Mapping the New Reality

If the novel is, in Stendhal’s words, a mirror moving along a highway, what is the fate of the novel in our time, when highways are turning “smart” and electronic gadgetry defines the fabric of human communication? Depicting our elusive reality may prove impossible, but Sven Birkerts here lance the efforts of some of America’s more daring novelists.

by Sven Birkerts

It has become a tiresome subject, and I feel more than a little perverse bringing it up. Still, there is more to be said—much more—so let me begin. American fiction, the genre, is in the muddle, I specify “genre” because the problem does not have to do so much with the individual works, which are various and often excellent, but with the form itself. And to contain the generalizing impulse, if only slightly: I will specify still further: It is the American novel that is in the muddle.

How can I say this? How can I at one and the same time suggest that there is a shortage of worthy works and express concern for the art? In the same way, I suppose, that one can point to the large numbers of affluent citizens in this country and still assert that the economy is in trouble. It is a question of the big picture, the center, it involves the disorientation that every serious novelist must feel when he or she tries to get a fix on the meaning or worth of the novelist’s enterprise. Simply, there is a pervasive and numbingly distancing sense of disavowal on the part of reader and writer alike of an attenuating communication. The reader no longer expects to encounter a challenging vision of life as it is really experienced, and the writer is no longer sure how to present an encompassing and relevant picture of things as they are. The ink on the old contract is fading.

This is not a new or sudden development. My sense is that the current condition has been several decades in the making. As far back as the 1960s we heard laments that the American novel was exhausted, finished; that it had moved into minor and academic modes, had divorced itself from political and social realities, and so on. Indeed, these plaints came at a time when other literatures—Latin American and Eastern European, especially—were burgeoning. We heard the same song with slightly different words during the 1970s and 1980s, when minimalism and the avant-garde became the fad. In a famous 1976 essay, "Plastic Poetry," Cory Miller lamented that novels had become mere "teaching tools, artifacts suiting the formaldehyde in a classroom."

The celebration of this disaffection was reached two years ago, when Tom Wolfe launched his widely discussed broadside, "The Bonfire of the Vanities," and other writers could help themselves to the same well.

Though I was wrong about the solution—and I hope my reasons for saying so will emerge shortly—I was, I think, right about the problem, which is a problem of representation. How to render in words a convincing picture of reality? The answer, also, is not to call for more representation. It is reality that has changed. And the problem is that to this day the aesthetic identity of the American novel remains largely tethered to the basic premises of 19th-century realism. Though a few brave souls have made a go at incorporating modernist approaches—including fragmented or multiple narratives, many subnarratives, ambitious referentiality, and the like—the majority have stayed with the staple conventions of realism. Whether this is owing to some peculiar vogue for the collective creative disposition or is simply a reflection of the demands of the marketplace—give people what they want or risk failure—is hard to say. But the fact remains that even now, in the early 1990s, our fiction is overwhelmingly realistic in approach. Whatever other ambitions we may have, the principal means are a development of credibility, invented characters, and a narrative that would simulate a seemingly coherent exterior order.

This is not, in itself, a problem. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with the realist procedure, and in skilled hands the results can still be persuasive. The problem lies elsewhere. It lies in the fact that our common reality has gradually grown out of the reach of the realist’s instruments. We live in a late-20th century lives less and less in the four-square world of surfaces and bounded events that realism evolved to depict. Our business is increasingly with a new experimental hybrid. We live among signals and impulses and processes that our language has a hard time capturing. Our consciousness is mapped to a new field, and the contours of that field are determined by the way we spend our days. We don’t talk of the social but over the phone—"we," we leave messages on..."
machines and check in to see if our messages have been returned. Our professional lives are likewise stiffer than ever before. The distance between us, both on the phone and in person, is vast. We all talk on automatic lines with buttoned-up voices that are cold and distant. This is a symptom of our disconnection from the world around us.

