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Faith and Fiction: The Modern Short Story (Book Review)

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ideas, issues, and other dilemmas. This is done in a number of ways. Chace has written large sections of this book in the present tense, and he has organized the book as a series of hypothetical crises of intellect and morality. And Chace has chosen to write this book in a grand rhetorical style which is doubtless an attempt to imitate what Chace calls Trilling's "stately lucubrations." But by whatever means, when Chace describes or summarizes Trilling's work, he removes what is essential to it (its wit, suppleness, and cogency) and turns Trilling's seriousness into lugubrious solemnity. Trilling had a weakness for the general topic and the broad generalization, but he more than compensated for this by his ability to generate interest in his engagement with a literary text or occasion. Chace's treatment magnifies Trilling's tendency toward the general and the vague, and allows for the false impression that Trilling was habitually sententious.

As distracting as these features are, the major problem with Chace's study is its limited focus, that is, its description of Trilling's work as being characterized by the relationship between criticism and politics. Although it is accurate to say that Trilling, in his work, was very much involved in issues that had a bearing on politics, it would be no less true to say that his criticism was involved in issues that had a bearing on education, or psychology, or intellectual history. But for Chace to assume that Trilling's work can best be comprehended within the limits indicated by the title of his book is to make an error which limits the usefulness of the study itself. Trilling's literary criticism involved itself with politics, education, psychology, and intellectual history because he was committed to secular matters generally, to the affairs of this time, of this place.

Any full treatment of Trilling's work will have to take account of a phrase borrowed from Hegel used frequently by Trilling from the late 1950s to the end of his career. This phrase is "the secularization of spirituality," and by it Hegel referred to the fact that, after the Reformation,

Christian spirituality was more and more exercised upon the concerns of this world, and rightly so, rather than upon the other-worldly. Trilling, in his use of the phrase, did not refer to Christian spirituality, but expanded it to refer to a 19th-century phenomenon (also described by M.H. Abrams in his *Natural Supernaturalism*) which was characterized by the application of Christian terminology, as well as religious energies, to the activities of this world, to man's life in history. Trilling's strongest allegiance was to a spirituality grounded in and committed to the realities of man's earthly existence. This kind of spirituality, a secular spirituality, was seen by Trilling to bring the advantages of realism to man's efforts in politics, education, psychology, and in literary criticism. He saw that the strongest temptation for modern man was to deny the reality of the limitations of this world, and to disregard the lessons of these limitations. It was Trilling's commitment to a secular spirituality which allowed him, in 1950, to offer the novel as the best source of knowledge about man's life in the world, and which later led him to suggest that the novel could lead away from the truth. Common to both statements was his commitment to the secular; according to Trilling, what had changed was the way in which people received the insights of literature. Literature which could provide a firmer purchase on reality could also become a means for misrepresenting reality.

It is only within this context that it is possible fully to understand Trilling's complex transactions with Marx and Freud, with the Romantics and the 19th-century novel, with the New Critics and American literature. It is because of Trilling's commitment to this secular spirituality that his assessments of literary situations could be as challenging as they have been and continue to be, and until this aspect of his work is accounted for, the best Trilling is the one we can experience in his work first-hand.

**Nation*, Sept. 17 and Sept. 24, 1977, pp. 247-250, 278-280.

Faith and Fiction: The Modern Short Story, by Robert Detweiler and Glenn Meeter. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979. 314 pages, \$10.95. Reviewed by James Vanden Bosch, Assistant Professor of English.

Barth, Barthelme, Brautigan, Coover, Gass, Hawkes, Elkin, Pynchon, Sukenick, Vonnegut; experimental fiction, innovative fiction, super fiction, metafiction, anti-realism, irrealism, fabulation, postmodernism, the literature of exhaustion, the literature of replenishment.

