

TRADITION OR INNOVATION IN THE «NEW» AMERICAN NOVEL: 1960-1990*

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The American novelists who emerge to their artistic consciousness after the political and social fracture produced by World War II, and who will reach their creative maturity in the 1960's and 1970's, are influenced in their view of the universe and of their own trade by a number of external and internal facts which may be useful to try to enumerate in order to put them into an appropriate context, and identify, at the same time, a possible starting point for their study. Obviously, it is not the intention of such an exercise to turn artistic creation into an unavoidable and mechanical consequence of objective or subjective realities, which would turn it into a

* The original idea to attempt the study of some aspects of the contemporary novel in the United States as contained here, was suggested to me years ago by a dear and remembered friend, Enrique García Díez. He asked me to participate in one of the sessions of study which he organised here periodically and hinted at this subject which had been the matter of many of our conversations.

Some of these ideas, therefore, were included in the proceedings of one such meeting and the paper was published in Enrique García Díez, editor, *American Studies in Spain*, Valencia, Universitat de València-Tirant lo Blanc Llibres, 1988. The text here presented has suffered, though, so many changes, including extension, as to make this a new piece: after all this is still an open and unfinished work.

I wish to renew here the expression of my gratitude to and my affection for a colleague and a friend, widely remembered and missed by many who devote our efforts to the study of American culture.

deterministic attempt that would be both short-sighted and unfair. Nevertheless, those facts can be deemed meaningful enough as to find it worth our while to review them even though it be briefly and of necessity, superficially. Just as, for example, it is necessary or at least extremely useful, to take a good look at the social, economic, and political transformations occurring in the English eighteenth century, in order to understand the birth of the novel at the time, and its development from Fielding and Richardson to the surprisingly «modern» title, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* by Laurence Sterne, which will seem to take this new genre («new», at least, as it concerns the realm of English culture) to its last consequences. Of course, this would be just an example among so many similar cases that can be brought to mind to illustrate this fact in the course of history.

First of all, from a strictly literary point of view, some of the young authors of the 50's and 60's feel what simplistically articulated could be defined as an inferiority complex when faced with the weight of the achievements of the great masters of the period between the wars, the modernist writers such as Faulkner, Hemingway, Dos Passos or Fitzgerald, to mention just a few of the most relevant ones. Through an analysis based on a somewhat superficial approach, as has just been said, they come to the conclusion that the above novelists have exhausted the genre, have left nothing new to add to what has already been done; in short, have brought the novel to exhaustion. Accordingly, they think they must look for new forms.

Along this line, they will announce once again the death of the novel, repeating something proclaimed almost fifty years earlier in other cultural spheres. In his 1967 essay, «The Literature of Exhaustion,»¹ John Barth, although not the only one to voice this feeling, will do it in the most precise and unmistakable way. Some fifteen years later Barth himself will recognise the simplification of his assertion, and will qualify his pessimistic forecasts when faced with the fact of a genre that is not only not exhausted, but more lively and thriving than ever. On a later essay, «The Literature of Replenishment,» he will admit that if there is anything that is exhausted, it is not the genre but the aesthetics of modernism.²

Anyhow the controversy is there: if the novel is dead, then a new name must be found to define what these new writers are doing. Barth speaks of «irrealism,» others of «superfiction,» «surfiction» or «metafiction.» A well known historian and critic, specially devoted to the novel of the South, will express his ironic remarks on this matter in an essay entitled «The Curious Death of the Novel: or What to Do about Tired Literary Critics.» His fable, as he calls it, tells about a time past when there was a group of writers known as modern novelists, who wrote books known as modern novels. And then along came other writers called critics who said to themselves: now we know what the modern novel is. As time went by, other writers came in turn, young beginners who thought their books were modern novels, but who were told by

1. John Barth, «The Literature of Exhaustion,» *Atlantic Monthly*, 220 (August, 1967), pp. 29-34. Included in Raymond Federman, ed., *Surfiction: Fiction Now and Tomorrow*, Chicago, The Swallow Press, 1975, pp. 19-33. I quote from this last volume.

2. John Barth, «The Literature of Replenishment,» *Atlantic Monthly*, 245 (January, 1980), pp. 65-71.

the critics that the modern novel was what the modern novelists had written, and what they were writing now didn't look at all as the real thing. Quite puzzled they asked how their creations should be called, since those modern novelists had all died. And thus replied the critics: the modern novelists are indeed dead and, therefore, the modern novel is dead, so we do no longer read what is being written at present; accordingly, we do not know what that is to be called. And he concludes with this morale: «Nothing is quite so dead as a dead definition, unless it is a dead critic.»³

In spite of this starting point with which he qualifies his critical stand, he does admit that the difficulty I mentioned above is real. So, when studying some new writers of the South, he calls his essay «The Difficulties of Being a Southern Writer Today: or, Getting Out from Under William Faulkner»⁴: «getting out from under» is according to him, the key sentence to the young novelists of the South in their effort to solve their creative bewilderment.

Simultaneously, as a reinforcement of the experimental impulses wherein the writers of this trend (those called, in a rather imprecise manner, «post-modernists»)⁵ look for originality, some of them become aware of the new notions about the universe that the recent scientific and technological discoveries suggest. After Einstein's relativity theories other formulations emerge that the scientific world regards as well as revolutionary: the formulation of the principles of quantic mechanics (with its notion of entropy so intensely assumed by Thomas Pynchon), the dizzying development of atomic physics, McKenzie's theory of chaos or one of its by-products, Benoit Mandelbrot's fractal geometry, deeply upset or alter the vision of the world, and of man's place on it (is not *Gravity's Rainbow*, after all, an attempt to discover the nature of individual identity within this new concept of environment?)⁶

Such influences of the sciences on the process of artistic reflection have not yet ceased, as is clearly illustrated by some recent novelists, and have even become part of popular literature: witness to that are, among other novels, Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park*, and Tom Clancy's *The Sum of All Fears*, both of 1991, although in these texts the appropriation of the above concepts is undoubtedly carried out in a less subtle way, as if superimposed on the story.⁷

3. Louis D. Rubin, jr., *The Curious Death of the Novel*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1967, pp. 3 and 4. The emphasis is Rubin's.