Dinner? Often as not, we sit in the microwave, before checking back for a well-deserved night in front of the VCR. If we were to have a conversation, it’s to drive home a point: that the ambient drift of our daily lives is not exactly inviting for the novelist. We’re tired, we’re not dyed. An accurate depiction of our doings would involve interminable descriptions of downtime—wasteful and dull—stuffed with talk show reruns.

What I’m saying is not new or revolutionary, though I don’t hear it verbalized all that often. Way back in 1961, in an essay entitled “Mass Society and Post-Modern Fiction,” Irving Howe quoted the critic Stanley Kauffman:

“When Wimmen de Sex was asked why so many of his films dealt with adultery, he said he had to answer, ‘If you take adultery out of the lives of the bourgeoisie, what drama is left?’ It is the continuing dilemma of the contemporary writer who looks for great emotional issues to move him greatly. The anguish of the ad- vancing generation is not enough to move him. But his possibilities in art are not too large. The writer who writes about sex has figured out to keep his job is a faggot. But is the possibility is not large.

This was written nearly 30 years ago. Urban life and advertising in our lives have been supplemented by the rampant incursions of labor-saving technologies and electronic communications. The problem of the

writer who would represent the world and do so with some artistic tension has become all but insurmountable. It will only intensify as we march deeper into late-modern times and the world of the real stuff of our daily experience. John Updike is one of the very few, and it is precisely for this that his last novel is important: It is a kind of "limb text" for the contemporary realist.

And the others, those who lack Updike’s special dedicatory gifts? Most of their novels have taken some of the available paths indicated by Kauffman. They are seen to one side of another of the great challenge—to find a shape for the experiences and sensibilities of our historical context in order to find a way to tell a satisfying story. And while many have succeeded, it is fiction itself that has paid a price. Fiction is now just an adjunct to the cultural life, an entertainment or a private vice. It is no longer the powerful medium of exploration and reflection that it used to be. And this is a shame.

The much-maligned movement of minimalism may have been the first real signal of the crisis in the genre. What was, or is, distinctive about minimalism, apart from its formalistic attention to the breakdown specific of our social environment? The use of the gas, the minimalists like Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, Frederick Barthelme, and Bobbie Ann Mason have a way of abruptly cutting from one rendered moment or situation to some completely different scene, in order to create emphasis or suggestiveness to absent or omitted material. It seems clear now that this was a logical first reaction to the excessive and random-telling materials of modern life. The plan was to impede the presence of these great spaces and the obvious spells of distraction—without trying to pin them down. We should note, by the way, the difference between the pristine minimalism of Ann Beattie and the lacquered representations of a Hemingway. For the latter, the unadorned was a solid presence, a firm ground on which to stand and a complex of emotions to be avoided. He knew, and we know, what was being left out. For Beattie, in her essays, the minimization becomes a way of not dealing with that which could not be dealt with—the thousand and one shades of a narrative that may not have existed 50 or 100 years ago.

Minimalism, for all the excitement it generated in the workshop communities of the 1970s and 1980s, failed with readers. Although it did catch something of the "real" of contemporary experience, it offered no purchase. It did not clarify life in the least but simply added its impressions of modishness to the middle class we already were living in.

At the opposite pole we have the much-maligned conclusion of the "Kabib" tetralogy. Updike appeared to exist in the challenge he had set himself: to make the unremarkable material of our present resonate with significance. And to a remarkable degree, he succeeded, though the power and presence of Radiation at first leaves us from his evocations of the present and much more from their constant, often implicit, contrast to the way things used to be. Kabib's aesthetic for our era is mighty in what makes him a poet:

Rabbit feels betrayed. He was raised in a world where war was not strange but change was the world stood still so you could grow up in it. He knows when the bomb fell out and when they closed the Krell’s that had stood in the center of Brewer all those years, bigger than a church, and the courthouse, right at the head of Welier Square there with every Christmas those otherwomen displace of circling trees and nodding stars and twirling stars in the corner windows as if God Himself put them there is light, the darkest time of the year.

