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loveliest, exquisite, apart," Kipling had written—with Captain Cook’s landfall, a sandy sheltered cove, only yards away. And lying not many miles beyond that, last July, stretched out on a bed in the seclusion of a comfortable resort, was a person whom it pleased one local paper to call a “nuke-flee mum to be,” freshly arrived, all atremble, from Germany. "Trixie Hoffman flew to New Zealand almost two months ago, shortly after the Chernobyl nuclear power station disaster . . . 'I want to be sure my baby will have food that is not dirty from the Chernobyl fallout,' she said." A dairy company, eager to get in on the act, had given her 40 kg. of their products, and Mrs. Hoffman, whose husband was arriving from Germany in a day or so, said she could hardly believe the company’s generosity.

This nuke-flee mum is only one of many. And the migratory wave she represents has brought New Zealand back, full circle, to the place it held in the European consciousness fully a century ago. In large part reacting against 19th century industrialism, English readers were drawn by the prospect of a pleasant pastoral alternative to soot in the eye, sweated labor, and dark satanic mills. Now the country is once more seen as a refuge, its remoteness an asset beyond price. Indeed in the minds of millions of Greens throughout Europe and America, the nearest thing to being on another planet is to still on planet Earth and in New Zealand. "Far out!" they cry—they’re right.

The Fiction We Deserve

Carol Iannone

To paraphrase George Orwell on the English language, most people who bother with American fiction at all seem ready to admit that it is in a bad way. It is true, as the novelist Walker Percy has remarked, that the novel "always has been in a mess"; but it is also true, as Percy adds, that "the present mess is singular."

Recent articles in diverse journals have lamented, from a variety of viewpoints, the diminished state of contemporary fiction. Most of the attention has been focused on the shortcomings of what is often called, albeit not to everyone's satisfaction, minimalism: fiction that is thin in texture, slight in form, banal in subject matter, well-crafted, empty, easy to read—in short, literature for the age of television. Bruce Bawer observes of authors working in this mode that they are inclined to write frequently in the present tense; to favor the short declarative sentence (very short and very declarative); to be preoccupied with domestic details (cooking, dishwashing, laundry), with the most banal of contemporary phenomena (TV commercials, trailer parks), and with brand names; to transmit clues to the nature of a protagonist's personal torments as dryly and emotionlessly as if those torments were just so many trite domestic details; and to think that surface details, if piled up high enough, can help us to see through to the heart.

The Mississippi Review, which has devoted an entire issue to the subject, chimes in that minimalism in literature is "loosely characterized by equanimity of surface, 'ordinary' subjects, recalcitrant narrators and deadpan narratives, slightness of story, and characters who don't think out loud."

Of course not every candidate for the minimalist label will display every characteristic in every work, and thus disagreement has arisen over who exactly fits the mold. Writers broadly associated with this style, sometimes over their own or others' protests, include Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, Bobbie Ann Mason, Richard Ford, Deborah Eisenberg, Jane Anne Phillips, Peter Cameron, Amy Hempel. There are many others.

The fact that there now seems to be a consensus on the existence of a problem in contemporary fiction does not, however, imply a consensus as to its source. Walker Percy, for instance, argues that our impoverished fiction arises from the general surrender of the task of understanding human experience to scientists, technologists, and specialists. One critic, Sven Birkenes, sees in minimalism, and in contemporary literature generally, "total refusal of any vision of the larger social connection" and "abrogation of literary responsibility." The writer Madison Bumgardner, more practically, suggests that publishers have been striving to compete with the undemanding entertainments available through mass media.
there are all interesting and compelling observations, but most persistent and surely the
perverse analysis is the one that defines minimalism as, in the
eyes of yet another critic, a custom of the neoconservative
Republican tide. The minimalists' remarks a second such
commentator, "are stuck in compenecy, stuck without convic-
tion, without alternatives to offer, muddling on defensively to a present
in which themselves don't believe in... makes them, like their char-
motor, emblematic of Reagan's critique." According to a third
critic, belonging to this perverse perspective: "What minimalism doesn't
embrace grand, inexorable forces of the heart, or pressing so-
questions such as "nuclear war, growing social inequity, a
blameless political administration, the unreality and immor-
tality of daily life."

