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U.S. Fiction Today

The Turn Toward Realism

Mark Shechner

As recently as five years ago, if a graduate student of American literature were to write a dissertation on contemporary American fiction, the chances were overwhelming that the student would incline toward the writing of one of America's minorities, or women's fiction, or the leading "metafictional" writers, among whom were prominently numbered Donald Barthelme, John Barth, William Burroughs (the *eminence grise* of American metafiction), Robert Coover, William Gaddis, William Gass,

John Hawkes, and most especially Thomas Pynchon, who, in light of his difficulty, his verbal zest, his encyclopedic range of reference, his touch of paranoia, and his reclusiveness, was widely hailed as the standard-bearer of the movement. If American fiction had a forward surge that did not arise out of purely social imperatives—the women's movement or Black nationalism—surely metafiction was it.

Of course, there was a political slant to some metafictional writing (Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* was anything but an exercise in purely stylistic audacity) but, on the whole, it represented an avant garde rather than a popular front. Metafictional writing did not propose to transform society so much as the sensibilities of a select, literate few, who were privileged by education to have access to difficult texts. It did not call into question the political or economic order, but the solidity and knowability of reality itself, a posture that was cheered—as it is today—by those whose vision had been cleansed by the *imperium philosophicum* that descended on



André Derain

the academy in the 1970s. William Burroughs and Vladimir Nabokov were the patron saints of this new fiction, and it was hailed as being both technically radical and artistically visionary. It was *en avant*, promising not only more esoteric forms of literary pleasure, but the liberation of the spirit from all that was lock-step, linear, patriarchal, and especially bourgeois in the traditional novel.

Seen from the distant perspective of the 1990s, metafiction—a term sometimes used interchangeably with post-modernism—appears to have possessed little unity from book to book or author to author. It was certainly not a school, though writers, as they always do, took instruction from one another. It was not even really a tendency. Its unifying and defining feature, which permitted critics to treat a vast and disparate assortment of writers as a movement, was a uniformity of rejection, a turn against those qualities that earlier generations used to dignify with terms like "mimesis" or "naturalism" or "realism." Among practitioners see *U.S. Fiction Today*, page 12

INSIDE

- The Life in Still Life, page 3
- David Mason's *Buried Houses*, page 5
- Interview—J.H. Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere*, page 8
- Book Ends, page 9

Thoughts on the Abrams/Culler Exchange

Blindness and Paradox

Allen Wood

In the past decade or so, literary criticism has taken a highly theoretical (even philosophical) turn. Just as 20th-century art has been art about art, so in recent years literary critics have often concerned themselves less with what they have read than with philosophical theories about reading. These concerns are exemplified in M. H. Abrams' "What is a Humanistic Criticism?" (*Bookpress*, May 1993) and the responses to it by Jonathan Culler and Ted Underwood (*Bookpress*, Summer 1993).

Abrams writes in favor of "humanistic criticism," and against an "anti-humanist" criticism. The latter, which more often goes by the names "post-structuralist" or "post-modernist," is largely inspired by some recent French philosophy, in particular that of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. To a philosopher, of course, it is tempting to judge philosophical-

ly-inspired criticism by the philosophy that inspired it. But this temptation should be resisted, as Culler's article helps me to do. For just as great art has sometimes been inspired by intellectually worthless aesthetic theories, so some very original and stimulating literary criticism might be inspired by some very bad philosophy. Culler's strategy in defending what Abrams would call "anti-humanist" criticism is to devote a large part of his reply to bringing out the "inhuman" aspects of Robert Frost's short poem "The Secret Sits." The result is a practical demonstration that the style of criticism he favors can be insightful and productive.

This much, of course, Abrams never denied. His aim was to question the theory that motivates "anti-humanist" criticism, especially its intention to discredit any approach to literature that is "humanistic" in the sense of "dealing with literary works as products of human beings communicating with other human

beings about matters of human concern." That the philosophical theories he has in mind do have some such intention is clear enough. For the theorists say such things as that texts are products not of human beings but of "language" or "writing" in general, that the human author of a text is simply a site for the operation of "language" or "writing" or rhetorical tropes, or systems of power. These theories go far beyond Culler's more modest attempt to show that we can also learn something by attending to the "inhuman" (unintended, materially linguistic, communicatively disruptive) aspects of a text. They imply that to the extent that literary criticism focuses on the text as the meaningful communication of a human author to a human audience, it has fallen victim to fundamental philosophical illusions about what a literary text is and how it should be read.

Culler comes closest to responding directly to Abrams when he uses the Frost poem as a vehicle

see *Paradox*, page 4

Land of Little Rain

WHERE THE BLUEBIRD SINGS TO THE LEMONADE SPRINGS
Wallace Stegner
Penguin Books, 227 pages, \$11

Roland Shanks

One hundred years after the American historian, Frederick Turner, declared the Western American frontier closed, Wallace Stegner, in *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*, completed his fifty-year journey seeking to redefine the myth of the frontier. His great success was in shifting the focus of the Western myth from the men and women who peopled the land, to the land itself, and in so doing he has imbued the land with a numinous quality. The frontiersmen, cowboys, loggers, railroaders, fishermen, and sodbusters, with all their mythic qualities of rugged individualism, stoicism, and toughness, are shown to be merely players on the stage, shaped by and ultimately absorbed into the Western landscape. The people who settled the West brought their European and Eastern American

cultures and dreams to this arid region, and the fine china and Victorian furniture that littered the trails heading west symbolized the cultural disjunction between their dreams and the land. Once there, they were either run off by the land they sought to tame, or they were transformed by it.

Where the Bluebird Sings is Stegner's last book. On April 13, 1993, a short time after the book's release, Stegner died of injuries received when he was struck by a car in Santa Fe. This collection of essays, many of which have been previously published, spans his career and is largely autobiographical, as is most of his work. For anyone seeking an overview of Stegner's life and work, this is a perfect place to start.

For me, reading Stegner is like going home. The land he writes about is the land that raised me, and I have visited many of the locations he describes. After the wanderings of his youth, which included tours of duty at the University of Wisconsin and Harvard, Stegner made his permanent home in California. See *Little Rain*, page 14

Letters to the Editor

Further response to the Abrams/Culler Exchange

To the Editor:

In his comment on M.H. Abrams' May 1993 article, "What is a Humanistic Criticism?" (Jonathan Culler (Summer 1993) quotes Mr. Abrams' protest to a remark of Jacques Derrida: "...to deal with a literary text as a 'play of writing,' exclusive of the story, is to denude the text of its human dimension."

Mr. Culler's comments on this seem to be based on a misunderstanding, for Mr. Abrams' statement does not imply, as Mr. Culler evidently thinks, that everything that is human exists in the story while everything outside the story is inhuman. Mr. Abrams assumes that the story is so intertwined with the other components of the text that their relationship may be considered virtually organic. Therefore, the human dimension not only exists in the story but also pervades all other components of the literary text.

If a critic chooses to discuss these components separately from the story, he necessarily denudes them of their "human dimension," just as Mr. Abrams avers. Meter and rhyme, for example, discussed apart from the story of the poem, are merely technical "inhuman" aspects of a work of literature. Examined in the context of the poem, they emphasize or illuminate a feeling, an action, or situation of a character of the poem's story, and thus participate in the human dimension. Note Mr. Culler's comment on the rhyme and meter in Robert Frost's two-line poem, "The Secret Sits": "The rhyme and meter enforce the parallelism between the human and inhuman cases."

Because of Mr. Culler's misunderstanding of Mr. Abrams' conception of the relationship among the components of a literary text, much of his attack on Mr. Abrams' humanistic criticism is irrelevant. He concludes his discussion of the "inhuman" element in literature by saying, "If one accepts, as I have done so far, Mr. Abrams' distinction between the human world of 'characters like ourselves' and the inhuman world of language and theory, it is hard not to conclude that the inhuman is a matter of great interest—even human interest." Mr. Abrams does not make this distinction that Mr. Culler attributes to him, and Mr. Culler's separation of the world of characters from the world of language, as if the story had no language, is illogical and bewildering.

In view of Mr. Culler's exclusion of the story from the serious consideration of the "literary critic who seeks to analyze literature," it is surprising to find that he expresses great interest in "the human" in the literary text, a trait which most readers find inseparable from the story. This interest is especially surprising when Mr. Culler defends the recent "critiques of traditional humanism [which]...contest the notion that there is such a thing as 'the human' or 'humanity.'" Perhaps Mr. Culler's analysis of Robert Frost's "The Secret Sits" provides some insight into what "the human" means to this deconstructive critic, as well as the relationship of "the human" to the "story" and of the "story" to the rest of the textual "body."

The Secret Sits

*We dance round in a ring and suppose
But the Secret sits in the middle and
knows.*

Mr. Culler begins his analysis of Mr. Frost's poem by declaring his intention to show "how the human and inhuman dimensions of a work are related." He does not define the word "human,"

though in his discussion of this poem he explains that this word has become virtually obsolete to deconstructionists because contemporary insights into individual men's and women's natures, their histories, and their relations to particular societies have made the concept of generic man virtually meaningless. Yet the word "human," or some form of it, appears thirty-eight times in Mr. Culler's analysis of Frost's poem in such phrases as "human experience," "the human condition," and "the human world." Mr. Culler then concludes his discussion of "the human" by archly warning "that readers construct a [human] content for 'we' at their own risk." These arbitrary shifts reveal that Mr. Culler feels privileged to banish a word from the English language when deconstructive theory requires and restore it to usage when the analysis of a work of literature makes the word indispensable.

Mr. Culler warns against giving a content to "We" also because the structure of the poem, as he understands it, warrants caution. The second line of Mr. Frost's poem contrasts with the first line, and the parallels between "the Secret" of the second line and the "We" of the first line make clear that "We" is to be taken as being as empty of "content" as "the Secret." Mr. Culler lists a number of "non-human structures and processes" that lead to the conclusion that "the Secret" is an "empty" "product of a supposing," a "rhetorical operation of fictional positing."

When he begins his attempt to show that "We" is the same kind of empty product or operation, Mr. Culler confesses: "So far I have written as if the meaning of 'We' could be taken for granted—as if it naturally meant 'mankind' or 'humanity.'" This is the second time he speaks of accepting only "so far" what he has just written, and these admissions reveal that he reserves the right to designate any of his statements to be "as if" declarations whenever he chooses. Earlier he wrote: "Brief though it is... the poem offers a wry or even sardonic view of human activity and raises the question whether dancing around a ring is a dismaying figure for the human condition or whether there is a suggestion of a happy community."

Frost's poem states, "We dance round," and when Mr. Culler refers to this dancing as "the human condition," his words imply (if they have any meaning) that "We" means, at least at this moment (in fact, not "as if"), mankind or humanity. It would be enlightening to see Mr. Culler state forthrightly at the beginning of his analysis of "The Secret Sits" that "We" is an "empty" "product of a supposing," "a rhetorical operation of fictional positing"

Editorial

As the Bookpress heads into its third year of publication, we would like to report some new developments, several of which you may already have noticed. Aside from our new banner, with this issue we are introducing a four-column format, a slightly larger typeface (Baskerville, for the cognoscenti) and other design improvements.

On the editorial side, our peripatetic team of Michael Serino and photographer Janice Levy, whose article on Edmund Wilson's Talcottville (*Bookpress*, November 1992) elicited many favorable comments, will do a series of essays and photographs this year on locations of literary interest in the Northeast. Also a new page of short reviews called *Bookends* joins Gunilla Feigenbaum's *A Bite of the Apple* as a regular feature. We are planning additional features, such as one on poetry in translation, which will appear from time to time throughout the year. While we intend to stick with our somewhat eclectic approach, the inclusion of these and other departments will help to define—but not to confine—the identity of *the Bookpress*.

Though we did not publish during the summer, a most gratifying event took place this June: the formation of the Friends of the Bookpress. We sent out about 90 invitations to this first meeting, and well over half the people invited showed up to participate in a lively discussion about the future direction of the paper. A subsequent fundraising appeal was met by an enthusiastic response, and the generous gifts of our first Friends have helped to get *the Bookpress* off to a strong start for this season. In this

like "the Secret," and then proceed to demonstrate the contrast between "the human case" of line one and "the inhuman case" of line two.

Although Mr. Culler notes that "this poem...offers a wry or even sardonic view of human activity," he withholds attributing this view to the poet or to the Speaker of the poem, apparently because he is committed to the dogma that "everything that makes the poem or novel a work of literature" exists outside of the story. To acknowledge the presence of a character in this poem would lead to the recognition that this character is involved in some action—doing, thinking, or feeling—and Mr. Culler would end up dealing with the story of the poem.

The human agent of the "wry or even sardonic view" needs to be identified

connection, *the Bookpress* has filed for incorporation as a non-profit organization, meaning among other things that donations to the paper will be tax-deductible.

We are redoubling our efforts to meet expenses by means of local and publisher advertising, and we are applying for grants. It is our hope that Friends of the Bookpress will assist our efforts by participating in fundraising events such as lectures and workshops, and by providing direct support. We urge you to join by completing the coupon on the back page of this issue.

We would also like to thank the many readers who took the time to complete and return the survey we published before the summer break. In addition to proving incontrovertibly that most of our readers buy books, but not boats (except canoes, perhaps), the survey results helped to suggest many of the technical and editorial changes we have begun to make.

Finally, we would like to assure our readers that all these innovations and our continued growth (circulation in upstate NY is now at 15,000) do not augur a turn towards commercialization. As demonstrated by Mark Shechner's lead article on the current state of American fiction, and Alan Wood's insightful contribution to the debate over post-modernism and deconstruction begun by M.H. Abrams in last May's paper, *the Bookpress* continues to extend serious discussion of science, literature, and the arts into the public domain. As evidenced by our new sidewalk racks, we shall continue to venture where no literary newspaper has gone before.

because, though the poem can "offer" this view, the poem cannot itself feel the emotions that wry and sardonic imply. If Mr. Culler assumes that it is the reader who feels wry or "sardonic" in response to the arrangement of the various components of the poem, he must make clear that the poem does not itself order this arrangement. That is the work of the poet. To fail to acknowledge either the Speaker or the poet as the human agent creating the poem's "wry" or "sardonic" tone is to dehumanize not only the poem but these words as well.

A tenet of Mr. Culler's critical dogma is not to talk about what the poet does with a poem but to speak "about what the poem does or what particular elements of the poem do," a tactic that enables
see Letters, page 18

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The Life in Still Life

Kenneth Evett

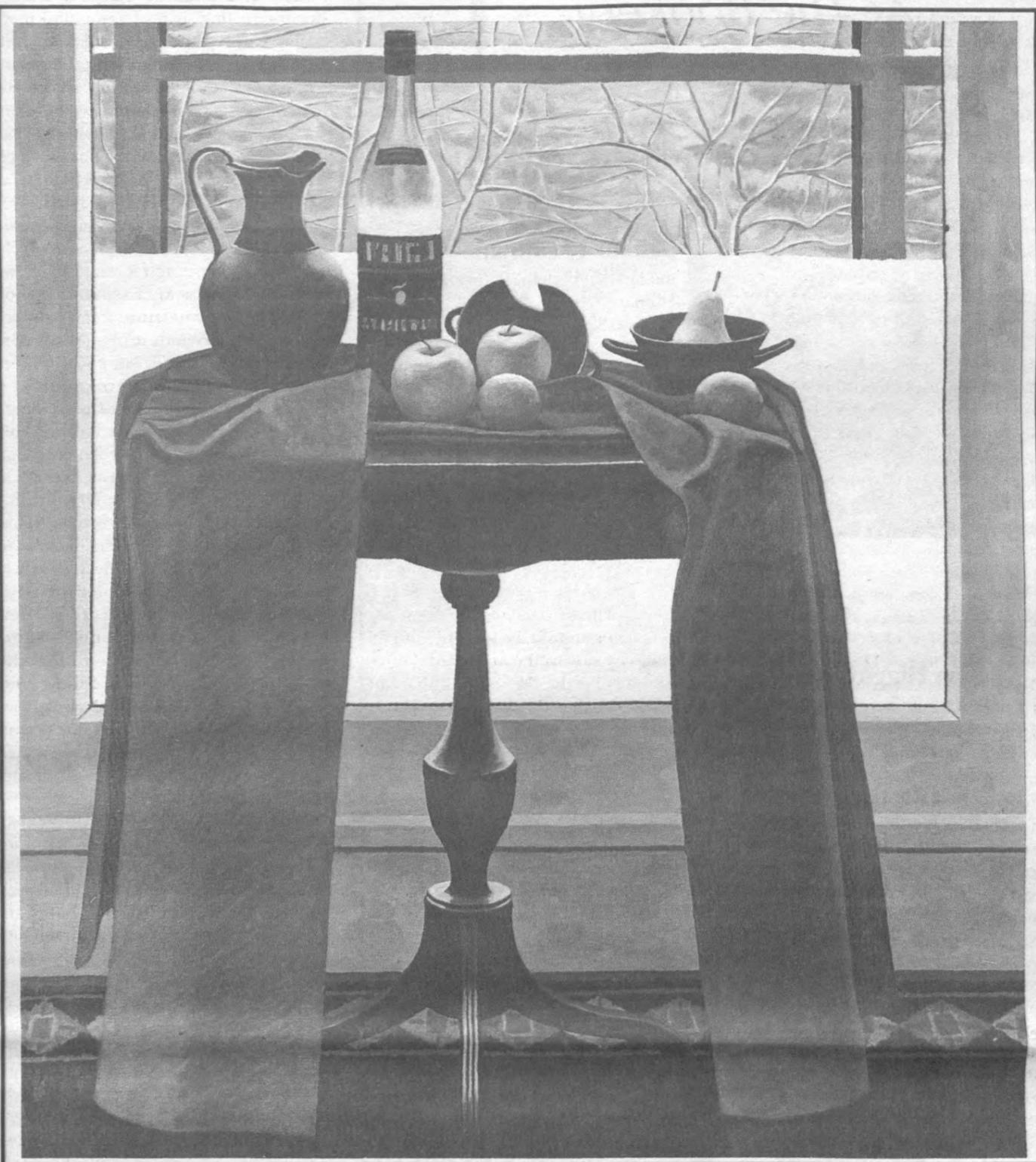
It is one of the ironies of 20th-century culture that still-life painting, a seminal force in modern art and a genre that yielded masterpieces of abstract order and sensuous appeal, should now have fallen into disrepute, regarded as an irrelevant exercise by bored art students or used as therapy in senior citizen art classes. Yet today, after the years of incessant innovation that followed the revolutionary still lifes of Cezanne and the Cubists, after the abandonment of traditional Western standards of drawing, structure, and technique, after gigantism, ambiguity, aesthetic cannibalism, and the impenetrable flatness of the picture plane have become the all-too-familiar clichés of the modern American Academy, maybe it is time for still-life painting once more to become an agent for change.

