

The Post-Modern American Novel

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Since 1950, the American novel has undergone a subtle and almost unnoticed change; there has been a break in the continuity of tradition. Before World War Two, writers like Ernest Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe could be placed by cultural historians into categories, and literary antecedents could be found: Mark Twain for Hemingway, for instance, or Walt Whitman for Wolfe. But since the war, or perhaps more accurately, since the Bomb, a kind of novel has appeared which is entirely different from the main, and even from the minor or eccentric, traditions.

True, the influence of Hemingway can be seen clearly (though in a much diluted and brutalized form) in the hard-boiled detective novel, and Thomas Wolfe has had much to do with the pose and prose of Jack Kerouac and James Jones. But the most significant works of writers like Steinbeck, Dos Passos, Hemingway and Wolfe had all been completed by the end of the war.

Since then, there have been no novelists of their stature. Nonetheless, there have been some writers of promise: James Gould Cozzens (*By Love Possessed*), Herman Wouk (*The Caine Mutiny*), Paul Bowles (*The Sheltering Sky*), Frederick Buechner (*A Long Day's Dying*), Norman Mailer (*The Naked and the Dead*, *The Deer Park*), and J. D. Salinger (*The Catcher in the Rye*). Both Cozzens and Wouk had relatively unnoticed pre-war careers. Indeed, their post-war careers were largely due to the political climate; each of them wrote non-experimental narratives in a reactionary, conservative, narrowly authoritarian tone during the McCarthy era. Novelists like Paul Bowles and Frederick Buechner were too esoteric, strained and mannered to contribute meaningfully to a living art form.

But none of these were writers of the same stature as Hemingway or Wolfe. And even though one could trace Hemingway and Wolfe back to earlier writers in the American tradition, they retained an interiority, an essential quality of their own. It is a unique quality which can be parodied or imitated, but never equalled.

Almost every year, a new writer is unveiled, a nimbus of breathy advertising blurbs surrounding him, and he is launched on a career which is 'promising' having written the 'greatest novel since *Ulysses*'. All of this has the overtones of the carefully planned and well-produced activism surrounding the unveiling of the latest example of Detroit Baroque. There is the same charade of suspense, the same straining to be one up on the other models, the same tortured lexical overtures in criticism ('thunder-torque', 'thrust' and 'roadability' could almost be terms used by a New Critic). One can carry the analogy on through a season and see the lately-touted works in their respective graveyards at the end of the year: the second-hand lot and the publisher's remainder table. The situation might be amusing were it not for the very real danger of missing the small individual voice of quality in all the uproar.

Norman Mailer's literary career, which really began after World War Two, offers a curiously exact picture of the past decade's intellectual currents and a perfect example of the effects of high-pressure advertising methods on an art form. From a melange of proto-Freudianism, anti-Hemingway Courage Test and warmed-over Thirty's Pacifism, which also contained some of the best writing about the war (*The Naked and the Dead*), to a kind of aimless but chilling Grand Hotel of the McCarthy era (*Barbary Shore*) to a Hollywood invaded by Congressional investigators, homosexuals, sadistic producers—all of whom thwart the artistic directors and idealistic bright young men who want to Write—(*The Deer Park*) and finally to the extremism and near-hysteria of the Beat Generation (*The White Negro*), Mailer has maintained a faithful reflection of literary progress in the United States: from a rejection of Lost Generation ancestors to an espousal of anti-intellectualism. Any major statement about Mailer's status as an artist might be made in terms of this reflection: one is never conscious of any critical distance in Mailer's attitude towards his subjects. Perhaps it is that tricky and weasel word 'compassion' that trips him up. He is, in his own new argot, too much 'with it'. Mailer is a victim of his times. Besides his penchant for being 'with it', he was highly touted by the critics, who expected great things of him, and he had a wide-spread popular success. One could postulate that he tried to live up to both. The sad truth is that no one *could* live up to the expectations aroused by the advertising blurbs.

Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) is a kind of thematic forerunner of the novelists I have designated as 'post-modern'. However, Salinger's link with the literary traditions of the past is clearly seen: the

shadow of Mark Twain lies heavily across this book. Holden Caulfield is brother to Huck Finn, both in their natural and easy use of colloquial vernacular and in their search for love in an adult world that gives nothing but the violation of love. This literary continuity makes me, somewhat arbitrarily, I admit, exclude Salinger from the 'post-modern' writers.

To my knowledge, though, there are four writers who are carefully going their own individual ways, seeking to perfect their art aloof from, or in spite of, the vicious conditions of publishing in the United States. They are William Gaddis, John Griffin, William Styron and James Purdy. They seem to me to be creating works which are original in a radical sense. When I said that a kind of novel had appeared since 1950 which differed sharply from the novels before that date, I was thinking of the work of these men.

