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lost utopian visions and the lost plans for the New Jew, the reality of contemporary Israel with all its challenges and problems cannot match the dreams once held, the messianic belief—for such it is—that socialism and social engineering practiced on immigrants could overnight make a new society, the false belief that the narrow and intolerant passions of *moledet* and *hagshama* made one humanly superior to those religious Jews whom Benvenisti scorns with all his soul and all his might. He is still riding on that bus in Haifa, still sneering at lesser mortals with urban mud on their shoes and the trials of daily life on their minds,

still ready to give the order to his countrymen to empty their water supplies on the desert floor in penance and march to Ein Gedi or be damned.

THE rejection of Labor Zionism at the polls in 1977 was not just an assertion of power by Sephardi Jews and Jews of Arab lands; it was in part a rejection of the attitudes and perspectives that characterize Benvenisti and his generation and their heirs among the still-entrenched Labor intellectuals, attitudes set out with almost frightening clarity in *Conflicts and Contradictions*. The Likud coalition grew out of Revisionist Zion-

ism, and once in power it revisited or attempted to revisit upon its Labor rivals all the pent-up resentments of forty years of political struggle.

But Likud's future is also uncertain, because its motivations, no less than those of Labor, are similarly based in the past. Meanwhile Labor intellectuals like Benvenisti continue to dominate the ideological discussion and set the cultural agenda, both in Israel and in the Diaspora. As long as this is allowed to remain the case, the national debate in Israel will remain arrested at the level of the youthful fixations of Meron Benvenisti and his peers.

Fiction

Post-Counterculture Tristesse

Carol Iannone

TO JUDGE by the work of some of our younger novelists, the American dream has died even while coming true. Material prosperity, sexual liberation, unparalleled expansion of personal choice—these often make their way into contemporary fiction more as problems, dilemmas, or occasions of anguish than as the victories for the human spirit they are usually claimed to be.

Of course in some way or other fiction should rub against the grain of the age, but our younger writers do not, for the most part, challenge the terms of our liberated culture. Accepting these terms as given—even at times celebrating them—

they devote themselves instead to spare, taut chronicles of the sundry tribulations that are the byproducts of personal and cultural expansion. The tension between their complacent perception of such expansion and the unhappiness occasioned by it can shape both the form and content of their work, as in the cases of David Leavitt and Lorrie Moore, two highly praised young writers who have just published second books.

David Leavitt's first book, *Family Dancing*, an ecstatically praised collection of short stories about affluent suburbia, appeared in 1985 when he was twenty-three, and was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award and the PEN/Faulkner Award. Acclaimed by *Esquire* as "a literary leader of a new (and as yet unnamed) generation," Leavitt was asked to

write that magazine's decennial "My Generation" essay (previous authors have included the likes of F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Styron). Leavitt also appeared on the cover of the homosexual magazine *Christopher Street* as the "sub-cultural hero" who was the first to publish explicitly homosexual fiction in the *New Yorker*.

David Leavitt grew up in Palo Alto, California. His father is a professor of organizational behavior at Stanford, his mother an occasional political activist who more than once screamed so violently at the image of Nixon on the TV screen that her son (by his present account) thought she was being murdered. His brother and sister, older than he by nearly a decade, devoted themselves for a while to the "movement."

Leavitt defines his generation as

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the "tail end" of the 60's, coming of age at a time when "disillusion had set in, people had given up, cocaine was the drug of choice." While his siblings' goals at his age "were to expand their minds, see the world, and encourage revolutionary change," his own generation is now "interested in stability, neatness, entrenchment. We want to stay in one place and stay in one piece, establish careers, establish credit." Moreover, "We want good apartments, fulfilling jobs, nice boy/girl friends. We want American Express Gold Cards."

Not, Leavitt makes clear, that any of this marks a return to the 50's. The ideals of *that* age were unceremoniously eroded by the counterculture. "We didn't grow up with the familial stability that people older than us grew up with," he has said; in his own milieu, "divorce was a more common state than marriage."

Without faith in the past or in the family, young people today have little faith in the future. Possessed of an "inability to think beyond the moment," or "to conceive of any future at all," they "refuse to take part" in history. In sum, Leavitt observes: "Our parents imagined they could satisfy [the] urge [for security] by marrying and raising children; our older brothers and sisters through community and revolution. We have seen how far these alternatives go. We trust ourselves and money. Period."

