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American Plastic: The Matter of Fiction

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Reviewed:

Writing Degree Zero **and** ***Elements of Semiology***
by Roland Barthes
Beacon Press

S/Z
by Roland Barthes, translated by Richard Miller
Hill and Wang

+ See All

The New Novel is close to forty years old. Although forty is young for an American presidential candidate or a Chinese buried egg, it is very old indeed for a literary movement, particularly a *French* literary movement. But then what, recently, *has* one heard of the New Novel, whose official *vernissage* occurred in 1938 with Nathalie Sarraute's publication of *Tropismes*? The answer is not much directly from the founders but a good deal indirectly, for, with characteristic torpor, America's Departments of English have begun slowly, slowly to absorb the stern aesthetics of Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet, not so much through the actual writing of these masters as through their most brilliant interpreter, the witty, meta-camp sign-master and analyst of *le degré zéro de l'écriture* Roland Barthes, whose amused and amusing saurian face peers like some near-sighted chameleon from the back of a half dozen slim volumes now being laboriously read in Academe.

Barthes has also had a significant (or signifying) effect on a number of American writers, among them Mr. Donald Barthelme. Two years ago Mr. Barthelme was quoted as saying that the only American writers worth reading are John Barth, Grace Paley, William Gass, and Thomas Pynchon.[1] Dutifully, I have read all the writers on Mr. Barthelme's list, and presently I will make my report on a kind of writing that derives from, variously, Gertrude Stein, Joyce, and Beckett; from the American University itself, as fact and metaphor; from Dada, Zero Degree French novelists, and Roland Barthes himself. But, first, a look at M. Barthes.

For over twenty years Barthes has been a fascinating high critic who writes with equal verve about Charlie Chaplin, detergents, Marx, toys, Balzac, structuralism, and semiology. He has also put the theory of the New Novelists rather better than they have themselves, a considerable achievement since it is as theoreticians and not as practitioners that these writers excel. Unlike Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet, and Butor, Professor Barthes is much too clever

actually to write novels himself, assuming that such things exist, new or old, full of signs or not, with or without sequential narratives. Rather, Barthes has remained a commentator and a theoretician, and he is often pleasurable to read though never blissful, to appropriate his own terminology.

Unlike the weather, theories of the novel tend to travel from east to west. But then, as we have always heard (sometimes from the French themselves), the French mind is addicted to the postulating of elaborate systems in order to explain everything (including the inexplicable), while the Anglo-American mind tends to shy away from unified-field theories. We chart our courses point to point; they sight from the stars. The fact that neither really gets much of anywhere doesn't mean that we haven't all had some nice outings over the years.

Nine years ago I wrote an exhaustive and, no doubt, exhausting account of the theory or theories of the French New Novel. Rejected by the American literary paper for which I had written it (subject not all that interesting), I was obliged to publish in England at the CIA's expense. Things have changed since 1967. Today one can hardly pick up a Serious literary review without noting at least one obligatory reference to Barthes, or look at any list of those novelists currently admired by American English departments without realizing that although none of these writers approaches zero degree, quite a few are on the chilly side. This is not such a bad thing. Twice, by the way, I have used the word "thing" in this paragraph. I grow suspicious, as one ought to be in zero-land, of all *things* and their shadows, words.

Barthes's American admirers are particularly fascinated by semiology, a quasi-science of signs first postulated by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). For some years the school of Paris and its American annex have made much of signs and signification, linguistic and otherwise. Barthes's *Elements of Semiology* (1964) is a key work and not easy to understand. It is full of graphs and theorems as well as definitions and puzzles. Fortunately, Susan Sontag provides a useful preface to the American edition of *Writing Degree Zero*, reminding us that Barthes "simply takes for granted a great deal that we do not." Zero degree writing is that colorless "white" writing (first defined and named by Sartre in his description of Camus's *L'Etranger*). It is a language in which, among other things and no-things, metaphor and anthropomorphizing are eliminated. According to Sontag, Barthes is reasonable enough to admit that this kind of writing is but "*one* solution to the disintegration of literary language."

As for semiology or the "science" of signs, Barthes concedes that "this term, *sign*, which is found in very different vocabularies…is for these very reasons very ambiguous." He categorizes various uses of the word "from the Gospels to Cybernetics." I should like to give him a use of the word he seems not to know. The word for "sign" in Sanskrit is "lingam," which also means "phallus," the holy emblem of our Lord Shiva.

In *S/Z* (1970) Barthes took "Sarrasine," a Balzac short story, and subjected it to a line by line, even a word by word analysis. In the course of this assault, Barthes makes a distinction between what he calls the "readerly text" and the "writerly text" (I am using Mr. Richard Miller's translation of these phrases). Barthes believes that "the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text. Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce…between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and its reader. This reader is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness—he is intransitive; he is, in short, *serious*. Opposite the writerly text, then, is its countervalue, its negative, reactive value: what can be read but not written: the *readerly*. We call any readerly text a classic text." Then "the writerly is the novelistic without the novel, poetry without the poem…. But the readerly texts? They are products (and not productions), they make up the mass of our literature. How [to] differentiate this mass once again?"

Barthes believes that this can be done through "*interpretation* (in the Nietzschean sense of the word)." He has a passion, incidentally, for lizard-like dodges from the direct statement by invoking some great reverberating name as an adjective, causing the reader's brow to contract. But then the lunges and dodges are pretty much the matter as well as the manner of Barthes's technique as he goes to work on Balzac's short story of a man who falls in love with a famous Italian singer who turns out to be not the beautiful woman of his dreams but a castrated Neapolitan boy.

I do not intend to deal with Barthes's "interpretation" of the text. It is a very elaborate and close reading in a style that seems willfully complicated. I say willfully because the text of itself is a plain and readerly one in no need of this sort of assistance, not that Barthes wants to assist either text or reader. Rather he means to make for his own delectation or bliss a writerly text of his own. I hope that he has succeeded.

Like so many of today's academic critics, Barthes resorts to formulas, diagrams; the result, no doubt, of teaching in classrooms equipped with blackboards and chalk. Envious of the half-erased theorems—the prestigious *signs*—of the physicists, English teachers now compete by chalking up theorems and theories of their own, words having failed them yet again.

Fair stood the wind for America. For twenty years from the east have come these thoughts, words, signs. Let us now look and see what our own writers have made of so much exciting heavy weather, particularly the writers Mr. Donald Barthelme has named. Do they show signs of the French Pox?

Two years ago, I had read some of Gass, tried and failed to read Barth and Pynchon. I had never read Mr. Barthelme and I had never heard of Grace Paley. I have now made my way through the collected published works of the listed writers as well as through Mr. Barthelme's own enormous output. I was greatly helped in my journey through these texts by Mr. Joe David Bellamy's *The New Fiction*, a volume containing interviews with most of the principals and their peers.