I should say, at this juncture, that I by no means suggest a category into which I can neatly squeeze the four of them, I make no brief for a 'school' or a 'generation'. But there are correspondences among them: first of all, they are technically innovative, impressively original and competent in style; for early attempts showing a maturity far beyond what one would expect from beginning writers. Secondly, there are thematic similarities. All are involved with the theme of violated love in our modern world, with the rejection of others and the ultimate death of the self because of that rejection.¹ And all are concerned with the theme of the search for a father—both a literal father, a home, a source of creative love and life, and a symbolic father; a source of certitude.

Styron's characters search for authority, for truth, and in *Lie Down in Darkness*, for instance, quite literally for a father. Purdy's *Malcolm* searches for his father, who has apparently abandoned him. Griffith's heroes go through agonies of self-exploration to find the lost Father, a lost paradise. In Gaddis' *The Recognitions*, Wyatt's father, a minister, searches for God the Father, moving ever backwards in his search, back through earlier and more primitive forms of worship and finally ending in Mithraism and sun worship. Wyatt, rejected in the course of this search, wanders his lonely world searching for certainty and finding only facades and empty promises. There is, consequently, a common tone in the words of the four: a feeling of spiritual isolation, a tone of anguished loneliness.

But I have sensed this tone of loss and isolation in most contemporary

¹It was for this reason that I called *The Catcher in the Rye* a thematic fore-runner.

works; it is found by no means only in the writers I have indicated here. It is a paradox of our jet-connected age. As men come closer together technologically, they move further apart and become more isolated in their art forms. One can, however, resolve the paradox: as our complexity grows, as we grow more subtle and sophisticated, we end in an agonizing awareness of others. The closer we come to others, the more we know that knowledge of that other complex being is difficult.

William Styron's first novel, *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951) was a study of the girl, Peyton Loftus, whose family denied her love. Her mother, self-involved and obsessively concerned with the crippled and retarded daughter Maudie (who ironically is the only character in the book to find love—which might be a symptom of subsurface anti-intellectualism) has sent Peyton's father into a liaison with another woman and into an alcoholic fog of self-pity. As Peyton vainly searches for love and for a father, she finds only an increasing isolation and a gradual drying up of her spirit. She ends by leaping from a window to her death. She had to climb or rise up in order to lie down in darkness—the darkness of death.

The chief images in the book cluster around two opposites which are symbolized in the clock and the bird. The bird is what Peyton can never be: far-soaring, integral, free. The clock is a machine, and people who are unloved become machines. Who was responsible for Peyton's death? One might posit this question as the crux of the book. But Styron's delicate unravelling of the tangle of cross-purposes and dark motive makes us conclude that the guilt cannot be laid on any one person. Styron, in showing us a world where human responsibility is continually rejected, shows us the multiple consequences of this initial renunciation of responsibility.

In *The Long March* (1953), Styron created an allegory of responsibility and authority. On the surface, it is the story of a forced march in a Marine training camp in the early 1950's. But on a deeper level, on a metaphoric level, it can be read as an initiation into a way of living, where we accept authority simply because it is authority, and where our survival depends on our acceptance, not only of ourselves as we are and of our potentialities, but because of our position on the razor's edge in the cold war.

In his richly figured and complex studies of the peculiar and anguished position of man in the world, burdened with uneasy freedom and terrible responsibility, Styron creates an ironic labyrinth of cross-purposes, love offered and ignored, missed chances, mistakes, lost opportunities. He is almost strident in his insistence on acceptance—

especially on man's acceptance of his own flawed nature. In *Set This House on Fire* (1960) Cass Kinsolving, after living through successive levels of an alcoholic Hell has achieved a hard and agonizing truth:

'... as for being and nothingness, the only thing I did know was that to choose between them was simply to choose being, not for the sake of being, or even the love of being, much less the desire to be forever—but in the hope of being what I could be for a time'

This is a meagre sort of conclusion, to be sure. But in Styron's grim picture of a world gone mad and insular, where we all wander like displaced persons, it is enough for the awful eternity of now.

In this third novel, Styron continues his investigation of the fate of love and the self in a rapidly narrowing world. All is developed in Faulknerian 'cyclic' flashbacks: a slowly evolving configuration is finally seen as parts of shade are brought into light and the past weaves into the present and on into the future. The important point, we begin to realize, is not who committed a crime or why a crime was committed. The point is, that Cass, like all of us, must learn to live with his guilt and with himself.

