

AFTER ALIENATION

American Novels in Mid-Century

BY MARCUS KLEIN

Essay Index Reprint Series



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For my mother and father
&
for my ladies

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CONTENTS

I INTRODUCTION	13
II SAUL BELLOW: <i>A Discipline of Nobility</i>	33
III RALPH ELLISON: 1. <i>The Initiate</i> 2. <i>The Invisible Man</i>	71
IV JAMES BALDWIN: <i>A Question of Identity</i>	147
V WRIGHT MORRIS: <i>The American Territory</i>	196
VI BERNARD MALAMUD: <i>The Sadness of Goodness</i>	247
VII AFTERWORD	294
NOTES	297
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	305

Our joy will be in love and restoration, in the sensing of humanity as the concrete thing, the datum of our cultural existence. It will lie in the creation of a new capacity, proof against terror, to experience our natural life to the full. What has once been transcended cannot be repeated; already we live without morality, though hypocrites study the old deceptions. Men will go on to seek the good life in the direction of what is joyous; they know what is terrible. May the knowledge of joy come to them, and the knowledge of terror never leave!

So who is alienated?

ISAAC ROSENFELD, "The Meaning of Terror"

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MARCUS KLEIN

February, 1964



INTRODUCTION

Current history is inevitably blurred by the rush of events, and one has scarcely room or time to see it. For that reason, among others, I have not intended this book about a current literary history to be anything more definite or complete than an introduction to a study.

The time I refer to has not yet come to order, and for that matter it has not come to an end. I discuss a period beginning about 1950 and extending to just this moment, and I regard it as a period because one must set end stops somewhere and because I do not want to be forced in some even more mechanical way at every moment to act the spokesman for a generation, at every other moment to predict and proclaim the future. But of course it is merely a convenience to assume that these few years do or will in themselves constitute an epoch in our literary process. Perhaps because the 1920s and the 1930s were marked off by a series of terminal events which did make a great difference to our literature—the end of a war, the Depression, the beginning of a greater war—for this reason we have got used to having our modern literature in tidy historical packages, and incidentally we have got used to a rule of decimals. Obviously such custom mis-

leads. And indeed it is perfectly clear, because the future is quick and one can see something of it, that this time in our literature, since mid-century, is not epochal nor discrete nor self-enclosed. A kind of literary journalism always listens for the first murmurs of significant revolutions and there are always literary revolutionaries to proclaim new partisanships, but truly there is nothing this year to indicate an imminent *terminus ad quem* or *terminus a quo* to anything. Art, says Joyce Cary's Gulley Jimson, keeps on keeping on. What has been going on recently, anyway, is still going on and defining itself.

Our best and our most serious novelists have in the years since mid-century, I believe, been engaged by an agony different from that which our best and our most serious novelists just before them typically knew, and that is the reason for this book, but our novelists' response is not yet shaped, and the agony itself is still fresh and challenging for everyone. Furthermore, the few novelists whom I study here are each still in mid-career, and summary statements about them will be not only tactless, one hopes for some time to come, but clearly impossible. Except that it can be said that when their response is fully shaped, their careers will be over.

But there is something *new* in the work of these writers, something that seems to have got started just a little more than a decade ago. It is something that everyone seems to have felt—it has been called variously, and in various voices, the new nihilism, poetic naturalism, radical innocence, a new concern for final matters, the rule of personality, the disappearance of manners, the death of dissidence, the end of social engagement, the age of accommodation. The epithets are informative especially, perhaps, as they dramatize an antagonism between the programmatic expectations of critics and the probationary, current discoveries of novelists, but

they also signify that novelists in the last few years have been working within a sentiment that is generally felt to be different. It is only a sentiment or an attitude or a motive, with some consequences in technique. It is something that is not yet a message or a program or even a deliberate theme—and therefore the novel in these years has seemed to disappoint those who prefer clear sermons only tricked out with exempla. It is something that can be felt but that by its nature will not be available to precise definition until it has defined itself, until what is sentiment or mood has become an idea.

An attempt at definition seems to me nevertheless worth some effort. The recognition of the seriousness of serious contemporary fiction is itself always important. What is more important, this contemporary fiction appears to be not only new and therefore subject to clarification, but in as many instances as one could hope it seems to be large, exciting, and peculiarly serious.

To describe the mood in which it has been written, I have in the following pages most often used the word "accommodation," and to describe the historical mood which it replaces I have used the word "alienation." The words themselves want a word of explanation. They are cant terms of contemporary criticism which have become standards in a battle, and therefore there is a certain risk of bombast in them. I have used them because they are available, because better than other terms they do describe what I think is to be seen, and I have used them precisely because they contain a usage and a tradition. They describe now not only historical circumstances, but parties and powers. On the other hand, as is the case with political yelps, they have come to comprehend a vagueness of partisan reference in which all issues may be lost.

As I find an excitement in a literature that I have called

accommodationist, I should not want to be thought to be defending *Marjorie Morningstar* against *Moby Dick*. If the distinction between these novels were one between "accommodation" and "alienation," then the terms would mean on the one hand everything that is slack and factitious and supine and cowardly and merely imitative of seriousness, and on the other everything of extensive awareness and intelligence, everything great and true and courageous. Marjorie in her novel accepted Mamaroneck, as she was doomed to do, in the same way that Sloan Wilson in our years accepted his tailor, and what took place in both instances was an adjustment to social realities which, to be sure, might be called accommodation, but which was really a constriction of awareness amounting to retreat. Melville, on the other hand, was in his time alienated, certainly, but "alienation" wasn't his accomplishment. The word "alienation" means, or should mean, something less than *Moby Dick*. Nor does it refer to that dissident outsideness which is simply the constant and the most conspicuous tradition in American literature.

I use the word alienation as in fact it is used by the critical laity—deriving on the one hand from a usage by Hegel and Marx, on the other from nineteenth-century theology, but come to refer really to a particular time in our history.* I

* Professor Sidney Hook points out that the word alienation actually has little appropriateness as applied to writers. "Hegel understood by self-alienation the process of dialectical development by which the individual consciousness progresses from innocence to maturity. . . . Marx's notion of self-alienation is historically circumscribed and . . . applies primarily to the worker who is compelled to labor at something which neither expresses nor sustains his own needs and interests as a person." See Sidney Hook, in "Our Country and Our Culture: A Symposium," *Partisan Review*, XIX (September-October 1952), 570-71, and "Marx and Alienation," *The New Leader*, XLIV (December 11, 1961), 16-18.

The word has become larger and less exact. Professor Joseph Brennan has recorded a discussion by a lady vice-president of the