Contemporary
American
Literature and
Culture

BEARING THE BAD NEWS

By Sanford Pinsker

University of Iowa Press Iowa City

University of Iowa Press, Iowa City 52242

Printed in the United States of America
First edition, 1990

Printed on acid-free paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pinsker, Sanford.
Bearing the bad news: contemporary American literature and
culture/by Sanford Pinsker.—1st ed.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-87745-292-X (alk. paper)
1. American literature—20th century—History and criticism.
2. Literature and society—United States—History—20th century.
3. United States—Civilization—1970– 4. Social problems in
literature. I. Title.
PS225.P56 1990 90-35570
810.9'005—dc20 CIP

Bearing the Bad News

for Stan Lindberg,

who prodded me to write,

and then to rewrite

Acknowledgments

The following essays have appeared in these publications in a slightly different form: "Philip Rahv's 'Paleface and Redskin' – Fifty Years Later," "*The Catcher in the Rye* and All: Is the Age of Formative Books Over?" "Comedy and Cultural Timing: The Lessons of Robert Benchley and Woody Allen" in the *Georgia Review*; "Lenny Bruce: *Shpritzing* the *Goyim*/Shocking the Jews" in Sarah Blacher Cohen, ed., *Jewish Wry* (1986); "Bashing the Liberals: How the Neoconservatives Make Their Point," "Modernist Culture, the Cunning of History, and Paul de Man," and "Lost Causes/Marginal Hopes: The Collected Elegies of Irving Howe" in *Virginia Quarterly Review*; "Gestures of Indefinite Revolt: College Life through Fictional Prisms" in the *Colorado Review*; "Saul Bellow and the Special Comedy of Urban Life" in *Ontario Review*; and "Revisionist Thought, Academic Power, and the Aging American Intellectual" in the *Gettysburg Review*.

Although this collection focuses on the varieties of bad news that permeate our culture, such essays generally are not written unless one is lucky enough to teach at a place that encourages, and supports, such writing, and where colleagues and students present countless opportunities to test out one's ideas and, more important perhaps, to have those ideas taken seriously. Lest there be any confusion, I am the "one" I have just written about, and an acknowledgments page strikes me as the proper place to announce this "good news."

Preface

To impose an arrangement onto a group of disparate essays is a bit like dragging Flem Snopes, William Faulkner's consummate wheeler-dealer, into court. You can subpoena his testimony – you can even make him act respectable – but as Mrs. Tull discovers, you're not likely to get much real satisfaction. It's much the same thing with journal articles that seek a more permanent place in the library stacks. One wants to believe that they belong between hard covers (indeed, that is the point introductions generally argue), but one also has the sinking feeling that this is precisely the sort of stunt Flem would pull if he were a professor.

Remember, too, that Faulkner's *The Hamlet* ends on a note as funny as it is ominously prophetic. After patiently trying to untangle Flem's complicated, wildly comic affairs, the Judge throws up his hands and admits publicly that he "can't stand it no more! This court's adjourned!" It's a delicious moment, but one destined for a long, and ultimately exasperating, run in American culture. For even as we celebrate Faulkner's updating of an Old Southwestern comic spirit that lies beyond law-and-order's grip, we recognize that the small claims court and civil suit are rapidly becoming for our world what the prison and the graveyard were for Hawthorne's. Public shame presumably mattered when Hester Prynne was paraded before the Salem citizenry sporting her Scarlet A; now one defines America as a land where, at any given moment, half the population is hard at work shamelessly filing a lawsuit against the other half.

I belabor this point because in our litigious times one does what one can to avoid trouble. So, I begin with what poets in the 1960s used to call a "confession," but which now travels under the legalese of "disclaimer." Unlike most solid citizens in the collected essays genre, mine comes into the world of letters waving its title, but not a title essay. Instead, I have used the notion of "bearing the bad

news" as a general statement about what I take to be the curious position of literary criticism today.

Moreover, I have used the term in at least several senses – not only to point out that critics are often called upon to be messengers of bad news, that here a work of art misses the mark or there exceeds it, that the emperor who thinks he's draped in finery is naked or the author who has a fistful of honors is, in truth, overpraised, but also as a way of suggesting that serious literature helps critics to endure, to *bear*, the glitz-and-shlock our popular culture hurls at us.

What concerns me is less that readers will agree with my judgments on specific issues – an unlikely prospect at best – but, rather, that we will once again see this tension between what critics knock and what critics need as a matter of wider cultural import. As things stand now, the safest thing one could say about American culture is that we're going through something of a bad patch. Never has so much been written by so many about so little.

