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# THE NEW REALISM IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE

UDK 820.015(73):7.036.1
Stručni članak. Primljen 15. 4. 1986.

> »Once in Chelm, the mythical village of the East European Jews, a man was appointed to sit at the village gate and wait for the coming of the Messiah. He complained to the village elders that his pay was too low. 'You are right,' they said to him, 'the pay is low. But consider: the work is steady.'«
>
> Irving Howe, *Steady Work*

In his novel *Slapstick* Kurt Vonnegut tells a story about his brother Bernard which, he says, »with minor variations could be told truthfully about myself.«

> Bernard worked for the General Electric Research Laboratory in Schenectady, New York, for a while, where he discovered that silver iodide could precipitate certain sorts of clouds as snow or rain. His laboratory was a sensational mess, however, where a clumsy stranger could die in a thousand different ways, depending on where he stumbled.
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> The company had a safety officer who nearly swooned when he saw this jungle of deadfalls and snares and hair-trigger booby traps. He bawled out my brother.
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> My brother said this to him, tapping his own forehead with his fingertips: »If you think this laboratory is bad, you should see what it's like in here.«

This anecdote neatly provides the central situation for this discussion of recent American literature which might be called: the relationship between the mess *outside* our heads with the mess *inside* our heads. If we were to be a bit more formal we might say that our subject is the relationship between the artist's vision and his material. Again Kurt Vonnegut provides an appropriate clue when he says of his novel *Slapstick:* »It is about what life *feels* like to me.«

We can begin then by asking what life has felt like to American writers during the past two decades. I suppose it is no secret that we live in dark times which are volatile and even explosive: times of extraordinary violence and radical confrontations. In Irving Howe's definition, »the word 'modern', as it refers to both history and literature, signifies extreme situations and radical solutions. It summons images of war and revolution, experiment and disaster, apocalypse and skepticism; images of rebellion, disenchantment and nothingness.« In this sense, the 1960s and 1970s have been the most modern of decades.

The word »modern«, however, signifies not merely the increased visibility of violence in our affluent world but also an increased sensitivity to our vulnerability amid all our affluence. In the 1960s that violence was all around us: in the televised slaying of Lee Harvey Oswald, repeated for our benefit in slow motion just in case we had missed any part of it; in the film clips of the Vietnam War which we watched on the evening news over our suppers; in the photograph of riots and demonstrations that adorned the front pages of our newspapers. Having extended the meaning of the motto that adorns the New York *Times*—— »All the news that's fit to print«—— the mass media provided daily proof for William Barrett's claim that »No age has ever been so self-conscious as ours.« Try as we might, we could not forget that Auschwitz and Hiroshima were just behind us while South Vietnam and South Africa were just ahead of us. As John McCormick has observed: »The tempo of catastrophe most certainly has accelerated, and mutations have occurred in the body politic that have demanded mutations in the forms of art.«

Given this situation, the American writer in the 1960s was faced with a series of problems which amounted to a crisis in imagination. In *The Golden Notebook* Doris Lessing identified this imaginative crisis as »the thinning of language against the density of our experience.«

The first problem had to do with what I have called the problem of the artist's material. How could the writer compete imaginatively with the fantastics nature of contemporary reality? In an article entitled »Writing American Fiction« Philip Roth described in great and hilarious detail an actual murder case in Chicago that was so gruesome and bizarre that the victim's mother ended up appearing on television and being rewarded with an expensive home appliance. »And what is the moral of so long a story?« Roth asked.

> Simply this: that the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make *credible* much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures daily that are the envy of any novelist.

