Introduction

Cluster on Modern Fiction

LIFE'S NONSENSE pierces us with strange relations, a modern writer said. The cluster of essays in this issue shows what he meant. Their coming together was, if not a nonsensical affair, at least a wholly fortuitous one. No PMLA issue on modern fiction was intended in advance; the essays gathered here were not written toward an announced topic; and the Editorial Board did not elect to print them on the ground that they formed a unified issue. They were accepted for PMLA one by one, through the usual process of anonymous submission and hundred-eyed review, and it was only afterward that "strange relations" were detected among them—relations sufficiently interesting to warrant their appearing together.

They form a group, then, only through happy accident and editorial afterthought, and the introducer of this group—himself an afterthought—should begin by acknowledging what, as a group, they are not. No presumption is made that these four essays survey the whole field of modern fiction. Many vigorous branches of that subject are not considered in the pieces printed here. Nor do these essays "represent," in any inclusive way, the work being done on modern fiction. They exhibit some modes of critical engagement, but other modes, equally prominent, are not here on display.

Still, while they should not be given a symbolic status they have no wish to claim, these essays do represent four strong instances of recent criticism of near recent work. And if we took them even provisionally as a sample, they might let us reflect a little on such criticism's present state.

One thought these essays might provoke is how fractured, indeed how extraordinarily unintegrated and unhomogenized, recent literary modernity remains both in artistic practice and as a critical construct. Some phases of literary history have had powerfully integrative definitions proposed for them while they were unfolding: many modernists learned what modernism was before they produced their "modernistic" work. Other historical phases have had integrations conferred on them retrospectively: although American writers of the 1840s and 1850s did not experience
themselves as an "American Renaissance," modern readers have always read them through this concept and, more recently, through the reconfigured but equally integrating concept of an "other American Renaissance." Not so—or not yet so—with more recent literary history. No articulation of comparable authority has yet arisen to put together Anglo-American fiction produced since 1930 or so (the period surveyed here). As a result, the whole heterogeneous range of work that always undergoes reduction when a unifying definition comes to power has stayed in sight in this field. Witness the fact that the books analyzed here—Dashiell Hammett's Red Harvest, Graham Greene's Brighton Rock, Norman Mailer's Of a Fire on the Moon, Russell Hoban's Riddley Walker—are neither exactly classics nor, really, texts marginalized by the classical status of other texts but are simply some of the very numerous, very mixed set of books that make up the category modern fiction. The concept of the postmodern—the leading candidate for the role of unifying (and thus simplifying) the field of contemporary cultural production—is well known to these essays, but it is striking that this construct does not dominate or delimit any of their critical agendas. They undertake four different projects, and they show the many questions that can be asked in a field of thought when no dominant Idea has organized it.

To no one's surprise, the essays have one thing in common—namely, that they figure the modern under the aspect of the dark, the tough, the disastrous, and the depressing. Carl Freedman and Christopher Kendrick find their representative text in the hard-boiled Red Harvest, set in a town named Personville but better known as Poisonville, where a presumably humane workers' movement has been suppressed by capitalists using gangsters to support their "free market" and where even that alliance becomes the object of a further capitalist monopolization of force. Neil Nehring's piece centers on Graham Greene's depression-bred image of ne plus ultra incivility in the sociopath Pinkie Brown and on punk culture's revival of that image under the dispiriting conditions of 1970s Britain. Joe Tabbi turns from social scenarios of dehumanization to a scientific one, Of a Fire on the Moon's nightmare of a perfect usurpation of human subjectivity by inhuman technology. The ultimate horror associated with technology—nuclear holocaust—has already happened in Peter Schwenger's chosen text, the postbomb fantasia Riddley Walker.

The world these essays posit is (in Captain Ahab's words) mortally intolerable. But I take it that, against this backdrop, these essays are always and only interested in the question how, and to what end, and with what gain, men and women figure their dreadful situation and, by figuring it, resist it. Not for these critics the optimism that a residual humanism made possible in an earlier generation: one hears nothing here about that abstract universal "Man" whom Faulkner, in his post-Hiroshima Nobel Prize address, said would endure, even prevail. If these essays are representative, such bald humanism is either a repudiated or a forbidden attitude in contemporary criticism, replaced by a wary circumspection—most especially, by the suspicion that the apparently liberated or subversive may
be complicit in maintaining a repressive order, as Hammett’s Op proves anything but oppositional. Still, behind their general distrust of the cult of the free human spirit, these essays remain focused on figuration as a possible work of resistance. Schwenger’s subject is what he calls “the paradoxes of nuclear representation,” that the unthinkable nevertheless must be thought and the unimaginable imagined—an action he finds endemic not just to post-nuclear-war fiction but to narrative at large. From a treasure trove in a Sixty-Second Street warehouse Tabbi has unearthed an unpublished manuscript chapter of Of a Fire on the Moon that shows Mailer engaged in pure counterscientific speculation, in a visionary assertion that human subjectivity is not negated by the technological but is constituted through the interactions of consciousness’s technologized and existential dimensions. Nehring, aware of every irony that has been mounted against liberationist theories of popular culture, still strives to find a truly affirmative character (not Herbert Marcuse’s ironic one) in punk, in its explosion of cliche and its art of cultural détournement (a word that refers to embezzlement, kidnapping, and hijacking, among other things). Having relentlessly exposed the Continental Op’s likeness to the oppressive agents he only apparently departs from, Freedman and Kendrick try to rescue Hammett’s narration from a like complicity—in effect, to preserve literary writing as a counterhegemonic force of critique.

Wallace Stevens defines poetry as a “violence from within that protects us from a violence without.” A violence from without is assumed in these pieces; but so is a force, however shyly named, that resists it, if only by giving it articulated form. The most striking similarity among these essays is that they believe so ardently in reading and in recent fiction as something worth reading for its power of figuring the current world. Fortuitous collection that they are, they can be said to have this much of a common faith (I quote from Henry James’s panegyric in his essay “The Future of the Novel”):

Man rejoices in an incomparable faculty for presently mutilating and distorting any plaything that has helped create for him an illusion of leisure; nevertheless, so long as life retains its power of projecting itself upon his imagination, he will find the novel work off the impression better than anything he knows. Anything better for the purpose has assuredly yet to be discovered. He will give it up only when life itself too thoroughly disagrees with him. Even then, indeed, may fiction not find a second wind, or fiftieth, in the very portrayal of that collapse?

James concludes with a line one wants to weight every word of in this context, since the literal unpeopling of the world—whether through proliferating social violence, as in the mass-extirmination novel Red Harvest, or through technological holocaust, as in Hoban’s “Bad Time”—is at issue in every work discussed here:

Till the world is an unpeopled void there will be an image in the mirror. 

(109–10)
Work Cited