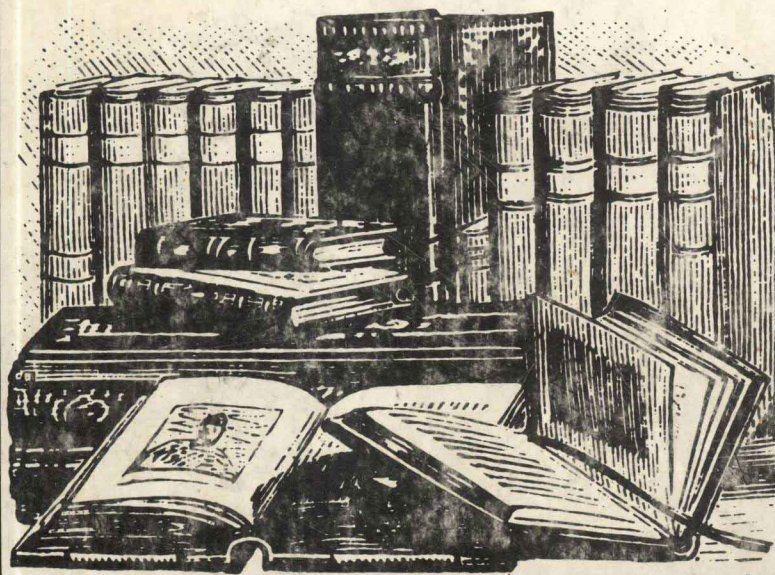


THE PRACTICE OF
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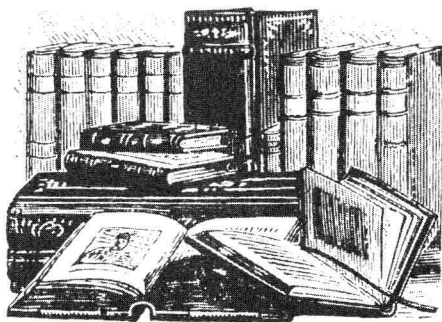
Writers from Hawthorne to the Present



JEROME KLINKOWITZ

The Practice of Fiction in America:

Writers from Hawthorne to the Present



JEROME KLINKOWITZ

The Iowa State University Press, Ames

to my Mother, Lucille McNamara Klinkowitz

and to the memory of my Father, Jerome F. Klinkowitz, Sr.

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P R E F A C E

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The editors of *ESQ: Journal of the American Renaissance, Modern Fiction Studies, Critique, Proof, Players, The New Republic*, and *Forms of the American Imagination* (Institut für Amerikanistik, der Universität Innsbruck) published parts of my commentary on Hawthorne, Howells, Faulkner, Motley, Vonnegut, and Updike in different form, and I am grateful for their permission to redo that material here. The chapters on Kate Chopin, Scott Fitzgerald, and Donald Barthelme, plus the Prologue and Epilogue were written originally for this volume.

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JEROME KLINKOWITZ

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The Practice of Fiction in America

P R O L O G U E

The Practice of Fiction in America

IN A SENSE, all American fiction is experimental. In England the eighteenth century novel, that wonderfully variegated genre that did virtually everything possible with prose, soon withdrew into the nineteenth century novel of manners, and but for a few exceptions like *Wuthering Heights* and *The Way of All Flesh* spent generation after generation mirroring the stable middle-class life of its most faithful readership.

America, of course, has prided itself from the start as a classless society, where manners were secondary to morals and lords and ladies (as models to the bourgeoisie) did not exist. Significantly, the novel of manners did not thrive in this country until after the Civil War, when business and manufacturing expansion produced a cynically named privileged class: the robber barons and railroad kings of the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s. But even then our writers saw their chance for literary experiment, as William Dean Howells and others set off upon a road to realism which would be a decidedly aesthetic journey.

From the start, the unique conditions of American life forced our writers into new and strikingly original modes. Because his own literary devices were so atypical, Nathaniel Hawthorne found it impossible to begin a book without a disclaiming preface. What America offered was as elusive and ethereal as the speculative conditions of its own political founding. Washington Irving before him and Henry James soon after chose travel and literary exile in Europe and England rather than staying home and forcing the unyielding American materials into foreign stereotypes of form. Even in the twentieth century T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound preferred London and Paris for the shaping of modernism, and the latter city persisted as the obligatory Mecca for the Lost Generation. It was the writers who stayed home, however, who wrote the most characteristically imaginative fiction. Like the Constitution and the Bill

of Rights, their works have proven to be original and lasting documents, basing themselves less on social experience than on projective imaginative power. From the spiritual dreams of the Puritan founders through the civic idealism of the Founding Fathers down to the zealots of Manifest Destiny, Americans have been a peculiarly visionary people. Few countries can claim such a strongly fanciful heritage. America is imagination's own land.