4. *Ibidem*, pp. 282-293.

5. For a description of the term «post-modernism» and an attempt to find a useful definition, see María Eugenia Díaz, «La novela post-modernista norteamericana: una aproximación general.» *Atlantis*, IX, (1987), pp. 83-93, especially 83 and 84.

6. These facts, here merely suggested, can be more thoroughly explored in the following works: for Pynchon and his *Gravity's Rainbow*, Paul Scott Derrick, *Thinking for a Change: Gravity's Rainbow and Symptoms of the Paradigm Shift in Occidental Culture*, Universitat de València, Anejo nº VIII of *Cuadernos de Filología*, València 1994. For a perusal of the application of science to literature, there are two quite useful books, both edited by Francisco Collado Rodríguez, *Del mito a la ciencia: la novela norteamericana contemporánea*, Universidad de Zaragoza, 1990, and *Science, Literature and Interpretation: Essays in Twentieth Century Literature and Critical Theory*, Universidad de Zaragoza, 1991.

7. Michael Crichton, *Jurassic Park* (1991), London, Cresset Editions, 1993 and Tom Clancy, *The Sum of All Fears*, New York, Putnam, 1991.

In the 1950's the global risks represented by the Cold War became apparent together with the threat of nuclear holocaust. The conflicts and tensions unwinding in the field of international politics and the clash between the two great powers will clearly show their reflection on their own respective environments, as shown by the diverse attempts to impose ideological and moral uniformity and conformity through authoritarianism, and the persecution and repression of the «different.»

The most notorious agent of those repressions, albeit not the only one, was possibly represented by the work of the «House Un-American Activities Committee,» whose most conspicuous endeavors, carried out within the Hollywood motion picture industry, reached their peak in 1947, as is well known, with the notoriously infamous «black listings» of dozens of artists and technicians in that field of creativity. This would be followed, in the early 1950's, by the investigations in wider areas of the country's life of a Senate committee, the so-called «Government Operations Committee.» Its Chairman between 1952 and 1954, the Senator for Wisconsin Joseph McCarthy, brought it to extremes that outraged public opinion and the very institutions he belonged to. His actions were mainly aimed against numerous officials of the State Department and the Department of the Army wherein, according to him, without proof and irrelevantly as well (although to many it didn't seem so in the chronological and geographical context), hundreds of members of the Communist Party had infiltrated those institutions. The strong reproof of these methods first by President Eisenhower, and then by the very Senate, finally did away with the prestige and the power of this senator, who lost his credibility in his violent and destructive crusade against communism.

All these facts will shade and modify the artistic and intellectual activity of other creators in the many fields of the human intellect, as is to be relevantly appraised from the metaphorical denunciations in the works, maybe ephemeral but undoubtedly significant, of the so-called «beat» writers of the Pacific coast, who will assert their very right to be «different», and their subsequent rebelliousness in the way of life they adopted.

Meanwhile, motivated by causes more exclusively belonging to the social and political context of the United States, the ensuing upheaval will reach so deeply into its texture that it becomes difficult to make even a summary: the civil rights movements, and the attempts to really guarantee the basic human rights of the American blacks or other minority ethnical and cultural groups; the opposition to the Vietnam War as a question of principle, and a matter of justice and freedom; the lively and fertile activity of women in various fields of experience; the exploration of space and its scientific and technological consequences, together with the spectacular and dizzying progress of the computer sciences and the new concept of cyberspace; and next to these huge areas we find a number of smaller events, maybe of a lesser scope, but with an undeniable impact on the collective mind and sensitivity: the political assassinations in the 1960's, the mass suicides, and so on. Each and every one of these events will cause or suggest new literary expressions or the recovery of traditional ones, if with their own particular differences.

Among all these factors there are some of them that specially stimulate the artistic imagination: the literature by the so-called ethnical minorities arises with

unexpected strength, taking those worlds and those cultures out of the ghettos into which they had been pushed until World War II by the prevailing WASP environment. That is what happens with the novel of the Jewish-American and African-American communities. Later on we can begin taking into account the literature written by the native American Indians, more scarce at the beginning, and by the people coming from the migrations from the Southern or the Pacific borders (Chicano, Asian-American, etc.). Another corpus of literature that is likewise going to grow in personality and intensity, in an overwhelming development as has already been suggested, is that of women writers belonging to all layers of the social and ethnical American panorama and that we could call, in accordance with Elaine Showalter's terminology, «female» literature or perhaps post-feminist literature.⁸

The vehicles of expression that all these imaginative worlds used to realize themselves implied the creation of new narrative methods and styles, or the recovery of modified traditional ones: the attempts to devise new techniques with which to replace the interior monologue as the instrument through which to examine the stream of consciousness of the characters; the sometimes almost revolutionary updating of sub-genres such as the historical novel; or the emerging of another genre that intends to be, and looks like, something new, the so-called «non-fiction novel,» that is still giving spectacular fruits in the unmeasurable work achieved by Norman Mailer, the most important among many others that could be recalled here.