Over the years I have seen but not read Donald Barthelme's short stories in *The New Yorker*. I suppose I was put off by the pictures. Barthelme's texts are usually decorated with perspective drawings, ominous faces, funny-looking odds and ends. Let the prose do it, I would think severely, and turn the page, looking for S.J. Perelman. I was not aware that I was *not* reading one who is described in *The New Fiction* as, "according to Philip Stevick…'the most imitated fictionist in the United States today.' " Mr. Stevick is plainly authority to the interviewer, who then gets Barthelme to say a number of intelligent things about the life of a "fictionist" today. Mr. Barthelme tells us that his father was "a 'modern' architect." Incidentally, it is now the fashion to put quotes around any statement or word that might be challenged. This means that the questionable word or statement was not meant literally but ironically or "ironically." Another way of saying, "Don't hit me. I didn't really 'mean' it." As son of a School of Barnstone architect, Barthelme came naturally by those perspective drawings that so annoyed (and still annoy) me. He has worked as an editor and "I enjoy editing and enjoy doing layout-problems of design. I could very cheerfully be a typographer."

Barthelme's first book, *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*, contains short stories written between 1961 and 1964. This was the period during which Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet and Barthes were being translated into English. Although Robbe-Grillet's *For a New Novel* was not translated until 1965, Nathalie Sarraute's *Tropismes* was translated in 1963 as were such essential novels as *Le Planétarium, Fruits d'or, Jalousie*, and *Le Voyeur*. I note the fact of translation only because Barthelme admits to our common "American lack-of-language." Most American and English writers know foreign literature only through translation. This is bad enough when it comes to literature but peculiarly dangerous when it comes to theory. One might put the case that without a French education there is no way of comprehending, say, Roland Barthes (Sontag suggests as much). One can only take a piece here, a piece there, relate it to the tradition that one knows, and hope for the best. There is comfort, however, in knowing that the French do not get the point to us either.

The stories in *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* are fairly random affairs. Barthelme often indulges in a chilling heterosexual camp that is, nevertheless, quite a bit warmer than zero degree centrigrade. There are funny names and cute names. Miss Mandible. Numerous nonsequiturs. Dialogue in the manner not only of Ionesco but of Terry Southern (another Texas master). One can read any number of Barthelme's lines with a certain low-keyed pleasure. But then silliness stops the eye cold. " 'You're supposed to be curing a ham.' 'The ham died,' she said." The Marx Brothers could get a big laugh on this exchange because they would already have given us a dozen other gags in as many minutes. Unhappily one small gag on its own shrivels and dies. " '*You* may not be interested in absurdity,' she said firmly, 'but absurdity is interested in *you*.' "

Three years later came *Snow White*. This fiction was billed by the publisher as "a perverse fairy tale." The book is composed of fairly short passages. Quotation marks are used to enclose dialogue and there are the usual number of "he saids" and "she replieds." This is an important point. *Truly* new writing

eliminates quotation marks and “he saids.” Barthelme is still cooking on a warm stove. The seven dwarfs are indistinguishable from one another and from the heroine. But the somewhat plodding tone of this work holds the attention rather better than did any of those fragments in the first volume. Yet Barthelme is compelled always to go for the easy twist. “Those cruel words remain locked in his lack of heart.” Also, he writes about the writing he is writing:

> We like books that have a lot of *dreck* in them, matter which presents itself as not wholly relevant (or indeed at all relevant) but which, carefully attended to, can supply a kind of “sense” of what is going on. This kind of “sense” is not to be obtained by reading between the lines (for there is nothing there, in those white spaces) but by reading the lines themselves….

Roland Barthes, his mark.

U*nspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* (1968) contains fifteen pieces mostly published in *The New Yorker*. Occasionally the text is broken with headlines in the Brechtian manner. With film subtitles. With lists. One list called *Italian Novel* names sixteen Italian writers “she” was reading. Most are fashionable; some are good; but the premier Sciascia has been omitted. *What can this mean?*

Many proper names from *real* life appear in these texts. Paul Goodman, J.B. Priestley, Julia Ward Howe, Anthony Powell, Godard. Also *Time, Newsweek*, the Museum of Modern Art. Curiously enough those names that are already invested with an *a priori* reality help the texts which, as usual, maunder, talking to themselves, keeping a dull eye out for the odd joke as the author tries not to be himself a maker of dreck but an arranger of dreck.

The most successful of the lot is “Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning.” The reader brings to the story an altogether too vivid memory of the subject. We learn from the interview in Bellamy’s book that, though the story “is, like, made up,” Barthelme did use a remark that he heard Kennedy make about a geometric painter (” ‘Well, at least we know he has a ruler’ “…high wit from Camelot). Yet the parts that are not, like, made up are shrewd and amusing and truthful (relatively, of course). Also, the see-Jane-run style is highly suited to a parody of a contemporary politician on the make as he calculates his inanities and holds back his truths (relative—and relatives, too) and rage. Mr. William Gass takes an opposite view of this story. “Here Barthelme’s method fails; for the idea is to *use* dreck, not write about it.” But surely one can do both. Or neither. Or one. Or the other. But then Mr. Gass thinks that Barthelme at his best “has the art to make a treasure out of trash….”

Throughout Barthelme’s work one notes various *hommages* to this writer or that (who lives at Montreux? and where will one hear the ultimate message *Trink*?); some are a bit too close. For instance, the famous opening scene of Beckett’s *Molloy* in which a father is carrying his son becomes in “A Picture History of the War”: “Kellerman, gigantic with gin, runs through the park at noon with his naked father slung under one arm.”

City Life (1970). Fourteen short stories, much as before except that now Barthelme is very deep into fiction's R and D (Research and Development) as opposed to the old-fashioned R and R (Rest and Recuperation). There are, galore, graphics. Big black squares occupy the center of white pages. Elaborate studies in perspective. Lots of funny old pictures. There are wide white margins, nice margins, too. There are pages of questions and answers (q and a). Father returns. In fact, the first paragraph of the first story is: "An aristocrat was riding down the street in his carriage. He ran over my father."

It must be said that America's most imitated young writer is also not only the most imitable but one of the most imitative. *Hommage* to Robbe-Grillet:

> Or a long sentence moving at a certain pace down the page aiming for the bottom —if not the bottom of this page then of some other page—where it can rest, or stop for a moment to think about the questions raised by its own (temporary) existence, which ends when the page is turned, or the sentence falls out of the mind that holds it (temporarily) in some kind of an embrace

and so on for eight whole pages with *not one full stop*, only a breaking off of the text, which is called "Sentence." The only development in "Sentence" is that what looks to be Robbe-Grillet at work in the first lines turns gradually (temporarily) into something like Raymond Roussel. Not quite zero degree: at the frozen pole no sentence ever thinks or even "thinks."