Imaginative latitude of fashion and material are what Hawthorne claimed for his own work. His Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) argued against the solid beef-and-ale realities of British social fiction and preferred instead the subtler tints and more evanescent flavor of American life. But the differences ran deeper than Hawthorne could anticipate, creating a major problem with form which was to tax his artistic strength. More influenced by the novel of manners than he chose to realize, Hawthorne was distressed by the unhappy endings fated for his American romances. Spurred on by the complaints of his wife, of his favorite literary critic (E. P. Whipple), and of his own conscience, he struggled to contradict the inexorable tendency of his own material. The laboratory for his experiment was his second full-length romance. Begun as a typically Hawthornesque meditation, *The House of the Seven Gables* ends as a well-made novel of manners with a happy resolution for all. Its failure, however, indicates the strength of Hawthorne's other works and establishes an essential principle for the development of American fiction: self-conscious critical attention to matters of theme and form will be the yardstick by which our fiction grows.

By the time of William Dean Howells, in the next generation of American fictionists, the novel itself was the center of a major aesthetic battle between the elder genteel idealists (representing New England transcendentalism in its decline) and the younger socially committed writers from the West. How to locate his writing in reality yet still maintain aesthetic order was Howells' first test. His career began with travel literature based on his and Mrs. Howells' time in Venice (where Howells was American consul, a political favor earned by his campaign biography of Lincoln). Soon afterward his first novel, *Their Wedding Journey* (1872), invented two fictional stand-ins (Basil and Isabel March) but still relied on travelogue to fill out the action. What makes the novel interesting is Howells' running debate on the subject of ethics and aesthetics—the socially pertinent subject of what the author considered responsible fiction pitted against the sentimental tide of aesthetics (at this point Idealism in decay). Howells stayed with this topic, and with these two characters so close to his own emotional life, throughout the next three decades. By the century's end he had expanded and matured their

voyeuristic sentimentalism into self-responsible creativity; as Basil and Isabel March grew as characters, Howells learned and expressed more about how fiction and experience intermesh. Less of a successfully self-conscious critic, Mark Twain spent the last decade of his life wrestling with similar problems—and being destroyed by them. Yet each writer was on to something important. In the process, their own fiction more and more resembled the modern novel.

But first came the experiment with literary naturalism. Emile Zola had introduced the style and the name for it in France with his essay “The Experimental Novel.” *Experimental* was used in the clinical rather than aesthetic sense; characters in a novel were to be studied like rats in a maze, and like variables in a controlled experiment would tell the author and reader more about the scientific laws which were assumed to govern life. The first American imitations of Zola’s method were heavy-handed and are best read today as parodies. Frank Norris was a master of Zola’s formula, and hence his novels are formulaic—*McTeague* (1899) moving toward its conclusion like a machine winding down, while *Vandover and the Brute* (written ca. 1895) is even more apparent in its pathological thesis.

How naturalism, seemingly a step backward in the development of fiction, would find its way to modernism can be seen from a striking literary experiment by Kate Chopin, her novel *The Awakening* (1899). Most Americanized naturalism would begin with a thesis and then follow it through the action to the inexorable and forewarned conclusion. An explicitly deductive method, it contradicted the spirit of Zola’s belief and made for boring, reductive literature. Kate Chopin’s success was to take the essentials of the naturalistic process and imbed them in the texture of her novel. Inductive rather than deductive, the story is a process of discovery for her heroine as she “awakens” to certain natural urges not conventionally treated in novels by women before. Discovery is made part of the reader’s experience by virtue of a carefully composed set of images. Unlike Norris, who explains his behavioral science directly, Kate Chopin weaves it into her imagery. We hear less of physical symptoms and more of the seductiveness of the sea, a persistent image which reaches back to the heroine’s youth. All the essentials of naturalism are incorporated in *The Awakening*, but as literary rather than scientific metaphors. Compositional integrity rather than scientific principle determines how the novel is written, and as a result it is as readable today as it was eighty years ago.

F. Scott Fitzgerald used the same control of imagery to grow from a nineteenth century novelist to a modernist master in just five years. His first book, *This Side of Paradise* (1920), ignored many of Henry James’

selectivist innovations and held more closely to H. G. Wells' reactionary "novel of saturation," a way of writing which placed the highest premium on artistically uncorrupted experience. Naturalistic determination need not be a feature, but most other elements from this reductive style of fiction prevailed, including strict chronology, historically detailed characterization, and a disinclination to shape experience or select events for aesthetic coherence. Fitzgerald's subject, the life and loves of a Princeton sophomore named Amory Blaine, appeared suited to this history-laden technique. The strategy works until Fitzgerald tries to make a point. Such artistic interference, necessary to the work of a twentieth century novelist but so alien to the novel of saturation, makes the book fall apart in his hands. The omniscient narrator becomes as befuddled as his adolescent moon-struck character, and the narrative becomes a shambles. Fitzgerald flirts with the same danger in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), but with the tools of artistic selection and commentary through imagery—Kate Chopin's lesson—he manages to make his narrator's momentary infatuation an essential part of the novel's action. Nick Carraway assembles and sorts out the action as a way of perceiving Jay Gatsby; a highly selective and artificial novel is thus written before our eyes in a most credible manner. Fitzgerald has given twentieth century art its most unique gift, the benefit of having it both ways.

