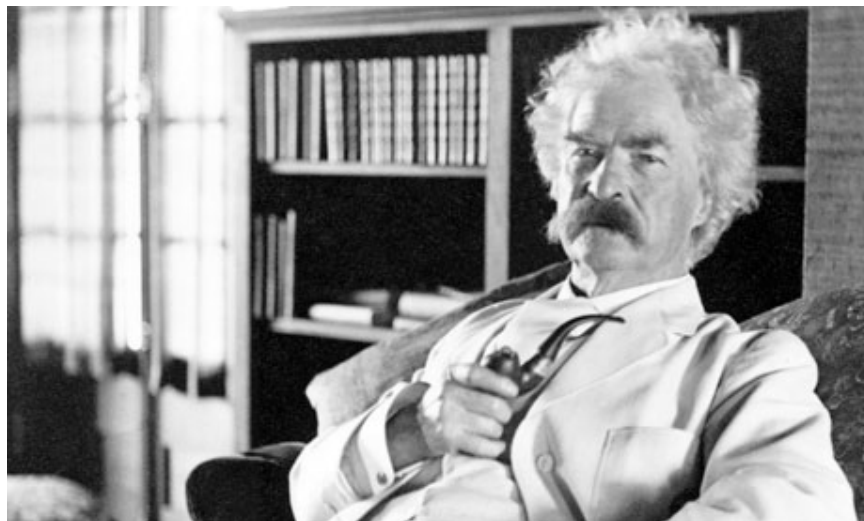


THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Philosophy is Everybody's Business

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There is only one expert who is qualified to examine the souls and the life of a people and make a valuable report—the native novelist. ... And when a thousand able novels have been written, there you have the soul of the people; and not anywhere else can these be had.
—Mark Twain

THE GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL

Will there ever be another?

Roger Kimball

A couple of years ago, I was asked to give a talk about “The American Novel Today.” It wasn’t my first choice of topic, frankly, partly because I read as few contemporary novels as possible, partly (here we get into cause and effect) because most of the novels that get noticed today (like most of the visual art that gets the Establishment’s nod) should be filed under the rubric “ephemera,” and often pretty nasty ephemera at that. I do not, you may be pleased to read, propose to parade before you a list of those exercises in evanescence, self-parody, and general ickiness that constitute so much that congregates under the label of American fiction

these days. Instead, I'd like to step back and make some observations on the place of fiction in our culture today, A.D. 2012. It is very different from the place it occupied in the 19th century, or even the place it occupied up through the middle of the last century.

We get a lot of new novels at my office. I often pick up a couple and thumb through them just to keep up with what is on offer in the literary bourse. The delicate feeling of nausea that ensues as my eye wanders over these bijoux is as difficult to describe as it is predictable. The amazing thing is that it takes only a sentence or two before the feeling burgeons in the pit of the stomach and the upper lip grows moist with sweat. I am not generally a fan of the Green party, but at those moments I feel a deep kinship with their cause: All those lovely trees, acres and acres of wood pulp darkened, and for what? No one, I submit, should pay good money for a college education and then be expected to ruminate over the fine points of what is proffered to us by the fiction industry today.

I know that I am not alone in this feeling. Indeed, whenever I mention the contemporary novel to friends, the reaction tends to alternate between bemusement and distaste. The bemusement comes from those who are at a loss to think of any current American novels I might wish to talk about. "I'll check my bookshelves when I get home," one well-read wag with a large private library wrote me, "to see if I have any contemporary American novels." Those expressing distaste, on the other hand, do have the novels on their shelves, but they have made the mistake of having read them, or at least read in them.

This might be the appropriate moment to issue a disclaimer. I do not deny that there are good novels written today. I think, for example, of the spare, deeply felt novels of Marilynne Robinson, especially *Gilead*, her quiet masterpiece from a few years back. It might even be argued (I merely raise this as a possibility) that there are as many good novels being written today as in the past. It is sobering to reflect that between 1837—when Victoria ascended the throne and Dickens's first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, was published—and 1901—the year of Victoria's death—some 7,000 authors published more than 60,000 novels in England. How much of that vast literary cataract has stood the test of time? How can we hope that our perfervid literary output will escape the exigent discriminations visited upon all prior periods? Jonathan Franzen. Bret Easton Ellis. Jay McInerney. Dave Eggers. Toni Morrison. Feel free to extend the list: Criticism is not prophecy, nevertheless I predict those and many other glittering darlings of the moment will

be forgotten as surely as those 59,967 novels from the Victorian period whose names, for us, are writ in water.

