors rarely err, and the essays in the book's final section, "American Writers," display the crisp style that made the first collection such a pleasure.

Birkerts's sense of the state of modern fiction is nowhere more evident than in his decision to end the book with a piece on David Foster Wallace. Wallace, let me proclaim in the spirit of manifesto, is by quite a long chalk the finest writer under 30 in the nation. His work is Woolf's map of the subjective submerged in Wolfe's external reality. It is without paranoia; it simply exists in the benumbed realm of the audiovisual, and is at once hilarious and disturbing as hell. Wallace's selection as final author in the book hints that Birkerts may recognize that he is wrong about his own prescrip-

tions to restore American fiction to vitality. As Birkerts writes, "Wallace's stories are as startling and barometrically accurate as anything in recent decades . . . [he] is, for better or worse, the savvy and watchful voice of the *now*." He goes on:

Between Wolfe and Wallace, we find ourselves in a strange bind. If fiction is to win and hold a readership, it will probably have to move Wolfe's way. But the new social novel does not hold much of the truth about the changed conditions of our subjective lives . . . the man—or woman—hunched over coffee in the mall. . . . Where shall we get the picture of who we are?

One hopes Sven Birkerts will use his talents to address this question thoroughly, and this question only, next time around. □

POPULISM AND ELITISM: POLITICS IN THE AGE OF EQUALITY

Jeffrey Bell

Regnery Gateway / 190 pages / \$21.95

reviewed by WILLIAM TUCKER

This is a book that I have been looking forward to reading for years. For at a time when it has become possible to talk about a universal sociology, social scientists are mired in the past, still thinking in terms of "class conflict" between rich and poor. Academia trudges on, assembling the evidence of how business elites "exploit the masses"—without ever addressing the fact that they themselves are a rival elite, trying to work out their own system of exploitation.

Jeffrey Bell gives us a completely different paradigm: of history as a chess game between "the people" and various elites. The vast majority of people embody a common sense that makes self-government possible, while elite

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opinion has quirky desires and values that rarely coincide with those of the majority. Thus, politics becomes the competition among elites to conform most closely to mainstream opinion. In the end, says Bell, populism always wins, but only after detours and derailments.

Until the American revolution, elites ruled everywhere through force or fear, perpetuating themselves through various rules of succession. Today, no group can rule a nation without presenting at least the *pretext* that their actions reflect the "will of the people." Yet because democracy operates almost everywhere through representative government, the people must choose members of one or another elite to lead them. Only Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who wanted the whole world to be split into self-sufficient cantons, was willing to confront