The novel has been annexed, but from an inside, a move from the interior and of Rabbit's private rue at what is gone. The present has not been carried, for its own sake, into the

areas of representation.

So the irony that we are back with the options as set out by Stanley Kauffman in the early 1960s. Most serious American novels fall into a very few categories. Of course, each category is vital in its own way, but each also represents a strategic way of avoiding head-on confrontation with the world as it is. Now—and I jump in ahead of myself—I do not mean to suggest that rural or small-town settings are not part of the here and now or that family relationships are not universally contemporary. But I do believe that there are other energies and currents that we all understand as more essentially of our moment. These tangential and elusive components of our zeitgeist are what pose the problem. They have everything to do with our present situation and what is likely to arise from it. They are largely missing from the novels of our most distinguished writers.
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when I am disturbed and battled by the alien structures I glimpse from the rear window, or on the picture of life I assemble from evening news, these are not the writers I am thinking of. For me the news is a world of screens and information packs, a population ever more distracted from its cultural roots, ever more alien to our crime rate, ever more estranged from the politics of death. No longer does the problem of social meaning exist, or the meaning of an individual existence in a future that promises to be shaped by the spirit of collective unconscious.

In a very real sense, then, our fiction is in retreat, and we have every reason to wonder if authors can, or will, find ways to connect the reader with the dominant forces of the age, most of which threaten our public and private myths of coherence. So long as they do not—or do so only in small numbers—our literature must stand removed from the center of relevance, it must be counted minor.

But of course there are exceptions, which, when considered together, give us some warning for imagining a different future for our fiction, a more meaningful one. These are the number of writers who have taken the challenge of representing contemporary experience more honestly, and whose art points toward the future in ways that their less cultivated peers do not.

The problem, as I have suggested, is not to disentangle the features of present-day reality from the pure—-the narratives accomplished in their way—but to determine those features and give them some measure of thematic necessity, to defeat the centrifugal tendency of our period. This is our task.

In this, a disturbing and straining kind of struggle to keep his job, begins to take on the qualities of the advertising scene, as straining to keep the visual appeal of the image of the past. The crisis and destruction of our age are such that even the gloves of the advertising scene are struggling to keep its job, to make a viable and marketed vision. The consumer, in turn, is forced to deal with forces that have no clear definition of its contours. The novelists we have to classify have adopted several different strategies for getting the consumer to buy into two groups.

In the first grouping are the novelists whose work, usually described as apocalyptic, is not only a productive force but also a principle of social distance. These are the novelists who in their work, against the prevailing winds of our culture, have created an alternative world of their own. Their art is the result of an intuitive understanding of the world, and a desire to create a new kind of reality.

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These novelists, including writers such as John le Carré, Graham Greene, and Iris Murdoch, have created a world that is at once a reflection of our times and a departure from it. Their work is characterized by a sense of urgency and a desire to create a new kind of reality.

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sea dives into the incredible... which is always rendered with just enough cool poise to give the political double-dealing of his Fordian-Vendome-Frenzel Games an edge at the limit of the credible, but on this side... his organization of death-loving. This is to say, the border of the characters, is nonetheless on the other side of the border. The task of setting out the line belongs to the reader. It is an apprenticeship in finding the "middle ground.""

Space and Maller engage the hidden hierarchies of power more directly and via an uncompromisingly straightforwardly realistic means. Both have a strong grip on the concrete particulars of bureaucratic process and a shrewd sense of how the individual functions psychologically when confused, compromised, or in some other way tested to the limit. Stone, I would say, is more intent upon revealing the evil fundamentals of power systems and is showing just how the hapless are victimized. Maller, though known as an outspoken critic of recent administration policies, is nonetheless more ambivalent. He finds in the complex deceptions and inflations of the CIA a subject worthy of his favored "existential" themes, but time and again his fascination blends over into something able to hero-venerate. Nevertheless, like Stone, and unlike DeLillo and Pynchon, Maller would appear to believe that some sort of ultimate sense can be derived from the whole business. As Harriet the Great ends with the words "TO BE CONTINUED..." however, this assessment must remain provisional.

