



PARANOIA, ENERGY, AND DISPLACEMENT

by Tony Tanner

"What's your idea of who runs things?"

The words are from Saul Bellow's *The Victim* (1947), but the question is one that in many different forms runs through American fiction of the last 30 years.

One of the most important writers who has endeavored to give some sort of fictional outline and metaphorical definition to power and its modes of operation is Norman Mailer. This has taken him from actual political conventions and demonstrations to the technology of moon rockets, the significance of such star-victims of American culture as Marilyn Monroe, the operations of the CIA, the problem of *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (not the ostensible reasons but the deeper psychic ones), and on to more all-embracing metaphysical speculations where God and the Devil square up, as if for some great cosmic boxing match. Mailer has traveled far beyond realism to explore the violence and distorted aggressions he feels are at work in America, the plots and mysteries he feels are swirling in the air. In his *An American Dream* (1965) the protagonist Rojack, a World War II hero and former U.S. congressman, says he has come to believe in "spirits and demons, in devils, warlocks, omens, wizards and fiends, in incubi and succubi." Rojack has a vague sense of being involved in plots that defy definition:

I did not know if it was a hard precise mystery with a detailed solution, or a mystery fathered by the collision of larger mysteries, something so hopeless to determine as the edge of a cloud, or could it be, was it a mystery even worse, something between the two, some hopeless no-man's-land from which nothing could return but exhaustion?

These words could lead us on to many other writers, but perhaps the most obvious one is Thomas Pynchon.

Pynchon's brilliant, difficult, and highly erudite work organizes itself around two feelings. One is paranoia, defined as "nothing less than the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that *everything is connected*." The other is what he calls anti-paranoia, "a condition not many of us can bear for long." Instead of suspecting the existence of plots at work everywhere, the characters have to live with a sense that nothing is connected to anything, in a state of volitionless rambling, with no clues to follow.

"This is some kind of plot, right?" Slothrop sucking saliva from velvet pile.

"*Everything is some kind of plot, man*," Bodine laughing.

"And yes but, the arrows are pointing all different ways."*

With this oscillating sense of too little hidden meaning or too much, traditional concepts of society, character, and narrative plot dissolve.

Pynchon's fiction draws on skills and discourses not usually found in the novel—information theory, probability theory, geometry, and calculus, as well as an encyclopedic knowledge of esoteric areas of learning and history. The result is not only a completely revised sense of the self and modern society, but a new kind of reading experience that forces one to revise one's sense of what a text is and what it *does*.

It was Pynchon who first made serious use of the idea of entropy† in fiction, an idea that has become so common that even a comparatively traditional writer like John Updike, who sets out to explore what he calls "'middleness' or the quality of things at rest," has made fleeting use of it. With Pynchon, it is part of a serious vision of things—and people—running down. Both his writing and our reading of his texts are a constant

* *Gravity's Rainbow*, New York: Viking, 1973.

† In physics, the measurement of randomness, disorder, or chaos.

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struggle between the deterioration of meaning and the counter-entropic creation of new ways of fictionalizing the world.

One result of this is an extreme dissolution of the individual. Although there is an excessive proliferation of *names* in Pynchon's work, there is a concomitant disappearance of *selves*. Just as he renames all of postwar Europe "the Zone," so individuals begin to blur as they try to work with, and live through, the new uncertain categories of the contemporary world. Even the hero—or central name—in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Slothrop, begins to "scatter" by the end. His "sense of Now" or "temporal bandwidth" gets narrower and narrower, and by the end there is a feeling that he is so lost and isolated and unconnected that he is vaporizing out of time altogether.

None of this is easy on the reader. Traditional novels tend to focus on what might be called the gradual assembling of a character, often starting from a near-zero identity—Tom Jones, David Copperfield, Jane Eyre, Stephen Dedalus. In Pynchon we are more likely to find a study of not just failure and loss, but the radical disassembling of character. His approaches to this process have produced perhaps the most important American fiction of our time—books that are as intricately assembled as anything since Joyce.

Saul Bellow would not be sympathetic to much of this. While his characters encounter many of the "new Uncertainties," and he has explored some aspects of "the disintegrating outline of the Self," he has in the latter part of his career written against those who overemphasize "the disintegrated assurances." Whatever miseries and doubts and bruising they have to endure, his characters Augie March, Henderson, Herzog, Mr. Sammler, and Charlie Citrine are still very much themselves at the end of their stories—not scattered and dissolved, but wiser, if sometimes sadder individuals.

Bellow was one of the first postwar writers to challenge the agreed-on "reality pictures" of the modern world. Having done that, he must face the problem of discovering new explanations and integrations (a dilemma experienced by other American writers as well). Thus, in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970):

Existence was not accountable to him. Indeed not. Nor would he ever put together the inorganic, organic, natural, bestial, human, and superhuman in any dependable arrangement but, however fascinating and original his genius, only idiosyncratically, a shaky scheme, mainly decorative or ingenious.