Because it is geared to intimate human scale, offers a return to the innocent pleasure of contemplating the forms of the physical realm (especially the edibles and utensils that sustain life), and permits arbitrary control over at least one segment of the environment, the genre can be used to reaffirm simple bedrock pleasures, as an orderly antidote to the violent chaos of the times, and a subversive activity against the banal rigidities of the modern academy.

The objects used in still-life painting, though they don't move about, talk back, or make love, nevertheless radiate a mysterious sense of presence and identity. Those apples, onions, oranges, cups, compotes, dead fish, flowers, books and bottles that make up the conventional cast of still-life characters have their own intrinsic, symbolic, and sexual meanings. When they are arranged together in controlled setups, they may assume psychic characteristics, become passive or aggressive, dejected or exuberant participants in a visual drama. What begins as a tableau of inanimate things turns into a lively theatrical performance of idiosyncratic characters, their surrogate bodily parts—noses, nipples, and genitals—in view as they press, threaten, snoop, cavort, or get along together on the still-life stage.

These same characters may also function as discrete abstract components in a miniature, nonfunctional form of architecture. The impingements and openings between them provide a conceptual path of progression through space that is comparable to the organized rhythms of actual volumes and voids in architectural systems.

But the abiding appeal of still-life painting is that it glorifies mundane, everyday objects by elevating them to a level of high abstraction. Still-life objects embody the elementary forms of geometry—cylinders, spheres, ovoids, cubes, and pyramids—and carry a full range of basic abstract properties. Axial direction, color, tex-



Winter Still Life by Kenneth Evett

ture and contours are all involved when the initial setup is assembled. The deployment of these components also requires immediate formal decisions about the great abstract issues of painting: proportion, the tension between symmetry and asymmetry, the pulls and oppositions of like and unlike elements, and the overt or implicit geometric constructs (triangles, rectangles, circles, or parallelograms) needed to organize the rhythms on the surface and in depth.

The color program of a setup may evoke moods that range from the claustrophobic gloom of Picasso's wartime still lifes to Van Gogh's joyful high-intensity visions of flowers. And, of course, those amenable still-life objects can be arranged by simple numbers with musical connotations (duet, trio, quartet), or the basic configurations of the alphabet, O, T, H, V, X, can be employed to establish order. With such a wealth of abstract possibilities, it is no wonder that artists as remote in time and place as the

anonymous genius who painted the still-life mural in the Tomb of Oserhat at Luxor, Zubaran in Guadalupe, Morandi in Bologna, Caravaggio in Rome, or William Bailey in New Haven should have exploited the abstract potential of the genre.

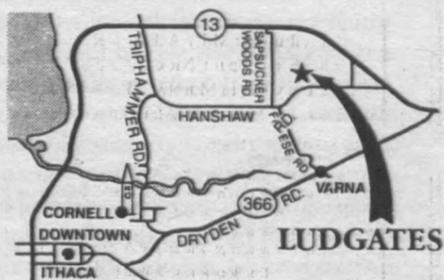
The French have made a national treasure of still-life painting, using it to celebrate the sensuous pleasures of life, to satisfy their love of lucidity, and occasionally to express their revolutionary aesthetic impulses. Chardin, the quintessential French still-life painter, developed a method in the 18th century that is valid to this day. Judging from the evidence in his work, he gazed upon the contents of his kitchen and studio with a receptive eye, selected the items that suited his iconographic and formal needs, arranged them together with deliberate intent, and then studied the relationships between them as they lay before his eyes in the real world of space and light. These visual discoveries were realized with definitive marks

and tones that carry a full measure of tactile and haptic significance. Of the many French painters who followed Chardin's method, none used it with greater profundity than Cezanne.

In Cezanne's old studio at Aix-en-Provence, the domestic utensils used in his still lifes have been preserved. Now, invested with a kind of legendary glamour, they are lined up on shelves along the gray walls, and contemporary examples of his transitory apples, oranges, or flowers are displayed on low tables about the studio.

These artifacts remind us that Cezanne always employed the traditional content of Western art: still life, landscape, and the figure. He gazed upon the forms of the visual realm with ardent attention and devoted his life as an artist to learning how to see and to realize his vision with responsible marks and tones. It is the tension generated by the concreteness of things in their relation to the spaces between them as their reality contends

see *Still Life*, page 19



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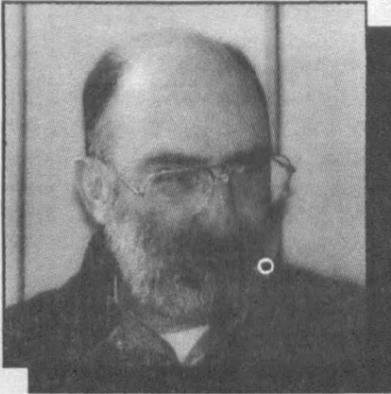
Off Campus

At The Bookery

The Bookery's Fall lecture series continues...

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September 19

**Sander L. Gilman**

the Goldwin Smith Professor of Humane Studies at Cornell, Will give a talk entitled "Freud, Race, and Gender." The talk will present the argument of his new book of the same title, which concerns the anti-Semitism of Freud's Vienna and how the specter of anti-Semitism haunts the creation of psychoanalysis.

September 26

**Joanna Higgins**

will read from her recently published book, *The Importance of High Places*, a collection of four short stories and a novella—tales of spiritual transcendence in generally humble surroundings. Higgins, also a children's author, is special projects creative writing instructor in the Binghamton public school system.

October 3

**Howard Gordon**

assistant provost for academic affairs and social equity at SUNY Oswego, will give a talk entitled "Writing About Race and Romance." Gordon will also read from his new collection of short fiction, *The African in Me*, which depicts African-American life and its conflicts, from racism to romance, from the late 1950s through the beginning of the 1990s.

October 17

**Timothy Murray**

will discuss his newly released book *Like a Film: Ideological Fantasy on Screen, Camera, and Canvas*. The book investigates how "the cinematic" invades our culture and identity. Murray teaches film, performance, visual theory, and Renaissance studies at Cornell University.

Paradox

continued from page 1

for insinuating such philosophical messages as the purely fictive character of the subject of knowledge and of "humanity" as something "we" all have in common. But this is hardly a vindication of the theories Abrams is criticizing. The real question is whether the insights of "anti-humanist" literary critics—for instance, Culler's ingenious comments on Frost's poem—are in any way beholden to the philosophical theories to which Abrams is objecting, or whether these insights could just as easily be accommodated within "humanistic" criticism as Abrams understands it. Surely nothing in "humanistic" criticism excludes the appreciation of the operations of rhetoric, rhyme, and alliteration, which Culler characterizes as "inhuman" aspects of the poem. Why should it not be a function of "humanistic" criticism to muse, as Culler does, on the enigmatic metaphor "the Secret knows"? This metaphor may be "inhuman" in that it personifies what is not a person, but it provides no support at all for the post-structuralist philosophical theories which tell us that such metaphors are justified because the person itself is a mere fiction. In fact, every aspect of the poem which Culler characterizes as "inhuman" belongs to the normal process of human communication which Frost employed in writing the poem and which we interpret in reading it. Perhaps Culler's comments on the poem will seem more interesting or edifying to people who hold certain philosophical theories about this process than to people who hold others, but the comments themselves surely count as "humanistic" criticism in (what Culler himself calls) the "capacious" or even "tautological" sense in which Abrams uses the term.

"Post-structuralist" or "post-modernist" philosophers have frequently proclaimed the demise of the "subject," and railed against attempts to understand what goes on in the world (or in texts) by reference to the conscious intentions of individual human beings. Perhaps they (or their literary followers) would charge "humanistic" criticism with the error of thinking that a text can express only that meaning which its author consciously intended it to express. But it would be implausible to lodge such a complaint against any type of criticism Abrams would be likely to endorse. It was a fundamental tenet of the tradition of aesthetics proceeding from German idealism (about which Abrams has taught us so much) that artistic genius includes precisely the ability to embody meanings in a work unconsciously. Further, the subsequent hermeneutic tradition has emphasized the way in which a text acquires meanings historically through its understanding by subsequent generations of readers. Post-structuralist philosophers would be confused if they thought the points just mentioned discredit any notion of subjectivity it would be worthwhile to attack. They may be trying to add some new insights along the same lines, but they don't make these insights easier to appreciate when they express them in hysterical hyperboles, denying of texts that they have any human author at all or exist within a world outside them, to which they might perhaps refer.

As Abrams presents it, the difference between "humanistic" criticism and "anti-humanist" criticism is that the first is rooted directly in the experience of literary communication between writer and reader, while the second is criticism mediated, motivated, or even dominated by philosophical theories which undermine this experience and alienate us

from it. Abrams' essay thus provokes the question: What role, if any, should philosophical theories play within the activity of literary criticism? It also occasions our asking a second, related question: Why, in recent years, has so much literary criticism felt the need to turn philosophical in the way it has?

Abrams' position on the first question, I take it, is that humanistic criticism has no particular need for philosophical theory; it begins and ends with the human world to which (as Abrams reports) David Hume could always repair even when faced with his most alienating skeptical reflections. Abrams does not mean to exclude an important role for philosophical reflection on the activity of critics within philosophical aesthetics. He doesn't even want to exclude the reflections of "anti-humanist" critics as *une aventure du regard* supplementing or enriching humanistic criticism, as long as there is no attempt to discredit or supplant the standpoint of humanistic criticism. And he views the choice of the human world as the starting point for criticism as something for which a critic is intellectually responsible, so that it is in need of some sort of philosophical defense, such as the one Abrams attempts to provide at the end of "What is Humanistic Criticism?"

The burden of Abrams' argument here seems to be simply that the "anti-humanist" critics themselves cannot avoid occupying the human standpoint. Of course, the critics do not deny this. They do want their theories to "subvert" the standpoint of communicating subjects, determinate meanings, and so forth, yet at the same time they don't really want to replace this standpoint with a theoretical one. Their aim, as they often like to express it, is to "put in question" this or that aspect of the "human" standpoint—which is, of course, unavoidably the standpoint of all of us.

But at this stage in the dialectic Abrams wants to charge them with inconsistency. For they treat their theoretical standpoint as "subverting," hence overriding, the familiar linguistic and discursive practices in which they admittedly participate. Is Abrams' charge correct? It often looks as though their theoretical assertions do directly contradict assertions they would have to be prepared to make in everyday life. For example, the theoretical assertions that no text has a human author, that texts are products not of human beings but of "language" or "writing," would seem directly to contradict the indignant (and far less theoretical) assertion that Derrida is the sole author of some text which another scholar has reprinted without his permission.

But we must not forget the love affair these theorists have with rhetorical ambiguity and indeterminacy of meaning. They are fond of employing (as well as theorizing about) a variety of linguistic devices, such as hyperbole, metaphor, and irony, whose function is to make it impossible to know what they are really saying or whether it could ever contradict anything else they might say. Besides, if the aim of their theory is not to reach truth (the whole notion of which they often "put in question") but merely to employ rhetorical devices which create an intellectually titillating paradox, then why should they be bothered at all by the charge of self-contradiction?

In one respect there is really no disagreement between Abrams and these theorists. Both apparently subscribe to the skeptical view that the standpoint we inevitably adopt as human subjects can't see *Paradox*, page 8

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Story Line Press, 95 pages, \$10.95

Jon Griffin

It's seldom one comes across as accomplished a first volume as David Mason's *The Buried Houses*, co-winner of the Nicholas Roerich Prize. Mason, who was born in Bellingham, Washington, received degrees from Colorado College and the University of Rochester, and currently teaches at Moorhead State University in Minnesota. His work ranges from quiet, meditative lyrics to dramatic monologues with a strong narrative current, and from lucid free and blank verse to deft handlings of tighter forms—even a very fine pantoum. In addition, the book possesses the sort of architecture that gives it a roomy coherence without insisting that it is somehow all one poem or sequence. There are certainly weak spots in the book, but they mostly remind us how good the rest of it is.

The book begins with a sort of erasure. "To a Photojournalist" invites us not only to "Imagine a day no photographs/ were taken," but to go a step further and imagine the events occasioning newspaper photos—fires and accidents, deaths and the grief of relatives—dissolving, undoing themselves to a calm whiteness. It is "A way of starting over" reminiscent of the "San Pantaleone" movement in Anthony Hecht's "The Venetian Vespers," but quieter and more personal (Mason's wife is a photojournalist). The poem is a forgiving prelude to a theme that recurs more darkly in later sections of the book: the loss, through death, displacement, or mere familiarity, of things that had once been, or seemed, valuable.

In Mason's memorial for the travel writer and novelist Bruce Chatwin, remaining in place and making a home are fraught with dissatisfactions:

*We are the ones who settle and destroy,
build and regret, wishing we could leave it,
wishing the code would signal our migration.
To get out of the car, thank the driver
and sling the moment's household on your
back...*

But movement, here figured as a good, has its drawbacks too, since leaving the known is a sure route to loss. Of course, in the most fundamental sense, everything is leaving, all the time. Even the traditional role of art in preserving a valued moment, or lifting us out of ourselves, is decidedly limited. "The Feast of the Rose Garlands" describes Rudolf II's restless acquisition of artifacts, in particular his monumental efforts to secure a fine Dürer which, once acquired, refuses to stay in aesthetic place: "But gazed at long, even perfection dulls/ like dust above the town at noon."

It would be difficult to name a strongest poem in this collection. The chief candidates are the longer narrative pieces, "The Nightingales of Andritsena," "Spooning," and "Blackened Peaches." Mason, also a writer of short stories, has an excellent feel for the structure of first-person narratives, and his flexible blank verse effectively handles the rhythms and quirks of his characters' speech.

"The Nightingales of Andritsena" is spoken by a woman who, when young, learned of her father's suicide while reading, and for whom language and loss have become intertwined, if not nearly the same thing. Divorced and middle-aged now, she survives as a translator and tour-guide in Greece. The poem recounts her brief infatuation with a client, a young American student with a much less conflicted relation to language, and a girlfriend to boot. The speaker is too self-aware not to see the absurdity of the situation, but also too lonely not to feel a little bitter. After she listens to the birds of the title, her frustrations with both language



The Old Treadle

Susan Booth Titus

and desire—how one tends to displace the other—come to seem those of the young people too, though of course it is not so:

*For me it had all gone flat. I won't deny
the music of the birds was beautiful,
but I saw how we transformed it in our
minds
to what we had expected it to be.
I saw the evening's mood envelope them,
how what they had desired became a shell
of words—of empty captivating words.
It angered me that I would think this way.
I knew that I was spiteful, that the girl
had everything I thought I'd ever wanted,
the thoughtlessness that comes with being
young.*

A sense of frustrated possibilities, this time another's, is one of the informing emotions of "Spooning." The speaker has returned to his small hometown to help settle his grandfather's estate. He comes across a photograph of a glossy silent-movie starlet, also a native of the town, whom his grandfather had claimed to know once. The speaker recalls an evening, when he was quite young, on which she returned to town for a benefit. He sneaked out to see the shimmering screen presence, but met instead a frail and cynical (albeit rich) shadow who, as it turns out, did remember the grandfather when the boy mentioned him:

*Old Georgie McCracken. Is he still alive?
Too scared to come downtown and say
hello?...
I knew he'd never get out of this town.*

It is a striking scene, where the conflict, between the speaker's loyalty to his grandfather and his vague, uneasy sense that there's some truth to what the actress says, again focusses a recurring paradox—the dangers of staying in one place, and the compensating penalties of moving along.

In "Blackened Peaches," the longest poem in the book, a very old woman recalls being briefly and diffidently courted by a widowed country doctor when she was sixteen, and her subsequent encounters with

him over the years as he attended her husband's illnesses. The poem delivers fine, implicit psychological portraits of both the speaker and the doctor, and has several moments of quiet intensity—even something of an epiphany during the husband's final illness—to which an excerpt could not do justice. Mason is in excellent control of his materials here, the local color (the events occur in the rural Pacific Northwest, between 1902 and 1964) emerging gradually through the speaker's almost stoic narrative.