Readers who recognize the above authors and labels know that the American short story has

undergone a transformation since the middle or late 1960s. This change has not gone unnoticed; accompanying the new fiction has been a debate which has not always been dispassionate and disinterested. The claims made for and against this literature are often extreme, ranging from worshipful attention to a body of writing that will save us, to a contemptuous dismissal of such

work as "literary onanism." The advocates of the new fiction have performed variously. Jerome Klinkowitz and John Somer, in their introduction to *Innovative Fiction: Stories for the Seventies*, announce a Greening of American Fiction, a fiction which will initiate us into a fourth dimension, a new order of existence:

We must forge a vision that we Earth-bound creatures can comprehend and surrender to, a vision that we can immerse ourselves in, a vision that will absorb our greed, hate, and fear of one another, a vision that will disarm us. What is a rite of initiation if not the absorption, the annihilation of the ego in a vision of the world that the ego has created? That is really what all our reading and writing is about. These acts are experiments in creating a world that will allow all men to serve one another.¹

Joe David Bellamy, editor of another collection of new fiction, performs a more useful service by distinguishing its kinds (fantasy/fabulation; irrealism; neo-gothic; myth/parable; metafiction; parody and put-on) and by showing the connections between realism, modernism, and post-modernism as literary modes.² Robert Scholes has been an early and persistent champion of the new fiction, since his 1967 study, *The Fabulators*. He has helpfully linked "fabulation" to the traditions of romance, satire, the picaresque, allegory, and epic;³ he has described structuralism as the great, positive modern system of thought which operates in the new fiction and in science fiction;⁴ and he has made unabashedly large claims for the beneficent effects of that literature:

As we approach the point where 'rational direction' of human life will require setting limits to man's freedom to procreate, we begin to arrive at the final dissolution of the liberal paradox. At this point we may sit around weeping . . . or we can try to be born again: to envision a new world and bring it into being around us. The structuralists in fiction, from Joyce to Barth, have been trying to help us toward the necessary vision.⁵

Other critics have expressed doubts about the value of this literature. Cynthia Ozick has described the work of Pynchon and Barthelme as being excessively parodistic:

Twenty years hence, every such fiction is going to require an addendum—complete

citations of the work and tone and attitude it parodies. What seems implicit now, because of its currency as memory or tradition, will have to be made explicit later, for the sake of comprehension, when tradition is forgotten and memory is dead. And meanwhile, the trouble with parody is that it is endlessly reflective, one parody building on a previous parody, and so on, until eventually the point becomes ingenuity in the permutations of derivitiveness, and you lose sight of any original objective notion of what literature can be about, of the real sources of literature.⁶

John Gardner, in *On Moral Fiction*, has taken on a wider range of adversaries than these new writers, but they do come in for repeated chastisement. Coover, Gass, Barth, and Barthelme are all cited for their refusal to enter the world of real morality, and for their consequent lack of love or compassion for the characters they have created. One of Gardner's too frequent generalizations should indicate the temper and tone which characterize the book:

Most art these days is either trivial or false. There has always been bad art, but only when a culture's general world view and aesthetic theory have gone awry is bad art what most artists strive for, mistaking bad for good. In Plato's Athens or Shakespeare's London, who would have clapped for the merdistes? For the most part our artists do not struggle—as artists have traditionally struggled—toward a vision of how things ought to be or what has gone wrong; they do not provide us with the flicker of lightning that shows us where we are. Either they pointlessly waste our time, saying and doing nothing, or they celebrate ugliness and futility, scoffing at good.⁷

These responses to the new literature are representative, if not always exemplary. Advocates and doubters alike share the tendency toward hyperbole and invective which is, unfortunately, characteristic of contemporary public discourse about literature. Although Gerald Graff's *Literature Against Itself* is not wholly free of this tendency, it is one of the clearest studies I have read concerning the claims of the new fiction and the aggressive poetics which has accompanied and championed it.⁸ It is an admittedly argumentative book, but it serves the purpose of engaging the new poetics on its own terms, and in a manner that is generally thoughtful and historical.