That thematics could profit from the same compositional design was shown again by William Faulkner, whose multivolumed epic of Yoknapatawpha County proved to be one continuous novel written over thirty-four years. Theme as controlling vision is most apparent in Faulkner's only fully integrated collection of short fiction, *Knight's Gambit* (1949). Though supposedly detective stories centered about the life of Gavin Stevens, *Knight's Gambit* shows itself to be a more profound meditation on the theme of community. The various stories point to different aspects: insiders, outsiders, natives, and outlanders, with the ratiocination and detection merely a formal excuse to introduce the theme. In no sense are the thematics simple rehearsals of history; instead, the single story of Yoknapatawpha's residents and aliens is told and retold from a multitude of different angles, until by the book's end Faulkner has achieved in miniature an effect not unlike that of his whole Yoknapatawpha saga.

A great irony in the development of American fiction is that an entire decade of concern was directed to the social use of fiction, a debate once hopefully concluded by William Dean Howells but which during the Great Depression once again became the novel's matter of concern, with no major gain of innovations in theme or form. The thirties were the years of Faulkner's most brilliant and prolific efforts, but for him

thematics were an aesthetic concern. At the other extreme proletarian novelists such as Jack Conroy and Tom Kromer were so heavily committed to social reform that critics judged their art a distraction. The major writers to emerge from this decade—John Steinbeck and John O'Hara—soon retreated into the elegantly crafted novel of manners, preparing the way for such later stylists as John Updike and John Cheever but adding little to the progress of fiction in their time.

Steinbeck's major contribution was a highly commercial house style which has persisted in best-sellers down to our own day. The case of Willard Motley, writing socially self-conscious fiction in the 1940s but still edited and told to rewrite his material according to the aesthetics of Steinbeck, James T. Farrell, and Richard Wright, illustrates what happens when a potentially major writer is not allowed to be his own best critic but is instead maneuvered into repeating stylistic successes of the past. Motley's unpublished manuscripts and the passages cut from his published novel *Knock on Any Door* (1947) suggest that he was anticipating a phenomenological spirit of new realism, and that in his social interest he was a deconstructionist who would substitute fictional models for unhappy social affairs. Had he been edited by the Paris intellectuals at Editions de Minuit, who gave the world Alain Robbe-Grillet and the *nouveau roman*, instead of by the businessmen who ran Macmillan and Appleton-Century in the postwar years, Willard Motley and his decade of apprenticeship might now be considered a revolutionary and innovative period for American fiction, instead of the backwater we now judge it to have been.

Most serious American writers since the 1950s have been affected by the realism debate. Some, like Bernard Malamud, have substituted the secular mythology of Jewish-American urban life for the deeper symbolism of the modernists. Others, most notably Saul Bellow, have moved directly to the exposition of morality, to the extent that some accuse Bellow of bypassing fiction entirely for essays, conversations, and debates. At the opposite extreme has been John Updike, whose own lush stylistic sensuousity at times obscures his story's action. Such an overbalance of the stylistic, it is claimed, creates literary decadence; having nothing to write about, Updike writes anyway, his lack of substance disguised by a thick sauce of adjectives, adverbs, and nouns.

What Updike has in fact accomplished is the legitimate use of writing as its own subject. From the start he has been careful to have his theme justify his stylistic excesses: the baroque obsolescence of the old folks in *The Poorhouse Fair* (1959), his protagonist's erotic aestheticism in *Rabbit, Run* (1960), and the self-conscious sensuality rampant throughout his most controversial novel, *Couples* (1968). Originally a

master of light verse, capable of writing Pindaric odes on the qualities of a cough drop, Updike has matured as a stylist who makes the act of writing itself perform the major action of his novel.