There is, however, another question, or rather set of questions, that I want to broach. And let me underscore the interrogative nature of what I am suggesting: When I say that there are a set of questions I would like to discuss, I do not mean that I have a satchel full of answers to which I have surreptitiously affixed question marks for rhetorical effect. I mean, rather, that I have sensed a change in the relation of literature to life and that this change, however we might best describe it, has had and will likely continue to have a profound effect on how we understand the significance of fiction. In any event, I'd like to bracket, as the phenomenologists say, the issue of how good American fiction now is and concentrate instead on what I have been calling in my own mind the "traction of fiction." Whatever we think about the literary accomplishments of a Toni Morrison or a Jay McInerney, I think that most of us would agree that, today, fiction exercises a different, and less vital, claim on our attention than it once did. Such, anyway, has been my observation.

And I would go further. It's not just contemporary fiction that is suffering from this form of existential depreciation: The same thing, I believe, is happening, perhaps to a lesser extent, with the fiction of the past. The novel plays a different and a diminished role in our cultural life as compared with even the quite recent past.

Matthew Arnold once described literature as "a criticism of life." He looked to literature, to culture generally, to provide the civilizing and spiritually invigorating function that religion had provided for earlier ages. And to a large extent, culture proved itself up to the task. Horace once said that the aim of poetry was to delight and instruct. For much of its history, literature has been content to stress the element of delight: to provide what Henry James, in an essay on the future of the novel, described as "the great anodyne." If a tale could beguile an idle hour, that was enough.

But there was a moment, an extended moment that lasted many decades, in which some fiction consciously performed a patently moral role quite apart from its value as entertainment. I should stress that by "moral" I do not necessarily mean moralistic or even didactic. Some fiction was indeed patently didactic, but much of the best fiction was moral in a broader, more insinuating sense. Its designs upon the reader—and the reader's designs upon it—were often laced with equivocation and ambiguity, but were no less im-

perative for that. It was in this context, perhaps, that we should understand James's observation (in that same essay) that the novel was "the most immediate and . . . admirably treacherous picture of actual manners." I feel sure that, could we but fully unpack the union of those words "admirably" and "treacherous" in James's understanding, we would understand a great deal. If we understood also what he meant by "manners" we would be in very good shape indeed.

My point here is to suggest that changes in our culture have precipitated changes in the novel or, more to the point, changes in the reception and spiritual significance of the novel. It was before my time, but not I think much before my time, that a cultivated person would await the publication of an important new novel with an anticipation whose motivation was as much existential as diversionary. This, I believe, is mostly not the case now, and the reasons have only partly to do with the character and quality of the novels on offer. At least as important is the character and quality of our culture.

In a great passage of "Burnt Norton," the first of his Four Quartets, T. S. Eliot speaks of being Distracted from distraction by distraction / Filled with fancies and empty of meaning / Tumid apathy with no concentration / Men and bits of paper . . . I would not be so rash as to venture a definition of "the novel." Those monsters, loose and baggy or otherwise, are by now too various to be susceptible of definition in a way that is at once accurate and not vacuous. (Samuel Johnson's pleasing definition of the novel—"a small tale, generally of love"—belongs to an earlier, more innocent age.) Still, one may observe that novels require, at a minimum, a certain quota of attention and a certain quality of concentration.

We live in an age when there is tremendous competition for—I was going to say "the reader's attention," but reading is part, a large part, of what has suddenly become negotiable. The Yale literary critic Geoffrey Hartman once wrote a book called *The Fate of Reading*: It is not, in my judgment, a very good book, but it would have been had Professor Hartman got around to addressing the subject announced in his provocative title. It is of course a subject that goes far beyond the issue of the American or any other sort of novel: The advent of television, the ubiquity of mass media, the eruption of the Internet and ebooks with their glorification of instantaneity—all this has done an extraordinary amount to alter the relationship between life and literature. Television lulled us into acquiescence, the Internet with its vaunted search engines and promise of the world at your fingertips made further inroads in se-

ducing us to reduce wisdom to information: to believe that ready access to information was somehow tantamount to knowledge. I pause here to quote David Guaspari's wise and amusing observation on this subject: "Comparing information and knowledge," he writes, "is like asking whether the fatness of a pig is more or less green than the designated hitter rule."