Yet note the ending of the book, set though it is (and not for the first time in Bellow's work) at a scene of death:

He was aware that he must meet, and he did meet—through all the confusion and degraded clowning of this life through which we are speeding—he did meet the terms of his contract. The terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows. As I know mine. As all know. For that is the truth of it—that we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know, we know.

I can think of few other contemporary American writers (Bernard Malamud would be one) who would conclude a book, which contains so much pessimism about the modern world, on a note of absolute assurance about some certain knowledge that we all share. As he has reiterated in many interviews and articles, Bellow still believes in the old values and truths and sees nothing very original in other contemporary fiction.

At the end of *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), once again set by a grave and heavy with the finality of death, we find Charlie and Menasha looking at some spring flowers. In their way, the flowers contest the dread misery of the city experience that the book transcribes. Refusing to blink at any of the miseries of modern life, indeed portraying them with considerable intensity, Bellow contrives to convey a flicker of optimism, of the ongoing possibilities of life, in his work. A quotation from Tocqueville comes to mind:

Nothing conceivable is so petty, so insipid, so crowded with paltry interests—in one word, so anti-poetic—as the life of a man in the United States. But among the thoughts which it suggests, there is always one that is full of poetry, and this is the hidden nerve which gives vigor to the whole frame.

Bellow is the contemporary American writer most interested in detecting and revealing in the texture of his work that "hidden nerve" without which his portrayals of American life would be grim indeed.

There are, of course, other seemingly neo-realist writers still working to project the American scene in a relatively undistorted way. Joseph Heller's latest book, *Something Happened* (1974), seems to have left behind the arresting absurdities of *Catch-22* (1961) to concentrate on the straightforward miseries of growing old, or older, in contemporary America. The hero, Bob Slocum, is obsessed with omens of death—"I dream about

death and weave ornate fantasies about death endlessly and ironically." Like some American writers he has that entropic sense that "the world is winding down." But when we try to find out what exactly it was that "happened" we turn up only a vague and unspecific resentment against the aging process.

Somebody pushed me. Somebody must have set me off in this direction, and clusters of other hands must have touched themselves to the controls at various times, for I would not have picked this way for the world. He has never been found. Lost: one child, age unknown, goes by the name of me.

The book in fact represents an enormous anthology of the dreads, disquiets, desolations and isolations, fears and tremblings of contemporary America, just as it serves a bitter indictment of the success-ethics by which Slocum helplessly measures himself. "When I grow up I want to be a little boy"—shades of Huck Finn. But for all its vivid misery, *Something Happened* does not release, or force us into, new and energizing ways of construing reality. Instead the novel is similar to Bob Slocum's bouts of insomnia, "those buffeting cataracts of fantasy, fury, reminiscence, and speculation—all of it inconsequential." Heller can indeed portray the miseries of contemporary American life, but cannot find "the hidden nerve."

Another American writer who feels obliged to stay close to the pains and pangs of ordinary people (though not without experimenting in prolific forms of realism) is Joyce Carol Oates. She seeks to give us a world "defantasized" and to that end she writes novels that, in one of her own phrases, project "The Nightmare of Naturalism." Not that she is an old-fashioned Naturalist; she explores all kinds of current transformations and inchoate changes in contemporary personality and attempts to analyse what America is becoming. *Wonderland* (1971) is a good example of all her fictional concerns.

One of Oates's most revealing remarks, about a novel by Harriet Arnow, indicates where her main interests lie:

Sunk helplessly in flesh, as in the turbulent uncontrollable mystery of the "economy," the human being with spiritual yearnings becomes tragic when these yearnings are defeated or mocked or, as in *The Dollmaker*, by Harriet Arnow, brutally transformed into a part of the social machine. . . . It is a depressing work, like most extraordinary works. Its power lies in its insistence upon the barrenness of life.

There are plenty of assumptions in Oates's work that many American writers would contest, as when she quotes approvingly the Wallace Stevens line "We keep coming back and coming back to the real." Fair enough, many would say, but what exactly is "the real" these days, and where do you find it? Is it really given or does it have to be made or re-made? But at least she tries to present us with depictions of contemporary society, whereas Heller and Philip Roth (in *My Life as a Man*, 1974), narcissistically give us portraits only of their own suffering selves, with the rest of society negated and desocialized into a series of more or less irritating external phenomena.