At the center of the book is a group of five poems remembering Mason's older brother, who died in a fall while mountain-climbing. These brief poems evoke the joys and exuberance of climbing, and the horror of the event itself:

*On the glacier I was looking up and looking
into the crevasse. When the helicopter came
I didn't want to leave him, though the storm-
clouds
rushing out of nowhere forced us from the
peak.
Flying out, I watched the darkened snow.
My hands still felt, from earlier that day,*

*the tension of my brother's weight on the
rope.*

—"Small Elegies"

Inevitably, on a return trip years later, the beauty of the mountains has become starker, more chilling, against the backdrop of the writer's memory:

*The canyon is quiet: old November snow
and the motionless granite.
Below us the creek bends darkly,
turning away from the blue.
The mind falls slowly, pressed
like water to absolute clarity...*

—"Dry Granite"

The deft syntactic identification of the landscape and the act of memory is typical of Mason's quieter skills as a craftsman, and also thematically apt. His willed engagement with the landscape depends on another type of fall, into experience, or self-consciousness—a psychic displacement that is rendered, in "An Absence," as a literal move:

*...I felt you rise and fall away
in the blue vertigo of glaciers.
A sudden absence made the firs
and waterfalls more than themselves.
I knew I wouldn't stay.*

*Now I live in another state
with hills for mountains and less rain.
You would have hated the small scale
of everything here, and how pain
comes early, stays late...*

The loss of a brother, with its attendant emotions and reflections, is the defining note of the book. It resonates forward and backward to inform silently the situations of many speakers in other poems, where loss is also sometimes figured spatially, as geographic displacement, as well as temporally. Absence is what keeps us moving, for better and worse, or leaves us dying in place. As the book begins with a sort of loss of experience, it ends with a sense of movement less ominous than much that precedes it:

*Small dun-colored swallows, they've been
away
the whole relentless winter.
Like them we can no longer call ourselves
both honest and young. But I assume they
know
what it's like to be lost in endless circles
and, suddenly weightless, sense which way to
fly.*

As a poem celebrating a wedding, "Chautauqua" is appropriately hopeful, but what precedes it prevents its being merely hopeful. The dominant sense *The Buried Houses* leaves is, on the one hand, the dangers of getting what we think we want, and of holding what we should release, and, on the other, the terrible brevity of the things worth saving.

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Fish Shack

Susan Booth Titus

A Bite of the Apple

Cooks Tour of Europe



Gunilla Feigenbaum

New York, September 1993

Thank God the summer is over. Those of us who are genetically or philosophically opposed to cooking at home—especially when the thermometer is licking the 100-degree point—are apt to starve to death in the Big Apple. It seems that both restaurants and psychiatrists' offices close in August. One theory has it that many shrinks are moonlighting as cooks these days in order to afford their Southampton beach houses. In any event, New Yorkers in need of both therapy and a square meal face a severe crisis. As for tourists foolish enough to visit New York in that cruelest of months, they are clearly expected to bring their own picnic baskets.

Ah, but this writer was able to live off the accumulated fat from a European trip, despite the several airplane meals it took to get there. Pioneers crossing the Great Plains in the 19th century could kill a buffalo or two along the way and there was no shortage of air, so they arrived in the Wild West in better condition than your average tourist who's spent eight hours in an oxygen allowance that certainly would kill the ubiquitous canary, in a space proportional to such a bird, and eating a meal that probably was that bird but goes under the name "Chicken Imperial."

Blois, Loire Valley, France

The first rule to eating in France is, bring a Frenchman. People who say that the food in France is wonderful are always French. French restaurants often keep two kitchens, one for the French and one for the non-French and an "un table, s'il-vous-plait" instead of "une table" will wake up the drunken cook in kitchen number two and he'll create, especially for you, a steak au poivre from the sixth vertebra of an unknown mammal and cover it in Bechamel sauce imported from Greece by way of a ship that rounded the African Horn.

Bring your own Frenchman, and he'll first consult the Guide Michelin, that bible of French restaurants. Our Frenchman found no three-star restaurant within driving distance and picked a two-star one, noting that there was essentially no difference in the food between two and three stars, only in the "over-all experience of dining."

What he selected was Grand Hôtel du Lion d'Or, an old stone mansion in a small town named Romorantin. The dining experience began with an aperitif of Champagne Amer—champagne with a dash of Campari and a slice of orange—in the 15th-century courtyard, fully appointed with trees, flowers and a fountain. Duly impressed by the Frenchness of our Frenchman, the proprietors also served us goodies on the house, a silver tray with canapés decorated with mysterious morsels which turned out to be asparagus with fresh nchovies, raw meat in a veggie sauce, igeon, and a salmon mousse, all made to look like colorful miniature objects a three-year-old might mistake for matchbox cars and run on the floor, chirping

"tut-tut-tut." They were delicious.

We were ushered into the dining room and Albert (our Frenchman) pointed out some of the features necessary to rate two stars in Michelin, such as the silver cocker spaniel on the table, the butter dish in a pattern matching the exquisite floral china, which matched the flower arrangement on the table, which matched the wreath intertwined in the chandelier, which matched the hue of the walls, which matched the waiter's bow-tie. Eat your heart out.

This is what we had:

Frogs legs
Vol-au-vent with cepe
Calf's brain
Lamb
Sweetbread with chantarelles
Duck in two parts (breast, then the leg, confit style)
Burnt caramel mousse
Apricots in a pastry in orange sauce
Strawberries in raspberry sauce with a pastry flute with hazelnut ice cream
Soft amaretto biscuits in orange flower and honey sauce
A plate of ten different kinds of fruit tarts

Most of this was disguised by sauces and decorated to look like something other than food, in case a non-French might wander in and correctly identify what was on the plates as edible and request "un table" for dinner. What did it cost? I have no idea. It was one of those establishments that believe the female psyche must remain unsullied by the mere mention of money, thus their price-free, gender menu. Or maybe it is because they suspect that a woman would take one look, exclaim "But Henri! The college education for the children!" and walk out.

Brussels, Belgium

Despite what they say in France, the French food in Brussels is the best in Europe. Nowhere is the seafood fresher, the sauces more cunning, and the foie gras creamier. And since Belgium is bilingual—French and Flemish—accents are the order of the day. (Flemish food, on the other hand, must be among the worst. It was developed by Protestants who believed that the most effective inducement for belief in the Hereafter was deprivation in this life.)

One of the best restaurants in Brussels, Les Brigittines on Place de la Chapelle, has no Michelin star at all. The cook, who goes by the unlikely name of Myny Dirk, says that he'd like to get one so he could refuse it. He claims the Michelin people are too snooty to award stars to non-French French cooks. The restaurant is opulent in the old-world style, with dark, polished wood panelling and glowing 19th-century paintings of food and naked ladies on the walls, calling to mind such expressions as "peach skin" and "dimpled flesh." We tried the Menu de Degustation, which featured eight courses at the price of—yes! No gender menu!—1,950 Belgian francs apiece (roughly U.S. \$60.) The most surprising item was an appetizer which went under the name Escalope de Foie de Canard Confit, which turned out to be Foie Carpaccio. I have to admit, I have never awakened in the morning, stretched, sighed and said, "Oh, for a slice of raw liver!" but now I might.

Aloyse Kloos, a restaurant named after its owner and cook, is in a country house in the outskirts of Brussels.

M. Kloos and his wife live upstairs. The restaurant specializes in wild mushrooms, which M. Kloos picks himself, and in-house smoked ham. We had the summer menu, five courses, each of which used some wild mushroom in the recipe—morels, chantarelles, cepe, and some unfamiliar ones. We also sampled the smoked ham, which comes in a vintage presentation—three slices of ham, each slice from a different year. The first was six months old, the next a year old, still leaving you unprepared for the savory thrill of the last slice of pungent three-year-old smoked ham. This will be another first, for both me and the A&P deli counter: "Sir! Half a pound of the oldest ham you've got!"



All the food in Brussels looks like food, a sign that Brussels is indeed the cosmopolitan center of the European community, and caters to all sorts of people, even Germans and the English.

Copenhagen, Denmark

Danes like to eat outdoors during the season they misleadingly call "summer"—the rainy months that punctuate the transition from one winter to another. They sit in sidewalk cafes and restaurants, wearing their best summer garb, which is actually styled for the autumn elk season: substantial padded jackets, mufflers and caps, all in bright colors unlikely to be found on an elk, an animal to which they otherwise bear an uncomfortable resemblance, especially when they cover their own layers of clothing with cocoons of wool blankets, supplied by the restaurant. No, I'm not kidding—Danish restaurants with outdoor tables offer blankets to their customers, along with the Tuborgs and the *smorrebrods*, those delicious open-faced Danish sandwiches which are so difficult to eat with mittens on.

Hudiksvall, Sweden

As one who is Swedish by birth, conviction, and passport, and who spent her formative first 18 years in Sweden, I can say that, generally speaking, Swedes mostly drink their suppers. They consume copious amounts of aquavit and beer, along with tiny portions of herring. Foreigners will watch in stupefied wonderment as the Swedes skoal away. If you want to have a conversation with a Swede you have to use the small window of opportunity that presents itself between his first drink and his fourth. That gives you less than twenty minutes. (Before he drinks, the typical Swede is usually too shy and formal to speak at all.) Swedes traditionally admire foreigners (though wondering why on earth they chose to visit Sweden) and grant them special privileges. You may, for example, safely decline the third aquavit. In a state of relative sobriety, you're thus able to observe a Swedish dinner from the first serving to the last.

All Swedish meals start with herring. It comes in hundreds of preparations and any given meal will have a sampling of at least half a dozen. Then there is the gravlax of course, and the Scandinavian shrimps, which are never frozen raw, but briefly dumped in boiling kegs of sea water right on the shrimp boats before they are frozen. Then they are thawed, peeled and eaten. All of these appetizers are salty, giving the Swedes an excuse to quench a powerful thirst before being confronted with the main course, which is likely to be some bland meat preparation with a lot of creamy sauce. Swedes don't care, because they are too drunk to notice. They often enjoy a brief recovery for dessert, which might consist of fresh berries—strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, or cloud berries, all of which seem to be more flavorful in Sweden than anywhere else.

Then they slap each other on the back, crawl home and rid themselves of the entire content of the dinner. Swedes, like other bovine creatures, have specially designed stomachs. They are able to absorb the nourishment from a herring in the short period between ingestion and ejection, enabling them to grow tall, strong, and blond.

The Big Apple, USA

Anyone wishing to dine French without jet lag and with their suitcase safe at home, rather than on its way to an unknown destination, can of course find French restaurants here, complete with arrogant waiters and unrecognizable food. There are even some French restaurants that have swallowed their pride and learned to treat their clientele with the gentle respect a hungry human being, willing to drop a few hundred bucks, deserves. (Though even here it helps to bring an authentic Frenchman.)

I recommend Lespinasse, in the St. Regis Hotel, 2 East 55th Street, for utter comfort in a Louis XV dining room, and truly outstanding, innovative food. The prices match the best in France—Menu de Degustation, with five courses, is \$69 and it's almost worth it.

The only restaurant I know that claims to be Belgian is Cafe de Bruxelles, on 118 Greenwich Avenue, at the corner of 13th Street. It's a rather simple, inexpensive bistro with Belgian specialties like Carbonade Flamande. The prix fixe menu is \$19.50. It won't come close to French food in Brussels but they do have a large selection of Belgian beer, and they're worth a visit if you love weird beer. They even serve it authentically, in glasses specially designed for each brand ("unless they have broken," the waiter said).

The best Scandinavian restaurant is "Aquavit" on 13 West 54th Street. Prix fixe menu is \$62. It has a chilly elegance to it, and the food is better than what you find in most places in Sweden. There are all the herrings to start with and main courses like snow grouse and Arctic salmon. It has mostly international customers but now and then, for authentic flavor, you'll encounter one of my countrymen, on all fours, looking for the rest room.

"A Bite of the Apple" is a regular column by Gunilla Feigenbaum, our not-so-farfaling correspondent who lives in New York City.

Slouching Towards Suburbia

Jeremy Bloom

Eighty percent of everything ever built in America has been built in the last fifty years, and most of it is depressing, brutal, ugly, unhealthy, and spiritually degrading....

Thus James Howard ("Jimmy") Kunstler begins his new book, *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-made Landscape*. A pithy, gutsy volume that pulls no punches, *Nowhere* develops the idea that the lack of community we feel in America today is, in large measure, a result of having failed to build communities.

Looking at how our towns and cities grew—from Long Island to Detroit to Disneyland—Kunstler points out what he thinks are the mistakes that were made. He also looks to the future and some hopeful changes already in motion.

I chatted with him on a warm summer day, sitting on the wide, carnival-painted porch of the spacious Victorian house in Saratoga Springs that he shares with his wife, writer Amy Godine. A glass of frosty iced tea in one hand, he contemplated the cover of *The Geography of Nowhere*, with its vista of Long Island's suburban sprawl.

J.H.K.: I first wanted to call the book "Why America Is So Ugly."

J.B.: So we're nowhere, and it's ugly. How did we get here?

J.H.K.: We had an incredible imperial boom in the '60s and '70s. The interstate highway system was built and FHA mortgages enabled many people to buy new houses. Lots of money was made off all this and the horizon seemed limitless. Few people were thinking of the consequences—particularly the unforeseen repercussions and hidden costs. But incredible damage was done to our culture, our spiritual and our civic life—to any notion of the common good.

If we're to continue as a viable civilization, we're going to have to build places we can care about so that we can enjoy civic life once again.

All that may seem abstract, but no more so than, for instance, the concept of justice—which is very important to Americans.

J.B.: This is very complex: questions of natural law, aesthetics, as well as questions of efficiency and economics....

J.H.K.: Most people think of this problem only in terms of aesthetics. They drive down some gruesome commercial strip like Central Avenue in Albany, and they go "ewwww, yuck..."

J.B.: If they notice it at all.

J.H.K.: I think they notice it. And I think they are quite justified in feeling that way. But the outward appearance of our landscape is just a manifestation of deeper problems.

We once had a sense of a community as a place where people lived, did business, enjoyed public gatherings—all these connected experiences that used to make up our civic life.

When our stomachs turn at these gruesome highway strips, what it comes down to is an apprehension that we have thrown our civic life away.

J.B.: Do you blame the automobile for that loss?

J.H.K.: The automobile played a large part in that destructive process, but it's not the only factor. Some



James Howard Kunstler

reviews of my book suggested that it is only about the effects of the automobile on the landscape—that's not true.

Our troubled townscapes and landscapes are manifestations of our economic predicament. We have come to the end of a 50-year-long, abnormal war-time boom economy—World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and the Cold War.

From 1945 until the early '70s we could sell our products to any country in the world, because after World War II all the other advanced nations were either bankrupt or bombed into ruins.

In the 1950s, Japan and Germany couldn't sell us cars. But then they started to catch up, and by the mid-'70s the Japanese were successfully competing against us. Now, the industrial jobs that gave our workers the highest standard of living in the world are gone, and they're not coming back. The economy is not going to be the same as it was for the past 50 years, with people driving around to the malls buying Guns and Roses posters and plastic trolls.

J.B.: But how was the "destruction of our civic life," as you put it, the consequence of that boom?

J.H.K.: Unintended consequences. One of the tragedies of our time is that people of the great bustling middle class—who used to be out in the public realm fomenting ideas and meeting each other and being involved in cultural life—abandoned the cities and are now locked in their suburban houses.

The analogue to that is the way the merchant classes have been eliminated from our towns. Merchants in small towns and cities were the people who supported all the civic institutions. They sat on library boards and school boards, and sponsored the Little League teams. We threw them into the garbage can so we could have K-Marts, where we could buy a microwave oven for \$9 less than in a locally-owned store, but in the process we lost a lot more than \$9 in public amenities.

J.B.: How did that happen?

J.H.K.: Mass merchandising in America came about because of cheap transportation. Truckers pay less for gas in America than they do anywhere else in the world. As long as that's the case, the huge mass-merchandising corporations can rationalize their operation. You can't do that in Italy, where gas is \$4.50 a gallon and it costs \$30 in tolls to drive 100 miles. You couldn't be trucking around 5 tons of trolls every day if the government didn't subsidize the highway system. I'm not saying this was altogether

avoidable. But what's really pathetic is the way people behaved contrary to their own best interests. The Rotary Club boosters did everything they could to get K-Mart to come to town. Then they stood there scratching their heads when all their fellow businessmen went out of business.

We see this in Saratoga. In 1974, a special supplement in the Sunday newspaper was put together by the Rotary Club and the Chamber of Commerce, promoting the hell out of the new Pyramid Mall, saying what a wonderful adjunct to downtown Saratoga it was going to be. Well, 98% of the stores that existed in downtown Saratoga when the mall opened are gone now.

J.B.: In *The Geography of Nowhere*, you take an in-depth look at the destruction of mass transit in this country, and the corollary that Detroit was given a chance to build smaller and more efficient cars when the oil embargo hit in 1973, and basically...

J.H.K.: They blew it.

J.B.: Or didn't see the possibility that things would change. We tend to look at the life we have, the economic environment we have, as being inevitable, a "natural order."

J.H.K.: Maybe people are like fish, they don't question the water that they swim in.

J.B.: Yet economic choices were made that could have gone differently with different results. For example, greater reliance on alternative fuels, or electric cars.

J.H.K.: Changing the fueling of the cars isn't going to solve our problems with the way people relate to place. The question isn't whether we're going to have solar cars, electric cars, or propane cars. I've been misquoted

see *Geography*, page 16

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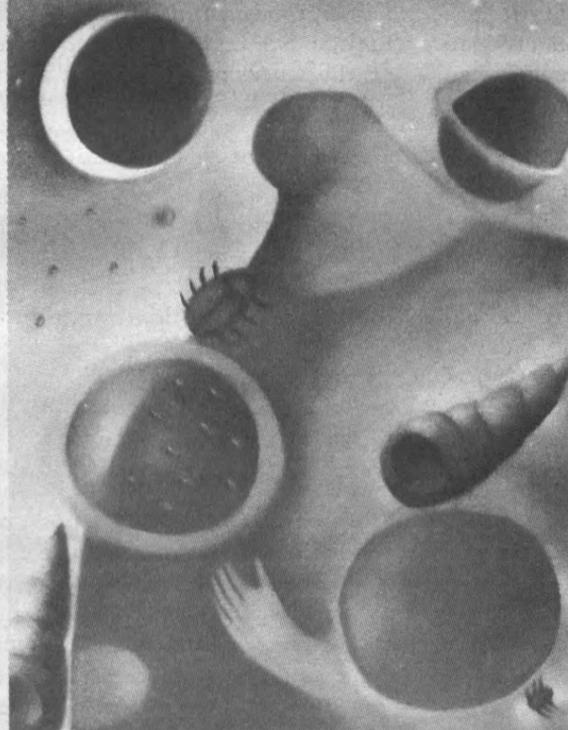
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Paradox

continued from page 4

be vindicated by any absolute theoretical (or philosophical) justification. Abrams' position seems to be that for the purposes of humanistic criticism this standpoint need not be vindicated, beyond the purely defensive argument Abrams provides for it. The position of the "anti-humanists" seems to be that there is something to be learned about texts themselves by constantly confronting the demand for such a justification and perceiving its failure. The philosophical *aporias* infect the texts themselves, and by displaying this we can learn something about the texts as well as about the paradoxical limits of the human standpoint.