Sadness (1972). More stories. More graphics. The pictures are getting better all the time. There is a good one of a volcano in eruption. The prose…as before. Simple sentences. "Any writer in the country can write a beautiful sentence," Barthelme has declared. But he does not want to be like any writer in the country: "I'm very interested in awkwardness: sentences that are awkward in a particular way." What is "beauty," one wonders, suspicious of words. What, for that matter, is "awkward" or "particular"? But we do know all about sentences and occasionally among the various tributes to European modern masters (in translation), certain themes (or words) reoccur. One is the father. Of that more later. Also, drunkenness. In fact, alcohol runs like a torrent through most of the writers I have been reading. From Barthelme to Pynchon there is a sense of booziness, nausea, hangover.

> I say: "I'm forty. I have bad eyes. An enlarged liver."
>
> "That's the alcohol," he says.
>
> "Yes," I say.
>
> "You're very much like your father, there."

The only pages to hold me were autobiographical. Early dust-jacket pictures of Barthelme show an amiable-looking young man upon whose full upper lip there is a slight shadow at the beginning of the lip's bow. The dust jacket of *Sadness* shows a bearded man with what appears to be a harelip. Barthelme explains that he has had an operation for a "basal-cell malignancy" on his upper lip. True graphics, ultimately, are not old drawings of volcanoes or of perspective but of the author's actual face on the various dust jackets, aging in

a definitely serial way with, in Barthelme's case, the drama of an operation thrown in, very much in the R and R tradition, and interesting for the reader though no doubt traumatizing for the author.

G*uilty Pleasures* (1974). This writer cannot stop making sentences. I have stopped reading a lot of them. I feel guilty. It is not pleasurable to feel guilty about not reading every one of those sentences. I do like the pictures more and more. In this volume there are more than thirty, pictures. In the prose I spotted *hommages* to Calvino, Borges, early Ionesco. I am now saving myself for *The Dead Father*, the big one, as they say on Publisher's Row, the first big novel, long awaited, even heralded.

In *The Pleasure of the Text*, published just before *The Dead Father* (and by the same American publisher), Roland Barthes observes: "Death of the Father would deprive literature of many of its pleasures. If there is no longer a Father, why tell stories? Doesn't every narrative lead back to Oedipus? Isn't storytelling always a way of searching for one's origin…. As fiction, Oedipus was at least good for something: to make good novels…." Apparently Barthelme took the hint. In *The Dead Father* a number of people are lugging about the huge remains of something called The Dead Father. Only this monster is not very dead because he talks quite a bit. The people want to bury him but he is not all that eager to be buried. Barthelme ends his book by deliberately burying the eponymous hero and, perhaps, fiction too. All of this is very ambitious.

Barthelme's narrative is reasonably sequential if lacking in urgency. There is, as always, Beckett: "said Julie, let us proceed. / They proceeded." Within the book is A Manual for Sons, written in a splendid run-on style quite at odds with the most imitated imitable writing that surrounds this unexpectedly fine burst of good writing on the nature of fathers, sons. For the record: there are no quotation marks. And no pictures. There is one diagram of a *placement*; but it is not much fun.

I am not sure that my progress through all these dull little sentences has been entirely justified by A Manual for Sons, but there is no doubt that beneath the mannerisms, the infantile chic, the ill-digested culture of an alien world, Barthelme does have a talent for, of all things in this era, writing. Shall I quote an example? I think not. Meanwhile, Barthelme himself says, "I have trouble reading, in these days. I would rather drink, talk or listen to music…. I now listen to rock constantly." Yes.

I can only assume that Grace Paley is a friend of Mr. Barthelme because she does not belong to what a certain Hack of Academe named Harry T. Moore likes, mistakenly, to call a *galère*. Paley is a plain short-story writer of the R and R school, and I got a good deal of pleasure from reading her two collections of short stories, *The Little Disturbances of Man* (with the nice subtitle: "Stories of Men and Women at Love") and *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*. She works from something very like life…I mean "life"; she has an extraordinary ear for the way people sound. She do the ethnics in different voices. Although she tends, at times, to the plain-Jane or see-Jane-run kind of

writing, her prose has such a natural energy that one is not distracted, a sign of good writing if not of a blissful text (she is close to boiling, in any case, and will never freeze).

With William Gass we are back in R and D country. I read Gass's first novel *Omensetter's Luck* in 1966 and found much to admire in it. Gass's essays are often eerily good. At his best, he can inhabit a subject in a way that no other critic now writing can do (see, in particular, his commentaries on Gertrude Stein). He seems not to have enjoyed being interviewed in Bellamy's collection, and his tone is unusually truculent (of New York quality lit. types: "I snub them"). It should be noted that of the writers admired by Barthelme only William Gass is an intellectual in the usual sense (I put no quotes around the words "intellectual," "usual," or "sense"). Gass's mind is not only first-rate but far too complex to settle for the easy effects of, say, Mr. Barthelme. But then: "As a student of philosophy, I've put in a great deal of time on the nature of language and belong, rather vaguely, to a school of linguistic philosophy which is extremely skeptical about the nature of language itself."

Gass has a complaint about Barth, Borges, and Beckett: "occasionally their fictions, conceived as establishing a metaphorical relationship between the reader and the world they are creating, leave the reader too passive." This is fair comment, though open to the question: just what is passive in this context? Ought the reader to be dancing about the room? blood pressure elevated? adrenalin flowing as he and the text battle one another? But then Gass shifts ground in his next sentence but one: "I have little patience with the 'creative reader.' " In other words the ideal reader is active but not creative. Quotation marks are now in order to protect these adjectives from becoming meaningless.

"I rarely read fiction and generally don't enjoy it." Gass is as one with the other R and D writers of fiction today. Although they do not read with any pleasure what anyone else is doing, they would like, naturally, to be themselves read with pleasure…by whom? Perhaps a college of writerly texts, grave as cardinals.

Gass himself is a curious case. Essentially, he is a traditional prose writer, capable of all sorts of virtuoso effects on the inner ear as well as on the reading eye. Yet he appears to have fallen victim to the R and D mentality. Speaking of a work in progress, "I hope that it will be really original in form and in effect, although mere originality is not what I'm after." This is worthy of Jimmy Carter.

> Fiction has traditionally and characteristically borrowed its form from letters, journals, diaries, autobiographies, histories, travelogues, news stories, backyard gossip, etc. It has simply *pretended* to be one or other of them. The history of fiction is in part a record of the efforts of its authors to create for fiction its own forms. Poetry has its own. It didn't borrow the ode from somebody. Now the novel is imagined news, imagined psychological or sociological case studies, imagined history…feigned, I should say, not imagined. As Rilke shattered the journal form with *Malte*, and Joyce created his own for *Ulysses* and *Finnegan*, I should like to create mine.

There seems to me to be a good deal wrong not only logically but aesthetically and historically with this analysis. First, poetry has never *had* its form. The origins of the ode are ancient but it was once created if not by a single ambitious schoolteacher, then by a number of poets roving like Terence's rose down the centuries. Certainly in this century poetry has gone off in as many directions as the novel, an art form whose tutelary deity is Proteus. The more like something else the novel is, the more like its true self it is. And since we do not *have* it, we can go on making it. Finally, whether or not a work of art is feigned or imagined is irrelevant if the art is good.