In fact, a very useful means of approaching this dispute is to take account of some of the terms crucial to it. Since Graff and John Barth have agreed on a provisional meaning of "postmodernism," as this term applies to literature, this would be a good place to begin.⁹ Postmodernism, they agree, is an outgrowth of literary modernism, which, in turn, developed from literary realism. Literary realism, associated with the nineteenth century, had the following features (generally): "linearity, rationality, consciousness, cause and effect, naive illusionism, transparent language, innocent anecdote, and middle-class moral conventions."¹⁰ The literary modernists (Eliot, Joyce, Mann, Pound, Kafka, Faulkner, Proust, Woolf) overturned the conventions of realism and substituted the "mythical method" ("the manipulation of a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity")¹¹ for the narrative or realistic method. Graff summarizes the modernist program as follows:

Modern fiction radically disrupted the linear flow of narrative, frustrated expectations about the unity and coherence of human character and the cause-and-effect continuity of its development, and called into question, by means of ironic and ambiguous juxtapositions, the universalizable moral and philosophical 'meaning' of literary action. It shifted the focus of attention from the objective unfolding of events to the subjective experiencing of events, sometimes to the point of enveloping the reader in a solipsistic universe. Often this fiction contained a tone of epistemological self-mockery, again symptomatic of the waning explanatory power of bourgeois rationality. The assertion that we need a mythical method to make the modern world possible for art presupposes that modernity cannot be made intelligible as part of a continuous evolutionary process. It also implies that the fiction writer cannot hope to *understand* the modern world, that the best he can hope to do is 'order' it by arranging its various constituents in structural patterns.¹²

Barth adds to this list several other characteristics: an insistence upon the artist's alienation from his society; an emphasis on language and technique rather than content; and the "famous relative difficulty of access" of the literature itself.¹³ Finally, Graff's description of postmodern fiction:

Since World War II it has seemed necessary to speak of a postmodern mode of

fiction, which departs not only from realistic conventions but from modernist ones as well. In retrospect we can see that it took postmodern fiction to carry to its logical extreme the break with traditional realism which critics like Eliot ascribed to classic modern fiction but which modern fiction had actually executed only in part. Indeed, one of the strengths of modern fiction was that it could often incorporate within its own structures much of the bourgeois realism which it was undermining. To put it another way, modern fiction, except in a few instances, did not actually effect the total subjectivization and privatization of human experience called for by modernist theories which defined literature as an expression of inward 'consciousness' set over against the rational discourse of the public, objective world. By contrast, postmodern fiction tends to carry the logic of such modernist theories to their limit, so that we have a consciousness so estranged from objective reality that it does not even recognize its estrangement as such If modern writers aimed at unmasking official illusions about the material and moral progress of civilization, postmodern writers begin at a point after this myth has been exploded and such demolition is needless The social context of modern fiction was a nineteenth-century middle class that still upheld the austere morality of production and the respectable manners embodied in Victorianism and the American genteel tradition. The social context of postmodern fiction is an amorphous mass society that has lost contact with these earlier traditions and beliefs.¹⁴

Graff adds that this program has the tendency to degenerate into self-parody, frustration, self-hatred, and the "literature of exhaustion."¹⁵ Within the terms of this large, general description of postmodernism, Graff is willing to make exceptions to his charge of triviality: Barthelme, Barth, Roth, and Elkin "are able to avoid some of the pitfalls of postmodern subjectivism."¹⁶ Barth himself admits that "disjunction, simultaneity, irrationalism, anti-illusionism, self-reflexiveness, medium-as-message, political olympianism, and a moral pluralism approaching moral entropy—these are not the whole story either," and his essay ends with the hope that someday this new literature will be known as the "literature of replenishment."¹⁷

Given these terms (realism, modernism, postmodernism) and the definitions more or less

agreed upon by Graff and Barth, the new fiction can be seen from one perspective as a phenomenon within a historical and cultural context, and many of the controversies generated by it as expressions of preference for one of the three narrative techniques. Yet it is also clear that the three narrative modes involve considerations beyond that of narrative technique. Also involved are views of man, of language, of society, and of human history. It is within this context, that is, of paying attention to the inherent beliefs and assumptions of literary works, that we can best understand the short story collection that I wish to review.