These are literary realities that the facts just mentioned or suggested can help clarify and make better understood. The deep turmoil in the contemporary North American novel, of amazing artistic and intellectual richness, and technical and thematic variety, could thus start being put into context, and would thus face one of the constant features in the history of literature in this country (although admittedly, it is not something unique to this national literature): a very deep and immediate interconnection of art with the historical and social contemporary context. This can be observed from its first utterings in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to become consolidated on a permanent basis in the nineteenth century. Parallel to this fact we need to underline a significant characteristic of a very positive nature: the intense and penetrating critical sense with which very often the American novelist or intellectual observes and analyzes his own national reality. The steely criticisms that the anti-American feeling which spreads throughout many European and non-European countries after World War II will produce due to political, economic, or ideological reasons, are nothing if compared to those which the North American intelligentsia and

8. Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1977. The author shows the progress of women's emancipation in letters, through three different stages: the first one, which she calls «feminine,» adopts the male cultural pattern, and among its characteristics we have the use of male pseudonyms, as in George Eliot's case. The second one, «feminist,» a stage of protest that develops simultaneously with the militant suffragette's movement, occasionally leading to pamphlet. And finally the third one, «female,» whose authors reject both imitation and protest, and create an autonomous writing rooted in the experience of women.

its artists themselves are going to express in a systematic manner to point out the vices and follies of their institutions, or to condemn specific actions taken by those institutions, which in the most extreme cases will reach true ruthlessness.

But the origin of all these contemporary movements must indeed be searched for in the great masters writing in the years between both world wars in the twentieth century.

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One of the means History uses to set its different stages, to fix its limits and officialize or almost verbalize the great changes thus implied, has been to drop onto the peoples huge destructing cataclysms which, in modern times, have been mostly wars. The fact comes to mind quickly that conventionally the real start of the twentieth century has been fixed after one of those disasters, after World War I: this cataclysm will cause a dramatic change in the prevailing intellectual and artistic situation. The modernist writers are going to acutely feel it, and their work is to a certain extent the result of their grief and anger when faced with their perception of the resulting chaos, especially plain in John Dos Passos' novels and Eliot's and Pound's poetry.

Just two decades afterwards the world will be witness to a new fracture, at least as intense and tragic as the previous one, caused by World War II. This conflict will cut in two the reality of our society and, putting an end to the previous world, it will give way to the one we have lived in until this decade. True enough, this world has not remained static, but although subject to important changes and modifications, these have been gradual and have not entirely transformed its personality.

Finally, this time segment has reached its high point with the fall of the Berlin wall and the subsequent dismemberment of the Soviet Empire, that seemed to mark the end of the «Cold War» and the beginning of a new stage. This stage, the so-called «New World Order,» in an unfortunate expression that sounds to the independent mind as an unconscious sarcasm, or at least an ironic counterpoint to reality as we see it, will make itself perceptible in all its effects, political, social, cultural, and artistic, only in the next few decades, although right now we can already identify some signals that hint to its future characteristics.⁹

Restricting our attention to the U.S. reality, the above considerations still apply. If we concentrate our focus on that part of reality that is the subject of literature while

9. One of those hints, however superficial and irrelevant, can be found in the transformation undergone by the international thriller or the literature of spies, where the «good guys» and the «bad guys» are no longer Americans and Russians respectively. The most recent novels reflect it on their search for new villains whom the hero must fight. Thus, the more than 300 hundred page long joke devised by John Le Carré, in *The Tailor of Panama* (1996); or the novels by Robert Ludlum, Frederick Forsyth, and Tom Clancy (his most recent one, *Rainbow Six*, 1998, taking the threat to humankind within his own United States, to apocalyptic extremes) and all published after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

being, at the same time, its essence, it can be likewise observed that those cracks or fractures are as operative here as in wider historical or social perspectives. In quite a superficial and simplified way (which can nevertheless reach any level of depth required when informed by the proper clarifications) the reason is that, as usual, literature finds itself conditioned in whatever measure, by the external reality of its creators, among other facts that shape and define it. This is reflected in various ways by the great masters of Modernism.

Briefly looking at the work of the writers of the first part of the twentieth century we will find that their great topics, peculiar and different though their treatment of them may be, are but a list of some of the great constant themes in the history of literature, explored from several points of view, from different critical stands, shaping a wide panoramic view of human experience, deep and rich in its extent even if not absolutely comprehensive.

Some of those themes are: Innocence versus Experience, analyzed by William Faulkner in a number of works. Among them we can highlight *Go Down, Moses*, where Ike McCaslin is described as if having been born old, «became steadily younger and younger until, past seventy himself and at least that many years nearer eighty than he ever admitted anymore, he had acquired something of a young boy's high and selfless innocence.»¹⁰ This is an image of the myth of the youth and innocence of the nation and its population that D.H. Lawrence already applied to James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo, almost literally making his a more general formulation voiced in theoretical terms by Emerson in his essay «Nature.»¹¹

The myth of Eden and Utopia, possibly the first ever to take shape in the American mind, since it is based on the wishful hopes of the Pilgrim Fathers that travelled aboard the Mayflower in 1620, analyzed in Faulkner's as well as in F. Scott Fitzgerald's work. The role of the Self and its place within the Family or social environment that they probe into from the character's most intense subjectivity, in their paradoxical search to attain the greatest objectivity that can be achieved, through the various ways they will create or upgrade. It must be stressed here one of the technical devices used in works of this nature: the development of the interior monologue technique that allows Faulkner (in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*, for instance), and Dos Passos (particularly in the «Camera Eye» sections, in *U.S.A.*) and others to examine their characters' stream of consciousness.

Nature and its presence in History, bound to be destroyed in the name of a self-proclaimed ideal of progress, with Faulkner as a representative figure but attracting as

10. William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*, New York, Random House, 1942, p. 106.

11. D. H. Lawrence: the novels of the «Leatherstocking» series are in some way the creations which first give voice to that myth, and they embody it in Natty Bumppo and other characters, who «go backwards, from old age to golden youth. That is the true myth of America. She starts old, old, wrinkled and writhing in an old skin. And there is a gradual sloughing of the old skin, towards a new youth. It is the myth of America» (*Studies in Classic American Literature*, New York, Viking, 1961, p. 54). And let us listen to Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his essay «Nature»: «In the woods too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life, is always a child. In the woods is perpetual youth» (*Essays and Lectures*, New York, The Library of America, 1983, p. 10).

well the attention in some key texts of Hemingway's and Dos Passos'. The independent Individual versus the Institution's authoritarianism, which the former tries to separate from and reject when he finds it unfair and crippling, Dos Passos and Hemingway once again being prominent examples. Injustice and Oppression, be they political, social, racial, or even religious in nature, represented above all by Faulkner and Steinbeck. Lack of communication and the resulting loneliness, against the need to share one's experience and feelings: main worry of the precursor and somehow master of the modernist writers, Sherwood Anderson, which manifests itself as well in Hemingway and Scott Fitzgerald.