That said, however, let me hasten to add that my sense of the "bad news" is not so much that we have minimalists where once there were giants, or that critical theory is more comfortable talking about texts than about novels, stories, and poems. Rather, what we are stuck with is a condition in search of what T. S. Eliot called an objective correlative. His demonstration that the modern world is a "waste land" was a brilliant stroke; and while I would admit that our age has not been blessed, or cursed, with a similarly insightful tag, I am not yet willing to turn the problem over to Tom Wolfe (who coined the phrase "Me Decade") or to those pundits who raised the ante with what they called the "Brie" Generation.

My hope, of course, is that the essays I've selected will sharpen debate without generating still finer gradations of bad news, although I am aware that "producing" is yet another of the puns that collects around my title. Most of all, though, I hope that my essays do not behave *too* well in the court of public opinion. In some cases, I've straightened their ties, buffed their shoes, or made them spit out their chewing gum, but I think Flem would want me to let 'em rip. After all, many of them celebrate that sense of humor which, as other essays point out, we probably need more now than ever before.

BEARING THE BAD NEWS

Contents

Literary Culture, the Way It Was

The fiftieth anniversary of Philip Rahv's justly famous, enormously influential article "Paleface and Redskin" struck me as an occasion to reflect on the literary scene as Rahv saw it in 1939 as well as on the ways his schema of deeply divided temperaments might be extended, modified, or overturned in our own time.

Looking back – both at the way that a New York intellectual such as Rahv talked about literary culture during the heyday of journals such as the *Kenyon* or *Partisan Review* and at the ways that such discussions are conducted currently – I began to realize that the piece might serve as a general introduction, an overview, if you will – to the concerns I hope to raise in this collection. At issue is not only what we read, but also *how* and *why* we read as we do.

When my piece appeared in the *Georgia Review* I received a letter from a young graduate student who readily granted that American literature "can be read as a reflection of this country's diversity, or can be deconstructed to show that it serves that purpose," but who then went on to voice his reservations about such currently fashionable pursuits: "But if all we are doing to literature is reading it for historical purposes or deconstructing its languages and purposes to achieve marginal meanings, then we are in dire circumstances." Much as I enjoy letters from readers who tell me that I've hit the cultural nail on the head, I'm not sure I agree that our present condition is either as dire or as hopeless as he suggests. Indeed, there are times when I would prefer to argue that we live in what an old Chinese curse calls "interesting times" – fully realizing that one's person's curse is another's opportunity and somebody else's blessing. Nonetheless, I take some measure of comfort in knowing that there may well be a generation of graduate students

out there who have grown disenchanted with efforts to separate literature from life, authors from novels, and culture itself from the life of the mind.

The second article in this section continues this discussion but pins it to my recollections of reading – and later, teaching – J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and what this implies about the larger, more important matter of formative books per se. No doubt certain notes of nostalgia creep in, and perhaps a few notes of sadness as well, because it is hard to imagine a world in which books matter deeply to the young and harder still to think about what might pass as formative reading for a generation reared on "Sesame Street" and MTV.

The question, of course, is not whether a high school student has "gone through" Shakespeare or Milton, Austen or Hardy, but whether these authors have gone through the student. To be sure, others have been much concerned about the shape that required reading ought to take; I worry more about the disappearance of *un*required reading. For if students encounter literature only in the classroom they are not likely to know, much less to bring with them, the excitement and the passion that genuine reading requires.

The following section, then, sets the stage for my assessment of how contemporary American literature and contemporary American culture are inextricably related. "Bearing the bad news" properly begins these considerations.

Philip Rahv's "Paleface and Redskin" – Fifty Years Later

That Philip Rahv's influential essay "Paleface and Redskin" first appeared in the pages of the *Kenyon Review* fifty years ago ought to give us pause – has it been *that* long? – as well as an opportunity for reflection (perhaps even for a symposium of the sort that *Partisan Review* loved to concoct, and that academic institutions then learned how to turn into three-day extravaganzas). But I suspect this is one literary anniversary that will pass without a modicum of fanfare. Where, after all, would one begin? By explaining who Philip Rahv was, and what the old, great days of the *Kenyon* and *Partisan* were like? By making a case for the literary essay when it has fallen on hard times? By reminding those who keep up with the latest theoretical news from France, the latest magical realists from South America, and the latest dissidents from Eastern Europe that the condition and the fate of *American* literature still matter?