These power systems, variously interpreted, blend together the dense scattered structure of our "parallel" novelists. While not identified explicitly (the system's complexity and reach prohibit it), they nevertheless form the backdrop against which all subsidiary activities and exchanges take on a relief. Whether this paranoia is justified or not— for one believes in its existence, is a matter of function. It sponsors a literature that, if read seriously, cuts against our growing sense of social political inconceivable. It may not make the case for itself, but it certainly helps in explaining it.

The other promising trend—if it is a trend at all—can be called "the" text of separate works by idiosyncratic talents is com-

posed of those writers who do not so much seek to provide a picture of the present as to understand an understanding of it through the mass of the work. Rather, it has been put in the service of his novelistic imaginacation as a whole, which has carried him from Nazi Germany in The Very Rich Hours of Count Karl Straussberg (1980), to post-war Paris in Rat Man of Paris (1986), to Victorian London in The Woman of Whitechapel and Jack the Ripper (1991). His works are not lightly parcelled but are grouped and held within from the start. The Jack the Ripper novel, for example, is a true of information about surgical practice, Victorian aesthetics, and prostitution...

While he is at ease with concepts, however, West's real intelligence is stylistic. He is one of a very few novelists committed to the project of transplanting the densities of consciousness into prose. In his way, West is keeping the Joycean tradition viable. He treats consciousness itself as a subject, and this straightforward way makes his endeavors relevant to the present. Here, from Jack the Ripper: Edward Rutherfurd, whose ambitions for creating success appear to be somewhat at odds with his appetite for prostitutes:

For several years now, fixed onto innumerable by having an English guitarist speak to women after a performance, he had been publishing and practicing his skills, the "pros"—the spontaneous and unplanned, the "essays"—. The novel has, for another... is this linked—their proof that the novel can successfully escape the subject of conventional plotting and take stock of diverse planes of reality, including the inward. They keep the gener,

open, to the currents of serious discourse. The novel's success and formal success, may yet pave the way for the great synthesizing works of the future.

And on and on he goes, not so much making thought about as discriminations of behavior and its replication, creating mental atmospheres, weather systems of language. West's verbal range and the demands placed upon our attention by syntax, as well as what results in sustained interiority, qualify him, loosely, for the category of an intellectual novelist.

Norman Rush fills his pages with a far greater density of references for the intellectually astute to register with a shock of "now familiar. His grand tour of the world, The Match (1991), features an impaired narrator with impressive strategies of bringing her wit and learning to bear on her narrative. Her idiom is itself a kind of modernity, with its references, sides, and incongruous modulations. Colloquially with her lover in an experimental village in Botswana, she is not to put words in his mouth."

There were the tenth of the world being, pretty much on the sly: Logan's, Toronto, etc. They evolved a fair decent models, I thought. He might say, who was the author. Also, the synch... Whereas, oh, a report from the interior, as though he were an abbot or a monkish...
Why a Bill of Rights Is Not Enough

Talk about rights has never been more in the air, and not only because last December marked the 200th anniversary of the ratification of the U.S. Bill of Rights. Throughout the world, among the many emerging democracies, lawmakers are struggling to formulate new constitutions, and foremost among their concerns is the protection of citizens' freedoms. Even one of the world's oldest democracies, the United Kingdom, is today debating whether to adopt a written constitution, including a bill of rights. Chief Justice William Rehnquist here offers a timely reminder that guarantees of rights are meaningless—without an independent judiciary.

by William H. Rehnquist

We who have lived through the recent furor surrounding the bicentennial of America's Bill of Rights may find it odd that the centennial of 1891 passed with virtually no ceremony and little if any recognition. Newspapers and periodicals, including the New York Times and the Washington Post, made no mention of the anniversary.