The second aspect of this imaginative crisis concerned the problem of the artist's vision. How was he to find some order or meaning in this material and how was he to make this meaning comprehensible to his audience? In an essay entitled »Slouching Towards Bethlehem« Joan Didion described her encounter with the anomie and paralysis of mind engendered in the California counter-culture. Later Didion analyzed the crisis she had experienced in writing and publishing the essay:

> It was the first time I had dealt directly and flatly with the evidence of atomization, the proof that things fall apart: I went to San Francisco because I had not been able to work for months, had been paralyzed by the conviction that writing was an irrelevant act, that the world as I had understood it no longer existed. If I was to work again at all, it would be necessary for me to come to terms with disorder. That was why the piece was important to me. And after it was printed I saw that, however directly and flatly I thought I had said it, I had failed to get through to many of the people who read and even liked the piece, failed to suggest

that I was talking about something more general than a handful of children wearing mandalas on their foreheads.

The third aspect of this imaginative crisis concerned the problem of artistic form. How was the writer to find a literary from adequate to his vision especially when the traditional forms appeared to be exhausted? John Barth adressed this problem in an essay appropriately entitled »The Literature of Exhaustion«:

> The simple burden of my essay [he said later] was that the forms and modes of art live in human history and are therefore subject to used-upness, at least in the minds of significant numbers of artists in particular times and places; in other words, that artistic conventions are liable to be retired, subverted, transcended, transformed, or even deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work.

The result of the imaginative crisis of the 1960s was the explosion of the traditional forms of writing prose fiction.[1] Under pressure from the density of contemporary experience some writers moved to the hybrid forms of »the New Journalism« and »the non-fiction novel«. I'm thinking of such works as Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood;* Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night;* Joan Didion's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem;* Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool--Aid Acid Test;* and James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time.* Feeling the thinning of language, other writers turned to black humor, paranoid visions and a kind of linguistic guerilla warfare. For instance, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22;* Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest;* William Burroughs' *Nova Express;* Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49;* and Norman Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?* Aware of the exhaustion of literary forms, other writers like John Barth, John Hawkes, Robert Coover, William Gass and Kurt Vonnegut explored the vein of reflexive and anti-realistic writing we now call *postmodernist.*

Perhaps Vonnegut spoke for them all when he wrote in *Slaughterhouse--Five:* »everything there was to know about life was in *The Brothers Karamazov.* 'But that isn't enough any more.'« In any event, the felt inadequacies of fiction were underlined by the perceived centrality of non-fiction to an understanding of the age. Indeed, many of the major *imaginative* works of the decade seemed to be visionary analyses that revised our sense of the times and the society we were living in. Among these works were Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man;* Norman O. Brown's *Love's Body;* Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media;* Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd;* and William Irwin Thompson's *At the Edge of History.* Clearly, literature was being pulled in opposite directions during this troubled decade.

If the 1960s was a period of literary upheaval resulting from the imaginative crisis I have described then the 1970s may be viewed as a decade of consolidation of the two opposing tendencies. On the one hand, we have seen a continuation of the kind of experimental fiction in which »the word was

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[1] The developments in creative writing parallelled the developments in literary criticism. As A. Walton Litz observed recently: »The general trend of literary criticism since 1945 has been from consensus to diversity, from the dominance of formalistic criticism to a bewildering variety of criticism which seek to move 'beyond' or 'against' formalism. In various subtle ways American literary criticism has followed the course of our political and cultural history, responding to the national movement from a broad postwar consensus into a time of divisions and uncertainties.«

evered from the world« which we now call *postmodernist*. On the other and, we have also seen a renewed interest in the world on the part of fic- on writers who have taken over areas of experience previously reserved for ournalists, historians and social analysts. Some critics have celebrated the ecade of the 1970s at the triumph of the postmodernist sensibility but I wo- ld say that the most characteristic quality of our recent literature has been s responsiveness to important social and political changes taking place in merican life. I would call this a *new realism* in American literature because returns to an interest in social reality while remaining skeptical of the mo- e extravagant claims of the literature of the 1960s.

What I think distinguishes the literature of the 1970s is the way it has ttempted to deal with a broad range of American experience. Whereas pre- iously writers had often dealt directly with the peripheries of American so- iety or more elliptically with its center, now writers were confronting the nain currents of contemporary experience and recovering hitherto buried as- ects of our recent past. This increased attention to social reality is apparent n three new areas of artistic concern: the situation of women, the impact of he Vietnam War and the meaning of the entire Cold War period. To put he matter succinctly: the political and social *analysis* so prevalent in the 1960s aved the way for the imaginative *experiencing* of buried but controversial reas of American reality in the 1970s.

