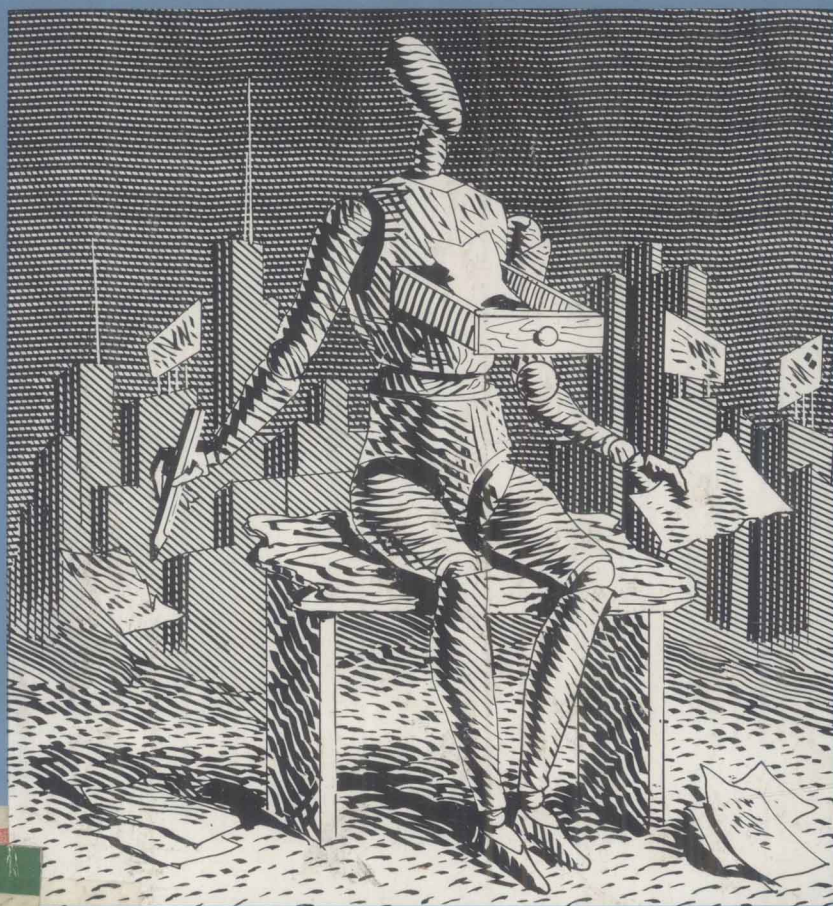


THE  
American Novel  
and the Way  
We Live Now



John W. Aldridge



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### For Patricia and Ann

Portions of this book have been previously published, usually in quite different form, in *Commentary*, *Harper's*, *Saturday Review*, and the *Chicago Tribune Book World*. I wish to thank the editors for permission to reprint them here.

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## PREFACE

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This book is at once a study, a commentary, and a meditation. It is a study—highly selective to be sure—of certain prominent features of the contemporary American novel. It is a commentary—highly subjective to be sure—on certain prominent features of contemporary American life. And it is a meditation on the possible connection between the two, the state of the novel and the character of the life.

Perhaps no responsible critic any longer takes seriously the old idea that the novel at any given moment in history can be considered a dependable fictive representation of the way of life prevailing at that moment—the suggestion made by Stendhal and others before and after him that the novel is a mirror carried along a high road or dawdling idly down a lane. The expectation that the novel will realistically reflect the experience of its time is not only fatigued, but has gone conspicuously unfulfilled, at least in this country, for a good many years. Most of our novelists now disdain the realistic reflection of life with as much vehemence as they disdain the happy ending. Indeed, their happiness seems most often to consist in the avoidance of endings, happy or otherwise, altogether and in perpetrating the most heretical violations of what once could confidently be thought of as the sacred law of verisimilitude. The contemporary American novel is perhaps most notable for its strong anti-realistic bias, and the surest way for any novelist to open himself to contempt is to resist that bias and create characters who bear some close resemblance to people one might encounter in ordinary daily life. He may comfort him-

self with the knowledge that he will probably be read by millions of grateful readers, but he will surely be snubbed by the critics and by his peers as meretricious and third rate.

And yet some relationship does exist, however remote and tangential it may be, between the material of the novel and the experience of the life from which, however indirectly, it derives. If nothing else, certain attitudes and unconscious assumptions, certain psychic styles and modes of perceiving reality that may be implicit in the life will be communicated or adumbrated in the fiction. For life is, after all, where the novel starts from, even though it may end at the remotest and most fantastic remove from what is conventionally recognized as life. The possibility that such a relationship exists has intrigued me for a long time, and anyone acquainted with my previous critical books will have seen that my tendency is to treat literature in its social and historical context. However unfashionable that approach may now be, I seem by temperament to be saddled with it and have no choice but to let it take me where it will.