Lastly, though the above does not exhaust the catalogue of topics and techniques cultivated by these authors, the realization of the fragility of the «American Dream» myth, which they will explore from acutely critical standpoints to come to the conclusion that this «dream» is more often a «nightmare,» as reflected in some of the works by Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, and Steinbeck. I consider these suggestions as eloquent enough to illustrate the point without the need to go into more detail, which would lengthen this paper unnecessarily.

The important work (or the important part of the work) of most of these authors will be done in the two decades between the wars. There are two kinds of exceptions: on the one side Fitzgerald, among the youngest, will see his work definitely cut short by death in 1940. The same happens with Nathanael West, an author not mentioned before but an incisive critic of men's follies and stupidities, whose work has fallen into somewhat unfair oblivion. Among those who will go on with their creative activity after World War II, in my opinion only a few reach any significant achievements within their whole artistic production. Probably Faulkner's case is the most valuable one, with the last two parts of his trilogy about the Snopes family, *The Town* and *The Mansion*, in 1957 and 1960 respectively, among other works of this period: *Intruder in the Dust*, 1948; *Knight's Gambit*, 1949; *Requiem for a Nun*, 1951; and *The Reivers*, 1962. These works make up an imaginative corpus that would be enough on its own to keep Faulkner in the place that he in all fairness has achieved in the canon most widely accepted by critics and readers.

The techniques and forms sway in a rich catalogue of options ranging from traditional realism to its most age-specific variations, overlapping sometimes within a work or an author: from the preservation of subtle naturalistic references, such as in Anderson and Faulkner, to the reaching of a symbolic realism in some works by Dos Passos and Hemingway on occasion, the latter incorporating it to his form of «romance» parodically used. The development of the interior monologue already mentioned with special regard to part of Faulkner's work and also perhaps in a lesser degree, of Dos Passos' work. The fictional biography, the more inwardly explored the better, used sometimes by Fitzgerald with a treatment that sublimates its autobiographical resources; and also practiced, with deep poetic touches, by John Dos Passos, who adds to it as well some autobiographical elements of metaphorical value, fruit of his personal aestheticism, thus achieving the universalization of experiences that would otherwise be kept to the realm of the merely anecdotal. And finally, the occasional appearance of expressionism should not be forgotten, although this will be cultivated more intensely in the drama: obviously in some plays by Eugene O'Neill,

including some part of his work extending beyond World War II; and also in Arthur Miller and his *Death of a Salesman*. But it too will flicker every once in a while in prose fiction, as it is shown in individual passages of, for instance, Dos Passos and, maybe more often, in Nathanael West.

As far as the premise or basic metaphor used by many of these authors as the starting point of their conception of the world and of mankind is concerned, we could point out that stated by the somehow precursor and for many a young creator, undeniable master, Sherwood Anderson, when asserting in *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) that «everyone in the world is Christ and they are all crucified.»¹² Thus the essence of the human condition is seen from a certain, almost fixed and constant perspective: man as a victim of pain, injustice and suffering, who is nonetheless able to lift himself above his misfortunes in order to state the triumph of his personal dignity and authenticity.

This attitude can be found in the excellent «political» works (in the best sense of the adjective) by John Dos Passos, *Three Soldiers* (1921) or the monumental *U.S.A.* (1930: *42nd Parallel*; 1932: *1919*; 1936: *The Big Money*). Or in the parodic, desolate and bitter «romances» created by Hemingway, in his obsession for encountering one's own self that will bring man personal, inner peace. It is a search that will lead him, as early as 1927 in his novel *The Sun also Rises*, to find out that this search needs to be an inner search if it is to be anything at all: «going to another country doesn't make any difference. . . . You can't get away from yourself by moving from one place to another.»¹³ This is the expression of a pervading mood in which other kinds of literature, the so called «low-brow», also participate. In the detective novel, *Recoil* (1953), by Jim Thompson, when the protagonist is offered a deal by the criminal (to not give him up to the police) promising him a fortune so that he can get away to start a new and comfortable life, the answer is as rotund as it is conclusive: «'I don't think so,' I said. 'A man can't get away from himself.'»¹⁴

This is an attitude shared by the poet from Saint Louis, by the Mississippi River, T. S. Eliot, who will express it with identical precision when referring to the interior forces that operate in another young traveller, Huckleberry Finn. When the teen-ager, born and grown up by this very «old man river,» remarks that his last resource is «to light out for the territory,»¹⁵ Eliot advises him not to foster too many hopes because, in the end, «The river is within us.»¹⁶

12. Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, New York, Penguin («The Viking Critical Library»), 1966, p. 57.

13. Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun also Rises*, New York, Scribner's, 1954, p. 11.

14. Jim Thompson, *Recoil*, Berkeley, Creative Arts, 1985, p. 173.

15. Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, New York and Evanston, Harper and Row, 1931, p. 405.

16. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, London, Faber and Faber, 1963, p. 36. It might be added here, by the way, that Hemingway's well known statement of 1935, in the sense that «All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*,» is shaded by a sharp warning about the true ending of the novel: «you must stop where the Nigger Jim is stolen from the boys. That is the real end. The rest is cheating.» *Green Hills of Africa*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, p. 26). This qualification may have been one of the reasons that gave rise in the 1950's to the long critical controversy about Twain's book ending. Leo Marx, for instance, believes that the burlesque ending betrays its intended seriousness and transcendence; on the contrary, Eliot and Trilling defend the ending as it is. This controversy carried on over the 60's and 70's and even later.