An entirely different way of dealing with reality has been perfected by Kurt Vonnegut. Challenged by the bleakly pessimistic view of life he encountered during World War II and again in the postwar corporate economy, Vonnegut drew on his anthropological training to decide that no single view of the world can claim precedence over any other—that reality itself is simply a description, and that the legitimacy of any one account depends solely upon how persuasively that account is stated. That is, of course, the practice of the fictionist, and Vonnegut soon learned how to discredit assumed notions of reality by demonstrating their arbitrary and conventional nature and then substituting a more effective description of his own. From *Player Piano* (1952) through *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) Vonnegut consumed and regenerated the main aspects of our culture, from individual human worth to the notion of free will. That his talent was tied to the practice of fiction is proven by his single experiment in legitimate theatre, the Broadway play *Happy Birthday, Wanda June* (1970–71). Here the different axioms of dramatic art caused his vision to be readjusted without notable success. But once returned to fiction, the Vonnegut magic reassumed its transformative power.

The breakthrough in American fiction came in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when an erratically brilliant group of young fictionists attacked social realism in its own grounds, and then proposed in its place a fiction whose prime feature would be its own physical structure of words, sentences, and paragraphs. The first novels by these innovationists were wildly comic and sexually exuberant affairs, such as Ronald Sukenick's *Up* (1968), Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* (1967), and Steve Katz's *The Exaggerations of Peter Prince* (1968). A great deal of deconstruction was necessary, including devices which would strip away the illusion of reality and substitute the self-conscious honesty of the writer writing his or her story. Beneath this new convention of throwing out conventions lay the mature work of innovative fiction, where writers such as Donald Barthelme and Richard Brautigan would take the common reader's familiar notions about language (from television, advertising, and vernacular speech) and exploit their objecthood. Barthelme's models were the collage method of Max Ernst and the assemblages of Joseph Cornell; in each case the artist could use objects as factors in his composition without sacrificing their real identity as artifacts preexisting his work. The central challenge of fiction, that unlike daubs of paint or notes of music words bring with them their own universe of previous

references and associations, spurred the best of these new writers toward finding ways of keeping language on the page as artifact. The results have been hysterically comic (Gilbert Sorrentino's *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things*, 1971), typographically bizarre (Raymond Federman's *Double or Nothing*, 1971), and deeply lyrical (Clarence Major's *Emergency Exit*, 1979). Helpful outlines of this new aesthetic have been supplied by Sukenick, Federman, Sorrentino, William H. Gass, and many other practicing fictionists. Indeed, the new fictionists must be their own aesthetic theorists, a practice common to all major developments in American writing.

American writers have been especially responsive to critical problems in their work since its beginning. What starts as outside criticism—Edwin P. Whipple to Hawthorne, Alfred Kazin to Barthelme—soon becomes the most exacting self-criticism. An awareness of problems in literary form, therefore, from the beginnings of serious American fiction down to today's avant-garde, has described the course of our literary heritage. The practice of fiction in America has been a necessarily self-conscious affair, for the challenges each writer faces have led in almost dialectical fashion to the next style of writing—hence the succession of major styles from Hawthorne's day to the present. This very self-consciousness has contributed to its greatness, for in facing these critical problems American authors have in turn produced their finest, most characteristic, and most innovative writing. The integrity of their finished work was foremost on these writers' minds; the sometimes painful awareness of threats to that integrity often made their final products masterpieces.

Hawthorne's Sense of an Ending

PARTIALLY through myth but largely by his own self-conscious behavior, Nathaniel Hawthorne has become an archetype for the troubled American artist. From his journals we know that themes of guilt and responsibility rattled his mind, and—if we are to believe his biographers—the very attempt to write, to “open an intercourse with the outside world,” unsettled his soul. A quick look at the three most famous portraits of him—by Charles Osgood in 1840 (age thirty-six), George P. A. Healey in 1852 (age forty-eight), and most strikingly by the British photographer Mayall in 1860 (age fifty-six)—reveals an interior aging process not unlike that of Oscar Wilde's picture of Dorian Gray. Osgood's portrait shows Hawthorne looking not a day over twenty-one; twelve years' solitude, culminating with *Twice-Told Tales*, had been no psychic burden, and had left him quite the young man who'd graduated from Bowdoin in 1825. But Healey's Hawthorne, the veteran of three major romances (the term he preferred for booklength fictions), is a driven man. The hairline has receded to reveal a troubled brow, the hair itself is now frayed and pulled, and the eyes seem as if dazed by the ponderous complexities of *The Scarlet Letter*, *The House of the Seven Gables*, and *The Blithedale Romance*. But the worst was yet to come. The Mayall photo is devastating: a man aged thirty years in less than a decade, worn down by *The Marble Faun* and facing four unfinishable romances, the struggles of his artistic life seemingly come to naught. A fourth portrait, by Matthew Brady in 1863, shows an old and broken man.

Writing romances obviously took its toll on Hawthorne's person, but his artistic powers were more specifically taxed as he struggled to write a book with a happy ending. To his own mind, he succeeded with Holgrave and Phoebe in *The House of the Seven Gables*, but the ending to that work remains, after a century and more of critical bickering, a