With regard to any book purporting to discuss contemporary fiction, the question of the principle governing the materials selected for discussion always arises and is seldom answered to the complete satisfaction of those who raise it. I have chosen here to discuss materials that seem to me particularly illustrative of certain defining characteristics of our current fiction, and I have *not* intended to present a thorough or systematic survey of the best or most prominent works in the field. Such a survey of a subject so rich and varied would be an endless and probably foolhardy undertaking. But in any case, I have not undertaken it and do not wish to be haled into court for not having undertaken it.

I am also confronted with the problem that in earlier critical books I have said what I had to say about certain writers and now have no desire to recapitulate opinions that may have been better stated in those books. I have, therefore, refrained from discussing here the work of John Updike, John Cheever, Mary McCarthy, James Jones, Eudora Welty, Wright Morris, Truman Capote, and Gore Vidal—to name a few of the writers I might be faulted for not discussing—and hope that readers curious to know what my views of these and some other contemporary writers are or

were will be led to read my earlier assessments of them, specifically in *After the Lost Generation*, *In Search of Heresy*, *Time To Murder and Create*, and *The Devil in the Fire*.

I am glad to say that the tendency of recent criticism is toward the subjective and impressionistic after decades during which it was virtually a matter of canonical edict that the critic should be invisible and the work be treated with the detachment of a biologist examining a specimen under a microscope. Some of our most sophisticated critics are now even going so far as to argue that the critic is the real and final maker of the work he criticizes, that his "reading" is far more crucial to the attainment of its ultimate significance than anything contributed by the mere author. I would not pretend to be quite so imperial in my claims. Still, it is pleasant to know that one is again permitted to be personal and provisional and conjectural and even crotchety and ironical without needing to feel embarrassed.

J. W. A.  
*Ann Arbor, Michigan*  
*July 1982*

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## CHAPTER I

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# The Novel and the Imperial Self

*Not the least of the effects of industrialism is that we become mechanized in mind, and consequently attempt to provide solutions in terms of engineering, for problems which are essentially problems of life.*

T.S. Eliot

Preoccupation with the state of the novel was until about ten years ago one of the major bores of American criticism. From the early fifties well into the sixties it was scarcely possible to get through a month without reading—as a rule in the Sunday book review supplements or the editorial pages of *Life*—that the novel in this country was dying, was dead, was coming back from the dead, was being reincarnated in the mutant forms of a new journalism or a fictional nonfiction. Then quite suddenly the autopsical discussions stopped. And even though at this time in the criticism of the other arts such problems as the desperate plight of the theatre, the scarcity of talented new playwrights, the vacuity or vulgarity of current films, the faddishness of modern painting continue to be dissected with undiminished vigor, we very seldom hear anything more about the state of



the novel, sick or well—presumably because we no longer care very much whether it lives or dies.

For those of us who have worked closely with contemporary fiction and may even be numbered among its more obsessive diagnosticians, an explanation for this rather curious development comes easily to mind, although a convincing explanation of the explanation may be enormously difficult to discover. Clearly, if public and critical interest in the novel has declined, it has done so in large part because the novel over the past decade has dramatically lost authority both as an art form and as an instrument for reflecting and educating public consciousness. We have long taken it for granted that the great innovative authority of the classic modern novel is now an entombed, even ossified authority represented by a body of sacred writings worshipped for their ancient wisdom and their ability to evoke the spirit of a dead historical past. But what still seems surprising, no matter how long we have lived with the fact, is that novelists we continue to think of as very much alive and functioning contemporaries have been similarly institutionalized, as if they were already considered as *passé* as their great predecessors, and have come to be admired more for their artistry than for their power to excite our imaginations or to deepen our understanding of the meaning of present-day experience. However gifted Bellow, Barth, Pynchon, Mailer, Roth, Heller, Updike, Hawkes, Gaddis, and our other important novelists may be, we somehow do not look to them for intellectual and imaginative leadership, as at one time we looked to the major novelists of the twenties and thirties.

Nor, for that matter, do we regard them as beings who, because of the originality of their work, have fascination as personalities or are leading lives that might in various ways instruct us in the possibilities of freedom, adventure, or individual integrity. Except for the two or three mostly third-rate novelists whose talent for self-caricature and bitchery has endeared them to talk-show audiences who know nothing of their books, the best of our writers today are ignored by the popular media unless and until they are arrested for disturbing the peace or manage to win the Nobel Prize. It is inconceivable that there is

a novelist among us at this time who would be met by reporters at Kennedy Airport as Fitzgerald, Hemingway, even writers like Louis Bromfield and Pearl Buck, used regularly to be met when their ships arrived in New York from Europe.