Probing for deeper causes, a fourth commentator opines that
minimalism reflects a human reac-
tion to the breakdown of a shared
sensetial system, a literacy pas-
tion in the face of moral confu-
sion. And responding to the sugges-
tion that readers like this fiction
because they recognize themselves
in it, this same commentator
insists that

"The process of connection with an "other" cannot be
found in language more directly than in the
human ground not previously recognized. Instead, it is
the process of feeling connected to a character perceived to be
equally like ourselves, according to a shared surface details... The ironic part is that the sur-
face is the level at which we are not like one another. It's
why when we go deeper that our resemblance to one another becomes
apparent.

In even a casual observer of the
cultural scene, such remarks are able to inspire anything from
admiration to incredulity. After
of a Left-inspired literary
movement that attacked the possi-
bility of narrative authority; the
possibility of shared moral and cul-
tral values in literature; the pos-
sibility of rendering a comprehen-
sive world view in fiction; the pos-
sibility of conveying any definitive
meaning whatsoever in literary
texts; the possibility of even know-
ing reality itself through language
—after all this, now we hear de-
nunciations of "literary passivity," "moral confusion," and the "lack
of a shared conceptual system."

For years of assaults on literary
standards as hierarchical and im-
perialist; of assertions that a
literary canon supposedly devised
by white males could not reflect the experience of "marginal"
groups; of vehement demands for
a separate literary criticism to
evaluate the work of women, of
blacks, of homosexuals—after all
this, now we are instructed that
identification through "surface de-
tails" is spurious and that we need to
go deeper to find "the shared
human ground" where "our re-
semblance to one another becomes
apparent."

What has happened? Literary
radicals adopted a set of views that
they believed would further the
cause of revolution: since tradi-
tional literary standards were held
to support the "system," it was
believed that destroying these
standards would help destroy the
system. But the system, though
perhaps shaken to the roots, never-
theless still seems to stand, and,
what may be even worse, the rad-
ical views themselves have been
"coopted" and defanged. Struc-
turalism and deconstruction, the
intellectual movements especially
responsible for the systematic dis-
mantling of traditional literary
standards in recent years, have
emerged as a kind of tired con-
vventional wisdom. As the critic
Walter Kendrick has reported,
"Despite the potentially revolu-
tionary nature" of this kind of
criticism, "it has been absorbed
without a jolt into the traditional
American academic machine... would-be subversive ideas are to be
memorized and applied, so that the
student can publish in some unread academic journal, get a job, and
perpetuate the inherited sys-
tem."

But meanwhile, whatever is hap-
pening in the academy, the values
promoted by the deconstructionist
movement clearly helped lay the
theoretical groundwork for the
new minimalism. This type of fic-
tion is a grimly logical demonstra-
tion project for the "deconstruc-
tion" of literature's pretensions to
meaning and range, of its claim to
speak a higher and subtler lan-
guage than that available in popu-
lar culture or everyday life. Our
critics do not like the resulting
dance, but it is they who helped
call the tune. In their attack on
the "cultural imperialism" of
literary standards, leftist critics
tore down the structures whereby
even their own values could be
given proper expression; evidently
it is easier now to blame the wreck-
age they caused on Ronald Reagan
than to begin the task of rebuild-
ning.

INTERESTINGLY, the editors of two
new collections of short stories
both seem to share in the general
disapproval surrounding contem-
porary fiction. In her introduction
to New American Short Stories:
The Writers Select Their Own
Favorites, Gloria Norris concedes
that the American short story now
suffers from predictability. And in
her introduction to Prize Stories:
The O. Henry Awards 1986, William
Abrahams echoes one of the
common complaints against mini-
malism when he observes, "Con-
sciously or not there seems to be on
the part of many writers (and their
teachers?) a tendency to overvalue
technique, to run away from the
possible serious content not only of
the story but of life itself."

While both editors claim that their
collections reflect such complaints, a
third to a half of each book is de-
voted to the work of writers who
are at least sometimes associated
with the minimalist school.

But what of the rest? Since minimalism has already absorbed
so much critical energy and aroused
so much critical disdain, it may
be appropriate to focus on the
other sorts of stories in these col-
lections. For what it is worth, it
turns out that social questions,
although perhaps in muted forms,
do continue to interest writers.

There are, for instance, several
historical stories in these collec-
tions. David Long's "The Last
Photograph of Lyle Pettibone, set in Montana in 1917, details the coming of age of a young man who rejects the values of his small town after he witnesses its brutal opposition to an IWW labor agitation. Peter Meinke’s “Uncle George and Uncle Stefan” deals with the deterioration of an American family of Polish-German extraction ravaged by the conflicting loyalties aroused in them by World War II. In Anthony DiFranco’s “The Garden of Redemption,” a timid Italian priest finds the courage to resist the Nazis who occupy his town.