Why would literary critics want to take this latter position? My hypothesis is that this is rooted partly in philosophical problems about modern culture and partly in deep problems with the whole discipline of literary criticism. Literary study is theoretically problematic in itself. People read literature, enjoy it, think a lot about it, and some of them say brilliant things about it; but the intellectual activity of commenting on literary texts has no clear aim in general and no record of systematic theoretical achievement on which it could base fruitful methodological reflection. There is no valid argument leading from this state of affairs to skeptical conclusions either about the meaning of literary texts themselves or about intellectual activity generally, but it is easy just the same to see how literary critics might be disposed toward philosophical theories that support such conclusions. Of more general concern is the other root of their view: a philosophical crisis about selfhood and society in the modern period which can also be played out as a crisis about literary art and its criticism, about writing and reading.

"Humanistic criticism," as Abrams conceives it, has the function of promoting and enhancing the intelligibility of the products of literary communication. This assumes that it is worthwhile to understand literary texts from within the "human" standpoint. But in the modern period this presupposition of "humanistic criticism" has been challenged from a number of directions. Freudian psychoanalysis portrays us as psychologically opaque to ourselves in important ways; Marxian social theory depicts us as socially and historically opaque, and the "human" standpoint as one that is complicit in a system of class oppression which wields power over oppressor and oppressed alike through ideological mystification. Feminist and post-colonialist theories have extended this to gender, racial, and cultural oppression. The inward (psychological) and outward (social) subversion of our self-comprehension is seen to operate in acts of human communication, and especially in the aesthetic and imaginative forms of communication found in literature.

If this is right, then any study of literature undertaken from the human standpoint, innocent of quite a far-reaching theoretical clarification, is naturally seen as victimized by or even complicit in social and psychological systems of self-opacity, oppression, and unfreedom. The natural inference is that the study of literature is badly in need of theoretical insight and philosophical self-clarification. Psychological and social theory shows us that we are, in effect, already strangers to ourselves; so it is no wonder that critics influenced by it adopt a standpoint that reminds Abrams of the view that extraterrestrials might take toward humans.

Up to this point I find myself in con-

siderable sympathy with the "anti-humanist" theorists and critics, at least to the extent that their motivations are as I have just been portraying them. Where I diverge quite sharply from them, especially from the self-styled "post-modernists," is over the role theory can and should play in confronting the problems of self-comprehension and self-opacity.

The philosophical origins of this crisis belong to the late 18th and early 19th centuries, to the counter-Enlightenment and Romantic reaction internal to Enlightenment thought, particularly in Germany. What is now called "post-modernism" was, in its philosophical substance, first articulated by "counter-Enlightenment" thinkers such as Hamann, Herder, and Jacobi, as well as the early Romantics, especially Hölderlin, Novalis, and Friedrich Schlegel, and partly too by the great German idealists (though the thought of Fichte and Hegel was far more a positive continuation of the Enlightenment tradition than a reaction against it). The counter-Enlightenment tradition questions the Enlightenment's reliance on reason, and its confidence in scientific systematicness, rational autonomy, and self-transparency as individual and cultural goals.

Hegel and Marx shared the counter-Enlightenment discontent, but they saw alienation and self-opacity as challenges to reason which must be met by further extensions of reason. The project is either to recover or else to achieve for the first time a genuinely human standpoint in which we may act with rational self-comprehension and self-transparency. Hegel described as the "need of philosophy" the challenge to overcome the bifurcation of life and reflection through rational comprehension. Marx found that theoretical understanding does not suffice, because the root of our self-alienation is practical, so he recast the challenge as practical, and viewed the task of theory as one of clarifying and supporting a liberating practice.

Hegel and Marx saw things this way because both were at bottom still on the Enlightenment rather than the counter-Enlightenment side of modernism. Those who call themselves "post-modernists" (a term whose sense guarantees its failure of reference) regard social and psychological obstacles to self-transparency as objections rather than challenges to the Enlightenment project. Along with their counter-Enlightenment predecessors, however, they have no alternative project, but only some alternative version of the same project—though perhaps muddled by doubt, ambivalence, and irresoluteness, or turned violently counterproductive by fear of Enlightenment liberation or overhasty emotional reactions against some of its imperfect or unripe manifestations.

For counter-Enlightenment theorists in our time, the Enlightenment goal of liberation through self-transparent practice takes the warped form of trying to catch fleeting glimpses of the futility of this goal, of the ways in which our lives as rational knowers and agents are hopelessly at odds with themselves, our communication irredeemably deceptive and self-subverting. This reduces the Enlightenment project to an idle *jeu d'esprit*, which neither enlightens nor liberates, but only flatters the *amour-propre* of the theoretician who is clever enough to display insight into the inevitable self-destructiveness of all thought and the vanity of all things human. The highest expression of this sense of self-alienated self-superiority is the attitude of irony, first theorized by the greatest of the

Romantics, Friedrich Schlegel, and now openly advocated as a life-attitude by Richard Rorty, the most respectable contemporary Anglo-American philosophical representative of "post-modernism". The marvelous advantage of irony is that you can mean what you can never say, say what you can never mean, communicate knowledge you can't have, and—in sum—be someone you are not. The objection to irony is that it is an abdication of responsibility. When it comes time for you to answer for yourself—for your thoughts, beliefs, contradictions, or even your actions—you are always somewhere else.

This makes it all too easy for counter-Enlightenment thought to appear politically progressive. For being nothing and nowhere, it can always disown what exists and pose as its most radical critic. But the objective tendency of counter-Enlightenment thinking is always conservative or even reactionary, however progressive its proponents may be subjectively. ("Humanism," on the other hand, is never any more or less conservative, liberal, or radical than its conception of the human and its understanding of the human world. That there are endlessly many such conceptions accounts for the protean character of "humanism" in modern history, to which Ted Underwood calls our attention, and also the danger of insipidity which infects any allegiance to "humanism" as a political creed.)

Friedrich Schlegel began as a radical republican, whose views about sexual morality and gender-identity were far ahead of his time; but ended as one of the Holy Alliance's leading ultra-reactionary monarchists. There is symbolic truth here, just as there is in the recent scandals about the Nazi affiliations of "post-modernist" heroes Martin Heidegger and Paul DeMan (though considered in themselves these scandals are of no philosophical significance whatever). The truth symbolized is this: at least in our European tradition there can be no politics of progress or liberation which does not represent a positive prosecution of the Enlightenment project of liberation through reason; and the chief danger to all progressive politics is that constant cultural shadow of reaction cast by the Enlightenment, that irrevocably modern fear and hatred of modernism variously exemplified intellectually in the counter-Enlightenment, Romanticism, "post-modernism," and culturally-politically in all forms of fascism and fundamentalism.

Abrams reports Derrida's revealing admission that deconstruction cannot "escape" what it "subverts" or even "supersede" what it "goes beyond." One wonders in that case what Derrida could possibly mean by "subverting" and "going beyond," and also how these boldly named gestures are supposed to differ from resigning or reconciling ourselves to what we cannot escape, or even apologizing for and rationalizing what we admit we can never supersede. Add to this the insistence of post-modernists that all the resources of the Enlightenment are bankrupt—its reason is mere rhetoric, its science logocentric metaphysics, its ideal of liberation merely a subjectivist illusion—and the whole business of "deconstructing," "dehumanizing," and "de-familiarizing" begins to take on the aspect of a barren intellectual exercise which gives off the all-too-familiar musty odor of decadent hypocrisy.

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**SWEET WILLIAM**

by John Hawkes

Simon & Schuster, 269 pages, \$20.

The new novel by John Hawkes, author of *Blood Oranges* and born at the head of a stable of writers who may be corralled under the term "mild misogynists," is the autobiography of Old Horse, aka William, a thoroughbred too mean-spirited to race or stud, who is handed down a succession of meaner and flintier owners, until he comes finally into the care of the "Master" and his trainer Ralph. We then spend many pages listening with no growing appreciation to Ralph's recounting of his many sexual exploits with his comely sister Carrie as he attempts to train Master to ride a half-lame and increasingly impatient William.

What I suspect Hawkes is saying about the tension between free will or desire and the restraints of society seems obvious and none too original, nor are the human characters agreeable or memorable, seeming only to exist, much like the stable doors and metal fences, so that they may be jumped over, kicked aside, or smashed through. Yet these episodes are enjoyable and well-written, and William himself, to Hawkes' credit, is more than willing to carry the entire book on his back; and if you, dear reader, can champ that misogynous bit for one more ride, you might find in Old Horse's story some lessons that endure beyond the dirty stables in which they were bred. —Jeff Schwaner

**IN A COUNTRY OF MOTHERS**

A.M. Homes

Random House, 275 pages, \$22

Each era creates its own favorite tales of terrors, and in the last hundred years, since the advent of "Frankenstein" and "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," we have read scary novels about global destruction, invasion from outer space, monsters of genetic alteration, and the selling of human organs, to name a few. Mostly they are expressions of our suspicions about what scientists monkey around with in their labs. In her latest novel, *In a Country of Mothers*, A.M. Homes presents us with the "me generation's" deepest fear—a shrink with her own destructive hang-up.

The reader is first introduced to Jody, a young woman with your average crisis—she is ambivalent about attending graduate school at UCLA. Enter Claire, a skilled and compassionate therapist with a deep dark secret: as a teenager

she gave up a baby girl for adoption. It happens that Jody is an adopted child and Claire comes to imagine that Jody is her daughter. What the reader must accept is that Jody would choose to see a shrink in the first place, that a fundamentally sane person can be driven to total psychosis merely by the maternal attention of a health worker, and, most erroneously, that sitting through someone else's therapy sessions is at all interesting.

The pace of the story picks up after the relationship between the two women has deepened beyond those boring therapy sessions and, in the last quarter, it transforms itself into a page-turner. The author splits our sympathies evenly between Claire and Jody, an unfortunate choice, since a good thriller benefits from real evil, not just some watered-down version of karmic kinks. The jacket hails the book as a psychological thriller, but in the end, *In a Country of Mothers* is a rather pedestrian journey, skimming the surfaces of two women's psyches. The ultimate threat isn't death and destruction, but the prospect of life-long guilt—the "me generation's" version of hell.

—Gunilla Feigenbaum

GARBAGE

A.R. Ammons

Norton, 121 pages, \$17.95

A.R. Ammons has titled his new, long poem "Garbage." This is a perverse move on his part: the poem is not garbage. After reading it, however, one is led to wonder if maybe it is, and to ask further what's wrong with garbage anyway. Everything becomes garbage sooner or later. There are people in our country who have to live off of it. There are species of plants and animals whose lives are spent breaking it down, gaining subsistence from it, and turning it into things that we don't think are garbage, such as light, heat, oxygen, and food. We need garbage. We make it every day.

The title is a dare: to publishers (imagine an editor saying "we are so proud to present the public with Garbage") and to readers who would like to take the poem seriously. Challenges to seriousness abound within the poem, which, sometimes, really *is* about garbage. Ammons' themes are aging, poetry, and an interconnected universe. Within these themes his concern is often with what gets thrown away in the process of making, be it the making of a life or a poem, and with what happens to things that are discarded. The poem is rangy and crazy; read its chapters in any order that pleases you and you will come away with much to think about, as well as a newly enriched store of funny and profound Ammonisms.

—Heather White

CHILD OF GOD

Cormac McCarthy

Vintage, 197 pages, \$10.

Before *All the Pretty Horses* and *Blood Meridian* and *Suttree*, Cormac McCarthy had already arrived as a major novelist with his third novel. *Child of God* follows Lester Ballard as he's evicted from his property and into our story courtesy of the broad business end of an axe. Rejected in almost every social encounter, Ballard responds with murder, retaining the corpses in a mountain cave where he can speak and interact with them without fear of rejection. Despite his obvious weaknesses, necrophilia not the least among them,

Ballard is one of the most sympathetic characters in recent American fiction. A scene where he shops for a dress and lingerie for one of his corpses and has to enlist the help of a young female salesperson evokes such empathy for his utter inability to communicate that your heart goes out to him despite the morbidity of the situation.

McCarthy is often compared, unfavorably, with Faulkner; but "A Rose for Emily" and its Gothic themes notwithstanding, Faulkner could not have created a Lester Ballard; nor, more to the point, would he have wanted to. *Child of God* is McCarthy's Old Testament, complete with flood, mean and stoic and impersonally his own. It's less a buried literary gem recently unearthed, than a spiky cactus which has survived despite the drought of readers and which, so severe is its vision, almost seems not to need readers at all. —J.S.

**THE CHANGING LIGHT AT SANDOVER**

560 pages, \$30

SELECTED POEMS 1946-1985

339 pages, \$25

James Merrill

Knopf

Defining what it is that makes James Merrill's poems more than simply perfect is difficult. Their perfection, at any stage in his long career, is immediately conspicuous. Words seem to behave for Merrill in a preternaturally obliging manner; rhymes and rhythms emerge so effortlessly and ingeniously that they seem inevitable. Merrill writes with equal aplomb in a multitude of forms, including the more and less obscure traditional ones, and those he makes up himself. A beautiful example of the latter is the stanza he introduces in his early poem "The Peacock." The stanza is composed of seven lines, of five, three, six, and eight feet, with a consistent pattern of off-rhyme. In its precision and employment of words that, disturbingly, don't quite rhyme, the stanza is an apt figure for Merrill's work as a whole. Underneath the sheen of the poems' technical brilliance there often lingers a sense of menace and the possibility of disorder. Most commonly, that lurking unease is embodied as a loss, usually the death of someone close to the poet. Such a generalization belies the scope of Merrill's subject matter; he is sophisticated, learned, and worldly, qualities attested to by the breadth of his poetic interests. However, loss and the recuperative powers of poetry are central to his work throughout the *Selected Poems*.

These concerns, as well as peacocks, are also central to his 1983 book, *The Changing Light at Sandover*. One of Merrill's pastimes is contacting dead friends on his ouija board. His conversations with those in the beyond have been a source of poetic material for some time; the *Selected Poems* contains a number of poems about his experiences with the board. *Sandover* is an epic in three books in which J.M. and D.J. (Merrill and his companion David Jackson) learn the secrets of the universe from



Ephraim, a Greek Jew from the year A.D. 8, and Mirabell, a bat who turns into a peacock. J.M. and D.J. are accompanied on their intellectual and spiritual journey by, among others, W.H. Auden and his friend Chester Kallman. Except for J.M. and D.J., all of the characters in the poem speak through the ouija board by means of an upended teacup, which Jackson touches while Merrill transcribes the conversations. It is an extraordinary poem. The plot is less confusing than it sounds in paraphrase, although it is even more implausible and outrageous. All of what makes Merrill so particularly satisfying, in his intelligence, his taste, and his wit, is present. There are passages in *Sandover* that are as moving as any of his previous poems. Additionally, there is the enjoyment of experiencing Merrill's genius for structural complexity in a book long enough to give it its greatest freedom. Reading the whole of *Sandover* is rather overwhelming, and not only because it is so long. The more carefully one reads, the more it becomes apparent that the poem is equally rich in its minutiae as in its overall effect; there are in it depths and more depths of pleasure for the reader. —H.W.

THE WRESTLER'S CRUEL STUDY

Stephen Dobyns

Norton, 426 pages, \$22.95

Readers of Dobyns' Saratoga mysteries will find this big book entertaining but oddly threatening, like wrestling itself. Marduk the Magnificent, aka gentle Michael Marmaduke, mighty beacon of Good inside wrestling's "squared circle," is the master of the Bosom of Abraham, a hold that sends opponents tumbling freight-free into slumberland. After two gorillas climb down the side of a skyscraper and kidnap his virginal fiancée Rose White, Marduk, or rather Michael, must enlist the aid of his fellow wrestlers to liberate the damsel in distress. But what lies outside the ring are endless other rings where Michael's authority and heroism are called into question.

Finding his ability to act limited by those who created him — his manager Primus Muldoon, the shady Wrestling Federation — Michael realizes the real fight is for his own moral identity. But where is Rose all this time? And what about her sister Violet, and a strange encounter with leather-bedecked deconstructionists, and the somewhat slimy Deep Rat, and a two-headed coin engraved with an angel's face and devil's face? Dobyns handles the myriad subplots and themes in the same way that the wrestler Hulk Hogan handles Brutus the Barber Beefcake — none too delicately. For all that, or because of it, *The Wrestler's Cruel Study* is a great exercise in hyperbole, illuminating the eternal struggle between higher concepts and chance falls, though in the end, Dobyns doesn't quite succeed in making us forget that this fight was fixed by the champ himself. —J.S.



Finding Home:

Michael Serino

Photographs by Janice Levy

To be at home in the world, once one has come to the fateful modern consciousness of alternatives, requires a tremendous labor, an endurance of great fear.