The Fractured Picture

If Joyce Carol Oates seeks to give us a world defantasized, Donald Barthelme gives us the world enigmatized. It is a world deprived of narrative, with fading grammar and deteriorating syntax; a world where the vocabularies, terminologies, and discourses that proliferate in modern life contest each other in surreal conjunctions. When he writes about *City Life* (1970), we find that the city has become a quite different kind of fictional space from that of Theodore Dreiser, say, or Saul Bellow. Thus, in one city there are prizes for those who produce "the best pastiche of the emotions." There is a prevalence of "white noise" and "white space," both of which can be purchased. Every surface is smoothed down; everyone has the same fingerprints. Imprecise sentences lessen the strain of close tolerances, and inhabitants "go forward avoiding the final explanation. . . . Creative misunderstanding is crucial." And is precisely the state of mind that Barthelme's innumerable stories seek to induce.

Rather than tease us with "creative misunderstanding," John Hawkes seeks to impose on us a series of dreamlike or nightmarish landscapes composed as a series of darkly lyrical tableaux (because he too has renounced the authority of traditional plot and character). Some of his novels have an almost claustrophobic horror. For a really tight, darkly arresting and encapturing style, there is perhaps no other contemporary American writer to compare with him, and we may take the following as a definition of what Hawkes admires and searches after in fiction:

a quality of coldness, detachment, ruthless determination to face up to the enormities of ugliness and potential failure within ourselves and in the world around us, and to bring to this exposure a savage or saving comic

spirit and the saving beauties of language. The need is to maintain the truth of the fractured picture; to expose, ridicule, attack, but always to create and to throw into new light our potential for violence and absurdity as well as for graceful action.

Given the agitation, sense of malaise, and even outrage felt by some American writers at society (not to say the world) around them, it is surprising that they shun overt political writing. Yet dating back to the first American novelist, Brockden Brown,* the interests of American fiction have generally been more psychological than political, just as there has been more interest in Freud than in Marx in the United States.

Some of this may be due to the great sense of loneliness and lack of community that is felt by so many Americans and constantly referred to in, for example, Vonnegut's *Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloon* (*Opinions*) (1974). The fact remains that the primary interest of American novelists seems to be in the private—often brilliant—manipulation of new forms of fiction, rather than in attempts to construct a more totalistic vision of society. The feeling is that if society seems to threaten and distract, in fiction one is free.

Old Stories

What we have instead of political writing is satire and a renewed interest in myth. Many writers would be happy to talk about constructing or reconstructing myths, while they shy away from the relation of politics to writing. John Barth, for instance, is not much interested in those writers who apply themselves to "reporting the secular news" (a phrase of John Locke), yet he is excited by the idea that his own work contains various mythic patterns.

"Myth" no longer refers to the kind of communal wisdom and narratives that are traditionally associated with the word. There is, to be sure, a highly developed awareness of the old stories among American writers, but the stories are transformed in all sorts of idiosyncratic ways. One particularly innovative writer is Robert Coover, who has made clear his interest in "mythic residue" and in the ways that very old narratives—including the Bible—can be made to yield new relevancies for our times. He uses myths not to reveal any hidden ideal order in

* Charles Brockden Brown (1771–1810) is cited by *The Dictionary of American Biography* as the "first American who tried to live by his pen." His major novels include *Wieland* (1798), based on the life of a religious fanatic, and *Edgar Huntly* (1799).

society but for the ironic possibilities that can emerge in the course of their systematic deformation, transformation, or hyperbolization. To use Coover's own words:

Our old faith—one might better say our old sense of constructs derived from myths, legends, philosophies, fairy stories, histories and other fictions which help to explain what happens to us from day to day, why our governments are the way they are, why our institutions have the character they have, why the world turns as it does—has lost its efficacy. . . . The world itself being a construct of fictions, I believe the fiction maker's function is to furnish better fictions with which we can reform our notions of things.

Thus, in such highly original works as *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966), *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (1968), and *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969), Coover encodes a large number of not always detectable mythic and religious references, in a new series of fictions or "constructs" that probe deeply into modern problems and concerns.

There are many other writers I could have mentioned in this brief piece; for instance, William Gaddis, whose *The Recognitions* (1955) has certainly been an influence on younger writers; the brilliantly original James Purdy; William H. Gass, one of the great contemporary masters of words; the richly experimental Joseph McElroy; and Stanley Elkin, who writes the most extraordinary monologues but who remains one of the most underrated writers in the country. But I will conclude with a final observation from Tocqueville, which has perhaps more relevance today than when he wrote it in the 1830s.

Thus not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever on himself alone and threatens in the end to confine him . . . within the solitude of his own heart.

Despite a certain amount of organized coming together of contemporary American writers, Tocqueville's words point to a deep truth: What is most amazing is the richness and variety of fictional forms that have been generated in privacy and solitude by the American novelists of the last 30 years.