Still, if Leavitt and his contemporaries imagine they have rejected the 60's, they are also its far from reluctant beneficiaries. In Leavitt's case the legacy takes the form of his free and open notions about homosexuality, which were "entirely formed" during his years at Yale. "Yale right now probably has the strongest and most visible gay community of any university in the country," he declared last year in an interview in *Christopher Street*. This holds for girls as well as boys: none of Leavitt's female classmates "seemed to be straight," and "there was an enormous amount of promiscuity" among them. In fact, when Leavitt politticked for gay rights at Yale he was being, he now confesses, "a

little hypocritical," because "in terms of the quality of life there things were fine. You could come out there, completely, and be very happy."

THE literary consequences of this somewhat confused and even contradictory set of attitudes are to be seen in Leavitt's two books. "If we are without passion and affect," Leavitt writes of himself and his generation, "it is because we have decided that passion and affect are not worth the trouble." Translated into literary terms, this is another way of saying that a young writer like Leavitt need not bother to create a functional moral framework according to which the actions of his characters will be more than momentarily meaningful, or their miseries more than spasmodically painful, or human suffering in general more than a compelling curiosity. Thus, in the stories of *Family Dancing*, a husband leaves a long-standing marriage with no explanation save "that I'm in love with someone else." A family man turns off the road while driving with his wife and is disabled in the ensuing accident. A man who spends a lot of time abroad refuses his wife's offer to accompany him although she is suffering from cancer. As Leavitt presents them, such actions may or may not strike us as regrettable but are no more subject to rational analysis, to judgment, to "choice," than cancer itself.

As for those left behind in these stories, their pain is depicted, and often graphically, in the bright contactless diction of sensitivity workshops, but it is not explained or understood, let alone transcended, either by the characters or by the author. Fittingly, in "Aliens," the mother of a woman who has survived intact the accident that disabled her husband explains to her daughter that in the Holocaust, the people "who don't need hope to live . . . are the ones who survived."

A central figure in the Leavitt landscape is the rejected or superfluous female, sometimes unmarried, more typically divorced, abandoned, or neglected, a victim, in a sense, of changing cultural

patterns. She has often been left for another woman, or for another man, or for more casually miscellaneous reasons like business or travel (or even accident, as in "Aliens"). Leavitt's intricate portrayals of these females' unhappy bewilderment are what his admirers partly have in mind when they wonder how anyone his age could demonstrate so much empathy, understanding, and insight. The truth may be that he rather enjoys detailing—if, again, to no particular literary purpose—the humiliations of women.

In "Territory," for example, a young man brings his gay lover home to meet his liberal mother, only to touch the limits of her tolerance. The mother, whose husband is "a distant sort . . . away often on business," is clearly discomfited by the physical attraction between her son and his lover. But her son "is glad his mother knows that he is desired, glad it makes her flinch." In "The Lost Cottage," a wife of over twenty-six years cannot quite maintain the cool civility expected of her at the dissolution of her marriage, and suddenly blurts out to her children: "I love your father, and I will always love your father. And he doesn't love me. And never will. . . . Did you hear me?" She says [to her husband] "I love you. You can escape me, but you can never escape that." The story ends as the husband "keeps his eyes focused on the window above her head, making sure never to look at her. . . . In his mind, he's already left."

Even in the rare case of a remarriage, the misery persists. In the title story, "Family Dancing," Suzanne is throwing a party to celebrate her son's graduation from prep school and also her own "graduation into life—her thirty pounds thinner body, her new house, and her new marriage to Bruce Kaplan, who works in real estate." But the story gradually exposes Suzanne's new life as a sham. She is desperately unhappy, has found her new husband a "disappointment," and still longs for her old husband, Herb, who arrives at the party with his girlfriend. As the night wears on, Suzanne

grows more frantic, drinks too much, and demands that the reluctant Herb dance with her. She grabs him "firmly around the waist, to make sure he doesn't try to run away from the slow dance. Now, alone in the circle, they writhe, Herb trying to keep his distance, Suzanne insistently holding him down so that his chest pushes against hers."

In "Dedicated," Leavitt's favorite story and the last in the book, femininity itself finally emerges as the problem. A fat, shy, unpopular young woman named Celia is the doggedly faithful friend of a frequently sparring homosexual couple who have been her friends since college. They often stand her up, or ignore her when they are in the distracting presence of other men. One night, when she attempts to accompany one of them to a gay bar and is turned away at the door, she is prompted to reverie:

"When all the men you love can only love each other," Celia would later tell people—a lot of people—"you can't help but begin to wonder if there's something wrong with being a woman. . . ." That night she stood before those closed steel doors and shut her eyes and wished, the way a small child wishes, that she could be freed from her loose skirts, her makeup and jewelry, her interfering breasts and buttocks. If she could only be stripped and pared, made sleek and svelte like Nathan and Andrew, then she might slip between those doors as easily as the men who hurried past her that night, . . . she might be freed of the rank and untrustworthy baggage of femininity.