Styron's fictional world is remarkably akin to the world which William Gaddis creates in his first and, to date, only novel. Gaddis spent seven years writing his massive, ambitious novel, *The Recognitions* (1955). It concerns itself with the question of human interrelationships, with love, or rather, the lack of it in our world, and with the spiritual aridity caused by a mass rejection of others. As Stuart Gilbert put it:

'(it) is a vast and devastating picture of the world that the powers-that-be have doomed us to live in: Mr Eliot's Waste Land was only a small corner of the wilderness so observantly and successfully explored by Mr Gaddis'

A short time after its publication, it was mysteriously withdrawn from the shelves by the publishers, who printed an equally mysterious and almost abject public apology in a trade paper. The novel found its way to remainder tables and is now out of print.

It has a large cast of characters, all whirling in insular orbits which move close but seldom touch. One predominating theme is that of forgery. There is Wyatt, the gifted painter who forges old masters for Basil Valentine, the corrupt art critic who 'discovers' them. There is Otto, who searches for his father and for himself, and unconsciously forges personalities for himself. There is Agnes Deigh (*sic*) who tries to run from her true self, and Anselm the blasphemous poet who tries to

escape from God in broadsides of invective ('Here's your salvation! Cheap, sanitary, comfortable'), and Mr Sinisterra, a conventional forger, who creates money, passports, even a mummy. There are swarms of minor characters, all involved in the world-wide forgery of the self, creating the brittle masks that keep the self safe, comfortable and dead.

The ultimate irony is that there is no recognition. The inability to love, to cherish, or rather, the refusal to love, to 'give, sympathize, control' leads to the ultimate inability to recognize, not only others, but finally even one's self. The chief technical device is the cinematic cross-cut, expanding one moment in time, annihilating time and space for the purpose of showing the world frozen in attitudes and postures of hate, hypocrisy and despair. It is not an attractive world that Gaddis creates. But it is one which we recognize.

John Griffin's first novel, *The Devil Rides Outside*, creates a tension between evil and good, between flesh and spirit, despair and ecstasy and then throws an ironic cloak of ambiguity over the dichotomy. What is conventionally regarded as 'good' is epitomized by the ageing and pious Madame Renee; the conventional 'evil' is seen in Madame Vincent. But as we enter into the agony within the young narrator's soul, we begin to see that the conventional rôles are just that: conventions. Madame Renee is worldly, petty, vain, materialistic, sensual, suspicious. Her attempts to weave a net of intrigue, a mesh of smallness and easy comfort around the young man contrast sharply with not only the joyous piety of the monastery but with the sensuous carnality symbolized by Madame Vincent.

In conventional terms, 'sin' and 'fornication' are equated. But Griffin brings us to a sharp realization that the ultimate sin is the proud insular shutting off of the self—it is the sin of rejecting love. Madame Renee is a more terrible sinner than Madame Vincent, whose sin after all springs from a mistaken notion of love. Madame Vincent's sin is a misjudgement of means, not of ends.

In his second novel, *Nuni* (1956), Griffin pushes his exploration of the self even further. An English professor is abruptly thrust into a primitive pre-intellectual society on a Pacific island where his masks and rôles mean nothing. It is a kind of derisive reversal of the Robinson Crusoe plot—where man conquers his environment because he is a product of Western civilization, and hence superior. Here, in *Nuni*, the professor is peeled of his layers of role: professor, father, husband, civilized man, superficial Catholic. Finally we have the essential man, at the frontiers of the self. In the process of this sloughing off of the

accretions of his world, he loses other attributes too: fear, pride, nostalgia, sentiment, selfishness.

Reduced to extremities, rendered in the fire of his ordeal, the professor (or the *man*) rises above the murk of his elemental level to a new, freshened view of his life's meaning. He begins to see the true nature of love which he had lost in the concrete world he had left and almost lost again in the steaming jungles of Nuni. The book ends on this note of triumphant discovery with the man scratching 'Sunday' in the earth floor of his hut, because the day seems one of renewal and promise.

Unlike Paul Bowles, who makes a habit of placing civilized moderns in an atmosphere of primitive violence and atavism to show the thin veneer crack and the awful nothingness spill out, Griffin shows us the ultimate man, stripped of sham and sentiment, shorn of intellectual pretension and posture, deprived of comfort and the snug sleep of companions in humanity, forced back to the frontier of being, and finding only that which endures: love.

One of the first things which strikes the reader of James Purdy's *Malcolm* (1959) is the style: it is wild, burbling, heightened, extravagant. It might be called 'surrealistic' in the manner of Nathaniel West's *Dream Life of Balso Snell*, or it might be called expressionistic or Kafkaesque—it might be called by any number of critical terms which would squeeze the book into a category. An immediately perceived uniqueness is the disparity between the chapter titles and the sequence of events narrated in the afore-mentioned style. The titles are in the staid, nineteenth century tradition—'The Girards Call on Kermit', 'Madame Girard Confronts Eloisa'—but the action is in the bizarre, garish, neon-lit waste of modern times. This distance between the connotations of the chapter titles (the world of order, stability, Victorian peace (and what the characters *do*) motor-cyclists in the manner of James Dean, tattoo artists, fantastic midgets, drunken rich women, a singing 'star') creates a tone of immediate displacement in the reader.