The problem with these historical stories, however, is their lack of urgency: they come to us as from a great safe distance. History in them has the quaintness of a reconstructed village, or the dusty reassuring earnestness of a memorial battlefield. In “The Garden of Redemption,” for example, the priest begins to enjoy “the certainty that his death was right and useful. It didn’t matter that no one would know what had become of him; he understood now the reckless sacrifices of the partisans, their lives thrown like stones beneath the treads of the Nazi bloodlust—not futile, no, but all part of a big fundamental struggle.”

Or history can be a source of imaginative quotation, in the sketchy, self-centeredly nonserious way it is sometimes invoked in postmodern architecture. In Ward Just’s “The Costa Brava, 1959,” a young couple is on a holiday in Spain just after the wife has suffered a miscarriage. In a restaurant at the story’s end, the wife, who is beginning to recover her sense of possibility, weaves “a dreamy narrative” about a Spanish couple nearby, sketching the man as “a romantic poet and playwright like Garcia Lorca, close to the Spanish people” and the woman as “a political, a young Pasionaria, a woman of character and resolve. They had been in love for ages,” the wife imagines, “exiled together, now returned to Catalonia incognito.” But her husband turns from this conversation to reflect that although “he had read all the books” on the Spanish war and “Franco’s hard-faced paz,” he “could not imagine what it had been like in Catalonia. He had thought he knew but now, actually in the country, face to face with the people and the terrain, he had no idea at all.” The sudden access into history seems to serve no purpose but to underscore the characters’ different capacities for dealing with their present lives.

What of contemporary issues? Stephanie Vaughan’s “Kid MacArthur” records the deleterious effects on a military family when a son goes to fight in Vietnam. Stuart Dybek’s “Blight” is the story of a bunch of teen-age boys growing up in a lower-class Chicago neighborhood declared “blighted” during the Johnson administration’s War on Poverty; the story has a refreshing twist, inasmuch as the boys are seen thoroughly enjoying the riches of their neighborhood that are imperceptible to the eyes of government bureaucracy. Alice Walker’s “Kindred Spirits,” winner of the first prize in the O. Henry awards, is the story of a disaffected and unhappy black woman visiting her family in Miami; it sketches the injustices of segregation, describes the physical brutality of black men and the emotional brutality of white men, endorses the Cuban revolution, and ends on a note of female solidarity between two sisters, albeit with a nod toward one of their male progenitors.

Feminism or at least a mild version of it is an impulse in other stories, too. Both “I Don’t Believe This,” by Merrill Joan Gerber, and “Crazy Ladies,” by Greg Johnson, deal with the emotional and physical abuse of women, as, on a different level, does Joyce Carol Oates’s “Master Race” (the choice for the O. Henry special award for continuing achievement), about a prominent German-American intellectual and his younger woman companion on a visit to Germany.

Most of these stories are reasonable efforts and yet pretty forgettable. It is plain that an engagement with social issues per se is no guarantee of a distinguished and resonant fiction, if only because most social issues today come complete with an a-priori interpretative context that converts them into instant clichés. This may why some critics of minimalism exercised less by its reputation for its social content than by its reputation for formal inventiveness, even if they run into a contradiction demanding an experimental fiction that will unmask the old pretenses of literature and then mourning the results for failing to resonate with wider significance. One story in the Norris collection, ironic excursion into experimental fiction by John E. Wideman titled “Surfiction,” seems almost be pointing to this very contradiction.

Two of the more satisfying efforts in these collections manage to suggest a social context without at the same time succumbing to it. John Updike’s finely polished “Made in Heaven” is about a long-term marriage that grows materially but shrinks emotionally. Updike charts a social background but finally goes beyond it to vision of individual spiritual loneliness. In Elizabeth Spencer’s “The Cousins,” middle-aged cousins sit in a terrace restaurant in Rome and reminisce about the past, particularly a European vacation they took over summer in their youth. An interesting delineation emerges of different types of character among the Southern aristocracy, but the story is really about the inscrutable nature of the past. On the other hand, Mary Hood’s hard little nugget of a story, “Solomon’s Seal,” which encapsulates forty years in the painfully ugly marriage of a pair of rural Southerners, makes no particular effort to engage a social context, although the backwoods milieu is well evoked, but becomes instead an effective study of selfishness, subbarness, and pride.

“Art is in most ways hostile to ideology,” Joan Didion (who has served both masters) rightly observes, and ideology is most definitely hostile to art. If we continue to insist that literature fight revolutions, then we will continue to get the fiction we deserve.