Granted, much has changed since Rahv unloaded his thesis about the split personality in our most representative writers. As "Paleface and Redskin" would have it, American literature falls into two neatly packaged, diametrically opposed packages: either the "open-air poems of Walt Whitman" or the "drawing-room fictions of Henry James." Across this Great Divide each camp hurled its disapprovals, be they by way of raspberries and barbaric yawps or in the mannered cadences of a consciousness so finely wrought that life's messiness dared not intrude. It was an essay so eye-catching, so wonderfully schematic, so eminently usable that whole

paragraphs were trotted out – usually unacknowledged – in hundreds of lecture halls and on not a few final examinations. No matter that Rahv took some pains to reckon the assets and liabilities that fastened to each position; no matter that Rahv was more interested in raising questions than he was in providing a quick litmus test for everyone from Anne Bradstreet to Ernest Hemingway. For better or worse, the words "paleface" and "redskin" stuck, and that is a fact of some consequence as one gives the essay a long retrospective look.

Admittedly, even Rahv's detractors would not hold him culpable for the oversimplifications, much less the misreadings, that have clustered around his essay. He set out to see American literature steady and whole, to provide the sort of overview that is conspicuously absent in contemporary treatments of our literature. But it is also true that Rahv's metaphors invite the oversimplifications that have dogged his essay's heels. Even its title – no doubt meant to be attention-grabbing at the time – can only strike us as problematic now. In short, given the essay's importance in the history of American literary criticism, what are we to do about the energies (e.g., of Blacks, women, *real* AmerIndians) and tensions that his schema conveniently leaves out?

Let me approach this problem by suggesting that there are rough parallels between Rahv's purpose and the combination of manifesto and prophecy that energized Emerson's 1844 essay "The Poet." In both cases, what mattered centrally was less the literature that preceded their respective moments than the cultural atmosphere they hoped to call into being. At its best, of course, literary criticism is a combination of assessment and injunction, but it is also true that the most memorable and significant literary essays find a way to fold the former into the pressing concerns of the latter. That is precisely the case in Emerson's essay, a piece that sets out to define *the* poet, the representative man who "stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth." One hardly need belabor the case that Emerson had himself in mind – indeed, that everything in his public discourse from *Nature* (1836) onward argues for the poet as self-

creating and self-justifying, as the perfect embodiment of what Quentin Anderson identifies as the Imperial Self:

> The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. He is a sovereign, and stands on the centre. For the world is not painted, or adorned, but is from the beginning beautiful; and God has not made some beautiful things, but Beauty is the creator of the universe. Therefore the poet is not any permissive potentate, but is emperor in his own right.

That scholars and creative writers have subsequently appropriated the essay either to justify work already done (e.g., Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition") or to clarify the direction of their own work-in-progress is hardly surprising. For Emerson, the name of the American bard he imagined may have been Adam, patron saint of namers, but his *secret* name – his pseudonym, if you will – was Waldo. *He* is the one who would "announce that which no man foretold," *he* who would become "an utterer of the necessary and the casual."

But as Emerson discovered a decade later, the poet he described so lovingly by looking into his own transcendental heart turned out to be another sort altogether: "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son." In this sense, Rahv had better luck because he argued neither as poet nor as fictionist, neither as paleface nor as redskin. Instead, he wrote as one who believed that we read American literature to better read ourselves as Americans, and it is this spirit – rather than his specific observations about, say, Whitman or James – that gives his essay a contemporary significance. Moreover, the same Rahv who described the fundamental tension of American literature as pitting paleface against redskin also worried about its limitations. By 1939, Rahv was convinced that the battle was largely over, and that the redskins had won. They controlled the "main highway of literature" (i.e., the novel) and – in words that sounded for all the world like echoes of D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923) – Rahv set about to ponder how much of this victory deserved the adjective "Pyrrhic":

> The redskin writer in America is a purely indigenous phenomenon, the true-blue offspring of the Western Hemisphere. . . . He is a self-made writer in the same way that Henry Ford was a self-made millionaire. On the one hand he is a crass materialist, a greedy consumer of experience, and on the other a sentimentalist, a half-baked mystic, listening to inward voices and watching for signs and portents.

A year later – this time in the pages of *Partisan Review* – Rahv waxed more explicit about American literature's missing ingredient:

> The intellectual is the only character missing in the American novel. He may appear in it in his professional capacity – as artist, teacher, or scientist – but very rarely as a person who thinks with his entire being, that is to say, as a person who transforms ideas into actual dramatic motives instead of merely using them as ideological conventions or as theories so externally applied that they can be dispensed with at will. Everything is contained in the American novel except ideas.