This change can be seen clearly in the recent literature about the situa- ion of women. Whereas the 1960s brought forth a string of important ana- yses beginning with Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, women's fiction nly emerged as a significant force in the 1970s. Whereas before the experien- ce of women had been analyzed now it could be experienced. As one charac- er puts it in Marge Piercy's *Small Changes:* »The word 'Oppression' came to her, not as a movement catch phrase — the oppression of women, the oppres- sion of gay people, third world oppression, working class oppression — but as the real weight of the system, of the hostile state crunching her under.« In many of these novels — for instance, Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*, Judith Rossner's *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* and Diane Johnson's *The Shadow Knows* — the heroine is cast in the role of the victim. But not always. Some recent no- els have depicted truly exemplary heroines. Marge Piercy's Vida and Alice Walker's Meridian are eponymous heroines who have survived the political wars of the 1960s with their integrity intact. In both novels the private and pu- blic spheres are unified in an expression of what Sara Evans has called »per- sonal politics«. *Meridian*, which deals with the connection between civil rights and women's liberation, is much the better novel: it gives a rich and moving portrait of Afro-American experience that is sharply different from what we are used to from reading black male writers. Indeed, it is interesting that the most stimulating black writing of the 1970s was produced by women like Walker and Toni Morrison who have radically revised our understanding of black experience in America.

But the mainstream of women's writing in the 1970s did not deal with women who were victims or heroines but with women who were alienated from the pressures of middle class life. Thus it is not surprising to find a lar- ge number of recent novels dealing with the theme of leaving home. In many cases this takes the form of new opportunities suddenly offered by a death

in the family and the potential liberation from traditional roles. In Lisa Alther's *Kinflicks*, for instance, the deceased is the heroine's mother. In Mary Gordon's *Final Payments* it is her father. And in Gail Godwin's *The Odd Woman* it is her grandmother. In each case the situation is the same: the heroine, approaching the magic age of thirty, finds herself at a crossroads in her life where she must choose between an old security and a new freedom. They are all, in fact, divided women, in transit from old to new values, trying to shake a new consciousness out of an old body. As one character puts it in *The Odd Woman:* »I think I was one of those people who have the misfortune to grow up with one foot in one era and the other foot in the next.« All three novels are concerned with the pitfalls as well as the possibilities attached to the quest for selfrealization. What is striking is how many recent novels about women end pessimistically or ambivalently, in striking contrast to the assertive rhetoric of some feminist writing in the 1960s. What is perhaps even more striking is how many of these novels combine a radical perspective with a conventional literary form. For the most part, recent women's literature remains resolutely traditional in its adherence to the tenets of realism.

Just as the women's movement produced a series of significant analyses in the 1960s so the anti-war movement spawned a number of eloquent critiques of American foreign policy and practice. But while historians and journalists have for years been describing the mess Americans made in Southeast Asia, only recently have novels and memoirs begun to reveal other aspects of that tragic adventure. Indeed, two novels about the Vietnam War won major prizes for fiction in the 1970s. Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers*, like the film *The Deer Hunter*, deals with the impact of the war on American society. Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*, a more ambitious and impressive novel, describes the impact of the war on those Americans who had to wage it. In these novels and in personal accounts like Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* and Michael Herr's *Dispatches* we come to a new understanding of the bitter legacy of Vietnam, an understanding that transcends even the most reasoned political analysis.