"DEDICATED" is one of two stories in *Family Dancing* that deal directly with homosexuality and they are both built on a triangular pattern, two male homosexuals and a woman who is somehow left out of their experience. This is also the pattern of Leavitt's recently published novel, *The Lost Language of Cranes*,\* which, unlike *Family Dancing*, cannot be said to be even remotely about anything other than homosexuality.

Surprisingly, this fact seems to

have caused some consternation among the critics. After years of militant activism that has encouraged homosexuals not only to admit their "sexual preference" but to define themselves by it, some people are still surprised to learn that this is just what they have done. Thus, to the declaration of the main character in this novel that "My sexuality, my attraction to men, is the most crucial, most elemental force in my life," the reviewer in the *New York Times* feebly protested, "Surely there are other tasks for the self to address." At the same time, however, since homosexuality is a form of behavior now considered utterly beyond the pale of moral judgment, the protests never proceeded beyond this altogether respectful point.

To David Leavitt, homosexuality would seem to be the one bright human possibility in a world of misery and compromise. Such, at any rate, is the moral of *The Lost Language of Cranes*, the story of Rose and Owen Benjamin and their son, Philip. Rose and Owen live on the East Side of midtown Manhattan; he is a prep-school admissions officer, she a copy editor. Philip, twenty-five, has his own place and works for a publisher of romances. Philip's main objectives in life are finding love and telling his parents about his homosexuality. For their part, Rose and Owen are worried about eviction from their apartment; their building is going co-op, there is no option to continue renting, and they cannot afford to buy.

While they are preoccupied with this problem, however, a much larger upheaval is occurring in their lives: Owen begins to surface with the truth about his homosexuality—which has hitherto found an outlet only in regular Sunday trips to gay porno movie houses. The novel contrasts Philip's pursuit of homosexual love—mainly guilt-free and aboveboard—and his eventual ability to "come out" cleanly to his parents with Owen's sleazy secret life and tormented self-confrontation.

Finally, encouraged by the example of his son and the other successfully functioning homosexuals he now sees all around him, Owen confesses to Rose. She had begun

to surmise the secret anyway (and has in fact been unfaithful due to Owen's unsatisfactory conjugal performance), but is nevertheless outraged. Owen then goes to Philip's apartment to tell him the big news and the novel ends with the two settling down for the night—the implication being that from now on Philip rather than Rose will be Owen's chief emotional support.

THIS awkward and unconvincing ending is perhaps indicative of the problematic shaping of a novel in which men and not women are the objects of pursuit. But there are other problems aplenty. The Benjamins' life together is curiously colorless and limited for a pair of Manhattanites with good educations and reasonably good jobs (Rose attended Smith, Owen has a Ph.D. in Renaissance studies). Moreover, to anyone who has ever been faced with the "co-op problem" it seems quite unlikely that a two-salary family with one child who have lived for years in a rent-stabilized apartment should be unable even to think seriously about buying at an insiders' price. Then, too, it is not clear why Rose is so horrified at the thought of having to move to another borough, since the Benjamins never seem to avail themselves of Manhattan's cultural amenities, unless we count Owen's trips to the porn parlors. In addition, they seem to have no friends, no functioning family besides Philip, and no social life.

The Benjamins' lackluster existence does begin to take on a symbolic role, however, as it is contrasted by Leavitt with that of another "family" in the book, the one belonging to Philip's first serious lover, Eliot. Eliot's now-deceased parents were "important Jewish intellectuals" who died in an automobile accident when he was young. He was subsequently adopted by a loving homosexual couple, and with them enjoyed a splendid childhood. One of his adoptive fathers is a famous writer of wonderful children's books that Philip especially loved as a child. The contented pair live in a sumptuous townhouse where Philip, as Eliot's

\* Knopf, 310 pp., \$17.95.

boyfriend, is invited for a marvelous dinner and made to feel warmly welcome. The whole situation, in short, is as idyllic as a tractor romance.

Leavitt eventually and unaccountably drops this subplot, but it has served its purpose: the grim, emotionally exacerbated heterosexual coupling of Rose and Owen cannot compare with the sweet, fructuous sharing of Derek and Geoffrey. Throughout Leavitt's work, indeed, heterosexual relationships, even when not troubled by the hidden homosexuality of the man, are a drab and sterile affair next to the rich possibilities of homosexuality. This is an obvious and fairly serious imaginative flaw. As the twice-rejected female, "the nearly invisible, the unnoticed, the undesired," Rose is treated with the usual Leavitt "compassion," but while she rails against the "self-gratification" of her men and lectures them petulantly that "In my day . . . you did without for the larger good," the tide of history is clearly against her. The heterosexual monopoly is being displaced, even as the Benjamins from their apartment.