At any rate, it would be a good idea to add that the conviction expressed by Hemingway and Eliot, among others, carries with it a call for solidarity that can be identified in some of these works. Indeed, Hemingway will conclude a number of years after his *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) that man starts to verify the uncertain glory of his own destiny within his own environment. But his characters can only realize this, which probably makes up the essence of their tragic fate, through their personal failure, when it is too late for them. If Frederick Henry's «separate peace» can be understood as an attempt to find himself through his apparently selfish refusal to be a part of an institution and a cause which he abhors, this stand is however based on a deeper and higher belief, perhaps even superimposed by the novelist on his character's nature, related to the individual's dignity. That is the explanation to his ambiguous new-born awareness: the perception of the injustice and irrationality of both the institution and the cause he has served, however reluctantly and hesitatingly. Therefore, he now leaves them behind it even if there are some personal factors bearing on his decision which de-ideologize his behavior to a certain extent.

In the second stage of his work I was referring to, the novelist will deepen and correct his original reflection to endow it with enriching nuances, adding to it the call for solidarity I just mentioned. This is what happens in Harry Morgan's case. When he gets to the point of no return, and is about to die as a consequence of his personal aloofness or even insolidarity, he will realize that «a man alone ain't got no bloody fucking chance.»¹⁷ A pronouncement almost literally stated in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, when Tom, addressing his mother, concludes: «But I know now a fella ain't no good alone.»¹⁸ Whereas the passage by John Donne that Hemingway used as an epigraph for his 1940 novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* formulates the same idea as strongly and expressively, although in a more delicate way: «No man is an Island, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine; . . . any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee.»¹⁹ In this way, Harry Morgan's tragic defeat, far from turning into a nihilistic and hopeless denial, becomes the element that lifts him above his misery and redeems him by making him the mouth-piece of Hemingway's, and his own, undeniable bequest of solidarity and hope.

This deep and bitter, though hopeful, awareness of the reality of the synonymical concepts «human being» - «suffering being,» is present in the best of Faulkner's work, even if the means he employs to voice it and give it artistic shape can vary. His personal microcosm, the Yoknapatawpha County, is a powerful image reflecting an extremely personal view of the world and of man's struggles in it. In this microcosm Faulkner gauges the weight of history as a defining agent of the present, as

17. Ernest Hemingway, *To Have and Have Not*, New York, Scribner's, 1970, p. 225.

18. John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, New York, Penguin Books («The Viking Critical Library»), 1985, p. 570. This passage was pointed out to me by my brother, Juan José Coy, professor of American Literature at the University of Salamanca. Thanks.

19. John Donne, «Meditation XVII,» *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, edited, with an «Introduction,» by Charles M. Coffin, New York, Modern Library, 1952, p. 441.

its shaping influence and cause, regarding both man and nature. And from the interaction of those two, such as he will splendidly show in his several times already quoted *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner succeeds completely in suggesting the power of innocence and at the same time its innate fragility, the injustice of man toward man, the relationship between the individual and the family, the clan, and that of the family with nature, at once enriching and constraining. And from the solution of all these conflicts there will emerge hope: that man, despite the weaknesses that sometimes will bring him to betray his strongest beliefs, those he has fought for all his life, will find in his unyielding spirit not only the power «[to] endure,» but even «[to] prevail.» This belief is of the utmost significance in Faulkner's thought, as it is to be inferred from his using it in his brief address of acceptance of the Nobel Prize in 1950, after having given voice to it in a metaphoric way in so many of his works.²⁰

In this last author as well as in the other mentioned novelists, in the midst of this «waste land» of Eliot's early thought, or in the «valley of ashes» of F. Scott Fitzgerald's greatest work, with their denunciation of the fallacy to which the myth of the «American dream» actually gets reduced, in this landscape of ruins and desolation, there rises the surviving spirit that conveys their ultimate and unmoved faith in man's essential dignity and incorruptible capacity of regeneration.

Lastly, another element thoroughly explored is language. All of these writers will manifest their deep concern with words. Here they are following in the footsteps first taken by Mark Twain in the use, revolutionary for his time, of the vernacular, dialectal and colloquial language, and developed and increased in some daring ways by Stephen Crane. Crane, in fact, is one more American writer among those which Hemingway considers the great ones, together with Henry James and the already mentioned Twain, while specifying that «That's not the order they're good in. There is no order for good writers.»²¹ And the freedom in the use of language all of them demonstrate bears witness to that assertion: one needs only to remember Harry Morgan's above statement, which was really a shocking expression for the times.

Many poets have repeatedly voiced this concern to use a language as free as possible of «moral» restrictions, as in e. e. cummings, or of purely ornamental accretions, among them William Carlos Williams, Archibald McLeish, and perhaps particularly Ezra Pound in his essays and poems: «Use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something,» will be one of his warnings when addressing the apprentice poet.²² Even the romantic poets themselves, so scorned by Eliot, proclaimed a similar attitude when stating that they wrote «with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure.»²³ A number of years later,

20. William Faulkner, «Address upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature,» Malcolm Cowley, editor, *The Portable Faulkner*, New York, Viking, 1974, p. 724.

21. Ernest Hemingway, *Green Hills of Africa*, ed. cit., p. 26.

22. Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays*, edited with an «Introduction» by T. S. Eliot, London, Faber and Faber, 1963, p. 4.

23. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, edited by R. L. Brett, and A. R. Jones, London, Methuen, 1963, p. 7.

Mailer would praise Hemingway's language in like terms: «Hemingway said not to use [adjectives], and he was right. The adjective is the author's opinion of what's going on, no more. If I write 'A strong man came into the room,' that only means he is strong in relation to me. Unless I've established myself for the reader. I might be the only fellow in the bar who is impressed by the guy who just came in.»²⁴

All these factors will contribute to give prose and poetry a freshness and an originality which appears to follow the injunction that Pound repeated so often along his career: «make it new.»