Perhaps this is best captured in *Dispatches*. Michael Herr was a reporter in Vietnam for *Esquire* and *Rolling Stone* Magazines and his personal account is a brilliant example of the New Journalism in which the idea of objective reporting has given way to a more consciously subjective style, the journalist becoming both witness and participant in the events he is describing. Herr puts it this way:

> Talk about impersonating an identity, about locking into a role, about irony: I went to cover the war and the war covered me; an old story, unless of course you've never heard it. I went there behind the crude but serious belief that you had to be able to look at anything, serious because I acted on it and went, crude because I didn't know, it took the war to teach it, that you were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did. The problem was that you didn't always know what you were seeing until later, maybe years later, that a lot of it never made it in at all, it just stayed stored there in your eyes. Time and information, rock and roll, life itself, the information isn't frozen, you are.

Like O'Brien and Caputo, Herr teaches us to see the Vietnam War from
e ground level and from that perspective the war is more monstrous, absurd
d yet comprehensible than it has ever been before. It is monstrous when
soldier sends a gift of an enemy ear to his girl friend back home and is
mbfounded when she breaks off their relationship. It is absurd when a
ajor explains the total destruction of a city in the memorable phrase, »We
d to destroy Ben Tre in order to save it.« Yet finally the war is compre-
nsible in a way that the anti-war movement failed to make it comprehen-
le because Herr and the others do not allow us to stand aside and judge.
e cannot judge without becoming implicated and we cannot become im-
cated without learning a fearful lesson about the ambiguities of power,
lence and extreme situations. Near the end of *Dispatches* Herr recounts
incident where a British journalist who was critically injured in Vietnam
asked by a publisher to write a book about his experiences which would
nce and for all 'take the glamor out of war.'« The request astonishes the
urnalist in its naiveté. »It's like trying to take the glamor out of sex, trying
take the glamor out of the Rolling Stones,« he exclaims. »I mean, you
ow that, it just *can't be done!*« Similarly, in *A Rumor of War* Caputo
scribes his own ambivalence about his war experience. »Anyone who fought
Vietnam, if he is honest about himself, will have to admit he enjoyed the
mpelling attractiveness of combat. It was a peculiar enjoyment because
was mixed with a commensurate pain,« writes Caputo. »It was something
e the elevated state of awareness induced by drugs. And it could be just
addictive, for it made whatever else life offered in the way of delights
torments seem pedestrian.«

Yet it would be mistaken to suggest that O'Brien, Herr and Caputo
amorize the war. Instead they attempt to show how the war marked and
ansformed the people who experienced it first-hand. Caputo speaks of his
rational desire to return to Vietnam even though he opposed the war.
is strange compulsion arose »from a recognition of how deeply we had been
anged, how different we were from everyone who had not shared with us
e miseries of the monsoon, the exhausting patrols, the fear of a combat
sault on a hot landing zone«:

> I was involved in the antiwar movement at the time and struggled, unsuccessfully, to reconcile my opposition to the war with this nostalgia. Later, I realized a reconciliation was impossible; I would never be able to hate the war with anything like the undiluted passion of my friends in the movement. Because I had fought in it, it was not an abstract issue, but a deeply emotional experience, the most significant thing that had happened to me. It held my thoughts, senses, and feelings in an unbreakable embrace.

Finally, however, the literature about Vietnam leaves us with a vivid
nse of the irrational nature of the war. By the end of *Dispatches* we sym-
athize with the journalist who »said he didn't mind his nightmares so much
s his waking impulse to file news reports on them.« This sense of History
s a nightmare from which its participants are trying to awake is, of course,
ervasive in modern literature but it is a particularly appropriate metaphor
r describing contemporary experience. For in a real sense, it is almost

impossible to make sense of the events leading from the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima to the present day. Instead, it is almost as if we have dreamed the Cold War and its aftermath, so little do we understand how we got into it and why we cannot get of it. During the 1960s historians like William Appleman Williams attempted to radically revise our understanding of the epoch but until recently the Cold War period remained a buried subject in the American imagination. (One measure of this fact is that while books and films about Vietnam have already appeared in great numbers, the total of works about the Korean War can still be counted on the fingers of one hand.)