Robert Detweiler and Glenn Meeter, in *Faith and Fiction: The Modern Short Story*, organize their short story anthology according to the assumption that fiction (both realistic and anti-realistic) can be examined and classified as bearing witness to or expressing one kind of religion or another. This is a useful maneuver on their part: rather than praise one kind and blame the other, they claim (or, rather, Meeter claims) that realistic and anti-realistic stories have in common a feature that can be called a religion inherent in them.¹⁸ By "religion" Meeter means that feature of a short story which is otherwise named as its "vision" or its "intuition"; as Meeter says, "At the heart or center of every work of literature is something sacred."¹⁹ In order to make the analysis of the religion of literature as simple and as inclusive as possible, Meeter employs "formal distinctions . . . of a very broad sort," and divides short stories into two camps, or ways of seeing and representing.²⁰ The adequacy of this two-camp scheme is attested to, according to Meeter, by scholars in a variety of disciplines: philosophy (immanence and transcendence), theology (Tillich's moral type of faith and ontological type of faith), psychology (James' healthy-minded and sick-soul religion), and anthropology (Joseph Campbell's Occidental mythology and Oriental mythology).

Meeter uses Martin Buber's typology of faith to characterize and name these two religious orientations: the religion of Canaan (associated with the first of each of the paired items above) and the religion of Rome (associated with the second of each paired item). The religion of Canaan is dominated by a feeling of "confidence and intimacy with the universe"; the religion of Rome by a "feeling of disharmony and disequilibrium" with the universe. Using this model of religious orientation, Meeter connects the religion of Canaan with the realistic tradition in narrative, and the religion of Rome with the anti-realistic tradition. Meeter here borrows some of the literary distinctions developed by Joseph Frank: the chronological narrative form (realism) deals with probable events, recognizable charac-

ters possessing free will and individuality, a neutral style, and narration aimed at laying bare the meaning of a character's life; the spatial narrative form (anti-realism) makes use of improbable events, patterned characters, a distracting style, and a puzzling narrative aimed at creating new meaning, rather than discovering meaning which is already available.²¹ The short stories which make up this collection are assigned to the one religious orientation or the other by means of deciding which narrative tradition each story most nearly belongs to; those with the characteristics of realism are grouped together as exhibiting the assumptions of the religion of Canaan, and the anti-realistic stories are grouped together as exhibiting the assumptions of the religion of Rome.

There is one further organizing scheme applied to the stories gathered in this collection. The stories are grouped in terms of four religious questions and how those questions are answered within the two religious orientations.²² The questions are based on the following concepts: the powers governing the world; the nature of the moral law; the nature of divine manifestation or revelation; and the relationship of the individual to the community. Stories manifesting the religion of Canaan would be expected to approach these concepts in a different way than would the stories belonging to the religion of Rome.

Meeter and Detweiler have performed a certain kind of service for readers interested in these broad narrative traditions. For one thing, they have assembled a diverse but representative body of literature, including works by such recognized authors as John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Samuel Beckett, Jorge Luis Borges, Peter De Vries, Flannery O'Connor, Frank O'Connor, John Updike, and Larry Woiwode; they have also included fiction representing the international literary community, with stories by writers from Austria, Germany, India, Japan, Poland, Russia, South Africa, and South America. There are twenty-five stories in all, several written in the mid-50s, but most of them written since the mid- to late 60s. It is a collection which provides ready access to a generous sample of the best contemporary writing in short fiction.

Moreover, in the "Preface" and "Introduction," the editors have attempted to mediate a literary controversy over the relative merits of realistic and anti-realistic fiction. By insisting that each narrative form has its own religious orientation, Meeter has made it more likely that both kinds of literature can be understood and appreciated for the variety of ideas and techniques available within them. Neither evil and stupidity nor beneficence and wisdom belong exclusively to one narrative tradition. For this attempt to un-

derstand the literature on its own terms the editors are to be commended.

The editors also put the interpretive scheme into practice at the end of the collection. In an "Afterword," each short story is analyzed and discussed in terms of the literary and religious features which characterize it; the reader is able not only to compare his reading of the story with the editors', but he is also able to judge the explanatory power and adequacy of the interpretive scheme the editors are applying. For the editors to give the reader this opportunity is an indication of their honesty and their sincerity.