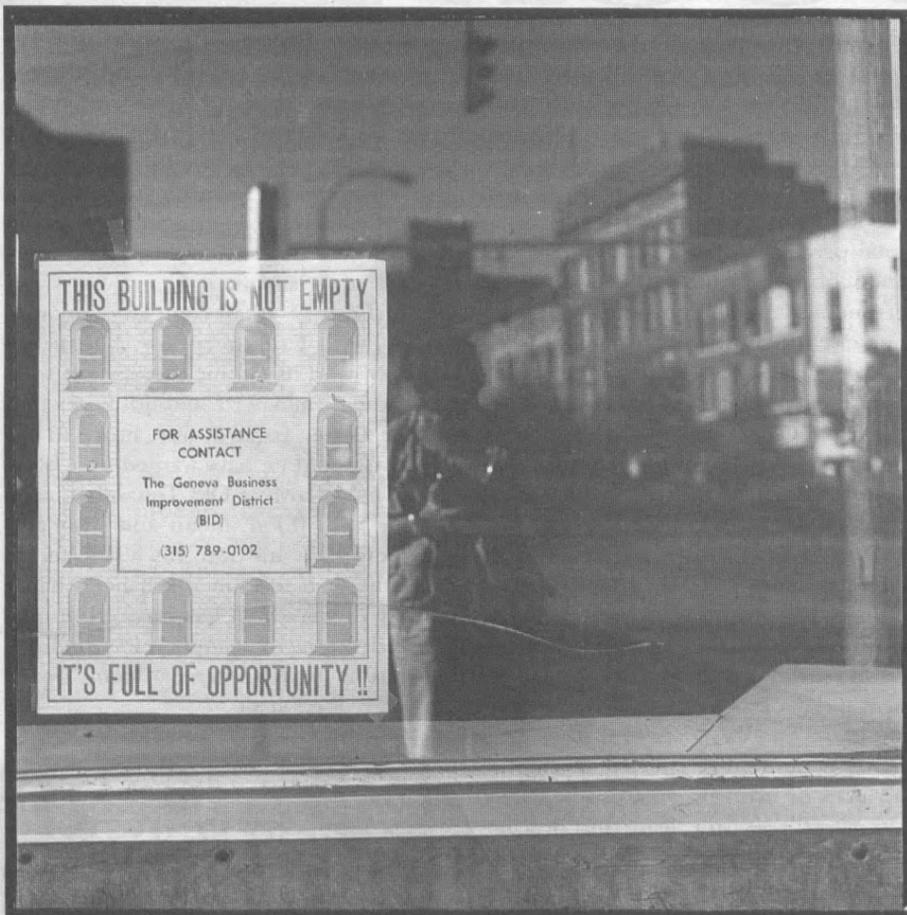
—Wendell Berry

Lately I have been thinking about settling in Ithaca.

The frightening term for me in that sentence is not "Ithaca"—which, to be sure, holds its own terrors—but "settling." Settling is something I had never been tempted to do. The problem was not some objection to the idea of staying in one place so much as the fact that I have never felt truly at home in any of the places I have lived. Over the past two decades I have moved on average once a year, occupying 21 different apartments or houses in 9 different cities or towns. The pattern is due in part to factors common to anyone associated with academic life: moving around during undergraduate and graduate school, then taking jobs at different institutions, trading up from one position to another. Other factors depended more on personal idiosyncrasies: restlessness, aesthetic considerations, and, most important, an extremely low tolerance for noise. (Ironically, convenience has usually led me to live near college students, who are still at the age where they confuse making noise with having a personality.) Another element militating against permanence was the fact that I equated owning a house with enslavement to a mortgage, taxes, and repairs. None of that for me, thank you: life is best lived simply, without high overhead or long-term commitments.

So why think about it now? One reason is a sense of personal stability—a secure knowledge of the direction I want my life to take, framed within the context of a marriage that goes beyond happy and borders on the ecstatic. Another factor is the place itself: I find myself responding to the beauty of the region, the lives of the people, the values of the community (or some of them, at least; let's not get crazy here). But at the heart of things is the feeling that there might be something worthwhile missing in my life in not ever feeling deeply connected to a place or its people, not feeling I have something at stake in the long run. It is the realization that, since leaving the house and town I grew up in at the age of 16, I have been without a sense of rootedness, and that that rootedness might be a very valuable thing.

There has been a great deal of literature, psychology, and sociology written about the American lack of rootedness in place and community, and I have read a great deal of it, but without regarding the question as a personal dilemma but merely as a factor in the understanding of our culture. The writer who struck me as being most eloquent on the subject was Wendell Berry, the novelist and poet who, after embarking on an academic career that led him away from home, returned to his native Kentucky to live as a farmer, continuing to teach and write but rooting daily existence in his relationship to his native soil. In collections of essays like *A Continuous Harmony*



(1975), *The Unsettling of America* (1977), and *The Gift of Good Land* (1981), Berry speaks for the values of tradition and continuity, love of the earth, and respect for its life. But while I found Berry's prose moving and many of his values worth embracing, I also found it difficult to identify with the essence of his position in that I, like so many Americans, found myself cut off from my own roots. The town I grew up in no longer contains any of my family or friends, and the urban "renewal" of the early 1970s changed the cityscape almost beyond recognition. Home, as I remember it, isn't there anymore.

A relationship to a place, I realized, might have much in common with a relationship to a person: attraction might lead you from one to another, but would not provide long-term stability. If you simply move on every time you begin to have problems, succumb to boredom, or hear about something better, life becomes an unmemorable chain of faces and places, devoid of attachment or significance. Feeling at home might be as much the result of making a conscious commitment to the life of a place as it is of a natural affinity with it. Yet it is so easy not to make that commitment, so comforting to read the daily paper and think, "They're not my problems, I'm just passing through." It is possible to live in a place for years without ever saying "I'm going to take my stand in this place, with these people" and join in a common struggle for a satisfying life. It is easy to believe that the parts of life one is responsible for are defined by the walls of one's house, car, and office. For many this has become the American way of life.

Yet reversing that trend, even in one's own life, is no simple matter. And while there has been much lamenting of the loss of rootedness in our culture, little has been said about how to reestablish it. Yes, there have been numerous calls for community participation and guides to grassroots involvement, but little has been written about the dilemma of the individual faced with the desire to establish a feeling of belonging to a place he or she is not from. It was a pleasant coincidence, then, that just as I was begin-

ning to think about this problem two books appeared addressing this very issue: Scott Russell Sanders's *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World* (Beacon Press, \$20.00) and Deborah Tall's *From Where We Stand: Recovering a Sense of Place* (Alfred A. Knopf, \$22.00). The authors write from different perspectives with different styles, but between them shed a great deal of light on both the importance and the complexity of the question of how to find a home in a rootless society.

Scott Sanders' *Staying Put* is a beautiful piece of writing. His spare, graceful prose carries his thoughts faultlessly from the personal to the philosophical and back again, weaving a fabric of understanding worthy of the richly textured fabric of human life. Rather than simplifying his complex subject matter he proceeds calmly through it, establishing his footing securely on one level before proceeding on to the next. The book's individual chapters, many of which were previously published independently, do what essays

do at their best. As Sanders has written, in the essay "The Singular First Person,"

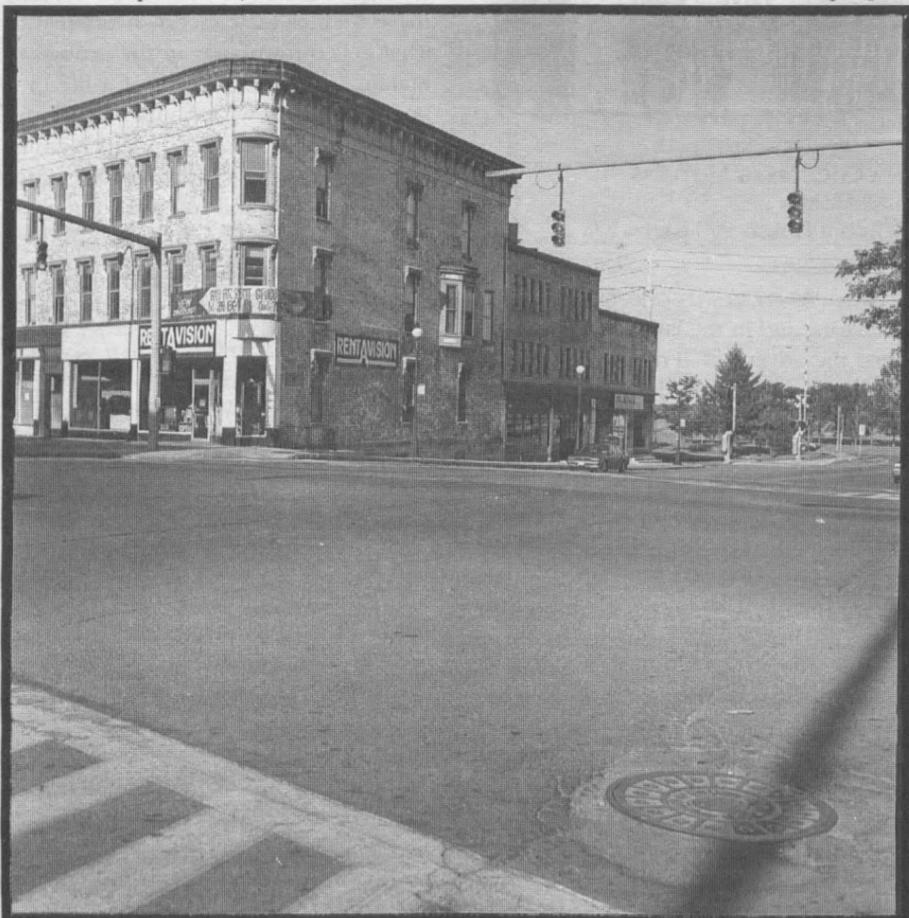
In this era of prepackaged thought, the essay is the closest thing we have, on paper, to a record of the individual mind at work and at play. It is an amateur's raid in a world of specialists. Feeling overwhelmed by data, random information, and the flotsam and jetsam of mass culture, we relish the spectacle of a single consciousness making sense of a portion of the chaos.

In the preface to *Staying Put*, Sanders states his purpose eloquently:

This book...records my attempt to fashion a life that is firmly grounded—in household and community, in knowledge of place, in awareness of nature, and in contact with that source from which all things rise. I aspire to become an inhabitant, one who knows and honors the land....I am always driven by a single desire, that of learning to be at home. The search is practical as well as spiritual. Only by understanding where I live can I learn how to live.

In this passage he points toward the essential terms that will form the book's conceptual constellation: "household," "community," "nature," and "spirit." It is in establishing their interrelationship on both the practical and the theoretical levels that Sanders makes his most valuable contribution to the conversation about a sense of place. This concern is reflected in the structure of the book, which begins and ends with autobiographical reflections and develops parallel narratives moving, on the one hand, through the practical elements of house, land, and water and, on the other, through the abstract themes of settling down, seeking foundations, and the life of the spirit.

Sanders' own history is one of uprootedness, beginning with the submersion of his home ground following the construction of a dam and reservoir that flooded his part of northeastern Ohio. He records the loss of his childhood haunts—the river bottom along which he gathered nuts and berries, the fields he walked in, the river he skated on. He had left the area as construction on the project



Geneva

Identity and Place

neared completion and did not return until many years later. "My worst imaginings had failed to prepare me for this," he writes of seeing the reservoir for the first time.

For a long spell I leaned against the guardrail and dredged up everything I could remember of what lay beneath the reservoir. But memory was at last defeated by the blank gray water. No effort of mind could restore the river or drain the valley. I surrendered to what my eyes were telling me. Only then was I truly exiled.

Turning to the problem of how to develop a sense of being at home once again, he chronicles his years in Bloomington, Indiana, where he has lived for most of his professional life. He describes the "alchemy" by which a house becomes a home: in buying and dwelling in the same house for almost two decades, repairing and improving it through time, he has developed a sense of attachment to the structure itself.

These walls and floors and scruffy flower beds are saturated with our memories and sweat.... After nearly two decades of intimacy, the house dwells in us as surely as we dwell in the house.

He likens this process to the processes of nature, to birds constructing their nests for support against the world's perils.

From his house, Sanders' rootedness spreads downward and outward, into the earth and toward the water. A knowledge of the natural world and the life it supports cements his relationship to the earth; his region's waterways connect him to the wider world, and the cycle of water from the sky to the earth to the sea connects him as an individual to the planet as a whole—and beyond.

The river's movement is an outward show of the current that bears everything along. Wearing a groove in the earth, it reveals the grain of the universe. Quick or sluggish, all creation is a flow—rivers, mountains, trees, babies and parents, butterflies and parrots, rocks, clouds, sun, Milky Way—each part driven at its own pace within a single current. When I look in the mirror each morning the face I see is familiar from the day before, yet subtly changed, shifted downstream, as the river sliding within its banks alters moment by moment."

The flow of rivers gives direction to our lives, he says, and satisfies that deep-felt need also addressed by narrative: "a shape and direction imposed on time. And so we tell stories and listen to them as we listen to the coursing of water."

What holds Sanders' relationships to all these things together is the strength of his commitment to them. "Having made my choice, I feel wedded to this house, as I do to my wife and my neighborhood and my region." It is a strength of character, a willingness to honor a relationship and work to sustain it through difficult times. In our time such commitment has become increasingly rare even in human interactions; commitments to houses and neighborhoods are rarer still.

Poet and essayist Deborah Tall's *From Where We Stand* contrasts with Sanders' book in that it describes the process of seeking a place to commit

to. While Sanders, at home in his world, reflects contemplatively on his place in it and reinforces his ties to it, Tall depicts the struggle to form that initial bond to a place and say "this is the one I choose." For this reason, and because the area she was writing about is the Finger Lakes region, her book was of particular interest, and I genuinely expected to like it.

But other contrasts with Sanders exist as well. While Sanders' style is poetic and spare, Tall's is poetic and florid. She is extremely conscious of her identity as "a writer," referring to it throughout the text.



Every molded mountain and tree-spoked hillside was alive, boldly beckoning me away from the tedium of my known world. I was slowly turning into a writer—nature was my ready muse, an invitation to fly....

'singing the world into existence' as Bruce Chatwin lyrically describes it, obviously as attracted to the notion as I am—it's a moving metaphor for a writer.

Mine was a journey of writerly admiration and appetite.

I want, like other writers, to bind such mementos to the present through the connective tissue of language.

Tall and her husband, poet David Weiss, came to Geneva, New York, more than a decade ago to teach at Hobart and William Smith. At the same time, Tall was longing to establish a sense of being at home somewhere. The product of a fragmented suburban childhood, she found herself at odds with her environment from an early age ("A stripped landscape is a grief for a dreamy child.") and later began searching for some sort of spiritual connectedness. This process was undoubtedly inhibited by what comes across in the book as a hyperdeveloped sensibility that reacts aversively to almost every aspect of contemporary American culture. Small wonder, then, that she initially sought a home elsewhere. Her description of that move establishes her persona in the book, and is worth quoting at length:

As soon as I was of age I went into exile. I followed an Irish writer to rural Ireland, desperate to live a life close to the land and far from middle-class niceties. I longed to escape indistinctness, to feel the world as unavoidably real, even if ferocious.... I'd spent my college years soul-searching and demonstrating and trying to write poetry. Defiant, romantic, I landed on an Irish island, an outcrop of rock and bog in the untamed Atlantic, a place still loitering in the nineteenth century with its heart exposed to weather. The island's climate matched my Sturm und Drang....

While in many ways satisfying, her life there was to last only five years. She

returned to the US for more schooling and decided to make a place for herself in her native land, at first in Manhattan and then, after another five years, in Geneva, where the book's narrative truly begins. But while one must accept her claim to have attempted to make a home in Geneva as sincere, the attempt seemed doomed from the start.

When the job was offered and we decided to come, the lake was what I kept telling my husband, David, about, not the slightly seedy town that hung on to the side of the campus like an embarrassing stepparent.

And later,

Naively, or perhaps nostalgically, I long for this to be a place where the natural world still informs human life, a place whose community lives attuned to a beautiful landscape.

This does seem naive, to be sure, and to anyone who has spent any time in Geneva and observed the impact of its depressed economy, highly unlikely. In fact, what she was looking for does not sound like any place in rural New York State, at least not in this century. But she was able to find something akin to the life she was seeking in the history and legends of the Native American tribes that had occupied the area before the white man's arrival.

Drawing a picture of this earlier way of living on the land is the particular strength of *From Where We Stand*. Tall is drawn to the ways of the Seneca and the Cayuga Indians who created a complex and meaningful mythological

structure to embody and direct their relation to the region, and the reader can learn a great deal about these subjects from this book. He or she can also learn much about the destruction of those cultures by the arrival of the white man, and about the treachery of the country's early political leaders.

But here Tall sets up the dichotomy that ultimately undermines her attempt to feel at home in Geneva, for virtually everything that has happened to life in Geneva after the removal of the Indians is depicted negatively. Seeking meanings from a vanished past and another culture's worldview, Tall makes little contact with the actual culture around her. Her narrative sings the praises of the landscape but condemns the culture. Nowhere is this more evident than in the almost complete absence of people outside her family in her narrative; for her, developing a sense of a place does not include a relationship to its people. In fact, when the local residents are mentioned, it is either negatively—

My neighbors are reticent, sedentary. They mumble and nod the rare times we pass on the road. No one, as in my rural fantasy, has come by with a welcoming plate of homemade cookies, with chat and advice, not to speak of legends. By nightfall, their houses give off the warm glow of television. We're left to our own devices.

or condescendingly—

In town, trapped in low-paying jobs, women spend their money at tanning parlors. Their morals are old-fashioned, politics conservative, but they long for the gloss of the up-to-date, the stamp of the middle class. Others, the inner- and edge-or-town poor, seem to long for little. They're plagued with alcoholism and obesity and indifference. Day in, day out, lines of unemployed men fish from a crumbling cement pier that once held a row of swank boathouses, old hats pulled down over their eyes, the view blocked.

