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## Iannone, Carol: National Council on the Humanities Nomination (1991): Article 03

Carol Iannone

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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 settlers 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 be still on planet Earth and in New Zealand. "Far out!" they cry—and they're right.

## The Fiction We Deserve

Carol Iannone

**T**O 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

CAROL IANNONE teaches English literature at Iona College and is managing editor of *Academic Questions*. Her article, "Post-Counterculture Tristesse," appeared in our February issue.

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, Jayne 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 Birkers, sees in minimalism, and in contemporary literature generally, a "total refusal of any vision of larger social connection" and an "abrogation of literary responsibility." The writer Madison Bell, more practically, suggests that publishers have been striving to compete with the undemanding entertainments available through the mass media.

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These are all interesting and compelling observations, but the most persistent and surely the most perverse analysis is the one that defines minimalism as, in the words of yet another critic, a symptom of the neoconservative Republican tide." The minimalist, remarks a second such commentator, "are stuck in complicity, stuck without conviction, without alternatives to offer, leading on defensively to a present they themselves don't believe in. This makes them, like their characters, emblematic of Reagan's America." According to a third critic belonging to this perverse persuasion: "What minimalism doesn't embrace grand, inexorable themes of the heart, or pressing social questions" such as "nuclear dangers, growing social inequity, a shameless political administration, the unreality and immorality of daily life."

Probing for deeper causes, a fourth commentator opines that minimalism reflects a human retreat, a breakdown of a shared conceptual system, a literary passivity in the face of moral confusion. And responding to the suggestion that readers like this fiction because they recognize themselves in it, this same commentator emphatically insists that

identification on the part of the reader is in this case not the psychological process of connection with an "other" to find shared human ground not previously recognized. Instead, it is the process of feeling connected to a character perceived to be entirely like ourselves, according to shared surface details. . . . The ironic part is that the surface is the level at which we are least like one another. . . . It's only when we go deeper that our resemblance to one another becomes apparent.

In even a casual observer of the recent cultural scene, such remarks are liable to inspire anything from amusement to incredulity. After years of a Left-inspired literary criticism that attacked the possibility of narrative authority; the possibility of shared moral and cultural values in literature; the possibility of rendering a comprehensive world view in fiction; the pos-

sibility of conveying any definitive meaning whatsoever in literary texts; the possibility of even knowing reality itself through language—after all this, now we hear denunciations of "literary passivity," "moral confusion," and the "lack of a shared conceptual system." After years of assaults on literary standards as hierarchical and imperialistic; 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 details" is spurious and that we need to go deeper to find "the shared human ground" where "our resemblance 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 traditional 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, nevertheless still seems to stand, and, what may be even worse, the radical views themselves have been "coopted" and defanged. Structuralism and deconstruction, the intellectual movements especially responsible for the systematic dismantling of traditional literary standards in recent years, have emerged as a kind of tired conventional wisdom. As the critic Walter Kendrick has reported, "Despite the potentially revolutionary 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 system."

But meanwhile, whatever is happening 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 demonstration project for the "deconstruction" of literature's pretensions to meaning and range, of its claim to speak a higher and subtler language than that available in popular 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 wreckage they caused on Ronald Reagan than to begin the task of rebuilding.

INTERESTINGLY, the editors of two new collections of short stories both seem to share in the general disapproval surrounding contemporary 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 his introduction to *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards 1986*,† William Abrahams echoes one of the common complaints against minimalism when he observes, "Consciously 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 deflect such complaints, a third to a half of each book is devoted 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 collections. 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 collections. David Long's "The Last

\* New American Library, 372 pp., \$16.95.

† Doubleday, 274 pp., \$17.95.

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 com-

plete with an a-priori interpretive context that converts them into instant clichés. This may be why some critics of minimalism are exercised less by its repudiation of social content than by its repudiation of formal inventiveness. But even they run into a contradiction demanding an experimental fiction that will unmask the old pretensions of literature and then mourning the results for failing to resonate with wider significance. One story in the Norris collection, an ironic excursion into experimental fiction by John E. Wideman entitled "Surfiction," seems almost to 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 a vision of individual spiritual loneliness. In Elizabeth Spencer's Whartonesque "The Cousins," two middle-aged cousins sit in a terrace restaurant in Rome and reminisce about the past, particularly a European vacation they took one 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, stubbornness, 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 our revolutions, then we will continue to get the fiction we deserve.