But during the 1970s the legacy of the Cold War became a major subject as writers returned to the early postwar period. Works like Lillian Hellman's memoir *Scoundrel Time*, Martin Ritt's film *The Front*, and Victor Navasky's history *Naming Names* helped to focus attention on the McCarthy era. In some cases, the new examination of the period led to a new and surprising revisionism: historians like Alan Weinstein and Ronald Radosh reconsidered the evidence in the two most notorious trials of the Cold War — those involving Alger Hiss and the Rosenbergs — and came to conclusions that upset both liberal and conservative assumptions about the convictions. But even more striking was the appearance during the 1970s of *two* major novels about the Rosenbergs. Both Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* and E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* combine history and imagination but in radically different ways. Whereas Coover places real people in outrageous situations to recreate the climate of the Cold War, Doctorow invents his own characters to illuminate what the historian Christopher Lasch has called »the agony of the American Left.«

In Doctorow's novel, the Rosenbergs are called the Isaacsons but, aside from changes in detail. *The Book of Daniel* remains remarkably faithful to the historical facts. In fiction, as in life, we witness how the power of the state is brought to bear upon two hapless and apparently insignificant individuals. In Doctorow's description, the Isaacsons are casualties of the Cold War, used by both sides for their own purposes. As a knowledgeable newspaperman says to the narrator, Daniel: »Shit, between the FBI and the CP your folks never had a chance.«

But the actual Rosenberg case is only one aspect of the novel. For Doctorow is more interested in the impact of events on the two Isaacson children he has created. In the legacy of guilt and resentment, anger and rebellion that they inherit, Doctorow develops his main theme: the necessity of confronting and accepting the burden of the past before we can fully act in the present. Thus *The Book of Daniel* is nothing less than an imaginative history of the Old and New Left in America: in short, a central document for understanding American political consciousness in the post-war years. But more than that, it is, like its Biblical counterpart, an intense and complex song of lamentation, full of pity and pathos, both passionate and prophetic.

Like the other works I have discussed, *The Book of Daniel* deals with a significant aspect of contemporary American reality in terms that are neither programmatic nor prescriptive but in terms that are speculative and descriptive. This means that recent American writing has been repoliticized while moving beyond the »truth« as defined by the prevailing ideologies of the 1960s. »But surely the sense we have to have now of twentieth-century po-

litical alternatives is a kind of exhaustion of them all,« Doctorow has observed. »No system, whether it's religious or anti-religious or economic or materialistic, seems to be invulnerable to human venery and greed and insanity.« What characterizes the best recent American literature is this new realism, not without hope but not without wisdom either.

This new realism I have attempted to describe is both a reaction to our contemporary situation and a revising of the revisionism of the 1960s. In the renewed concern with the social world and the recent interest in history, writers have consciously connected the imaginative and moral functions of art. In his recent novel *The Dean's December,* Saul Bellow reiterates the first responsibility of the artist:

> In the American moral crisis, the first requirement was to experience what was happening and to see what must be seen. The facts were covered from our perception. More than they had been in the past? Yes, because the changes, especially the increase in consciousness — and also in false consciousness — was accompanied by a peculiar kind of confusion. The increase of theories and discourse, itself a cause of new strange forms of blindness, the false representations of »communication,« led to horrible distortions of public consciousness. Therefore the first act of morality was to disinter the reality, retrieve reality, dig it out of the trash, represent it anew as art would represent it.

For Bellow the writing of literature is an act of recovery as well as a process of discovery. But the recovery of our social reality is more than an encounter with an inner city slum; it is, as Bellow says, a confrontation with »the slums we carry around inside us. Every man's *inner* inner city . . .« Thus the objective of the new realism I have described must be to help us recover the world we have lost touch with — or in Bellow's words: »To recover the world that is buried under the debris of false description or nonexperience.« It is a daunting task and one that we might find is beyond the reach of our contemporary writers. But as Upton Sinclair observed some seventy years ago: »So long as we are without heart, so long as we are without conscience, so long as we are without even a mind — pray, in the name of heaven, why should anyone think it worthwhile to be troubled because we are without a literature?«