Like many good books, *Omensetter's Luck* is not easy to describe. What one comes away with is the agreeable memory of a flow of language that ranges from demotic midwest ("I just up and screams at him—thump thump thump, he'd been going, die die die—I yell…") to incantatory ("For knowledge, for good and evil, would Eve have set her will against her Father's? Ah, Horatio…"). In his interview the author tells us that he knows nothing of the setting (an Ohio river town); that everything is made up. He also confesses, "I haven't the dramatic imagination at all. Even my characters tend to turn away from one another and talk to the void. This, along with my inability to narrate, is my most serious defect (I think) as a writer and incidentally as a person."

The stories in *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* seem to me to be more adventurous and often more successful than the novel. "The Pedersen Kid" is beautiful work. In a curious way the look of those short sentences on pages uncluttered with quotation marks gives the text a visual purity and coldness that perfectly complements the subject of the story, and compels the reader to know the icy winter at the country's heart. In most of these stories the prevailing image is winter.

> Billy closes his door and carries coal or wood to his fire and closes his eyes, and there's simply no way of knowing how lonely and empty he is or whether he's as vacant and barren and loveless as the rest of us are—here in the heart of the country.

At actual zero degree, Gass, perversely, blazes with energy.

The title story is the most interesting of the collection. Despite a sign or two that the French virus may have struck: "as I write this page, it is eleven days since I have seen the sun," the whole of the story (told in fragments) is a satisfying description of the world the narrator finds himself in, and he makes art of the quotidian:

> My window is a grave, and all that lies within it's dead. No snow is falling. There's no haze. It's not still, not silent. Its images are not an animal that waits, for movement is no demonstration.

What is art?

Art is energy shaped by intelligence. The energy that the text of *Madame Bovary* generates for the right reader is equal to that which sustains the consumer of *Rebecca*. The ordering intelligence of each writer is, of course, different in kind and intention. Gass's problem as an artist is not so much his inability to come up with some brandnew Henry Ford-type invention that will prove to be a breakthrough in world fiction (this is never going to happen) as what he calls his weak point—a lack of dramatic gift—which is nothing more than low or rather intermittent energy. He can write a dozen passages in which the words pile up without effect. Then, suddenly, the current, as it were, turns on again and the text comes to beautiful life (in a manner of speaking of course…who does not like a living novel? particularly one that is literate).

> I have seen the sea slack, life bubble through a body without a trace, its spheres impervious as soda's.

For a dozen years I have been trying to read *The Sot-Weed Factor*. I have never entirely completed this astonishingly dull book but I have read most of John Barth's published work and I feel that I have done him, I hope, justice. There is a black cloth on my head as I write.

First, it should be noted that Barth like Gass, is a professional school-teacher. He is a professor of English *and* Creative Writing. He is extremely knowledgeable about what is going on in R and D land and he is certainly eager to make his contribution. Interviewed, Barth notes "the inescapable fact that literature—because it's made of the common stuff of language—seems more refractory to change in general than the other arts." He makes the obligatory reference to the music of John Cage. Then he adds, sensibly, that "the permanent changes in fiction from generation to generation more often have been, and are more likely to be, modifications of sensibility and attitude rather than dramatic innovations in form and technique."

Barth mentions his own favorite writers. Apparently "Borges, Beckett and Nabokov, among the living grand masters (and writers like Italo Calvino, Robbe-Grillet, John Hawkes, William Gass, Donald Barthelme)—*have* experimented with form and technique and even with the *means* of fiction, working with graphics and tapes and things…." What these writers have in common (excepting Robbe-Grillet) "is a more or less fantastical, or as Borges would say, 'irrealist,' view of reality…." Barth thinks—hopes—that this sort of writing will characterize the Seventies.

What is "irrealism"? Something that cannot be realized. This is a curious goal for a writer though it is by no means an unfamiliar terminus for many an ambitious work. Further, Barth believes that realism is "a kind of aberration in the history of literature." I am not exactly sure what he means by realism.

After all, the Greek myths that he likes to play around with were once a "reality" to those who used them as stuff for narrative. But then Barth broods. "Perhaps we should *accept* the fact that writing and reading are essentially linear activities and devote our attention as writers to those aspects of experience that can best be rendered linearly—with words that go left to right across the page; subjects, verbs and objects; punctuation!" He ends with the rather plaintive, "The trick, I guess, in any of the arts at this hour of the world, is to have it both ways." How true!

T*he Floating Opera* (1956) and *The End of the Road* (1958) are two novels of a kind and that kind is strictly R and R, and fairly superior R and R at that. The author tells us that they were written in his twenty-fourth year, and a good year it was for him. Publishers meddled with the ending of the first novel. He has since revised the book and that is the version I read. It is written in first person demotic (Eastern shore of Maryland, Barth's place of origin). The style is garrulous but not unattractive. "I was just thirty-seven then, and as was my practice, I greeted the new day with a slug of Sherbrook from the quart on my window sill. I've a quart sitting there now, but it's not the same one…."

There is a tendency to put too much in, recalling Barthes's "The Prattle of Meaning" (*S/Z*): certain storytellers

> impose a dense plenitude of meaning or, if one prefers, a certain redundancy, a kind of semantic prattle typical of the archaic—or infantile—era of modern discourse, marked by the excessive fear of failing to communicate meaning (its basis); while, in reaction, in our latest—or "new" novels,

the action or event is set forth "without accompanying it with its signification."

Certainly Barth began as an old-fashioned writer who wanted us to know all about the adulteries, money-hassling, and boozing on what sounded like a very real Eastern Shore of a very real Maryland, as lacking in bears as the seacoast of Illyria: "Charley was Charley Parks, an attorney whose office was next door to ours. He was an old friend and poker partner of mine, and currently we were on opposite sides in a complicated litigation…."

In 1960 Barth published *The Sot-Weed Factor*. The paperback edition is adorned with the following quotation from *The New York Times Book Review*: "Outrageously funny, villainously slanderous…. The book is a brass-knuckled satire of humanity at large…." I am usually quick, even eager, to respond to the outrageously funny, the villainously slanderous…in short to *The New York Times* itself. But as I read on and on, I could not so much as summon up a smile at the lazy jokes and the horrendous pastiche of what Barth takes to be eighteenth-century English (" 'Tis not that which distresses me; 'tis Andrew's notion that I had vicious designs on the girl. 'Sheart, if anything be improbable, 'tis…' "). I stopped at page 412 with 407 pages yet to go. The sentences would not stop unfurling; as Peter Handke puts it in *Kaspar*: "Every

sentence helps you along: you get over every object with a sentence: a sentence helps you get over an object when you can't really get over it, so that you really get over it," etc.