As a literary device, the homosexual theme often veers out of Leavitt's aesthetic control. True, he does not flinch from showing us the seamier side of homosexual life, although he does so mainly to justify what can happen when so urgent an impulse is forced underground. But the contrast that emerges in the novel between, in effect, two forms of infantilism—idealized, almost childlike domesticity and disruptive pornographic energy—radically undercuts the seriousness with which Leavitt wants us to regard the homosexual "option." It is as if, for him, the ideal literary form were not so much the novel as the fairy tale, a form in which good and evil are engaged in premortal combat. For that reason alone readers looking for more mature literary satisfactions will inevitably find *The Lost Language of Cranes* a caricature of the real thing.

IN MANY ways, the material dealt with by Lorrie Moore is similar to David Leavitt's: lifeless marriages,

bad relationships, infidelity, divorce, lost children, mental breakdown, cancer and other diseases. In short, life as usual on the American scene. To be sure, Miss Moore's focus is more on the heterosexual side of things, but the sexual disorganization of modern life having become so extreme, this provides her with no special coherence or workable aesthetic form. Like Leavitt, too, Miss Moore stays mainly on the hard enameled surface of pain and works proficiently through cumulative detail. But her faculties of judgment are more astringent than his, and her prose tends to be peppy, humorous, wry, and sardonic in contrast to Leavitt's determined seriousness. Finally, whereas Leavitt's baggage of cultural awareness seems to begin with the television age (he ends his *Esquire* essay with what his generation learned from Mary Tyler Moore), Miss Moore actually appears to have read a little, listened to some music, looked at a few paintings, and seen some old movies.

Her first work, a collection of short stories entitled *Self-Help*, originally written as a master's thesis at Cornell, was published in 1985 when she was twenty-eight and widely acclaimed as "a remarkable debut by an original and gifted writer" and the "work of a sorcerer's apprentice." Six of the nine stories are written in the second-person style of self-help manuals: "How to Be an Other Woman," "The Kid's Guide to Divorce," "How" (about a woman who wants to leave an unsatisfying relationship but is stopped for a time when she discovers the man is sick), "How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)," "Amahl and the Night Visitors: A Guide to the Tenor of Love" (pun intended), and "How to Become a Writer."

Miss Moore seems to be saying with some sarcasm that modern life has grown so complex, its possibilities so multifarious, we are continuously in urgent need of fresh guidance. But the self-help form also mocks the old American idea that we can be steered smoothly through any situation, no matter how trying, painful, or even bizarre (one of the book's epigraphs is a quota-

tion from Amy Vanderbilt on how to shake hands with a man who has lost both arms), as well as the more contemporary notion that one should be able to manage life's vicissitudes, including death, divorce, and all-purpose unhappiness with the utmost equanimity.

But Miss Moore no more readily challenges the etiquette of contemporary manners and mores than does Leavitt. In fact, the forms she has chosen precisely serve her purpose in creating women who are "stylish about their victimization" (as she has put it). Thus, "How to Be an Other Woman" bright young college graduate stuck in a secretarial job becomes involved with a more established and professionally successful older man who turns out to be otherwise engaged:

After four movies, three concerts and two-and-a-half museums, you sleep with him. It seems the right number of cultural events. . . . He tells you his wife's name. . . . She is an intellectual property lawyer. . . . When he says "How do you feel about that?" don't say "Ridiculous" or "Get the hell out of my apartment." Prop your head up with one hand and say: "It depends. What is intellectual property law?"

The character tries to cope with the situation by making lists—lists of her former lovers, of things to do when she becomes angry with the man, of items in his medicine chest that clearly belong to a woman. She even assesses the relationship itself by means of a list:

1. The affair is demeaning.
2. Violates decency. Am I just some scampish tart, some tartish scamp?
3. No emotional support here.
4. Why do you never say "I love you" or "Stay in my arms forever my little tadpole" or "Your eyes set me on fire my sweet nubkin"?

Discovering that there is yet a third woman in his life, she explodes: "Tell him not to smoke in your apartment. Tell him to get out. . . . Slam the door like Bette Davis."