It is also significant that the members of the current establishment of novelists are now all past forty-five and have produced very few highly talented descendants, even though they themselves had begun to appear with promising work in most cases by the time they were thirty. This would seem to suggest that the novel has not only lost authority but is failing, perhaps for just that reason, to attract the kind of new talent that might ultimately reconstitute its authority.

We may pass over the more obvious and cliché reasons why these things are so: how artists of all kinds have lost celebrity status in a time when only regular media appearance can, however temporarily, confer such status; how the novel has declined in influence with the decline in the habit of serious reading and with the rise of the dictatorship now exercised by television over the limited powers of mass public attention. These are factors we may cite without engaging the more complex realities of the problem. It is much more to the point to suggest that the authority of the novel never has been and probably never can be viewed as separable from the nature and quality of the human experience which, at any historical moment, may form its central subject matter. It is even possible that the novel will be most deeply influential at those moments when it is able to explore areas of experience that are not yet completely familiar to the reading public, thus functioning in its classic role as literally a bringer of the news, a discoverer of what is indeed novel.

These moments will usually coincide with periods of profound social dislocation, such as the rise of the mercantile middle class out of the collapsing order of feudalism—a process in which the novel as we know it in fact began—or they may be typified by radical changes in manners and morals of the kind that tend to follow major wars. They may also occur during the emergence of ethnic, racial, regional, and sexual subcultures in which the initial struggle out of feudalism of the middle class is recapitulated in the struggle for freedom, acceptance, and personal

autonomy of Jews, Blacks, provincial Southerners or Midwesterners, women, or homosexuals—groups, in short, that have become newly conscious of themselves and the special nature of their minority or regional experiences.

Such central social transformations have over the past century provided the American novel with a continuously replenishing supply of vital materials, and always their vitality has depended in very large measure on the factor of novelty, the opportunity afforded novelists by historical accident to express for the first time hitherto unknown or unexplored modes of feeling and being, new experiences that in some ultimate way were working to reshape the character of our national life and in the process were introducing fresh perspectives from which to envision the individual in some significantly altered relation to that life. These experiences will of course have been shared by some perhaps substantial part of the reading public. But they will not have been made understandable or imaginatively available to the public until recreated and evaluated in the work of an important novelist.

The history of the twentieth-century novel in this country may in fact be described as an evolutionary development in which each successive generation of novelists has discovered and appropriated to its particular creative use one or more of the emerging social situations of its age, then has gradually—or in some cases very quickly—depleted it of its potential as imaginative material, in time, as a rule, with its absorption into the homogenizing system of the established national community. There seems always to be a moment when a nascent subculture, whether racial, ethnic, regional, or sexual, is, because of its newness or its bizarre character, a particularly fertile ground for the novel, just as there comes a moment when its materials will have grown familiar to the point of becoming unusable clichés and will lose authority to a more recently emerged subculture possessing newer and as yet unfamiliar materials.

This is a major reason why it is possible to speak of the stages in the growth of the American novel in terms of geographical locale and minority-group interest—and the process has repeatedly involved the conquest, consolidation, and finally the

depletion and abandonment of new territories of social and imaginative experience. Beginning early in the nineteenth century and continuing through the years following World War II we have had the New England novel of Hawthorne and Melville; the novel of the developing Western frontier of James Fenimore Cooper; the more deeply Western novel of Mark Twain; the international and New York novel of James and Wharton; the many works appearing after the turn of this century that dramatized the plight of the Midwestern and Southern adolescent struggling to escape the suffocations of the small town; other works that explored the usually destructive consequences of the adolescent's escape—to New York, Long Island, Paris, and the south of France. Later during the thirties there were the large numbers of novels having to do with the new Depression-created subculture of the economically dispossessed.

After World War II the racial and ethnic novel came into authority as the Anglo-Saxon Midwestern experience ceased to be the typifying experience of most American writers. During that same period the Southern renaissance, initiated by Faulkner, reached maturity in the work of several writers who were among the last to derive their primary materials from geographical locale, materials which in their case were ultimately devalitized as a result of the proliferation of novels composed of self-parodistic Southernesque formulations. Currently, the best of our novelists seem, for reasons later to be discussed, to have turned away from the direct presentation of regional and sub-cultural experience, leaving the field largely to the newer women writers who, now that the homosexuals have had their day, are speaking for what may well be the sole remaining American subculture still capable of providing relatively fresh materials for the novel.