To read Barth on the subject of his own work and then to read the work itself is a puzzling business. He talks a good deal of sense. He is obviously intelligent. Yet he tells us that when he turned from the R and R of his first two novels to the, well, megalo-R and R of *The Sot-Weed Factor*, he moved from "a merely comic mode to a variety of farce, which frees your hands even more than comedy does." Certainly there are comic aspects to the first two books. But the ponderous jocosity of the third book is neither farce nor satire nor much of anything except English-teacher-writing at a pretty low level. I can only assume that the book's admirers are as ignorant of the eighteenth century as the author (or, to be fair, the author's imagination) and that neither author nor admiring reader has a sense of humor, a fact duly noted about Americans in general—and their serious ponderous novelists in particular—by many peoples in other lands. It still takes a lot of civilization gone slightly high to make a wit.

Giles Goat-Boy arrived on the scene in 1966. Another 800 pages of ambitious schoolteacher-writing: a book to be taught rather than read. I shall not try to encapsulate it here, other than to say that the central metaphor is the universe is the university is the universe. I suspect that this will prove to be one of the essential American university novels and to dismiss it is to dismiss those departments of English that have made such a book possible. The writing is more than usually clumsy. A verse play has been included. "*Agnora*: for Pete's sake, simmer down, boys. Don't you think / I've been a dean's wife long enough to stink / my public image up?"

Barth thinks that the word "human" is a noun; he also thinks that Giles is pronounced with a soft "g" as in "guile" instead of a hard "g" as in "giant." But then the unlearned learned teachers of English are the new barbarians, serenely restoring the Dark Ages.

By 1968 Barth was responding to the French New Novel. *Lost in the Funhouse* is the result. A collection (or, as he calls it, a "series") of "Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice." Barth is not about to miss a trick now that he has moved into R and D country. The first of the series, "Night-Sea Journey," should—or could—be on tape. This is the first-person narrative of a sperm heading, it would appear, toward an ovum, though some of its eschatological musings suggest that a blow-job may be in progress. Woody Allen has dealt more rigorously with this theme.

The "story" "Lost in the Funhouse" is most writerly and self-conscious; it chats with the author who chats with it and with us. "Description of physical appearance and mannerisms is one of several standard methods of characterization used by writers of fiction." Thus Barth distances the reader from the text. A boy goes to the funhouse and…. "The more closely an author identifies with the narrator, literally or metaphorically, the less advisable it is, as a rule, to use the first-person narrative viewpoint." Some of this

schoolteacherly commentary is amusing. But the ultimate effect is one of an ambitious but somewhat uneasy writer out to do something brand-new in a territory already inhabited by, among other texts that can read and write, the sinister *Locus Solus*, the immor(t)al *Tlooth* and the dexterous *A Nest of Ninnies*.

It is seldom wise for a born R and R writer to make himself over into a R and D writer unless he has something truly formidable and new to show us. Barth just has books. And sentences. And a fairly clear idea of just how far up the creek he is without a paddle. “I believe literature’s not likely ever to manage abstraction successfully like sculpture for example, is that a fact, what a time to bring up that subject….” What a time! And what is the subject, Alice? Incidentally, Barth always uses quotation marks and “he saids.”

In 1972 Barth published three long stories in a volume called *Chimera*. Two of the stories are based on Greek myths, for are they not, as admirers of Jung declare, part of the racial memory, the common stock of all our dreams and narratives? Well, no, they are not. The Greek myths are just barely relevant to those Mediterranean people who still live in a landscape where the *anima* of a lost world has not yet been entirely covered with cement. The myths are useful but not essential to those brought up on the classics, the generation to which Dr. Jung (and T.S. Eliot) belonged; and of course they are necessary to anyone who would like to understand those works of literature in which myth plays a part. Otherwise they are of no real use to Americans born in this century. For us Oedipus is not the doomed king of Thebes but Dr. Freud’s depressing protagonist, who bears no relation at all to the numinous figure that Sophocles and Euripides portrayed. Thebes is another country, where we may not dwell.

Joyce’s *Ulysses* is often regarded as a successful attempt to use Greek myth to shore up a contemporary narrative. But it is plain to most noncreative readers that the myth does not work at all in Joyce’s creation and were it not for his glorious blarney and fine naturalistic gifts, the book’s classical structure alone could not have supported the novel. Since Joyce, alas, the incorporation of Greek myth into modern narrative has been irresistible to those who have difficulty composing narrative, and no Greek. These ambitious writers simply want to give unearned resonance to their tales of adultery on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, of misbehavior in faculty rooms, of massive occlusions in the heart of the country. But the results are deeply irritating to those who have some sense of the classical world and puzzling, I would think, to those taking English courses where the novel is supposed to have started with Richardson.

Barth has browsed through Robert Graves’s *The Greek Myths* (and gives due acknowledgment to that brilliantly eccentric custodian of the old world). At random, I would guess, Barth selected the story of Bellerophon (tamer of Pegasus) for modernizing; also, more to his point, Perseus, the slayer of Medusa. The first story is taken from Arabian mythology, a narrative called “Dunyazadiad,” as told by the “kid sister of Scheherazade.” It should also be noted that two of the stories in *Lost in the Funhouse* were wacky versions of certain well-known highjinks in old Mycenae.

The kid sister of Scheherazade is a gabby co-ed who mentions with awe the academic gifts of her sister "Sherry," "an undergraduate arts-and-sciences major at Banu Sasan University. Besides being Homecoming Queen, valedictorian-elect, and a four-letter varsity athlete…. Every graduate department in the East was after her with fellowships." This unbearable cuteness has a sinister side. Since Barth's experience of literature and the world is entirely that of a schoolteacher, he appears to take it for granted that the prevailing metaphor for his own life (and why not all life itself?) is the university. There is also an underlying acceptance of the fact that since no one is ever going to read him except undergraduates in American universities, he had better take into account that their reading skills are somewhat underdeveloped, their knowledge of the way society works vague, and their culture thin.

Barth's *Hamlet* would no doubt begin, "Well, I guess flunking out of Rutgers is no big deal when I got this family up in Wilmington where we make these plastics that, like, kill people but I'm changing all that or I was going to up until my mother went and married this asshole uncle of mine…." Perhaps this is the only way to get the classics into young television-shrunk minds. But the exercise debases both classic and young minds. Of course Barth is no fool. He is often quick to jump in and forestall criticism. Sherry's kid sister remarks: "currently, however, the only readers of artful fiction were critics, other writers, and unwilling students who, left to themselves, preferred music and pictures to words."

Sherry is helped in her literary efforts to think up 1001 stories by a genie who is, like so many of Barth's male protagonists, a *thoroughly good person*: his policy "was to share beds with no woman who did not reciprocate his feelings." For a United Statesman (posing as an Arabian genie), this is true heterosexual maturity. In case we missed Barth's first testimonial to the genie's niceness, we are later told that "he was no more tempted to infidelity than to incest or pederasty." I guess this makes him about the best genie on campus. Between Genie and Sherry there is a lot of talk about the nature of fiction, which is of course the only reason for writing university fiction. There is not a glimmer of intelligence in this jaunty tale.