The book has the quality of a film—not only in its cartoon-like hyperreality, but in the scenic presentation of the visible, with swift montaging from scene to scene and with the furiously speeded up action in the style of a Mack Sennet chase. It is not however, only the style, rich and comic as that is, that makes this a beguiling and unique work of art. It is the openness of the plot, or the multiple significance of the action. One can isolate a number of meanings.

Malcolm is a young boy of fifteen who is 'discovered' in the dramatic sense of that term, on a park bench in front of 'one of the most

palatial hotels in the world'. And this is one of the extravagant qualities of the style: everything is hyperbolic. Madame Girard is the richest woman in the world, Melba is the most famous singer in America, Professor Robinolte is the king of tattoo artists, and so on.

Malcolm is tentatively taken under the wing of Mr Cox, 'the most famous astrologer of his period' who gives him a list of addresses. As Malcolm meets the people at the addresses, he becomes initiated into the greater world. All alone, he lives in hope of finding his father again, the father who had unaccountably left him at the bench in front of the hotel. Malcolm meets only intrigue, lust, avarice, selfishness. At the end, tattooed and married to Melba, he sickens and dies, without ever finding his father. Malcolm, like Telemachus, searches for his father—or perhaps he searches for God. But he finds only society and people who want to possess or to use him. His death is the ironic result of finding what would be the American Success to some of his society: getting a tattoo, spending a night in a brothel, marrying the American Dream Girl. But Malcolm was initiated into the world, not into life. And his world was a world of self-death.

Purdy's novel is an open allegory. There is no one-to-one relationship between what happens and what is signified. First of all, there is a possible existential meaning. Malcolm, while uncommitted, is safe. When he becomes engaged with existence, he dies. (His earlier self dies. There is a hint at the end, that there is no body in the coffin, and rumours begin to circulate that Malcolm is alive and moving in more sophisticated circles). Besides this, the theme of innocence and experience underlies the story. In a mythic sense, Malcolm the innocent and uninitiated child must die, so that the man can be born. Paradoxically, it is evil (the child's death) that is good for the man. But over these meanings, there is the overpowering sense of what has happened to the verb 'to love' in modern times. Love has become, not a cherishing of another self, but a destructive and cannibalistic devouring. Like the counterfeiters in *The Recognitions*, self-love turns inverse and destructive and, even as the sharks in *Moby Dick*, the characters tear at themselves in their rage.

Thus in Gaddis, Styron, Griffin and Purdy, we see the isolation and death of those who cannot love, who cannot take on the responsibility of being human in a total sense, who delude themselves into thinking that their comfortable somnolence is life.

I have suggested several times, in this essay, that the break in the continuity of the genre might be due to the Bomb, or the cold war. There

is, at any rate, a gap in the transmission of sensibilities. Yesterday's world—the world of Cozzens and Wouk or of Hemingway and Wolfe—seems as lost and as fabled as a Currier and Ives print. These four post-modern writers find their roots in more cosmopolitan and esoteric sources than their immediate predecessors. Gaddis seems to owe more to Hieronymus Bosch than to Joyce; Styron and Griffin may have read John of the Cross more closely than Faulkner. And Purdy could have got his inspiration from the 'symbolic action' in a Mack Sennet film or from the comic strips, rather than from Melville's *Confidence Man*.

At any rate, it is a new and frightening world we live in, and these novelists help us to see it accurately, to find ourselves in it. Instead of escape, they offer confrontation.

Nuclear Deterrence by Bluff

NICHOLAS WHARTON

Probably very few people accept the 'political' arguments against British participation in the nuclear deterrent system; the arguments that British unilateral nuclear disarmament will encourage an Afro-Asian movement leading to multilateral disarmament, and that, whether or not the present Western deterrent is immoral, Britain is entitled to withdraw from it and expel its bases in order to cut down her risks in the event of war actually breaking out. But the traditional teaching of the Church on war and murder suggests to many Catholics that the deterrent system involves immoral risks and intentions, and must therefore be rejected on these grounds whatever the consequences may be. Now that this traditional teaching on war and murder is being clearly set out, fewer and fewer people will be able to hold that it is inapplicable to modern conditions. Yet, given this teaching, the current arguments from risks and intentions are still not strong enough to convince the majority who support nuclear deterrence. As the Revd. A. Kenny