Not a very poetic bunch.

By the end of the book it is evident that the attempt to find a sense of being at home in Geneva has failed. The notion of commitment so dominant in Sanders' book is entirely absent here. Tall and her family move to Ithaca, justifying the move—in one of the most uncomfortable-to-read passages in the book—in the kind of language so often used to justify, say, white flight from the cities:

Like many, we made a decision based largely on our children's needs rather than our own. We've given up rural pleasures and purities in order to be in a neighborhood with other young children nearby. We've moved to have well-funded, progressive schools, music and dance lessons, plays, films, museums—all the activity of a university town—and a more heterogeneous, open-minded community.

Her rationalization that she has established a sense of place in "the region" is unconvincing. Geneva and Ithaca are as different as two places can be, and loyalty to the "Finger Lakes region" is meaningful only to an outsider with no grasp of the specificity of place; it is like claiming loyalty to "the tri-state area" in justifying a move out of the Bronx to Westchester and then to Connecticut.

U.S. Fiction Today

continued from page 1

tioners of the metafictional avant garde, it was a turn against the unexamined assumption that a text could ever actually reflect or recreate the world of experience. Among critics it was a turn against earlier generations of writers—Howells, Zola—who had tried to establish realism on firm intellectual grounds.

A typical ukase of the 1970s—typical in its rhetorical conceit as well as its sentiments—is this by Robert Scholes from his book *Metafiction and Fabulation*, one of the leading sales brochures for the metafictional revolution. Decrying the reign of what he called “empirical notions of characterization so essential to realistic and naturalistic fiction,” he declaimed:

Proust's brilliant exposition of the paradoxical notion that we can truly experience life only through art is the death knell of the realistic-naturalistic movement in fiction, though even today, fifty years afterward, a small school of neo-naturalists continues to write frantically, headless chickens unaware of the decapitating axe.

In Scholes' violent and overbearing metaphor, writers who didn't fall into line behind the Proustian epistemology were dead, though they continued to flap around in their own blood. “The flat prose of sociological fiction,” Scholes continued, “is being abandoned to the sociologists, who, God knows, have need of it.”

At the beginning of our own decade, that avant garde and the rhetoric that boosted it seem a trifle shopworn. Barthelme died an untimely death, robbing the movement of its most beguiling and accessible voice. Reviewers have dealt harshly with the later novels of

Barth, Coover, and Gaddis. And Pynchon, silent for seventeen years after the astonishing *Gravity's Rainbow*, emerged at the beginning of the new decade with *Vineland*, which did little to satisfy any aficionado's hopes for one more sensational romp through his fevered and abundant imagination. *Vineland* is a tired book: fiendishly clever in patches, but wearily monotonous throughout. Whatever it is, it is not the performance through which an entire movement might find its justification. The test of any movement is whether it gives rise to subsequent generations, and metafiction in America looks to have been a one-generation blip, which took twenty years to cross our radar screens and then vanished. There may well be gifted young anti-realists waiting in the wings (William Vollman? Kathy Acker?), but the cultural moment is not favorable to their becoming anything like a force; they are rowing against the tide.

What seems to be new in contemporary fiction in America is likely at first blush to seem old, if not discredited: realism. That is a troubled and ambiguous word, and for that reason it is sensible to keep the “r” small and the concept modest, allowing the writers who mine that seam in our literature to sharpen their tools and define their methods as they go. There is no need to turn realism into just another bumper sticker, like William Dean Howells' “truthful treatment of material,” or even to recite with Henry James, “The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life.”

Realism these days is a flexible practice, open to influences of every sort and boasting more flavors than Ben and Jerry's. The hallucinatory realism of

Robert Stone bears little resemblance to the socially engaged realism of Louise Erdrich or the pointillist realism of John Updike. All of them, however, share a devotion to the world they inhabit. To enter the groves of American realism and the thickets of ficto-journalism is to come upon an extraordinary fecundity, precisely where the critic may be least likely to look for it: on the *New York Times* bestseller lists and even the drugstore bookshelves. One finds writers like Stone, Erdrich, William Kennedy, the late Raymond Carver, Anne Tyler, Cormac McCarthy, Barry Hannah, Jay McInerney, Terry Macmillan, Toni Morrison, Barbara Kingsolver, Russell Banks, Jane Smiley, John Casey, Norman Rush, Amy Tan, and an older generation that includes Updike, William Styron, Walker Percy, Philip Roth, and Peter Matthiessen. This bounty of American writing emerged with little attention from the academy until quite recently. I hesitate to call this an age of gold—it lacks the great national themes and towering figures that commonly define golden ages. Updike is more likely to be remembered as our Howells than as our Hemingway. But it isn't an age of brass either. It strikes me as an age of silver, short on grandeur but brimming with fresh talent.

How should we account for this flowering of American realism in the last decade, when the reading audience for fiction apparently shrank? One obvious factor is that realism was always there and always had its practitioners and defenders. John Updike, Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, William Styron, Philip Roth, and the late Walker Percy and James Baldwin have been major forces on the literary stage for four decades or so, and for one segment of the population, residing outside the academy, they have been the very stage itself. Some younger writers picked up the novel much as they found it, as though the visions and strategies of realist fiction had never experienced challenge or been called into question.

Writers learn more from other writers than from the precepts of critics, which may be why some of what is new these days sounds much like what we have been reading throughout this century—why Jay McInerney recalls Fitzgerald (a resemblance he has cultivated), why Richard Ford and the late Raymond Carver sound like Hemingway, and why Louise Erdrich and Cormac McCarthy are so reminiscent of Faulkner. That doesn't mean, of course, that the new in American fiction represents no advance over the old. Erdrich's Chippewa Indians and McInerney's cocaine yuppies are fresh, contemporary subjects, though that is not what the general student of lit-

erature wants to know when the question of “what's new?” is raised.

Two decades of metafiction—fiction that called attention to its own fictionality, subordinated depth to style and surface, tended to play with its subject and dissolve every emotion and every belief into irony—did not pass without leaving a trace. It brought a new register into the American writer's vocal range along with a new freedom to conjure with history, and it brought a new theatricality to a genre whose standard moves had come to seem boringly predictable. As a workshop in techniques and maneuvers for writers who had not surrendered their claim to representing life but had grown weary of the forms they had inherited, metafiction proved to be invaluable. The road travelled by Philip Roth from *Letting Go* to *The Counterlife* and *Deception* is a paradigm of how a tired form could refresh itself through the absorption of new freedoms. Louise Erdrich's and Maxine Hong Kingston's intricate tapestries of dream, lore, myth, daily experience, and historical fact mark them as writers in the wake of Italo Calvino, Julio Cortazar, and Gabriel Garcia-Marquez.

All the same, there has been something like a renewal of the values realists have traditionally stood for, and some shifts in compositional emphasis that suggest a movement: a new awareness of voice and of language as the echo chambers of history and tradition, a consciousness of region and place, a revived ethnic and regional sensitivity, a new awareness of traditional folk narrative, a distinct political animus. Furthermore, movements within society as a whole and the cultural order in particular have been instrumental in the emergence of this new realism.

I. Pressure from “below,” “outside,” or “the margin”

These are sensitive terms that can be misleading, and not everyone to whom they are applied looks kindly upon the ascription of marginality. (Though in our time, there is a cachet attached to being marginal or, better, “marginalized,” with its clear implication of having been nudged into the corner by the dominant, “hegemonic” culture.) One problem with the term “marginal” is that not every non-white or female writer buys it, since what the critic needs for the sake of moral leverage is not always what the writer needs for the sake of a broadly-based readership. The famous complaint raised years ago by Saul Bellow that he, Philip Roth, and Bernard Malamud had become the Hart, Schaffner and Marx of literature has gotten an amen from other hyphenated writers—Maxine Hong Kingston, for one—who protest that ethnic labels falsify their American identities by re-packaging them as exotics rather than, as the title of Gish Jen's recent novel brashly puts it, typical Americans.

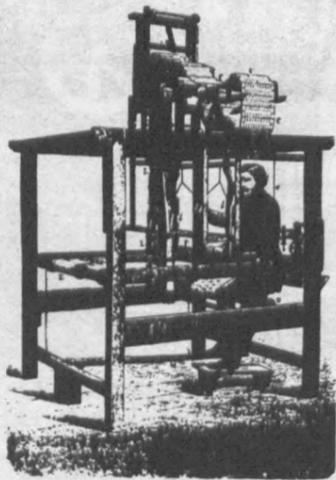
Moreover, “marginality” assumes the existence of a stifling cultural hegemony whose existence grows increasingly problematic. In culture these days, pluralism is in the driver's seat and hegemony is on the run, but who are the hegemonic writers and how exactly is their fiction an instrument of their control? Updike, who has just finished his *Rabbit* tetralogy about the decline of America? Tom Wolfe, who thinks we are all at sea on a ship of fools? Philip Roth, who wraps irony within irony in the construction of his elaborate counter-lives?

Be that as it may, it is true that a fair proportion of the new fiction, sometimes referred to as “neo-realism,” emerges from social groups whose stories have

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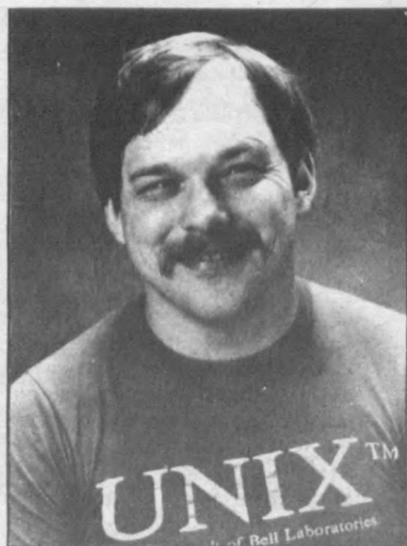


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not been told and who seek expression through the main media of cultural dissemination. The list of new realists includes Hispanic-American, Chinese-American, Native-American, and Black or African-American writers, and while there is a long and rich history of Black writing in America, most Black writers are still seeking to be heard outside their own communities. To this list must be added women, and it is no accident that some of the most provocative writing from within the "marginal" groups is by women: Louise Erdrich and Leslie Marmon Silko among Native-Americans, Maxine Hong Kingston (in her non-fiction), Amy Tan, and Gish Jen among Chinese-Americans, and Gloria Naylor, Terry Macmillan, and scores of others among Black writers. Realism is the medium of new voices.

The social pressure for muckraking realism has fused with a revived interest in folk narrative as an agent of minority-group "empowerment." With the eclipse of the "master narratives" that once dominated American culture, the poverty of myth in our lives has had to be filled by local and regional stories that give consciousness to our group affinities and form to our identities. From this perspective, what Louise Erdrich and Leslie Silko do for Native American culture, Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston are doing for Chinese-American culture and Cynthia Ozick for Jewish-American. Their middle-American counterparts might be writers like Larry Woiwode, Annie Dillard, and Alice Munro (a Canadian, but apposite here), whose stories of the small town life—German Lutheran life in North Dakota, pioneer life in the Pacific Northwest, and Scottish Presbyterian life in rural Ontario—give

voice to insular existences that have their own places, times, manners and morals, their own specific weight. The most spectacular instance of this is the surge in Southern writing, led by Barry Hannah, Lee Smith, Fred Chappell, Alan Gurganus, Madison Smartt Bell, Larry Brown, Kaye Gibbons, Jill McCorkle, Dorothy Allison, and others. Each of these writers is carrying out the same enterprise in his or her own terms. No Balkanized America has so far been imaged forth, but these writers and artists draw their energies from local communities, even if they aspire to be read by some as-yet-undifferentiated community of the whole.

Seen from a different angle, this invasion from the margins may look like a nativist revival. The stark similarities, in voice and in region, between Louise Erdrich and Larry Woiwode, between *Love Medicine* and *The Neumiller Stories*, both about life in the rural enclaves of North Dakota, suggests not so much their differences as their mutual participation in the same social movement: a renaissance of regional consciousness and regional lore. Indeed, I would propose that the realist revival is a broadly-based movement in which Black writers and White, Native-Americans and Chinese-Americans, Southerners and Northerners, men and women alike are all trying to reclaim American voices and reinterpret American experiences for largely the same audiences.

The literatures that we call by the various names of surfiction, metafiction, and postmodernism look to Europe for their muses, rather than to native ground, and to the extent that these literatures are enjoying their own small revival, it is

see *U.S. Fiction Today*, page 15

Finding Home

continued from page 11

But while I can only understand *From Where We Stand* as a failure to find a sense of being at home, it also points out something Sanders neglects to consider—the large extent to which the ability to maintain a commitment to a place depends on luck. It was good luck for Sanders that he landed in Bloomington, bad luck for Tall that she landed in Geneva. Would Sanders have "stayed put" if they had torn down the houses across the street and constructed a shopping mall? It seems unlikely. If he had landed in Geneva would he have stayed? Hard to say. But it is easy to practice virtue when the gods smile on you, difficult when they make things hard.

The other lesson here is that those who value a sense of being at home but have lost their own roots have the luxury of picking and choosing where to settle down. If they take the commitment seriously they will choose carefully and then honor their commitment. Like Sanders, they should sincerely seek to engage with the land and the people of the place they inhabit. But, like Tall, they should make that decision not on the basis of where they happen to land, but according to where they truly feel at home. As for me, Ithaca is still looking good.

Michael Serino is a writer and editor, and Janice Levy is a professor of photography, both at Ithaca College.

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Little Rain

continued from page 1

ment home at Stanford University, only 20 miles from my childhood home. But more important, the stories he tells about his family and their life on the land ring true to me—and to many other sons and daughters of the American West. He describes his youth traveling with a father who was always moving, always looking for the next big opportunity, the bonanza, the "Big Rocky Candy Mountain." As Stegner's family moved from Saskatchewan to Montana to Salt Lake City to Reno to Hollywood and back to Salt Lake City, my own grandfather, with family in tow, was moving from Coos Bay, Oregon, to Susanville, California, to Reno to Sunnyside, California. To read Stegner is to hear my father speak. Stegner gives voice to what my father, who like many Westerners was better with his hands than with words, could only feel—a true sense of the American West and the people who lived there. Stegner's father never found his "Big Rocky Candy Mountain" and neither did my grandfather. They were good men, like thousands of others, but the land is too big, too arid, to be reshaped by the dreams of mere men and women, and it wore them out. The West can only be coexisted with; it can't be conquered.

Stegner defines the West as the area beyond a line where the annual rainfall drops below 20 inches, starting in Western Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas and extending to the Pacific. The Pacific Northwest and the coastal strip of California he considers subregions; while they have much in common with the rest of the region, each has one important distinction—in the case of California, its abundant people, and in the case of the Northwest, its abundant water. Stegner

writes:

the Western landscape is more than topography and landforms, dirt and rock. It is, most fundamentally, climate—climate which expresses itself not only as landforms but as atmosphere, flora, fauna. And here, despite all the local variety, there is a large, abiding simplicity. Not all the West is arid, yet except at its Pacific edge, aridity surrounds and encompasses it.

Aridity is the true essence of the West, what defines the region and its people.

In *Where the Bluebird Sings* as in all his writings, the land is the hero, not the people who have lived there. From the desolation of the high desert, to the grandeur of the Rockies, to the big sky country of the high prairie, Stegner shows us how the land has molded a segment of the American population and shaped the American Dream. But I think he's trying to show us more. He describes how man's constant assault on the land has been the outgrowth of a fundamental misunderstanding of our relationship with the natural world. We attempt to remake the landscape to fit our dreams, instead of aspiring to understand the land and deriving our dreams from it.

The sixteen essays here are organized into three suites. The first recounts Stegner's personal life, and the second discusses the land itself and his view of it. He concludes with a critique of Western writers and his own writing life.

In the suite entitled "Personal" he includes three essays: "Finding the Place: a Migrant Childhood," "Letter, Much Too Late," and "Crossing into Eden." Here he exposes the values that make him and his writing unique. In discussing his life growing up, his relationship with his mother,

and a favorite lake he used to visit, he shows us the basis of his feelings about the Western myth, the value of family, and his philosophy of co-existence with and respect for the land.

"Finding the Place: a Migrant Childhood" describes Stegner's personal witnessing of the Western mythic hero in his father, traveling the west seeking the "mother lode," never living in one place long enough to call it home, to learn its secrets, to feel its poetry. Stegner draws from this childhood his insights about the Western culture and myth. Westerners do not sink their roots deeply in any one place, and though they try to portray this as the norm, as good, Stegner says it is this disjuncture with place that allows Westerners to treat the land with so little respect. At the same time, and with some irony, he portrays the Westerner's allegiance to the region, to the mountains, the deserts, the high prairie, and the power the land holds over those who grow up there. He recounts his sojourn in the East, teaching at the University of Wisconsin and Harvard, and his relief at returning to the West, to Stanford University:

It is not an unusual life-curve for Westerners—to live in and be shaped by the bigness, sparseness, space, clarity, and hopefulness of the West, to go away for study and enlargement and the perspective that distance and dissatisfaction can give, and then to return to what pleases the sight and enlists the loyalty and demands the commitment.

Stegner contrasts the mobility, lack of commitment to place, and immaturity of the Western culture with that of the East, where people have lived in the same community for generations and where the communities have a culture and a history.

In "Letter, Much Too Late," Stegner addresses his mother thirty years after her death, as he approaches his eightieth birthday, and writes of how the family's relentless moving cemented his relationship with her. She, like my own grandmother, played a central role in the family, holding it together, trying to build a home, civilize the kids, build a culture, create a sense of community wherever a group of people stopped long enough to put up houses. But she was a perpetual victim, always being ripped away from what she had made by the hero's quest for fortune. I hear echoes of my grandmother as she followed my grandfather through logging camps and ranches throughout Nevada, California, and Oregon. Grandma used to tell stories of how, just about the time she started getting a home established, Grandpa would come home with a team of horses and start building a wagon. He'd never say very much, but she

knew. Soon they would be off again on some new hunt for adventure and "the good life."

