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Legal reasons: far greater were the existing outright or isolationist views of peace...

which exist in the continuing material, separately interacting action is Revisionist dispensing life on its own... instantiated Israeli citizens as free as those in their Arab world; housing and to anyone though a village, only 35 percents there... 51 percent fell by 20 percent... few individuals of an economic now or at all... is astonishing, number of individuals and economy... Arab citizens not as privileged as free as those, but they are in their Arab... As the real differences in current, which range in the possession of divergent attitudinal choices are need better understanding the cloud of that lies just over... Benvenisti, without such... measure of territory. An... the occupance, grew in or fifteen...ical vision and the lost... the New Jew, the reality... challenges and problems cannot match the dreams once held, the messianic belief—for such it is—that... their, the narrow and intolerant passions of molested and thrown made one humanly superior to those religious Jews whom Benvenisti scorns with all his soul... He is still riding on that bus in Haifa, still sneering at lesser mortals, 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 Zionism, 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.

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—

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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 politicked 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, loveless reasons like business or travel (or even accident, as in “Aliens”). Leavitt’s intricate portrayals of these females’ unhappiness and 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 woman 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 and 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
...longs for his admirer, her eyes, and his mother, glad to keep his distance, frequently spatting homosexual cou-

The Benjamins' lackluster life and tormented self-confrontation. Their building is going co-op, and the novel ends with the two lovers, 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...

The Lost

Owen has in fact been unfaithful due to 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 seamy 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 premoral 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 ardent than his, and her prose tending 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 quotation 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 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 morals than does Leavitt. In fact, she forms her choice precisely as 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 stuns in a secretarial job becomes involved with a more established, 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—list 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 scavenging 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 nubbin?"

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
dropping no particular insight in the
process. A woman feels she should
never abandon a sick man but then
does anyway, and yet can give no
description to the event:

A week, a month, a year. The
woman will die like an old dog.
You will feel nothing but indif-
ference. The logy whine of a cow-
boy harmonica, plaintive, weary,
it will fade into the hills slow as
dow Williams. One of those endings.

Miss Moore's presiding deficiency
in Self-Help is this willingness to
settle for an utter lack of conse-
quence, and it besets her second
book, Anagrams, as well. The
heroine of this novel, Benna Car-
penter, is living through the "aw-
ful stage of life from the age of
sixty-six to thirty-seven known as
maturity. 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 sepa-
rate sections, Miss Moore creates
different lives for Benna, using
the same basic set of characters.
"I was inspired by the idea of an an-
agram," 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 house-
wife, 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 oc-
cupations. 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, "down-
wardly mobile" childhood growing
up in a trailer, and has lost her
mother to a "strange disease." Hav-
ing 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 mar-
rriage 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 "congeni-
tal morons and savages."

Although, or perhaps because, she
seems to love poetry, she feels her-
sel a "perpetrator of public fraud."
An ultimately unsuccessful and
rather humiliating affair between
Benna and a student, a black
vetern of the Vietnam war, causes dis-
tress 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 Thanksgiv-
ing but he has a new girlfriend.
Gerard dies because of hospital
incompetence. Benna loses her job,
partly due to budget cuts but per-
haps also because of the affair with
her student. Determined to take a
package-tour Caribbean vacation,
she spends the night before de-
parture 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 mor-
dant jokes, ranging from standup
comedy ("Our sex life is disappear-
ing . . . Gerard goes to the bath-
room and I call it 'Shaking Hands
with the Unemployed'") to lin-
guistic wordplay ("Anguish as a
Second Language") to Woody Al-
len mock-philosophy ("What does
poetry owe the world? Are we all
vagabonds or are we all 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 loneli-
ness, 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-confronta-
tion, or at least of an author's con-
frontation 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, under-
employment, and prolonged child-
lessness. Miss Moore's remedy for
the turmoil of such a life is fan-
tasy, while Leavitt's (in the words
of the homosexual Philip Benja-
min) is the desire for a "no more
pleasurable life than the kind led
within the 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.

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