Barth was born and grew up a traditional cracker-barrelly sort of American writer, very much in the mainstream—a stream by no means polluted or at an end. But he chose not to continue in the vein that was most natural to him. Obviously he has read a good deal about Novel Theory. He has the standard American passion not only to be original but to be great, and this means creating one of Richard Poirier's "worlds elsewhere": an alternative imaginative structure to the mess that we have made of our portion of the Western hemisphere. Aware of French theories about literature (but ignorant of the culture that has produced those theories), superficially acquainted with Greek myth, deeply involved in the academic life of the American university, Barth is exactly the sort of writer our departments of English were bound, sooner or later, to produce. Since he is a writer with no great gift for language

either demotic or mandarin, Barth's narratives tend to lack energy; and the currently fashionable technique of stopping to take a look at the story as it is being told simply draws attention to the meagerness of what is there.

I am obliged to remark upon the sense of suffocation one experiences reading so much bad writing. As the weary eyes flick from sentence to sentence, one starts *willing* the author to be good. Either I have become shell-shocked by overexposure to the rockets' red glare and bombs bursting in air or Barth has managed a decent narrative in "Perseid." As usual, the language is jangling everyday speech. "Just then I'd've swapped Mycenae for a cold draught and a spot of shade to dip it in…." The gods and demigods are straight from Thorne Smith, who ought to be regarded, in A.H. Harry T. Moore's *galère*. as the American Dante. But the story of the middle-aged Perseus and his problems of erection (and love) with a young girl seems at times authentic, even true… despite Barth's unremitting jocosity: " 'Were you always psychosexually weak, or is that Andromeda's doing?' "

In some way, the writers' interviews are more revealing about the state of fiction than the books they write. The twelve writers interviewed for Joe David Bellamy's book often sound truculent; also, uneasy. For instance, John Gardner (whose *Grendel* I much admired) is very truculent, but then Mr. Barthelme is on record as not admiring him; this cannot help but hurt. Gardner is as much his own man as anyone can be who teaches school and wants to get good reviews from his fellow teachers in *The New York Times Book Review*. Yet he dares to say of *The Sot-Weed Factor*: "nothing but a big joke. It's a philosophical joke; it might even be argued that it's a philosophical advance. But it ain't like Victor Hugo." It also ain't an advance of any kind. Although Gardner is myth-minded, he is much more intuitive and authentic than the usual academic browser in Robert Graves's compendium. Gardner also knows where proto-myths are to be found: Walt Disney's work, for one.

Gardner tells us that "most writers today are academicians: they have writing or teaching jobs with universities. In the last ten years the tone of university life and of intellectuals' responses to the world have changed. During the Cold War there was a great deal of fear and cynicism on account of the Bomb." Gardner then makes the astonishing suggestion that when the other Americans (those somewhat unreal millions condemned to live off-campus) turned against the Vietnam war (after eight years of defeat), the mood changed in the universities as the academicians realized that "the people around you are all working hard to make the world better." A startling observation. In any case, the writers of University or U-novels will now become more life-affirming than they were in the sad Sixties; "notable exceptions are writers who very carefully stay out of the mainstream and therefore can't be influenced by the general feeling of people around them."

At first I thought Gardner was joking. But I was wrong. He really believes that the mainstream of the world is the American university and that a writer outside this warm and social-meliorizing ambiance will fall prey to old-fashioned cynicism and hardness of heart. For instance, "Pynchon stays out of universities. He doesn't know what chemists and physicists are doing; he

knows only the pedantry of chemistry and physics. When good chemists and physicists talk about, say, the possibility of extraterrestrial life, they agree that for life to be evolved beyond our stage, creators on other planets must have reached decisions we now face." Removed from the academic mainstream and its extra-terrestrial connections, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* is just an apocalyptic "whine."

Fortunately, Gardner's imagination is fabulous; otherwise, he would be fully exposed in his work as being not only *not* in the mainstream of American society but perfectly irrelevant in his academic *cul de sac*. Yet if he is right that most contemporary writers are also teaching school and listening in on warm-hearted life-enhancing physicists and chemists as they talk of their peers on other planets, then literature has indeed had its day and there will be no more books except those that teachers write to teach.

Although Barthelme has mentioned Pynchon as one of the writers he admires, neither Gass nor Barth refers to him and Gardner thinks him a "whiner" because he no longer spawns in the mainstream of Academe. I daresay that it will come as news to these relatively young writers that American literature, such as it is, has never been the work of schoolteachers. Admittedly, each year it is harder and harder for a writer to make a living from writing, and many writers must find the temptation to teach overwhelming. Nevertheless, those of us who emerged in the Forties (Roosevelt's children) regarded the university (as did our predecessors) as a kind of skid row, certainly even worse than a seven-year writer's contract at Columbia. Except for Saul Bellow, I can think of no important novelist who has taught on a regular basis throughout a career.

I find it admirable that of the nonacademics Pynchon did not follow the usual lazy course of going for tenure as did so many writers—no, "writers"—of his generation. He is thirty-nine years old and attended Cornell (took a class from former Professor V. Nabokov); he is eminently *academebile*. The fact that he has got out into the world (somewhere) is to his credit. Certainly he has not, it would seem, missed a trick; and he never whines.

Pynchon's first novel, *V.*, was published in 1963. There is some similarity to other R and D works. Cute names abound. Benny Profane, Dewey Gland, Rachel Owlglass. Booze flows through scene after scene involving members of a gang known as The Whole Sick Crew. The writing is standard American. "Kilroy was possibly the only objective onlooker in Valletta that night. Common legend had it he'd been born in the U.S. right before the war, on a fence or latrine wall." Above this passage is a reproduction of the classic Kilroy sketch; below this passage there is a broken-line Kilroy. These are the only graphics in a long book that also contains the usual quotation marks and "he saids." All in all, a naturalistic rendering of an essentially surrealist or perhaps irrealist subject, depending on one's apprehension of the work.

Benny Profane is described as "a schlemihl and human yo-yo." He is a former sailor. On Christmas Eve 1955 he is in Norfolk, Virginia. He goes into a bar, "his old tin can's tavern on East Main Street." People with funny names

sing songs at each other (lyrics provided in full by the author) and everyone drinks a lot. There is vomiting. Scene with a girl: “What sort of Catholic was she? Profane, who was only half Catholic (mother Jewish), whose morality was fragmentary (being derived from experience and not much of it)….” Profane is “girl-shy” and fat. ” ‘If I was God…’ ” begins a fantasy. Definitely a clue to the state of mind of the creator of the three books I have been reading.