In "Crossing into Eden" Stegner discusses his conception of the Western land, and the importance of wilderness for the human psyche. Not to be conquered but loved and respected, the land has power to renew the spirit and revive the soul. Stegner writes of his favorite lake, the hike from the desert to the high mountain valley, and the bigness as he looked back down on the desert, which made him feel insignificant. Different people respond differently to that feeling. Some revel in it while others fight it, wanting to change the land to make themselves feel more important. In this piece Stegner's conservationist ethic crystallizes as he testifies for the need for wilderness in America:

The best thing we have learned from nearly five hundred years of contact with the American wilderness is restraint, the willingness to hold our hand: to visit such places for our souls' good, but leave no tracks.

In the second suite of essays he brings together some of his best works on the Western landscape and its effect on people who try to live there. "Thoughts in a Dry Land," "Living Dry," "Striking the Rock," "Variations on a Theme by Crèvecoeur," and "A Capsule History of Conservation" define the West as Stegner sees it.

Bits of the East and Middle West are buried here and there in the West, but no physical part of the true West is buried in the East. The West is short-grass plains, alpine mountains, geyser basins, plateaus and mesas and canyons and cliffs, salinas and sinks, sagebrush and Joshua tree and saguaro deserts. The East is radically different, and the people who came from the East did not have a culture that let them live with and respect the Western land for its uniqueness.

In the last suite of eight essays Stegner critiques Western writers, many of whom were former students or close personal friends. Part of the great legacy Stegner leaves is an impressive list of contemporary authors. As Director of Stanford University's Writers Program from its inception until his retirement in 1971, he passed on his orientation to an imposing list of students, including Tom McGuane, Ed Abbey, Scott Momaday, Tillie Olson, Robert Stone, Jim Houston, Larry McMurtry, Ernest Gaines, Wendell Berry, Max Apple, Scott Turow, Nancy Packer, Phillip Levine, Eugene Burdick, Robin White, and Ken Kesey. Many of these writers have helped to mold the American environmental movement and the growth of a land ethic in America.

In "Coming of Age: the End of the Beginning," Stegner bemoans the fact that there is no good critic of literature writing in the West, one who can see past the drugstore cowboys, horse operas, and strong silent heroes, to the spirit and power of the land. He then becomes that critic, as he surveys the writing of several Western authors.

In two essays, Stegner critiques the work of Wendell Berry. In "The Sense of Place," he writes:

I know about this. I was born on wheels, among just such a family. I know about the excitement of newness and possibility, but I also know the dissatisfaction and hunger that result from placelessness. Some towns that we lived in were never real to me. They were only the raw material of places, as I was the raw material of a person. Neither place nor I had a chance of being anything unless we could live together for a while. I spent my youth

see *Little Rain*, page 20

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U.S. Fiction Today

continued from page 13

largely confined to New York City. The key figures in this movement are Paul Auster and Kathy Acker, who are the curators of what remains of the metafictional remnant, and for them and the writers around them: Lydia Davis, Lynne Tillman, Karen Finley and Amy Hempel, to name a few, the European connection is the great umbilicus to inspiration.

2. The market

Fiction has always been a commodity, existing in the marketplace and subject to its laws. It arose coextensively with the bourgeoisie and was always a middle-class entertainment and middle-class consumable. What was unique about metafiction was that, during its heyday, it flourished semi-independently of the market and made its mark through another economy that raised its hand to support it: the academy. The laws of taste and value in the academy are opposed to those of the market: they are state socialist or ecclesiastical laws, in which value and the languages of value flow from the top down, from investiture taste-makers, the faculty, to captive taste-consumers, students.

As the outpost of the anti-hegemonic, the university becomes, almost by definition, the citadel of the anti-commercial, as it should be, though in being so it also relieves art of the need to meet the tests of entertainment and popular approval. Realism, by and large, is a creature of the marketplace. It makes its initial claim to value (though not its ultimate claim to canonical status) as entertainment. Its first economic base is voluntary readers, not captive students.

As a counter-institution that consumes culture in massive doses, the academy is also a counter-economy, which draws its sustenance from the dominant economy but deploys its intellectual and aesthetic resources against it. This division between two economies that operate by different rules is explanation enough of why, at a time when it has no obvious presence in American fiction, except perhaps through sci-fi and cyberpunk, post-modernism continues to thrive in the academy, where theories are as abundant as basketballs in the NBA.

Each economy has its own culture and history, the academic culture drawing its models largely from Europe while our novelists explore native ground. The avant garde is, almost by definition, the presence of Europe in America. Look to the heart of American criticism these days and you'll find Derrida, Lacan, Marx, Foucault, Adorno, Bakhtin, Benjamin, Wittgenstein, and Habermas. Look to the heart of our fiction and you'll find North Dakota, New Mexico, Oregon, and Louisiana.

3. Film

If we are to look closely at the pressure of market forces on literary forms, we are bound to see film as the most potent market factor of them all. Make no mistake about it; there is a Treasure Island and Hollywood is its name. Contrary to popular myth, film has been the salvation of fiction, not its undoing. I would push this observation a step further and say that the current health of American fiction is dependent substantially upon the motion picture industry, for it ought to be clear that fiction in itself is not a profitable venture without subsidiary rights. There just aren't enough readers to go around in America.

The list of writers whose novels or stories have been made into films in the

past fifteen years is virtually a who's who of fiction. Here is a mini list of credits:

William Styron ("Sophie's Choice"), E. L. Doctorow ("Ragtime"), Robert Stone ("Who'll Stop the Rain?"), Joyce Carol Oates ("Smooth Talk"), Susan Isaacs ("Shining Through"), Ann Beattie ("Head Over Heels"), William Kennedy ("Ironweed"), Isaac Bashevis Singer ("Enemies"), Marilynne Robinson ("Housekeeping"), Alice Walker ("The Color Purple"), Jay McInerney ("Bright Lights, Big City"), Bret Easton Ellis ("Less Than Zero"), John Updike ("The Witches of Eastwick"), Philip Roth ("Portnoy's Complaint"), Anne Tyler ("The Accidental Tourist"), John Irving ("The World According to Garp"), William Burroughs ("Naked Lunch"), T. Coraghessan Boyle ("The Road to Wellville," forthcoming), W. P. Kinsella ("Field of Dreams"), Larry McMurtry ("Texasville").

If money, markets, and the commodity status of art have any bearing on form and style, it is not beyond notice that it is the realists whose work is optioned by the studios and made into films. (Make an exception for David Cronenberg's ingenious adaptation of William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*. But of course, as they say in the studio boardrooms, "Art's nice, but what did it gross?") Clearly the money for a writer is in paperback publication, television adaptation, and film, and all those factors favor a literature of swift and vivid stories, routinized apocalypses, and settings that are themselves vivid with local color. Neither requirement mandates realists as such, but they do favor those flashes of color and idioms of verisimilitude that were pioneered in realist fiction.

Indeed, for an aspiring writer to set his or her sights on an avant garde career—to be, say, a l=a=n=g=u=a=g=e poet or this year's celebrated postmodern novelist, is to surrender the possibility of making a decent living, if not striking gold, from the labor of putting words on the page, and while there are always writers with the courage—if that is what it is—to turn their backs on the big killing, the tug of money is as universal as that of gravity, operating on the literary culture as a whole, skewing the general direction of literature toward what might easily be converted into film. Writers are, as they have ever been, their own best commercial exploiters, and the chance to sell out the dream of virtually all. The only question is to whom one will sell, Hollywood or Hopkins.

I don't mean this to sound smug, since I scarcely disapprove of business or of artists making a living through it, and money aside, writers need audiences,

and there is no writer who is wholly unaffected by the pressure of contemporary taste, or lack of same. If money were not an issue, fame, recognition, and the common human need for an audience would remain one, and film, however it may corrupt a writer's words and distort his/her designs in the process of turning them into images, certainly gives the writer an audience.

4. A growing realization that prose cannot "advance" without surrendering its identity as prose

In an age of truly progressive arts like photography, film, video, and electronically-generated music, the capacity of prose alone to be polysemous, multidimensional, synesthetic, and consciousness-altering would appear to be limited. With those media now inexpensively available to artists to carry out the modernist project of deranging the senses and recycling consciousness, the pressure is taken off prose to take the lead or even to follow suit. The modernist project doesn't need any more *Finnegans Wakes* or *Cantos*, and prose can go back to doing what it has traditionally done best: tell stories. Film, television, and video may be thought of as the liberators of prose from revolutionary tasks that it never has performed with any great efficiency.

5. Class warfare

This criterion needs to be applied cautiously, but it seems that metafiction is finally a conceptual fiction that comes out of and speaks largely to educated elites. It may be characterized as one of

the social insignias of a mandarin sensibility: status expressed as taste. At a moment in American history marked by the "disappearing middle" from our economy, there is simply not an audience large enough to sustain a literature that desires at once to "make it new" and also to make it big. One or the other must be sacrificed. A realist revival might be thought of as the revenge of common sensibility, a demotic upsurge of taste from social orders that lack the leisure, and the will, to cultivate mandarin sensibilities.

The native mode of writing that most of our novelists practice is pragmatic and experiential and represents a critique of abstraction of every sort. Does this suggest that fiction has surrendered its rights to the visionary and the apocalyptic in favor of staying home and tending its own garden? In one sense, I think that is precisely the case, but we should not interpret that case too hastily. Formal conservatism does not always go hand in hand with conservatism of content. The visionary, the apocalyptic, and the radical can manifest themselves in stories, images, and arguments, not in form or style. Indeed, with so much tribute being heaped these days upon the "subversive" thrust of postmodern writing, it can't be emphasized enough that subversion doesn't take the form of rupturing the text or "smashing hegemonic codes of discourse," but in proposing new orders and visions that can be invoked within the range of common language. Writers know that instinctively; English professors will eventually catch on.

Mark Shechner is a writer living in Buffalo and a regular reviewer for the Bookpress.



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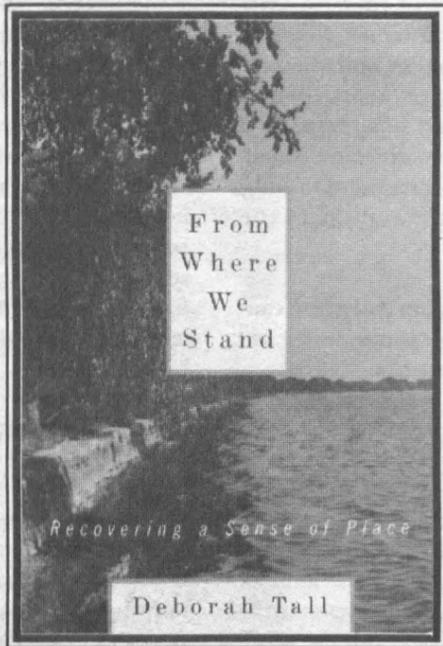
ROUTLEDGE

Timothy Murray will be speaking on October 17 at

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(See page 2 for details.)

From Where We Stand



Probing other traditions—Chinese, Australian Aborigine, Native American—to discover the different ways people attach themselves to the land (or fail to) and why it matters, Tall considers the price Americans pay for their mobility and rootlessness.

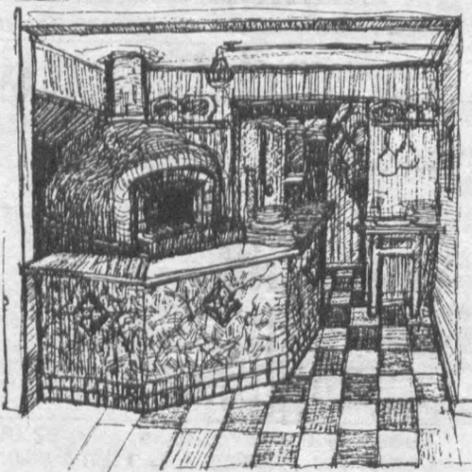
From Where We Stand is at once a celebration of human attachment to place, a superb evocation of a particular place, and a personal chronicle of one woman's striving to open herself to that place, to dwell in it alertly, so that she might at least know it and belong to it.

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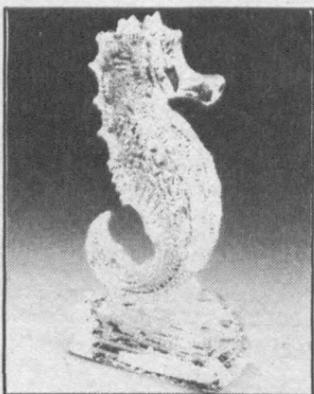
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Geography

continued from page 7

in some reviews as having said that the automobile is going to disappear; I never said anything of the kind. I do think we're going to have fewer automobiles in the future, partly because fewer people are going to be able to own them.

But no amount of redesigning the automobile will give us our civic life back. The point is to redesign the human habitat so as to get places that are worth living in.

J.B.: In your book you describe how visitors to Greenfield Village, Henry Ford's "old time Main Street USA," like it very much, but can't quite put their finger on why it feels good. Americans seem to instinctively like the old Main Street with its shops—without parking lots full of cars—but somehow, it's not what we ended up with.

J.H.K.: People know how to make a good town. The problem is that their instincts and longings are in direct opposition to present building practices, laws, and regulations.

J.B.: In the book, you talk about zoning as a prime villain.

J.H.K.: We invented zoning at the turn of the century, and it seemed like a good idea to have all these factories with their noxious pollutants go to their own part of the city where their dirt, smell, and noise wouldn't harm property values.

J.B.: Maybe this points at one of the roots of our trouble: rather than deal with a problem, we've tended to just put it somewhere else and pretend it's not there. "Out of sight, out of mind"; put all the obnoxious activities where they'll bother someone else.

J.H.K.: After World War II, it's as though we decided that shopping was also an obnoxious activity in whose proximity people were no longer allowed to live.

Zoning created the strip mall—which is an obnoxious place to shop. For hundreds of years, people had built their towns in a different way, with stores on the first floor and other activities above: apartments, offices, all mixed together. That was the basic pattern for the American small town, and it's not a bad pattern. People wonder why small towns don't feel like they used to—it's because zoning laws don't allow them to build small towns anymore.

If you look around America, you will notice a curious thing: every strip mall is one story high. We have a crisis of affordable housing in this country, and one of the reasons is that, for the

last 50 years, we have ignored one of the most practical forms of cheap housing—apartments over stores.

Other than subsidized housing, the only kind of housing we've encouraged, are single-family dwellings—subsidized in a different way, by government policies and mortgage deductions.

J.B.: Where did the idea come from, that it's "inhumane" to let people live over stores?

J.H.K.: I don't know. We also think it's inhumane to have grocery stores in housing developments. I don't think I've ever seen a housing development in America that actually includes a corner store.

J.B.: But that makes sense. As you point out, the setback and lighting requirements would drop that corner store into the middle of a sea of asphalt and all-night mercury-vapor lighting—not exactly a pleasant neighbor.

J.H.K.: But you don't need the mercury-vapor lights or even the parking lot. In Saratoga, we have corner stores without parking lots in the old neighborhoods and they function very well; the people who operate them seem to be able to make a decent living. So it can be done. It's a matter of changing the zoning.

J.B.: In your book, you mentioned a strip mall in the Massachusetts town of Mashpee that had been converted into a kind of "town center."

J.H.K.: Yes, they took this one-story strip-mall, built apartments on the second floor, and turned the parking lot into a street by building on the other side of it and infilling it.

By observing a few good rules of urbanism, they took a place that looked like nowhere and turned it into a place that looks like somewhere.

J.B.: What rules are those?

J.H.K.: Well, for a place to have any civic vitality, it really helps if you have people living there. You go to a strip mall at night and it's a dead place, whereas a live downtown at night, like Saratoga, has people around and shops on the ground floor that come out to the sidewalk. The rules are really simple, the trouble is they've been zoned out of existence, except in places that are essentially antiques.

J.B.: Like Woodstock, Vermont.

J.H.K.: Yeah, or Georgetown (D.C.) or Beacon Hill (Boston), where people feel a sense of community because they can walk down a flight of stairs and out onto the street and buy a newspaper, and then go back for breakfast, or go down the street to a

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corner tavern and have a beer, or actually know the person they are buying their meat from.

But our present artificial way of living, created by zoning and government policies, isn't going to be economically feasible much longer, because of the hidden costs.

For example, every town and hamlet in America has to bear the expense of operating a mass transit line that runs only twice a day, and only for people under 18. It's called "a school bus fleet." The costs are immense—we're talking about millions of dollars for every small town in the country. There's no reason on earth those vehicles couldn't be used the rest of the day for public transport, but they're not. We need to rethink some of these "settled" issues, or we're never going to have decent towns in America.

When Robert Moses built his highway out to Jones Beach in the 1920s, he made the overpasses too low for busses, because he wanted only the people who could afford cars coming out to Jones Beach—in short, he was a snob.

We pretend that we're the most egalitarian country on earth. Yet, few countries segregate their people and activities as rigidly as we do. People who make less than \$12,000 must live in this concrete can we call public housing; we can't have any shopping or work places where people live. So everything is disconnected.

That's not the way it used to be, when poor people lived right around the corner, or right upstairs from middle-class people, when all the children walked to school and played together.

We pay a lot of lip service to being a democracy, but when it comes down to the nuts and bolts of it, we really don't allow democracy to exist.

We don't want to live around people who are different. Forget racism—white people don't want to live around other white people who make less money.

J.B.: One of the standard arguments against the kind of planning that you advocate is that Americans won't stand for government interference in business and private property. But you seem to be saying that most of the current situation is precisely because of government interference in business decisions, from zoning restrictions to FHA-subsidized suburban tract-housing and government-subsidized highways.