As a narrative device, the self-help "rap" is slyly, unfeeling, agnostic. Miss Moore follows her heroines into messy relationships

and out of them again, gaining and offering no particular insight in the process. A woman feels she should not abandon a sick man but then leaves anyway, and yet can give no shape to the event:

A week, a month, a year. The sadness will die like an old dog. You will feel nothing but indifference. The logy whine of a cowboy harmonica, plaintive, weary, it will fade into the hills slow as slow Hank Williams. One of those endings.

Miss MOORE's presiding deficiency in *Self-Help* is this willingness to settle for an utter lack of consequence, and it besets her second book, *Anagrams*, as well.\* The heroine of this novel, Benna Carpenter, is living through "that awful stage of life from the age of twenty-six to thirty-seven known as *rapidity*. It's when you don't know anything." Appropriately enough, this may be all *we* know for sure in this looking-glass novel. In five separate sections, Miss Moore creates five different lives for Benna, using the same basic set of characters. ("I was inspired by the idea of an anagram," she has explained, "which is the rearrangement of characters to make a new word. What I did was rearrange characters to make new worlds.")

Thus, in her different avatars, Benna is a cocktail-lounge singer, an aerobics instructor, a creative-writing teacher, a suburban housewife, and a mother, sometimes more than one at the same time. A character named Gerard also plays different roles in each section—sometimes a lover, more often a friend—and he too has different occupations. In most of the sections Benna has a delightful six-year-old daughter—but, we are told, she has imagined her—and a friend, Eleanor, smart, tough, witty, over thirty, and overweight.

AS BEST we can make out, Benna has had a rather shriveled, "downwardly mobile" childhood growing up in a trailer, and has lost her

mother to a "strange disease." Having completed "only five pages of a dissertation on Miltonic echoes in 19th- and 20th-century children's literature," Benna has dropped out of graduate school and shortly thereafter married, "not because I'd met Mr. Right, but simply because I felt like getting married." Soon she found herself asking, "Where does love go?" The marriage broke up and her husband died an alcoholic soon after. She now works part time at a small upstate community college, teaching poetry workshops to "congenital morons and savages." Although, or perhaps because, she seems to love poetry, she feels herself a "perpetrator of public fraud." An ultimately unsuccessful and rather humiliating affair between Benna and a student, a black veteran of the Vietnam war, causes distress in the Black Women's Equality Group on campus. "My life, what I've lived so far," she observes, "crumbles across its very center and the pieces float off at a slight distance and just stay there, jigsawed, glueless, and dead."

And that's the good news. In her various incarnations, Benna also endures infidelity, betrayal, an abortion, a breast lump, and an impacted wisdom tooth. She tries to invite her father to Thanksgiving but he has a new girlfriend. Gerard dies because of hospital incompetence. Benna loses her job, partly due to budget cuts but perhaps also because of the affair with her student. Determined to take a package-tour Caribbean vacation, she spends the night before departure with her divorced brother Louis who lives in Queens, and discovers that his life is a lonely, failed reflection of her own. "The two of them: How had they come to this?" she ponders. At the novel's end Benna has nothing left but the imagination that has apparently fashioned her different lives and even the daughter who is now her only friend.

The narrative switches back and forth between first and third per-

sons, heightening the dizzy sense of displacement, as does the steady stream of sardonic, sometimes mordant jokes, ranking from standup comedy ("Our sex life is disappearing . . . Gerard goes to the bathroom and I call it 'Shaking Hands with the Unemployed'") to linguistic wordplay ("Anguish as a Second Language") to Woody Allen mock-philosophy ("What does poetry owe the world? Are we all vagabonds at a cosmic dump or are we just not paying attention?"). As usual in Miss Moore's universe, Benna seems to understand her own defenses—both her self-absorption and her imaginary escapism—but, typically, such knowledge brings no consequence. Near the end of the novel, Benna is "stupid with loneliness, bereft of any truth or wisdom or flicker of poetry, possessed only of the wild glaze of a person who spends entire days making things up."

IN A different era this statement might have marked the beginning of a character's true self-confrontation, or at least of an author's confrontation with her material, but in ours it is just the lull before the next imaginary escape. In some ways Benna, at age thirty-three, is like one of David Leavitt's "older siblings" of the 60's, an exemplar of the kind of chronically aimless life typical of that generation of dropouts, early divorce, underemployment, and prolonged childlessness. Miss Moore's remedy for the turmoil of such a life is fantasy, while Leavitt's (in the words of the homosexual Philip Benjamin) is the desire for a "no more pleasurable life than the kind led within the comfy confines of a half-hour situation comedy." Neither of these two young writers seems to have the least understanding of how deeply they thereby signal their thralldom to the impoverished, disordered, and irresolute culture in which they have matured.

\* Knopf, 225 pp., \$15.95.