What Rahv points toward would become, in the decades that followed, the most significant contribution of immigrant Jewish writers to American literature – namely, a European texture of ideas, of history, of experience itself. As Irving Howe put it in a 1975 unpublished lecture entitled "The East European Jews and American Culture": "What then, we may now ask, did the Jews contribute to American culture? The simplest but fundamental answer is: *they contributed Europe, they brought the old world back to a country which had fled from it.*" To be sure, Howe has in mind a rich tapestry of names and cultural phenomena: Abraham Cahan, Abraham Reisen, Henry Roth, the *Di Junge* poets, Jewish Socialists, the Yiddish theater – indeed, the whole teeming *World of Our Fathers* (1976) his encyclopedic study so meticulously explores. But at the time Rahv was arguing for a novel energized by ideas rather than by the "cult of experience," the landscape of American literature was dominated by Theodore Dreiser, Thomas Wolfe, Erskine Caldwell, Sinclair Lewis, John Steinbeck, John Dos Passos, F. Scott

Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, and (perhaps most of all) Ernest Hemingway.

When Saul Bellow's first short story, "Two Morning Monologues," appeared in *Partisan Review* (1941), it had little if any impact on those writers fully credentialed as members of the "cult of experience." But by the time Bellow published his first novel – *Dangling Man* (1944) – there was little doubt about who had thrown a gauntlet to whom:

> There was a time [the novel begins] when people were in the habit of addressing themselves frequently and felt no shame at making a record of their inward transactions. But to keep a journal nowadays is considered a kind of self-indulgence, a weakness, and in poor taste. For this is an era of hardboiled-dom. . . . Do you have feelings? There are correct and incorrect ways of indicating them. Do you have an inner life? It is nobody's business but your own. Do you have emotions? Strangle them. To a degree, everyone obeys this code. . . . [As a result] most serious matters are closed to the hard-boiled. They are unpracticed in introspection, and therefore badly equipped to deal with opponents whom they cannot shoot like big game or outdo in daring.

Joseph, the brooding protagonist of *Dangling Man*, has more in common with, say, Dostoyevsky's Underground Man than he does with those in the Hemingway school, whether their name be Natty Bumppo or Nick Adams. In short, Bellow has never been especially shy about demonstrating his kinship either to the Russian novel or to the place of "ideas" in fiction. The trouble with most American writers, he once said in an interview, was that they "imagined they were populists – that is, writing about the people":

> Now most American populist writers of the James T. Farrell or John Steinbeck sort don't bother with ideas very much. Their characters don't have them. If there are ideas, they belong to the whole class of people they are writing about. The individuals themselves can be rather unremarkable, if not down-

> right dumb. Now it seemed to me that we had gone as far in America as stupidity would get us. We are living in a very sophisticated society – on the technological side, extremely sophisticated – surrounded by all sorts of curious inventions, and writers still insisted on sitting on the curb playing poker and talking about whores. It seemed to me to be a little artificial. You know, out of loyalty to the people, to cling to your original dumbness. Since it *was* extremely artificial, it was time, I thought, to give it up. I'm not trying to develop a literature for intellectuals. It's just that I'm not afraid of ideas, and when I have to deal with them, I do.

As Bellow's career developed, his brainy protagonists became commonplace, as did the stump speeches they delivered on everything from the decline of the West to long-winded recitations on what women want. One thinks, for example, of Moses Herzog, of Artur Sammler, of Charlie Citrine, of Dean Albert Corde, of Kenneth Trachtenberg – explainers all. Here was the answer to Rahv's plea for the intellectual-as-character with a vengeance, the dream of "Paleface and Redskin" turned into a public success story.

To be sure, Bellow keeps his eggheads on a short comic leash. As Kenneth Trachtenberg, the chief explainer of *More Die of Heartbreak* (1987), puts it:

> If you venture to think in America, you also feel an obligation to provide a historical sketch to go with it, to authenticate or legitimize your thoughts. So it's one moment of flashing insight and then a quarter of an hour of pedantry and tiresome elaboration – academic gabble. Locke to Freud with stops at local stations like Bentham and Kierkegaard. One has to feel sorry for people in such an explanatory bind. Or else (a better alternative) one can develop an eye for the comical side of this.

Indeed, Bellow's richest fictions make it their business to explore "the comical side" of dreamy intellectuals with lives in great disorder. Thus, urban comedians like Moses Herzog or Charlie Citrine are better architects of moral vision than they are accountants of hard fact. Bellow leaves it to others, drawn from a mélange of