3

The expertise and greatness of these writers can lead one to believe, when briefly reviewed, that the above topics and techniques reach with them their peak and, as a result, end up exhausted; in other words, the sources are empty, the roads hold no distance to walk, no mysteries to disclose. Rightly or wrongly (in my opinion the facts will later on prove that this is but a superficially fallacious argument) this belief will become widespread among some writers of the second half of the century, heirs to creators and traditions that oppress them, wherein they feel unable to go on.

This is a reaction that all those who start new literary trends, after the «weariness» spread by the decadence of the previous one, have undergone, experienced and formulated one way or another, as can be easily ascertained and as expressed by, for instance, the above mentioned authors of the *Lyrical Ballads* in their romantic preface or «manifesto.» Together with this fact, in coexistence with it, there is in the contemporary novel the awareness that reality is more fantastic, enthralling, and «imaginative» than any genuinely imagined fiction could ever be.

There is not much novelty here, either. In 1849 Josiah Henson, a black slave on the run from Maryland who took refuge in Canada and became a Methodist minister, dictated the story of his life, under the title *Truth Stranger Than Fiction*,²⁵ based

24. Norman Mailer, *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, New York, Random House, 1984, p. 92.

25. *The Life of Josiah Henson, formerly a slave, now an inhabitant of Canada, as narrated by himself* (to Samuel Atkins Eliot), Boston, Phelps, 1849. This narrative had a second much enlarged edition (from 76 pages originally, to 212) under the title of *Truth Stranger Than Fiction. Father Henson's story of his own life*, with an «Introduction» by Mrs. H. B. Stowe, Boston and Cleveland, J. P. Jewett & Co. 1858. Indeed, there is little new under the sun, as can be proven once again if we take a look, for the sake of curiosity, at Lord Byron: «'Tis strange, but true, for truth is always strange./Stranger than Fiction. If it could be told,/How much would novels gain by the exchange!/How differently the world would men behold» (Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, a bilingual edition in two volumes, translated by Pedro Ugalde, with an Introduction and notes by Juan Vicente Martínez Luciano, María José Coperías Aguilar and Miguel Teruel Pozas, Madrid, Cátedra, 1994, volume II, Canto XIV, 100, p. 1274. I already alluded to the fact that all these elements are part of a pervading mood, when I mentioned Jim Thompson above. Let's look again at another one of his novels, originally published in 1952, in this new context: «I debated calling the newspapers and complimenting them for their 'accuracy'. ... I could say something—I laughed—I could say something about truth being stranger than

obviously on his own experience (in which Harriet Beecher Stowe would find inspiration a few years later for her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*). The title of Henson's story constitutes a pronouncement that quite a few American novelists of these past few years would not hesitate in making their own as a definition of their starting point as creative writers.

Regarding the first of these convictions, John Barth will become the speaker, more or less consciously, for a group of novelists, among them John Hawkes, Ronald Sukenick, Richard Brautigan, Thomas Pynchon, and William Gass, just to name a few of the most significant examples. What makes them appear to be in the same category is the fact that all of them seem to start searching for renovation through technical experimentation, through manipulation of the form, although each of them will develop their own particular method. In the above mentioned essay, talking about what he calls «The Literature of Exhaustion,»²⁶ Barth discussed the challenge today's writers face in their pressing need of finding original ways out of the dead end represented by having to keep on talking in a world where everything has already been said, where to surprise the reader or stir up their interest seems such a desperate undertaking, doomed to failure from the start, since the tradition they come from, its richness and plentifulness, would make preposterous any attempt at personal originality.

Therefore, they will search no new formulas within their own tradition, but will attempt to break with them all: with notions such as plot, which will be replaced by digression; with point of view, that will become multiple and anarchic, diverse and contradictory, in a backward jump that will take them to apparently forgetting the teachings of Henry James, James Joyce, William Faulkner; with the conventional concept of literary character, that will disappear in its traditional meaning, wrapped in endless and sometimes incomprehensible verbosity that mixes the character up with the narrator, him with the author, and the author with a new character of fiction created by the real author to stand in the end as author of his own work. In *The Floating Opera*, John Barth makes his anguished leading character wonder: «Good Heavens, how does one write a novel?»²⁷ This would be as good as saying that sometimes the novel itself becomes the novel's subject: it is written in order to probe into the nature of fiction as an *artifact*, as an aesthetic object.

The experimentation with the «multiple ending» device²⁸ appears to them as the perfect aim on which to elaborate. As opposed to the closed ending of the realist novel

fiction» (Jim Thomson, *The Killer inside Me*, en *Crime Novels: American Noir of the 1950s*. New York, The Library of America, 1997, page 60).

26. John Barth, see note 1, above.

27. John Barth, *The Floating Opera*. New York, Doubleday, 1967, p. 2.

28. The game of the «multiple ending» is found often enough in contemporary narrative: it is the subject of the discussion in one of the stories by Jorge Luis Borges, who is considered by the postmodernists as one of their masters and the bridge linking them with their modernist predecessors. The short story I am referring to is «El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan» (*Nueva Antología Personal*, Buenos Aires, Emecé Editores, 1968, pp. 130-145). It is also paradigmatically found in John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (London, Cape, 1969), and also in quite a few popular stories such as Michael Ende's *La historia interminable*, Madrid, Alfaguara, 1982.

of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (closed with the wedding of the protagonists, for example), and to the open ending of modernism (as shown in Faulkner's *Light in August*, whose beginning and ending consists of the initiation of a journey), contemporary experimentalists, at least some of them, play with the multiple ending, expressly illustrated, in a facetious and ironic manner, in the double chapter of the mayonnaise that brings to its ending Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America*: the one before last, entitled «Prelude to the Mayonnaise Chapter» concludes with the sentence, «I always wanted to write a book that ended with the word Mayonnaise.» The last one, therefore, is called «The Mayonnaise Chapter» but its final line reads: «P.S. Sorry I forgot to give you the mayonnaise.»²⁹

It is just one further resource to achieve what in *Surfiction: Fiction Now and Tomorrow* (1975) Raymond Federman describes as an attempt «to unmask [the novel's] own fictionality, to expose the metaphor of its own fraudulence, and not pretend any longer to pass for reality, for truth or for beauty»³⁰ what is none other but a clumsy figment of the imagination. In other words, what lies deep into this question is just one more among the many paradoxes these writers tangle themselves into in their efforts to find absolute originality, even at the expense of bonding themselves to the absurd, in their creative undertaking.