How adequate is the scheme based on such "broad formal distinctions"? Apart from the question of how significant the agreement is among philosophy, theology, anthropology, psychology, and literary criticism concerning the types of basic religious orientation, how good is the fit between Buber's typology and the spiritual directions that give shape to these short stories? Are myths and tales best described as anti-realistic and of a certain religious orientation solely because they do not exhibit the narrative features of realism? Is it true that stories employing realistic narrative conventions will also express a feeling of "confidence and intimacy with the universe," or that stories written in the anti-realistic mode will express "a feeling of disharmony and disequilibrium" with the universe? In terms of the four religious questions used in Meeter's scheme, if a short story suggests an answer which fits with the religion of Rome, does it follow that its literary mode will be, or should be, anti-realistic? If the answer fits the religion of Canaan, is the narrative mode automatically realistic? Each reader will also question whether a particular story is best understood within one of the four question areas, or, indeed, within one of the two religious orientations.

By asking these questions, I do not mean to suggest that this collection of short stories has failed in what it set out to do. In their attempt to break through some of the hysteria and cant that prevent a real experience of contemporary literature, Meeter and Detweiler have found it necessary to simplify, and my questions come from an awareness that this simplification presents problems of its own. The fact that this interpretive scheme is not fully satisfactory does not change the fact that it may provide an increased awareness of and sensitivity to the literature of our time. If it does that, it has performed a useful task, since neither has any other simplified system ever proven to be fully satisfactory. Literature is too varied and elusive for ready systematizing. The short stories brought together by Meeter and Detweiler, and their discussion of them, bear witness to that variety and elusiveness.

That is sufficient warrant and recommendation for this anthology.

Notes

¹Jerome Klinkowitz and John Somer, *Innovative Fiction: Stories for the Seventies* (New York: Dell, 1972), p. xix.

²Joe David Bellamy, *Super Fiction, or The American Short Story Transformed* (New York: Vintage, 1975), pp. 3-17.

³Robert Scholes, *The Fabulators* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

⁴Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

⁵Scholes, "The Illiberal Imagination," *New Literary History*, 4 (1973), 535. This essay, in a revised form, is part of chapter 6 of *Structuralism in Literature*; for a critique of the essay's optimism, see Lionel Trilling's essay "Art, Will, and Necessity" in *The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews, 1965-75*, ed. Diana Trilling (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), pp. 129-147.

⁶Cynthia Ozick, in "Culture and the Present Moment: A Round-Table Discussion," *Commentary*, Dec. 1974, p. 34.

⁷John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), p. 16.

⁸Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

⁹John Barth, "The Literature of Replenishment," *Atlantic*, Jan. 1980, pp. 65-71; in Graff, see especially chapter 8 ("Babbitt at the Abyss"), pp. 207-239.

¹⁰Barth, p. 70.

¹¹T.S. Eliot, as quoted in Graff, p. 207.

¹²Graff, p. 208; see also Barth, p. 68.

¹³Barth, pp. 68, 69.

¹⁴Graff, pp. 208, 210; see also Barth, pp. 68, 70.

¹⁵Graff, pp. 220, 225, 239. The phrase "the literature of exhaustion" was coined by Barth, who used it as the title of a famous essay of 1967 (*Atlantic*, Aug. 1967, pp. 29-34). Barth's essay "The Literature of Replenishment" is an explanation, defense, and updating of the earlier essay.

¹⁶Graff, p. 225.

¹⁷Barth, pp. 70, 71.

¹⁸Robert Detweiler and Glenn Meeter, *Faith and Fiction: The Modern Short Story* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979). Meeter has written the introductory essay; he and Detweiler have edited the collection of stories.

¹⁹Detweiler and Meeter, p. xviii.

²⁰Detweiler and Meeter, pp. xxii - xxviii.

²¹Detweiler and Meeter, pp. xxviii - xxix.

²²Detweiler and Meeter, pp. xxix - xxxii.