Four Postwar American Novelists: Bellow, Mailer, Barth, and Pynchon by Frank D. McConnell (review)

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In short, *The Novels of John Steinbeck* is a thesis-ridden book, but there are also moments when Levant's good critical sense manages to transcend all the heady constructionist talk. Connie Joad, for example, is characterized as a man with

> . . . plenty of substance. He is married to Rose of Sharon and deserts her because he has no faith in the family's struggle to reach California. His faith is absorbed in the values of "the Bank," in getting on, in money, in any abstract goal. He wishes to learn about technology in order to rise in the world. He does not admire technology for itself, as Al does. He is a sexual performer, but he loves no one. Finally, he wishes that he had stayed behind in Oklahoma and taken a job driving a tractor. In short, with Connie, Steinbeck chooses brilliantly to place a "Bank" viewpoint within the family. By doing so, he precludes a simplification of character and situation, and he endorses the complexity of real people in the real world (pp. 106-07).

To be sure, Levant is out to make a structural point, but his reading generates from Steinbeck's novel rather than an imposed framework. The difference is a crucial one. As E.M. Forster points out in *Aspects of the Novel*, a rigid pattern "may externalize the atmosphere, spring naturally from the plot, but it shuts the doors on life and leaves the novelist doing exercises, generally in the drawing-room." Saul Bellow says much the same thing more simply: "I never fully know what I am out to do until I have done it." In the case at hand, rigid patterns may extend the scope of Steinbeck scholarship, but they shut too many windows and leave the critic inside his blinders, generally inside his study.

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McConnell, Frank D. *Four Postwar American Novelists: Bellow, Mailer, Barth, and Pynchon*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1977. 206 pp. Cloth: $15.00.

It is Frank McConnell's almost heroic thesis that American fiction after World War II abandoned an apocalyptic vision in favor of fictions which transform the city once more into the basis for nourishing myth. In separate chapters, he examines these "fictions of continuity" which come to grips with the central modern dilemma of inauthenticity in the representative work of Bellow, Mailer, Barth, and Pynchon. McConnell associates each with a distinctive strategy of survival. For Bellow it is the value of civilization and the awareness of tradition as a humanizing element; for Mailer, the resistance of personal style; for Barth, the self-consciously parodic repossession of conventional narrative forms; for Pynchon, the confrontation of the nightmare of history by the process of fiction. Animating these concerns, McConnell finds the recent fictional awareness of America's historic role as a projection of the European dream of Edenic possibility, an awareness which allows the transformation of irrationality from a state of mind to a fictional metaphor. Accordingly, postmodern fiction in general takes on the abreactive character McConnell associates chiefly with Pynchon, takes on, that is, a tension between aesthetic demands and the claims for social transaction that recapitulates the isolation celebrated by the early modernists in an attempt to resolve it.

Though McConnell recognizes the revisions of and struggle against the romantic assertions of American literature, his insistence on its current affirmative posture echoes that of such critics as Marcus Klein, Richard Rupp, and, more recently, Raymond Olderman. Unhappily, however, McConnell does not make a case for the contemporary individual or collective achievement that he equates with the American Renaissances of the 1850s or the 1920s. Nor does the city as the myth underlying much of contemporary fiction receive more than occasional attention. Rather the argument of this study shifts back and forth between the effect and the dynamic of fiction. In what prove to be mostly self-contained analyses, McConnell is led often to discover reversals or inversions, alluding to them both by explicit references scattered throughout the text and by rhetorical structuring in which evidence that seems to invite one interpretation is used to arrive at a contrasting one. The very grisliness of *The End of the Road,* for example, accounts for the sustaining impression it leaves. *Lost in the Funhouse* gives evidence of being Barth's most controlled and even moving work "precisely because of the impulse behind its trifling, its self-indulgence, and its confessional frivolity." Similarly, Bellow's resistance to the development of fiction becomes itself a defining element of that fiction, his articulation of social responsibility, though in conflict with self-transcendence, is revealed ultimately to be an essential element of that transcendence, his polarity of gentile and Jew an indication of the basic unity in human society.

Equally troublesome is McConnell's feverish style marked by the frequent use of apposition to expand meaning and hyperbole to enforce judgment and by the absence of formal citations for secondary sources or even text and page reference for primary ones. The latter omission is made particularly glaring by both McConnell's occasional lapses in factual accuracy and by his questionable readings of the text. Janet Leigh rather than Eleanor Parker is identified as the actress who played Deborah in the film version of *An American Dream;* Jake Horner's terminal destination is termed ambiguous though he clearly indicates at the beginning of the narrative that he has followed the doctor to the new Pennsylvania location; Herzog is seen anticipating the arrival of his brother and his mistress when in fact he has said goodbye to one and is troubled by the forthcoming visit of the other. Further, the end of Herzog's desire to write letters is cited as evidence of his willingness to suffer though the letters are not so much protests against suffering as rehersals of them; they permit him, Herzog insists, to transform reality into language where it can testify to an ideal order.

McConnell's suggestion that a fabulous element underlies Bellow's eye for realistic detail is helpful in counteracting the Naturalistic label that still attaches itself to much of his work. The city, for example, does not necessarily oppress Bellow's characters. As often as not they draw strength from it, so that echoing Dreiser, Bellow reflects an ambivalence made more pronounced by the uncertainty about whether his perspective is that of objective narration or the distorted view of his protagonists. McConnell's opposition of New York and Chicago as contrasting emotional centers, however, addresses only a peripheral aspect of Bellow's complex treatment of the city and makes little use of earlier studies of it by Ralph Freedman, David Weimer, and Mark Christhilf, among others.

Similarly, McConnell's discussion of Pynchon overlooks much of the thematic complexity that informs, say, the notion of Conspiracy, which, for McConnell, represents the demonic element. In the searches of Stencil, Oedipa, or Slothrop, however, Conspiracy is responsible at once not only for the mechanically fragmented quality of modern life but for the order which, if it exists at all, affords a counterforce to that quality. Against both public and private emptiness, Pynchon poses the struggle to keep life from disolving by remaining, somehow, on the Street despite its serving as the arena for what one of his

characters calls the fiction of continuity, despite even the recognition of the ordering impulse as a defining principle of entropic annihilation.

McConnell calls attention to the hallucinatory, even fictitious quality of reality and the consequent blurring of fact and fiction which informs much of the way we have come to think of the postmodern period, and he illuminates the creative strategies novelists have adopted to deal with the seemingly consequent dead end to which fiction is subject. Yet his discussion leaves unanswered for the most part the questions it raises about the altered relations between fiction and reality that result from the increasing self-consciousness which from a manner of composition has almost preemptively become the subject of contemporary fiction. Along with this shift has come a concern for formal experimentation distinct from that of the earlier classicism of Eliot and Pound in both its spontaneity and in the radical redefinitions of human personality on which it insists. Contemporary fiction no longer takes its authority from an additive view of reality or from a narrative structure such a view supports. Without adequately addressing those conditions, McConnell leaves open to challenge his fundamental assertion that the quartet of writers he examines is representative of the postmodern imagination. Neglected are those writers who reveal what John Barth, in another context, called a concern for "nonsignificant surfaces." The complementary depthlessness and discontinuities which as much as anything else shape their view of reality suggest that the central activity of postmodern fiction may be that of defining its own function.

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