All in all, the anxiety of artistic creation derives, whether in a spontaneous or a conscious manner, into the constant inversion or alteration of chronology and toward presenting the conscience as something not univocal, but equivocal or ambiguous; not unitary, but fragmentary; not intelligible and logical, but paradoxical and non-sensical. That is to say, to the wild manipulation of the categories of time and space. And thereby, apart from being the subject of its own observation, as I said before, fiction turns into another aspect of the reflection onto what is the true relationship between individual and inner conscience and the external world.

However, it could also happen that, deep down, at the bottom of their efforts this experimental eagerness does not imply breaking with the past and the tradition in such a dramatic and absolute way as they intend, or as they pretend to believe. What is significant in the modern experimentation might be once again just the human mind at work trying to adapt itself to the continuous changes that take place, every once in a while in the course of history, about the way the external reality is conceived. That is to say, this experimentation would then be reduced to a means of fitting within one's own experience the change in the relationship between the mind and the outside conditions, «an attempt to re-orient thinking within an altered sense of the real.»³¹

More specifically: what these writers are trying to do is to create a new procedure, a technical method that will make it possible for them to convey to the reader the characters' «stream of consciousness.» without the need to resort to the method developed and apparently taken to its last consequences by Joyce, Woolf,

29. Richard Brautigan, *Trout Fishing in America*, New York, Seymour Lawrence/Delacorte Press, 1968, pp. 111 and 112.

30. Raymond Federman, editor, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

31. Paul Scott Derrick, *op.cit.*, p. 78.

Faulkner and others. The interior monologue had been the initial technique developed by the writer to reveal to the reader the instinctive world contained in the «stream of consciousness,» which we call so since William James coined the expressions «stream of thought, of consciousness or of subjective life»³²; they help to describe the autonomous, uncontrollable and rich «stream» that contains and expresses the unstoppable activity of our inner world. This new narrative method has been labeled «the omniscient stream of consciousness.» Though at face value it may seem a blatant contradiction, when properly explored it comes down to the simple paradox it really is. For example, when Thomas Pynchon seems to turn back to the traditional method of the omniscient narrator in *Gravity's Rainbow*, «that appearance is deceptive. He does not intend to convey the sense of a coherent, comprehensible world, nor of complete authorial control. Ours is the post-Einsteinian world of relativity and irresolvable paradox.» What he rather does is «to apply the technique of interior monologue to the voice of the omniscient narrator, and thus, metaphorically, to depersonalize consciousness,» that could just be the right formula to describe this method paradoxically called the omniscient stream of consciousness.³³

As for the second of the coexistent factors mentioned earlier, the belief that in our present world, this world of nuclear energy, space exploration, and computers, the reality is more fantastic, more enthralling, and more «imaginative» than any truly imagined fiction, «truth stranger than fiction,» such as Josiah Henson said, it might just be sheer ingenuity. However, what cannot be denied is that such an awareness exists, and it has proven its weight upon, and strongly influenced, many American writers.

This is stated, expressly and downright precisely, by the novelist Philip Roth, who can be regarded as the «unofficial» spokesman for a whole group of writers that will search for novelty or personal originality, not through formal experimentation or technical innovation, but by turning their eyes to real worlds we could call «virgin,» treading previously unexplored territories: the environment of minority ethnic groups, such as Jewish Americans, African Americans, native American Indians (or «Peoples of the First Nations,» as they somewhat foolishly are occasionally called), and so on. Or the fields of crime, outer space, or others cultivated by the so-called «New Journalists,» such as Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, or Norman Mailer; whereas Philip Roth himself, Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, or Ishmael Reed, Alice Walker, or Toni Morrison, and N. Scott Momaday, on their part, might as well be trying to represent in artistic form their own personal worlds, as one other metaphor used by the creative imagination to give the reader a new personal view of the human condition.

32. William James concludes in Chapter XI, «The Stream of Consciousness,» of his work *The Principles of Psychology*, 1890, that the personal consciousness is a continuous process, and unequivocally adds: «I can only define 'continuous' as that which is without breach, crack or division.» Consequently, he proposes: «In talking of it hereafter, let us call it, the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life.» *Writings, 1878-1899*, New York, The Library of America, 1992, pp. 157 and 159.

33. Paul Scott Derrick, *op. cit.*, pp. 24 and 25.

In a very much quoted lecture about the problems raised by the question of «Writing American Fiction,» Philip Roth said in 1960: «the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full trying to understand, describe and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meagre imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist.»³⁴

In one way, this assertion points to the handling of a part of American reality not yet explored in an intendedly exhaustive manner. Now the writers that make up the worlds of minorities, be they ethnic, sexual, religious or otherwise (and all of them having valuable predecessors) will try to describe this reality from their interiorized first-hand knowledge of it. They start rebelling against the role of victims of discrimination, persecution or injustice imposed upon them by the society in general, and their anglosaxon protestant paradigms, as prevailing canons of behavior and values. Far from being satisfied with dissolving and integrating themselves into the so-called «melting pot,» which has been proved to be a complete fallacy, they refuse to accept the subordinate role they have been traditionally assigned in order to profess and express their pride in their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic origins, in their differences. Accordingly, they will try and carry out an intense, deep, and honest exploration of their particular worlds in order to newly define their own and true identity, bearing witness thereof, with their own moral and aesthetic weapons.