I am not, to be candid, quite sure what the "designated hitter rule" portends, but I am confident that it has nothing to do with being green or porcine plumpness. When I was in graduate school, I knew some students who believed that by making a Xerox copy of an article, they had somehow absorbed, or at least partly absorbed, its content. I suppose the contemporary version of that *déformation professionnelle* is the person who wanders around with a computer perpetually linked to Google and who therefore believes he knows everything. It reminds one of the old complaint about students at the elite French universities: They know everything, it was said; unfortunately that is all they know.

At the end of the *Phaedrus*, Plato has Socrates tell the story of the god Theuth, who, legend has it, invented the art of writing. When Theuth presented his new invention to the king of Egypt, he promised the king that it would make his people "wiser and improve their memories." But the king disagreed, claiming that the habit of writing, far from improving memories, would "implant forgetfulness" by encouraging people to rely on external marks rather than "the living speech graven in the soul." I think of Schopenhauer's observation about the perils of excessive reading: Just as he who always rides gradually forgets how to walk, so he who reads constantly without pausing to reflect "gradually loses the capacity for thinking."

"Such is the case," said Schopenhauer, "with many scholars; they have read themselves stupid."

Well, reading ourselves stupid is perhaps not our largest educational problem today. And in any case, none of us would wish to do without writing—or computers, come to that. Nor, I think, would Plato have wanted us to. (Though he would probably have been severe about television: That bane of intelligence could have been ordered up specially to illustrate Plato's idea that most people inhabit a kind of existential "cave" in which they mistake flickering images for realities.) Plato's indirect comments—through the mouth of Socrates recounting an old story he picked up somewhere—have less to do with writing (an art, after all, in which Plato excelled) than with the priority of immediate experience: the

“living speech graven in the soul.” Plato may have been an idealist. But here as elsewhere he appears as an apostle of vital, firsthand experience: a realist in the deepest sense of the term.

The problem with computers is not the worlds they give us instant access to but the world they encourage us to neglect. Everyone knows about the studies showing the bad effects on children and teenagers of too much time in cyberspace (or in front of the television set). It cuts them off from their family and friends, fosters asocial behavior, disrupts their ability to concentrate, and makes it harder for them to distinguish between fantasy and reality. I suspect, however, that the real problem is not so much the sorry cases that make headlines but a more generally disseminated attitude toward the world.

I have said that in the contemporary world literature suffered because so many things competed for our attention. That competition proceeds on two fronts. On the one hand, it offers a panoply of superficially attractive objects for our consumption and delectation: It is a world of apparently instant gratification except that the gratification is so ephemeral that it is conspicuously unsatisfying, more nominal than real. On the other hand, the competition for our attention also proceeds by attacking the very capacity for attention. Often, it seems to operate not by offering new objects for our attention, but by offering us a substitute for attention itself: a sort of passive receptivity that registers sensations without rising to meet them with the alertness of critical attention. We had the experience, wrote Eliot in *The Four Quartets*, but we missed the meaning. In this situation, the novel—which requires time, not instantaneousness, which requires careful attention, not its passive substitute—is going to have a hard time making itself heard.

Everyone knows Andy Warhol’s quip that someday everyone would be famous for 15 minutes. Behind the humor—or perhaps I should say “behind the cynicism”—of that remark is the dark prospect of significant cultural diminishment. A quarter-hour’s fame is not fame. On the contrary, it is the demotic parody of fame; it is mere celebrity. It is worth pausing to consider how much of our cultural life—even in its most august precincts—is caught up in the voracious logic of celebrity. It is a logic that builds obsolescence into the banner of achievement and requires that seriousness abdicate before the palace of notoriety and its sound-bite culture.

It has often been observed that the novel is the bourgeois art form par excellence: that in its primary focus on domestic manners and morals, its anatomy of private vices and exercise of private virtues,

it answered the spiritual needs of a specific historical epoch.

With the passing or maturation of that epoch, perhaps the novel, too, has matured or even graduated to the second infancy of senility. That theory would account for a good deal of what gets published and praised today, but I don't think it tells the real story. It does seem as if there have been important alterations in the relation between life and literature—between life and the world of culture generally—and this is as much due to changes in the character of life as to changes in the character of culture.