A shift from Profane to “Young Stencil, the world adventurer” and the mystery woman V. Eliptical conversation (1946) between a margravine and Stencil (whose father Sidney was in the British foreign office; he died in Malta “while investigating the June Disturbances”). They sit on a terrace overlooking the Mediterranean. “Perhaps they may have felt like the last two gods.” Reference to an entry in father’s journal, ” ‘There is more behind and inside V. than any of us had suspected. Not who, but what: what is she.’ ” Stencil pursues the idea of V. A quest: “in the tradition of *The Golden Bough* or *The White Goddess*.”

From various references to Henry Adams and to physics in Pynchon’s work, I take it that he has been influenced by Henry Adams’s theory of history as set forth in *The Education of Henry Adams* and in the posthumously published “The Rule of Phase Applied to History.” For Adams, a given human society in time was an organism like any other in the universe and he favored Clausius’s speculation that “the entropy of the universe tends to a maximum” (an early Pynchon short story is called “Entropy”).

Pure entropy is that state at which no heat/energy enters or leaves a given system; or if energy should leave the system, its loss will be balanced by an equal acquisition from outside: lose Sarmatia, gain Dacia. But nothing known is constant. The Second Law of Thermodynamics appears to be absolute: everything in time loses energy to something else and, finally, drops to zero (centigrade) and dies or, perhaps, ceases to be matter as it was and becomes anti-matter. Question: to anti-matter are we anti-anti-matter or no matter at all?

I have little competence in the other of Lord Snow’s celebrated two cultures. Like so many other writers I flunked physics. But I know my Adams and I can grasp general principles (without understanding how they have been arrived at); in any case, to make literature, a small amount of theory (correct or incorrect) is enough to provide commanding metaphors. Pynchon’s use of physics is exhilarating and as an artist he appears to be gaining more energy than he is losing. Unlike the zero writers, he is usually at the boil. From Adams he has not only appropriated the image of history as Dynamo but the attractive image of the Virgin. Now armed with these concepts he embarks in *V.* on a quest, a classic form of narrative, and the result is mixed, to say the least.

To my ear, the prose is pretty bad, full of all the rattle and buzz that were in the air when the author was growing up, an era in which only the television commercial was demonically acquiring energy, leaked to it by a declining

Western civilization. Happily, Pynchon is unaffected by the French disease, except for one passage: “Let me describe the room. The room measures 17 by 11 1/2 feet by 7 feet. The walls are lathe and plaster…. The room is oriented so that its diagonals fall NNE/SSW, and NW/SE.” As another ex-seaman, I appreciate Pynchon’s ability to box the compass, something no French ice-cream vendor could ever do. With this satisfying send-up, Pynchon abandons the New Novel for his own worlds and anti-worlds.

The quest for V. (the Virgin? or nothing much?) takes Stencil to Valletta, capital of Malta, a matriarchal island, we are told, where manhood must identify itself with the massive rock. There are clues. False scents. Faust is on the scene. And Profane is also in Malta. The prose is very close to that of the comic books of the Fifties:

> “Thirteen of us rule the world in secret.”
>
> “Yes, yes. Stencil went out of his way to bring Profane here. He should have been more careful; he wasn’t. Is it really his own extermination he’s after?”
>
> Maijstral turned smiling to him. Gestured behind his back at the ramparts of Valletta. “Ask her,” he whispered. “Ask the rock.”

Energy nicely maintained; controlling intelligence uneven.

With *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) Pynchon returns to the quest, to conspiracy. Cute names like Genghis Cohen, an ancient Hollywood joke. Bad grammar: “San Narcisco lay further south,” “some whirlwind rotating too slow for her heated skin.” A lot of booze. Homophobia. Mysteries. It would appear that most of the courses Pynchon took at Cornell are being used: first-year physics, psychology, Jacobean tragedy—but then his art is no doubt derived “from experience and not much of that.”

This time the grail is an alternative postal service. Haunting the narrative is the noble house of Thurn and Taxis (the wife of a descendant was a literary agent in the United States: known to Pynchon? Also, Rilke’s patroness was a princess of that house). Jokes: ” ‘I was in the little boys’ room,’ he said. ‘The men’s room was full.’ ” There are numerous images of paranoia, the lurking “they” who dominate the phantom postal service of the Tristero (sometimes spelled Trystero), a mirror-alternative in earlier times to the Thurn and Taxis postal monopoly. “While the Pony Express is defying deserts, savages and sidewinders, Tristero’s giving its employees crash courses in Siouan and Athapascan dialects. Disguised as Indians their messengers mosey westward. Reach the coast every time, zero attrition rate, not a scratch on them. The entire emphasis now toward silence, impersonation, opposition masquerading as allegiance.’ ” Well, Joyce also chose exile, cunning, silence, but eschewed allegiance’s mask. Lot 49 has been cried. Who will bid?

Gravity’s Rainbow (1973) contains close to 900 densely printed pages. For a year I have been reading in and at the text. Naturally, I am impressed that a clear-cut majority of the departments of English throughout North America

believe this to be the perfect teachers' novel. I am sure that they are right. Certainly no young writer's book has been so praised since Colin Wilson's *The Outsider*.

The first section of *Gravity's Rainbow* is called "Beyond the Zero." Plainly a challenge not only to *l'écriture blanche* but to proud entropy itself. Pynchon has now aimed himself at anti-matter, at what takes place beyond, beneath the zero of freezing, and death. This is superbly ambitious and throughout the text energy hums like a…well, dynamo.

The narrative begins during the Second War, in London. Although Pynchon works hard for verisimilitude and fills his pages with period jabber, anachronisms occasionally jar (there were no "Skinnerites" in that happy time of mass death). The controlling image is that of the V-2, a guided missile developed by the Germans and used toward the end of the war (has Pynchon finally found V.? and is she a bomb?). There is an interesting epigraph from Werner von Braun: "Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation." Braun believes "in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death." So much then for zero degree. This quasi-Hindu sentiment is beguiling and comforting and, no doubt, as concerns matter, true: in time or phases, energy is always lost but matter continues in new arrangements. Personally, I find it somber indeed to think that individual personality goes on and on beyond zero, time. But I am in a minority: this generation of Americans is god-hungry and craves reassurance of personal immortality. If Pynchon can provide it, he will be as a god—rather his intention, I would guess.

It is curious to read a work that excites the imagination but disturbs the aesthetic sense. A British critic no longer in fashion recently made the entirely unfashionable observation that prose has everywhere declined in quality as a result of mass education. To compare Pynchon with Joyce, say, is to compare a kindergartener to a graduate student (the permanent majority of the culturally inadequate will promptly respond that the kindergartener *sees* more clearly than the graduate student and that his incompetence with language is a sign of innocence not ignorance and hence grace). Pynchon's prose rattles on and on, broken by occasional lengthy songs every bit as bad, lyrically, as those of Bob Dylan.