An obsessive hunger for new experience and a disposition to seek it in the actualities of the social world rather than to produce it imaginatively—these have been highly visible characteristics of our writers for as long as we have had a distinctively national literature. But what is perhaps less evident is how often their pursuit of novelty in material is joined with a preoccupation with the pursuit and exploration of novelty as a literary

theme. If in the traditional European novel, characters tend to move in an environment already discovered and subdued by law, class hierarchy, and established custom, experience for Americans is an entity actively sought as destination and quarry, a dynamic and elusive state of both being and perpetual becoming that needs to be tracked down, grappled with, and brought under the control of the will and imagination. By the same token, dramatic conflict in the European novel has classically been generated within the givens of the established culture. Hell is indeed other people and the institutions they have created to force individual needs into harmony with communal interests, whereas the resolution of conflict is most often attained through the achievement of some more or less satisfactory mediation between individual and community. So the European novel again and again comes to rest in serenity and reconciliation, reminding us that salvation may perhaps be found only in an enlightened and usually chastened realignment of personal desire with public necessity.

The American novel tends by contrast to remain in a state of uncompromised adversary motion. Its characters move on or walk out at the end rather than regain admission to the social fold. The thrust of our imagination is resolutely kinetic, and the driving impulse is to seek salvation in escape from community and the confrontation of unknown possibility. It is not surprising that we have come to endow the search for new experience with mystical and sacramental meaning. To leave behind the known and, because known, commonplace reality is to invest in the promise of finding an elsewhere that will provide a second chance for being and consciousness, a regeneration of sensibility in the discovery of the authentic sources of the self. Cooper's intrepid and simple-minded frontiersmen, Melville's sea-going pioneers, Hemingway's seekers after the holy communion of precise language and true emotion, Fitzgerald's oddly ascetic sentimentalists of wealth and glamor—all are fantasy projections of an essentially religious view of experience, a belief in the possibility of some form of beatific transcendence to be achieved through submersion in elemental nature, the exploration of instinctual truth, or the discovery of an earthly paradise of

infinite richness and perfect beauty. It would seem that the experience of the frontier along with its attendant myths founded on such ideas as that the corruptions of civilization can be left behind, that there exist inexhaustible territories of fresh challenge and adventure to be conquered, that the meaningful life is a continuous romantic pilgrimage into the virgin unknown, and that man is most noble as a pilgrim in the wilderness and closest to God when he is closest to nature—these have all obviously done much to program our psychic expectations just as they have helped to form a central thematic preoccupation of our novels.

But there has also been a contrary impulse at work behind the American novelistic imagination, and it may well derive from what remains of the original function of the novel as a form, which was to provide critical and satirical commentary on the excesses of the medieval romance. For even as our novels have expressed, and often seemed to celebrate, our romantic fantasies and aspirations to transcendence, they have also served—as a rule through the indirections of irony, metaphor, and ambiguity—as stern moral monitors of them. If there was a strong mythic and mythologizing dimension to the frontier experience, there was also an even stronger dimension of practical reality, physical hardship, privation, and danger—the inescapable limitations imposed by the environment upon the flights of the pioneer imagination. The conquest of the wilderness may have depended upon the existence of the dream of an earthly paradise, but survival in the wilderness depended upon the development of a hardy and altogether disenchanted pragmatism. Americans, we know, have never been at ease with the schizophrenia thus induced in them, and many of our most important novels have recorded with powerful intensity the anguish and frustration it has caused.

From the first genuinely American fiction of Cooper through the fables of Vonnegut, the pattern has repeatedly been one in which romantic aspiration or a certain idealistic vision of reality is subjected to the test of experience and shown to be empty pretense or illusion, founded on false values or meretricious hopes rather than on premises that take into account the