In spite of everything, we find in the end that they are embedded in the tradition deeper than they think, for as was said before, Sherwood Anderson had already concluded that «everyone in the world is Christ and they are all crucified»; then, when we learn later on that for Bernard Malamud «all men are Jews»³⁵; and for Richard Wright, similarly formulated though shaped to serve his own imaginative interests, «the Negro is America's metaphor,»³⁶ we see that it is not really that original, and originality must be looked for in the particulars rather than the generalities. As late as 1994 the idea is going to be re-formulated, in a somewhat new and more inclusive manner; the speaker, it must be strongly emphasized, is a black man and the novelty is easily perceived, with a new call for solidarity, this time making express reference to the differences because of race that should disappear: «Any man be an Indian no matter how he's born.»³⁷ So that, perhaps for the first time, there is an artistic formulation trying to unite all races in the one and only human race.

All in all, the research into, and the expression of man's dignity in his suffering due to intolerance, injustice, oppression, whether he is African American, Jewish

34. Philip Roth, «Writing American Fiction,» *Reading Myself and Others*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975, p. 120.

35. Quoted by Allen Guttman, *The Jewish Novel in America*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 118, source not mentioned.

36. Quoted by Ihab Hassan, *Contemporary American Literature, 1945-1972*, New York, Ungar, 1973, p. 74, source not mentioned.

37. Wynton Marsalis, *Blood on the Fields*, New York, Sony Music Entertainment, 1997.

American, Chicano, Asian-American or whatever, becomes one further metaphor (with its particular features) of the destiny of mankind, of the misery and the greatness of the human condition. This circumstance is what in the end grants these writers the universality they certainly don't lack turning their stories into *mere* works of art, that would only be unfairly distorted and narrowed in their scope by any restricting or conditional labels.

Roth's observation points also to a more obvious meaning encompassing such events as the political assassinations watched in T.V. (sometimes even live, as in Lee Harvey Oswald's case for example, in 1963, or Robert Kennedy's in 1968); the cold-blooded murders photographed by journalists that happened to be in the right place at the right time (such as the Viet-Cong guerrilla murdered by a Viet-Nameese general, the chief of police in South Vietnam in 1968, that gave international fame to the photographer from Associated Press Eddie Adams); the account of the mass suicide of hundreds of Reverend Jones' followers in Guiana. Or in a different context, the amazing scientific and technological progress in the fields of nuclear energy, space research, or the possibilities, that we can only start glimpsing, created by computer science and its various applications, which could dramatically change so many aspects of man's life in a not so distant future.

In light of all these facts, we cannot however conclude that those stimuli may have caused amazement, outrage, wrath, admiration or terror in a greater degree than that caused by past technical findings, crimes or horrors in the corresponding readers or audiences. It would be a fairly naïve assumption, and it would mean ignoring a fact that, as such, is hard to question. (As John Adams said a few centuries before: «This is a fact and facts are stubborn things in opposition to speculation.»)³⁸ The human being's capacity of emotional reaction is not necessarily weighted by the more or less objective magnitude of his stimulus, but by the limits and conditions of man's own nature. Thus, nobody can say that President Kennedy's assassination stirred up deeper emotions, of one kind or another, than Abraham Lincoln's; or that the invention of the telephone surprised and marvelled the people at that time less than the landing on the moon did our contemporaries.

Therefore, the question is not whether our present world is more violent, more astounding or crueller than in the past. At any rate, this would be a futile discussion based on sheer speculation impossible to prove. The question is that while the actual event in the past, whatever its nature might have been, was distant from the citizen, and only available through the filter of literature (whether journalistic or not), nowadays, in this world permeated by the explosion and far-reaching range of the mass media, it is quite often readily available to the hand and the eye of the ordinary citizen. The consequence is then that when referring strictly to fact, the literature of war cannot compete with television as far as immediacy and vividness are concerned. Likewise, to have a murder recounted is not the same as watching the images on

38. John Adams, *The Works of John Adams: with a life of the author*, by his grandson Charles Francis Adams, Boston, Little Brown and Co., 1850-56, vol IX, p. 470. Which sentence could be just a reformulation of the old aphorism of Scholasticism, «*contra facta, non sunt argumenta*».

television in our own living-room. But deep down in human consciousness that truism does not seem sufficient cause to understate the importance of art in all its forms.

Today's world seems thus a stage where a number of events are being represented that go beyond the novelist's imagination, for which his capacity of invention is no match. That's why they feel compelled to look for new ways of awakening and stimulating the reader's interest, by procedures other than invention. Since reality is prodigally producing flamboyant, interesting, and amazing events, many writers turn to it in order to make artistic stuff of what initially seemed to belong to the realm of fact, by applying to it a treatment that used to be reserved for fiction.

This is all true and perhaps obvious, but in no way does it exhaust the view if we must be fair and balanced. The contemporary American novel, the art in general, is not to be limited in such a dramatic, narrow, rigid way. Tradition is not exhausted, its various components still allow for new combinations that give original, fresh, new results. As Eliot said, those results are influenced by the tradition they belong to in as much as they modify and enrich such a tradition: «The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.»³⁹ Barth seems to approve of this idea when he uses Jorge Luis Borges' quotation as the epigraph of one of his already mentioned texts: «The fact is that every writer creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.»⁴⁰

And man's own experience, his behavior and his reactions, his vices and his virtues, still contain unexplored deposits and unprecedented resources within themselves, as befits the endless stream, the unpredictable road upon which he treads and which constitutes at the same time his own nature.

39. T. S. Eliot, «Tradition and the Individual Talent,» *The Sacred Wood*, London and New York, Methuen/Barnes & Noble, 1966, p. 50.

40. John Barth, «The Literature of Exhaustion,» Raymond Federman, editor, *op. cit.*, p. 19.