My point is that even if a new Melville or Twain, Faulkner or Fitzgerald were to appear in our midst, his work would fail to achieve the critical traction and existential weight of those earlier masters. We lack the requisite community of readers, and the ambient shared cultural assumptions, to provide what we might call the sponsorial friction that underwrites the traction of publicly acknowledged significance. The novel in its highest forms requires a certain level of cultural definiteness and identity against which it can perform its magic. The diffusion or dispersion of culture brings with it a diffusion of manners and erosion of shared moral assumptions. Whatever we think of that process—love it as a sign of social liberation or loathe it as a token of cultural breakdown—it has robbed the novel, and the novel's audience, of a primary resource: an authoritative tradition to react against. Affirm it; subvert it; praise it; criticize it: The chief virtue of a well-defined cultural tradition for a novelist (for any artist) is not that it be beneficent but that it be widely acknowledged and authoritative.

There are many aspects to the cultural situation I have tried to adumbrate. At stake is not only the fate of the novel but also the fate of artistic life more generally. Perhaps Hegel was right when he said that "art in its highest expression is and remains for us a thing of the past." Hegel's thought was that if, traditionally, art had been tied to the truth, our culture's commitment to scientific rationality had in an important sense led to the replacement of art by reason. Art would not disappear, Hegel thought; it would simply degenerate to a form of entertainment, a vacation from rather than a revelation of reality.

Of course, Hegel was wrong about a great many things. And perhaps he is wrong about this, too. If our tendency to tie truth to reason—to look, when we are really in earnest, to the scientist rather than the artist for truth—describes an important aspect of our culture, there is another aspect summed up (for example) by Wallace Stevens when he suggested that in the modern age, "an age of dis-

belief,” art takes the place of religion as “life’s redemption.” In such an age, Stevens wrote, “it is for the poet to supply the satisfactions of belief.”

Hegel would have us embrace reason and relegate art to the status of recreation; Stevens would have us look to art and literature as substitutes for religion and compensation for the diminishments of modernity, which means in part the diminishments of scientific rationality. The arguments put forth by Hegel and Stevens are not incompatible, though they address the spiritual requirements of the modern world from different perspectives.

It counts for Hegel’s position that much of the most beguiling fiction written today is genre fiction: mysteries, for example, or certain species of light comedy—frosting on the serious cake of life. (There are exceptions, of course, but they remain just that: exceptions.) On the other hand, it is undeniable that we continue to think of art and literature as something more than mere recreation: We want it, as Hamlet said, to hold the mirror up to nature, at least to our nature, and we value it not simply as a source of distraction but also as a source of revelation. Indeed, it might be argued that in the modern world, whose understanding is so deeply shaped by scientific rationality, the novel—and art and literature generally—is more valuable than ever because it reminds us that reality, our reality as moral agents, exceeds the demonstrations of science.

In his essay on “Manners, Morals, and the Novel,” Lionel Trilling described the novel as “a perpetual quest for reality,” in particular the reality framed and invigorated by the field of manners, the field of social awareness and exchange. To a great extent, Trilling argued, the novel in this sense had “never really established itself in America” because “American writers of genius have not turned their minds to society.”


Despite his strictures about manners, Trilling nevertheless looked to the American novel as an accomplice in the great project of what he called “moral realism,” that is, to “the perception of the dangers of the moral life itself.” In a liberal society, Trilling thought, we have as much to fear from our beneficence as from our selfishness.

Some paradox of our natures leads us, when once we have made our fellow men the objects of our enlightened interest, to go on and make them the objects of our pity, then of our wisdom, ultimately of our coercion. It is to prevent this corruption, the most ironic and tragic that man knows, that we

stand in need of the moral realism which is the product of the free play of the moral imagination.

The signal achievement of the novel, Trilling thought, was “involving the reader himself in the moral life, inviting him to put his own motives under examination. . . . It taught us, as no other genre ever did, the extent of human variety and the value of this variety.”

Whether the American novel still plays an important role in this drama is, perhaps, an open question. My own suspicion is that the novel’s heyday is past. Different genres speak with greater vitality and pertinence to different times. The novel was probably the pre-eminent literary genre of the later 19th and most of the 20th century. Whether it continues to enjoy that distinction is unclear. I suspect that, increasingly, our most intense encounters with novels will be with novels of the past.

But who knows? Perhaps Henry James was right when he observed, in his inimitable diction, “Man rejoices in an incomparable faculty for presently mutilating and disfiguring any plaything that has helped create for him the 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.” 

Roger Kimball, editor and publisher of the *New Criterion*, is publisher of Encounter Books and author of the forthcoming *The Fortunes of Permanence: Culture and Anarchy in an Age of Amnesia*.

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