> *Light-up, and-shine, you—incandescent Bulb Babies!*
> *Looks-like ya got rabies*
> *Just lay there foamin' and a-screamin' like a buncha littledemons,*
> *I'm deliv'rin' unto you a kingdom of roaches….*

England. Germany. Past. Present. War. Science. Tell-tale images of approaching…deity? Two characters with hangovers "are wasted gods urging on a tardy glacier." Of sandbags at a door, "provisional pyramids erected to gratify curious gods' offspring." And "slicks of nighttime vomit, pale yellow, clear as the fluids of gods." Under deity, sex is central to this work of transformation. A character's erections achieve a mysterious symbiosis with the V-2s. A sadist abuses a young man and woman. "Every true god must be

both organizer and destroyer." A character declaims: " 'If only S and M could be established universally, at the family level, the state would wither away.' " This is a nice joke (although I thought S and M was already universal at the family level). " 'Submit, Gottfried. Give it all up. See where she takes you. Think of the first time I fucked you…. Your little rosebud bloomed.' " Hard to believe that it is close to a decade since that pretty moss tea-rose was first forced, as it were, in my greenhouse.

Eventually, the text exhausts patience and energy. In fact, I suspect that the energy expended in reading *Gravity's Rainbow* is, for anyone, rather greater than that expended by Pynchon in the actual writing. This is entropy with a vengeance. The writer's text is ablaze with the heat/energy that his readers have lost to him. Yet the result of this exchange is neither a readerly nor a writerly text but an uneasy combination of both. Energy and intelligence are not in balance, and the writer fails in his ambition to be a god of creation. Yet his ambition and his failure are very much in the cranky, solipsistic American vein, and though I doubt if anyone will ever want to read all of this book, it will certainly be taught for a very long (delta) time: "approaching zero, eternally approaching, the slices of time growing thinner and thinner, a succession of rooms each with walls more silver, transparent, as the pure light of the zero comes nearer…." Everything is running down. We shall freeze. Then what? A film by Stanley Kubrick?

Richard Poirier is more satisfied than I with Pynchon's latest work. For one thing, he is awed by the use of science. But neither Poirier nor I will ever know if the theorems are correct. Only a physicist who wrote good prose could tell us if, say, Heisenberg's famous and culturally deranging principle[2] is correctly used in these many, many pages. Like Barthelme, Pynchon is very much a product of the late Fifties (Eisenhower's children), is enamored of dreck. As for the use of science,…well, Sputnik was a trauma for the US. Overnight the physicists became the lords of the university and the English teachers lost their ancient prestige. Given this state of affairs, it was inevitable that one of Ike's kids would try to redress the balance and make literature out of physics.

Approvingly, Poirier quotes Wordsworth's hope that the poet would one day "be ready to follow the steps of the Man of science, not only in those general indirect effects, but he will be at his side, carrying sensation into the midst of science itself." Pynchon would appear to fulfill Wordsworth's reverie. He is as immersed in contemporary physics and cybernetics as Henry Adams was in the scientific theories of *his* day. But the scientific aspects of Pynchon's work will eventually become as out-of-date as those of Henry Adams. Science changes: one day we are monists, the next day pluralists. Proofs are always being disproven by other proofs. At the end, there are only words and their arrangement.

Poirier compares Pynchon to the Faulkner of *Absalom, Absalom* and finds both likeness and a significant difference, for "this genius of our day is shaped by thermodynamics and the media, by Captain Marvel rather than by Colonel

Sartoris.” This is no doubt a true description, but is the result as good? or good? What I find to be tedious and random in Pynchon’s list-making, Poirier sees as so many

> Dreiserian catalogues of the waste materials of our world that only by remaining resolutely on the periphery, without ever intruding himself into the plotting that emanates from his material, only than can he see what most humanly matters.

“Matter,” a verb. “Matter,” a noun. The matter of fiction has been expanded by Pynchon’s ascent from zero degree (writing as well as centigrade); nevertheless, entropy is sovereign. That which gains energy/heat does so at the expense of that which is losing energy/heat to it. At the end there is only the cold and no sublunary creatures will ever know what songs the quasars sing in their dark pits of anti-matter.

I cannot help but feel a certain depression after reading Mr. Barthelme’s chosen writers. I realize that language changes from generation to generation. But it does not, necessarily, improve. The meager rattling prose of all these writers, excepting Gass, depresses me. Beautiful sentences are not easy to write, despite Mr. Barthelme’s demur. Since beauty is relative only to intention, there are doubtless those who find beauty in the pages of books where I find “a flocculent appearance, something opaque, creamy and curdled, something powerless ever to achieve the triumphant smoothness of Nature. But what best reveals it for what it is is the sound it gives, at once hollow and flat; its noise is its undoing, as are its colors, for it seems capable of retaining only the most chemical-looking ones. Of yellow, red and green, it keeps only the aggressive quality….” What is “it”? The work of the new American formalists? No, “it” is plastic, as described by Barthes in *Mythologies*.

The division between what I have elsewhere called the Public novel and the University novel is now too great to be bridged by any but the occasional writer who is able to appeal, first to one side, then to the other, fulfilling the expectations (more or less) of each. I find it hard to take seriously the novel that is written to be taught, nor can I see how the American university can provide a base for the making of “new” writing when the American university is, at best, culturally and intellectually conservative and, at worst, reactionary.

Academics tell me that I am wrong. They assure me that if it were not for them, the young would never read the Public novels of even the recent past (Faulkner, Fitzgerald). If this is true, then I would prefer for these works decently to die rather than to become teaching-tools, artifacts stinking of formaldehyde in a classroom (original annotated text with six essays by the author and eight critical articles examining the parameters of the author’s vision). But the academic bureaucracy, unlike the novel, will not wither away, and the future is dark for literature. Certainly the young in general are not going to take up reading when they have such easy alternatives as television, movies, rock. The occasional student who might have an interest in reading will not survive a course in English, unless of course he himself intends to become an academic bureaucrat.

As for Thomas Pynchon, one can applaud his deliberate ascent from Academe into that dangerous rainbow sky in which he will make his parabola and fall as gravity pulls him back to where he started, to Academe, to zero, or to (my first graphic, ever).

Letters:

Name Withheld

Plastic Fiction

October 28, 1976

Paul Illert

Plastic Fiction

October 28, 1976

Gore Vidal

Gore Vidal (1925–2012) was an American novelist, essayist, and playwright. His many works include the memoirs *Point to Point Navigation* and *Palimpsest*, the novels *The City and the Pillar, Myra Breckinridge*, and *Lincoln*, and the collection *United States: Essays 1952–1992*.

1. I am told that Mr. Barthelme later, sensibly, denied having made such an exclusive pronouncement. ↩

2. The Uncertainty Principle, composed in 1927, states that one cannot, reliably, determine the position and the speed of a particle simultaneously. Applied to literature, this principle means that nothing can ever really be known, described, or judged. ↩