practical necessities and the frailties of the human condition. The Ur-figures are of course Cooper's Leatherstocking and Melville's Ahab, both of whom are men obsessed with an idea of godliness and personal purity, and who pursue it in the conquest of, or escape into, the sanctity of nature. Leatherstocking is overtaken and finally destroyed by the evils of the civilization he was presumptuous and innocent enough to try to flee, while Ahab presumes beyond the limits of human power and is defeated by a force that is both natural and cosmic. Twain and James were both champions of the natural moral sense, that innate power of knowing right from wrong, which Thomas Jefferson believed to be part of the common property of all mankind. But both writers also knew that such a sense is a fragile weapon for survival in a world in which the universal possession of this sense is, in actual fact, proven again and again to be itself an illusion. In Twain's case it is the adult world into which one day Huck and Tom, like Holden Caulfield, will have to grow up. For James the continuing metaphor is the society of Europe in which Isabel Archer's and Lambert Strether's trusting American ingenuousness is educated into a sullied comprehension of the nature of evil and the necessity for personal responsibility. The emphasis in Fitzgerald is not dissimilar. Gatsby's virginity of heart, oddly augmented by the illegality of his business enterprises, is despoiled by the greater because morally lawless power of the Buchanans' carelessness and cynicism, their better understanding of the expedient ways of the world. In Faulkner a society basing its vision of itself on certain assumptions about a half-mythic, half-actual heritage of honor and nobility is overcome by the barbarous, wholly pragmatic Snopeses and their ilk, even as it is eaten away from within by false pride, blood guilt, and decades of duplicity perpetrated in the name of honor.

The list could be extended, but significantly enough, appropriate examples become scarcer as we approach closer to the present time. While it is true that the twentieth century has been remarkable for the accelerating vengeance with which novelists throughout the world have carried on the process of demythifying experience and eviscerating our illusions, it seems also to be

true that at some point the dialectical balance had radically shifted. For we now suffer from a surfeit of negation and an apparent failure of understanding of just what values have been negated, what were the illusions we once mistook for truth, and what, if any, remain to be exposed. In a time when there is much evidence to indicate that fresh areas of social experience for the novel's exploration have sharply diminished in number, we must also confront the fact that the great demythifying function of the novel seems to have come to an end in a cultural situation in which there seems to be little of importance left to demythify and which has actually been engaged for years in a self-destructive process of demythifying itself. In almost every sector of human experience and endeavor—in politics, education, business, sexuality, marriage, the having and rearing of children—contemporary American society is itself performing the job once performed by our novelists, stripping away layers of idealistic assumption, hypocrisy, illusions of purpose, meaning, integrity, principle, and responsibility and exposing the emptiness or the corruption or the insanity beneath.

This has of course profoundly affected the nature of life in America at this time, hence, inevitably, the nature of the contemporary novel and our response to it. For if we once found pleasure, instruction, even perhaps a form of Aristotelian purgation of the emotions of pity and fear through seeing, in so many novels of the past, our idealistic aspirations subjected to the test of actuality and exposed as mistaken or illusory, we did so in part because aspiration in its conflict with actuality was endowed with virtue, even when affirmed in the face of hopeless odds. The urge for self-transcendence in the struggle to defend some abstract ideal of dignity, moral principle, or social responsibility was revealed as a response to some deep necessity within the human spirit, a hubristic challenge to the power of the gods in which defeat was finally the measure of the significance, even the tragic heroism, of that necessity.

Today, in most of the novels that, for artistic reasons, should be able to make a serious claim upon our attention, we find reflected a complex of conditions and responses of a radically different order. To the extent that they contain any realistic



portrait of present actualities, they tend to dramatize not our hopes, but our feelings of generalized frustration and disappointment, not our need for transcendence, but our paranoid fears that some obscure force, some metaphysical CIA has robbed us of the means and the possibility and is bent on manipulating us in directions and for reasons we cannot understand and that have nothing to do with us personally. In fact, it is a characteristic feature of some of our best and most serious fiction that in it both the ideal and the reality of individual self-discovery and transcendence as central thematic preoccupations have been replaced by a dark fantasy in which prophecy and paranoia join to project a horror of universal conspiracy and mass apocalypse. At the center of that fantasy one discovers once again the classic modernist representation of the human condition: the dislocated self no longer sustained by the social structures and idealistic assumptions of the past, trapped in a demythologized and therefore demoralized present, dying a little more each day as the forces of entropy deepen and accelerate throughout the world. This is not a vision capable of giving us very much further instruction. Its meaning has been canceled by the cliché it has become, and it has lost its former adversary function: it is no longer a heretical corrective of the pieties behind our illusions. But it is, nonetheless, a reflection, however oblique and metaphorical, of a state of mind and condition of life we recognize as common now, even as we also recognize that one of the most frustrating features of our time is precisely that the vision of apocalypse, a relic of another age and so thoroughly devitalized by excessive literary use, should still have such pertinence to us. Yet there can be no question but that the conditions of which that vision was initially the radical expression have become more visible and seemingly more malevolent in our own age. We have, in fact, institutionalized all the famous old disaster syndromes and so assimilated them into our way of life and patterns of thought that disaster has become not only our central pre-occupying experience, but our principal fantasy of salvation. If religions of the past offered promise of some form of transcendental redemption, disaster holds out the possibility of