J.H.K.: Absolutely.

J.B.: So, as long as there is still money to be made, what's going to

change that?

J.H.K.: It's changing already. I interviewed a very interesting man named John DeGrove, who is a professor at Florida Atlantic University and a major player in the revolutionary new land planning that's going on down there. They now have what is called a "concurrency" law, which requires the developers to do all the infrastructure work before they put in the development, so they can't just plop the houses down and then say to the county, "Okay, here's 7,000 new people, build schools for them." Now the developers have to put in sewer lines, and do all the other things that were bankrupting municipalities. And as a consequence you don't have the same kind of development you had before.

Also, the Federal government is bankrupt. We're out \$500 billion from the savings and loan debacle; we're out several billion dollars from Hurricane Andrew, and that's probably just the first of many high-price disasters we're going to suffer in the decade ahead. [*We were speaking before the Mississippi flooding, another disaster magnified by Federal subsidies that encouraged people to build in the flood plains.*]

In an economy with less money sloshing around, it's not going to be possible to say "Go ahead, build your development on the beach, and if anything goes wrong the government will pay for it." So far we've postponed the reckoning by rolling over the debt. But we can't keep doing it forever.

J.B.: And yet you are not—despite what some critics have said—a "zero-growth" advocate either.

J.H.K.: The question is not *whether* we're going to have development—we're going to have it. But the development issues of the next decade are going to be different.

What we've been doing in America is taking the functions of town life and smearing them all over the countryside. This has two consequences: it ruins the countryside, and it impairs the life of our towns.

The towns that people like best are pedestrian-oriented, but we have built an infrastructure that serves only motorists. When we discover that our life, based on motoring, is bankrupting us, we are going to build a different kind of environment.

A town is like an organism: it grows or it dies. The question is, *How* does it grow? Where does the development belong? We're going to have to rethink those questions.

Jeremy Bloom is a writer living in Albany.

COMPULSIVE BEAUTY

Hal Foster

Surrealism has long been seen as its founder, André Breton, wanted it to be seen: as a movement of love and liberation. In *Compulsive Beauty*, Foster reads surrealism from its other, darker side: as an art given over to the uncanny, to the compulsion to repeat and the drive toward death.

Foster redefines the crucial categories of surrealism—the marvelous, convulsive beauty, objective chance—in terms of the Freudian uncanny, or the return of familiar things made strange by repression. He considers the surrealist use of out-moded images as an attempt to work through the historical

repression effected by these same processes. In a brief conclusion Foster discusses the fate of surrealism today in a world become surrealistic.

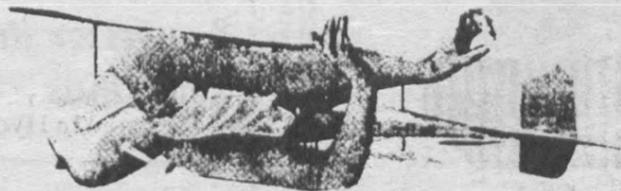
Compulsive Beauty not only offers a deconstructive reading of surrealism, long neglected by Anglo-American art history, it also participates in a postmodern reconsideration of modernism, the dominant accounts of which have obscured its involvements in desire and trauma, capitalist shock and technological development.

Hal Foster is Associate Professor of Art History and Comparative Literature at Cornell University.

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The MIT Press

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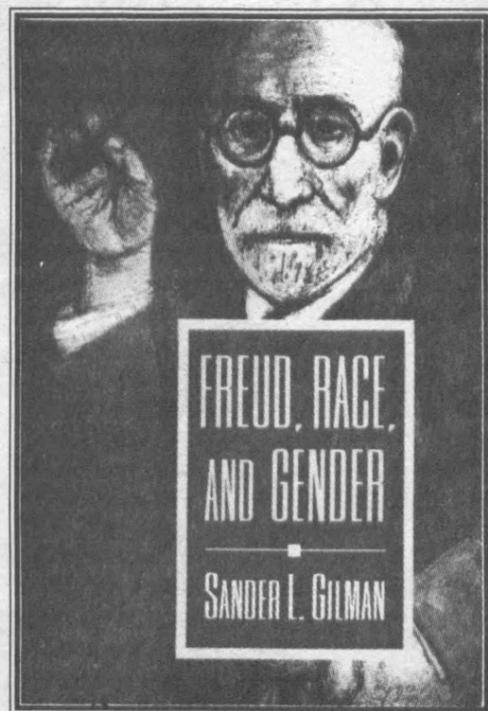


Giorgio de Chirico, *The Enigma of a Day*, 1914

Princeton University Press

A Jew in a violently anti-Semitic world, Sigmund Freud was forced to cope with racism even in the "serious" medical literature of the fin de siècle, which described Jews as inherently pathological, sexually degenerate, and linked in special ways with syphilis, insanity, and certain types of cancer. Did Freud's internalizing of these images of racial difference shape the question of psychoanalysis? Here a leading expert on the representation of race and gender answers this question in the affirmative.

Sander L. Gilman argues that Freud dealt with his anxiety about himself as a Jew by projecting it onto other cultural "inferiors"—such as the woman.



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Princeton University Press

Sander L. Gilman will talk on September 19 at The Bookery's Off Campus lecture series. (See page 2 for more details.)

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Hysteria Beyond Freud

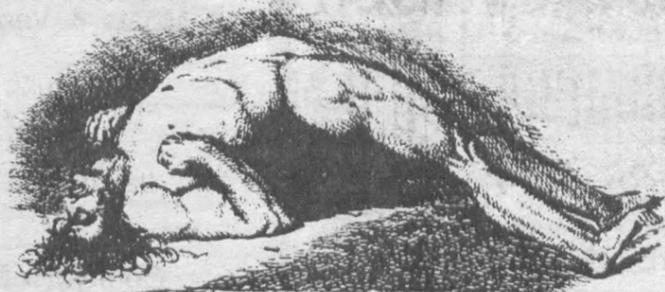


Illustration from Sir Charles Bell's *Essays on the Anatomy and Philosophy of Expression*, 1824.

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Letters

continued from page 2

Mr. Culler to view the poem as self-contained. The poem is not, however, a character in the imaginative world created by the poet; the poem is the vehicle presenting that world, and it cannot take action inside of itself. When Mr. Culler declares, "It [the poem] becomes knowing only by supposing the Secret," I do not understand what these words mean. When he rises to a vision of the poem "holding itself up to view as it makes a secret into the supreme knower," I can only read what he says with wonder. Rhetoric is less strained and the poem is more human, more moving, if it is interpreted as expressing the sardonic view of a Speaker who has become disillusioned with the hope that he could some day understand the significance of human activity on this small planet in a vast universe.

Mr. Culler has an explanation why it is better to speak about what the poem or its elements do than to attribute the poem's characteristics to the poet: "Describing parts of the poem as doing this and that" and thus "treating [them]...as actors enables a critic to avoid tendentiously identify[ing] the poet's thought with every statement or implication that may appear in his fictions." Further, "A critical vocabulary could not be responsive to the workings of language if it could only describe effects in the poem by attributing them to the decisions of the author."

I am sure that Mr. Abrams would agree that identifying every statement or implication of a literary work with the author would be tendentious, and that a critical vocabulary that could only describe effects by attributing them to the author's decisions would be inadequate. Nothing Mr. Abrams has written justifies insinuating that his critical views are so doctrinaire that he can never talk about the effects created by meter and rhyme, or the other innumerable workings of language, without attributing them to the author's decisions. When Mr. Abrams expresses a desire for acceptance of authors "as purposeful agents capable of initiative, intention, design, and choice," he is objecting to the practice of treating works of literature as subjects, as self-contained entities, as agents that can themselves initiate and create effects. Mr. Culler's exclusive attention to the play of language in "The Secret Sits" enables him to disregard the story of this poem and treat it as if it were self-contained, but in my opinion his analysis of this poem reveals the inconsistencies and confusions inherent in the dogmatic approach to literature of a deconstructionist.

William Terwilliger
Professor of English (retired)
Ithaca College

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Still Life

continued from page 3

with his powers of abstraction that gives drama to his work, and it is his resolution of that tension that evokes a sense of ultimate harmony. In my view, it is Cezanne's practice of seeing and doing that is far more important nowadays than the legacy of revolutionary vanguard influence assigned to him by conventional art historians.

While no one can know what went on in his mind as he worked, it is my belief that the distortions that were later adopted as stylistic devices by the Cubists were possibly either inadvertent or inept, that they came about in the heat of battle while he was deeply engaged in a search for relationships among the forms. And it is my guess that after he had arranged his setup with great precision, he moved very close to it to work, the better to see what was going on, and that the tilted axes, the multiple perspectives, the interrupted or coincidental contours came about partly because of his physical proximity to the scene, looking down on the setup, and partly because his attentive gaze moved through the arrangement inch by inch as his search led him from one area to another.

Consequently, fragmented and disconnected segments appeared, but his years of study in the Louvre had conditioned him to a deep awareness of classic Mediterranean pictorial structure: a system in which internal rhythms echo the vertical and horizontal framework of the basic rectangle, and the visual energies of each form, the speed of its contours, its axial direction, tonal weight, color attraction, and texture are maintained full force by responsible control of all encounters and juxtapositions of the forms. This discipline sustained him in reaching a resolution of his own contradictions and enabled him to produce paintings that have an aura of inevitable rightness and truth.

It is wonderful that the simple act of selecting a few humble items of daily life, contemplating them, and defining their abstract relationships could have produced the range of still-life painting that flowered in the early part of this century. When Braque and Picasso appropriated Cezanne's fractured planes and reduced the world to tones of black, white, umber, and ochre, direct references to the initial setup all but disappeared, but later, in Synthetic Cubism, they used their arrangements as points of departure

for the invention of decorative forms of great elegance, organized with classic clarity and enriched with sophisticated French color.

Morandi, on the other hand, cosseted his little flock of domestic items, moved them about on a table top, huddled together or apart, fully aware that the resulting changes of proportion and the spatial intervals between the forms were momentous matters. Matisse, with his omnivorous eye for the sensuous charms of the physical world, used his seductive and witty sense of decoration as a counter to 20th-century angst, while Giacometti recorded his perception of alienation in ashen tones and marks that trace his eye movements between objects and their environment, thus building up a visual structure that fixes the object in space like a captured biological specimen. By contrast, Bonnard revealed the splendors of his bourgeois environment with still lifes that are a pure affirmation of joy in the beauty of the world. And, of course, there were other painters who added their own contributions to this age-old painting style—Leger, Gris, and the English painters Nicholson, Hanson, and Sutherland.

Given the preeminent achievements of all these artists, coupled with the current low state of the genre and the fashionable notion that the art of painting itself is dead, it may seem that still-life painting in particular has nothing more to offer. Yet the beauty and mystery of the forms of our environment remain, and the possibility of fresh individual perceptions of their abstract potential also remains. On these assumptions, implausible as it may seem, I am advocating, by example, a revival of still-life painting as a corrective to the wayward floundering of contemporary art.

For such a creation to subvert the status quo and establish quality rather than novelty as an aesthetic goal, it should be based on direct observation of forms and portray them with unequivocal fidelity; no easy ambiguities, no random titillations, just a bare-bones delineation of forms in space. In this condition of simplicity, the ideal modern still life should provide metaphoric equivalents for the varied experiences of life and images of orderly progressions in space solely by artful arrangements of the forms. It should make use of the traditional powers of proportion, symmetry and asymmetry to generate visual excite-

ment, and it should offer a wide range of formal subtleties as a true source of continuing aesthetic pleasure. If all these radical things were done, there might be some life left in still life after all.

Kenneth Evett, professor emeritus of Art at Cornell University, painted the rotunda murals for the Nebraska State House as winner of a national competition in 1954. During the 1970s he wrote art criticism for the New Republic. He has had ten one-man shows at the Kraushaar Galleries in New York, and has recently been elected to the National Academy of Design.

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192 pp., \$18.95

Little Rain

continued from page 14

envying people who had lived all their lives in the houses they were born in, and had attics full of proof that they had lived.

In "A Letter to Wendell Berry," Stegner opens his heart to his former student:

The more my admiration goes out to a man or woman personally, and not to some performance or accomplishment, the harder it is for me to express. The closer I come to reticence.... When I quote you, as I often do, I am paying tribute to your verbal felicity, which is always there, but I am really quoting you for qualities of thoughtfulness, character, integrity, and responsibility to which I respond, and to which I would probably respond if they were in pidgin.

In the last essay, Stegner discusses his own approach to writing, describing how his fiction, nonfiction, biography, and history inform one another. Much of his fiction is autobiographical, and he has this to say about the role of the author in writing fiction:

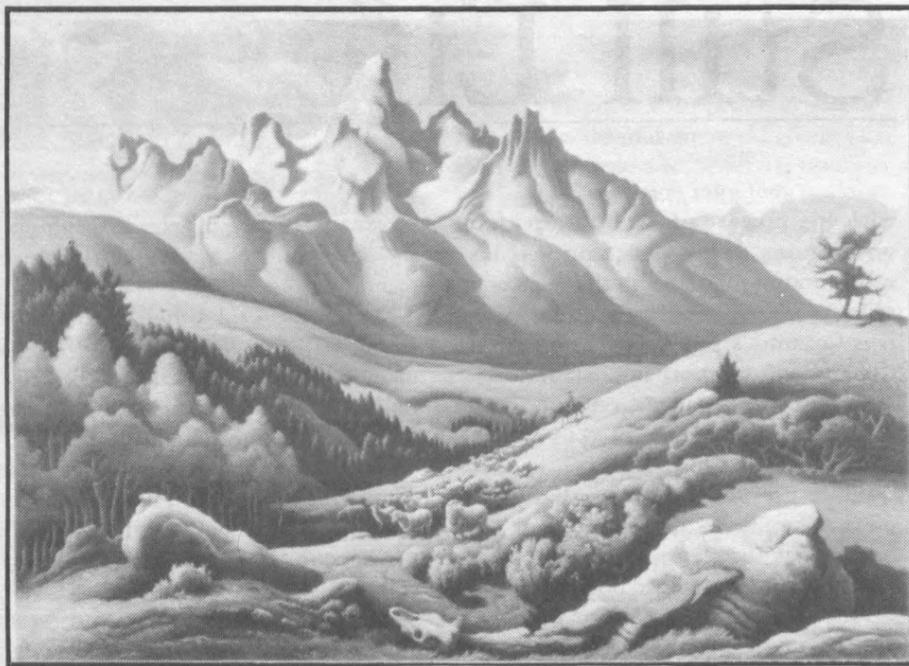
When we invent fictional characters, as when we invent gods, we often invent them in our own image: we create the unknown out of the materials of the known. The worlds that novelists create, even the fantasy worlds of space and backward or forward time are made out of the details of the world we were born into.... I do believe that the real world exists, and that literature is the imitation of life....

He places his writing in the Western American literary landscape when he says:

I have been trying to make natural chaos into human order, trying to make sense of an ordinary American life, for a long time now, more than fifty

years. The West, in which I have spent most of my life, is not simply a retarded culture, though for a time [in the late 19th and early 20th century] it was. It is also a different culture from that of the literary capital [of the East, specifically New York City], a different culture with different drives and assumptions and prides and avenues of opportunity. School and college do sandpaper the roughness of the frontier, but the frontier leaves its tracks. My first fifteen years were migrant and deprived, my next fifteen aspiring and academic and literary and deprived, my last fifty-odd academic and literary and not so deprived. It is progress, of a sort, I suppose; but I am still the person my first fifteen years made me.

I think Stegner would agree that like him, the West has matured, it has made progress of a sort, but despite this maturity, it is still the land it was in the beginning. In *Where the Bluebird Sings*, Stegner repudiates the popular idea of the mythic Western hero: ruggedly individualistic, self-reliant, and given to violence in the protection of righteousness. In so doing, he gives us a key to understanding the depths of environmental controversies in the West, such as the spotted owl debate or the fight for wilderness protection. But to fight for the land or the owl we have to repudiate the myth and give up our dream of changing the land. To repudiate it is to say the Westerner is wrong; that all the folks who believe in the myth, who try to live the myth, all those TV shows and movies, are chasing a West that does not exist and never did. But once again Stegner points out it is the land that gave rise to that hero. To protect the land is to protect what is the true essence of the myth. Time and again, he explains that the land underpins the Western culture as it matures and creates new myths, that it



The Shepherd, by Thomas Hart Benton

will persist long after the mythic hero has passed into cultural history.

To Westerners he says our relationship to the land is a living, growing thing. He makes us recall it was our parents and grandparents who filled the ranks of the conquering armies and commanded the assaults on the earth. My grandfather was a logger. He helped to open up the Coquille River country in Oregon. He probably logged a lot of spotted owl habitat in the process. My grandmother, who lived with him and cooked in the logging camps, came from a cattle ranch her grandfather homesteaded in the Washoe Valley where he raised meat for the miners of the Comstock Lode. Loggers, ranchers, and miners; are there any others that we blame more for the rape of the West? I think sometimes that, like the children of murderers, our lives are consumed by trying to repay the victim.

If Stegner admonishes us to respect the land, he also has the grace to help us for-

give our parents. Western culture was young then, he says, and the culture and dreams our parents brought there weren't wrong, simply misplaced. They were doomed to fail in a place where gold might be King, but water was God. The relationship our parents had with the land must grow during this and future generations into a relationship "reinforced with spirituality, art, respect for the earth, a knowledge of good and evil." He urges us to remember

something about the West's difficult becoming, something about its mistakes and crimes, something about its spiritual birthright sold for a mess of pottage, something about its hope... That the Western experience is more than personal: it is part of the process of civilization-building.

Roland Shanks is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Natural Resources Policy and Management at Cornell University.

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