

Shadows of the Times on Fiction

by Ovid W. Pierce*
 Writer in Residence
 East Carolina University

I am going to try to point out as briefly as I can, some of the apparent conditions of this late mid-century which have so vividly affected the fiction of our contemporaries. Generalizations, about a place and time, are, of course, of limited value. But in this accelerated age, it is impossible not to be aware in the press and in fiction, of the immediacy of response to event traditionally, at least in fiction, where perspectives have the value of delay.

The land on which I live for a part of the time, happens to be in Eastern North Carolina. It is located about two miles from one of the great Interstate Highways. Occasionally, I can hear the roar of traffic. At night, I see long searching thrusts of lights across the sky. These passing vehicles bear across old, almost forgotten country, the license plates of a nation. And in the wake of this traffic, literally, the countryside is deserted: old wells dry up; fences fall; mules and plows disappear from the horizon.

As it has been for a hundred years, the Black population is leaving the rural South. It isn't news that the slums of cities are filled with uprooted southern Blacks. And we know, too, that this century-old exodus of Blacks from the South is only a part of the migration. We watch the flight of rootless, searching people, daily, along the land ways of America. What these unending traffic streams have done to old borders we're only beginning

to see — the borders that once divided histories, landscapes, and regional memories.

But it goes without saying that the disappearance of regional lines — if indeed it proves that they are disappearing — is not attributable only to the accelerated mobility of the age. There are other and unresting lines of communication everywhere. We are led to ask: What is news and what are the manipulated assaults of special interests?

The number of agencies which have a vested interest in the mechanics of an unbroken flow of information is astonishing. The raw mills of the press are often as grasping as they are insatiable.

Then, too, we are watching the proliferation of schools — technical schools, community colleges, great sprawling state universities absorbing floating youth, a youth that belongs neither to college nor to the world outside — colleges that are becoming all things to all people, adjusting themselves to passing decrees.

If the far-off effects of this new mobility, these unending proclamations of alarm cannot yet be assessed, we can at least ask questions.

Already we lament the effects of provincialism, of attachment to the past. But can we yet measure the effects of that other extreme: that state of no attachment, of belonging nowhere? Of living where continuities are severed, loyalties are diluted, and identities blurred?

Is identity with place to disappear in the path of these neutralizing waves of our age?

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Not long ago I read an article by Mary McCarthy, in the *New Yorker*, on the disappearance of background in fiction. For her, background meant "physical setting" — physical setting as we remember it in the late 19th century novels of Hardy, Thackeray, Dickens, in the American novels of Cooper, Simms. In these works long descriptive backgrounds — landscape: forests, lonely roads, brooding skies — were all functional. They were alive with their own distinctive features which set them aside from other corners of the earth. These backgrounds were fate. In physical setting the reader felt a visible representation of the morality of the book itself.

To come closer home, do not we, especially in the South, see tragedy in fiction as the tragedy of place? Conventional settings, especially for decadent themes, are projected, symbolically, as dramatizations of the moralities the writers want to convey.

What interests us in the McCarthy essay is her claim that background, descriptively achieved, no longer functions as one of the forces in contemporary narrative.

Listen to this from Hardy. "The night had a haggard look, like a sick thing — and there came finally an utter expiration of air from the whole heaven in the form of a slow breeze, which might have been likened to a death."

And this: "A rolling down country, crossed by a roman road: here a gray standing stone, of what sacrificial, ritual origins I can but guess; there a grassy burrow, with its great bones, its red brown jars, its rude gold ornaments, still safe in earth: a broad sky burning with stars — and a solitary man."

What strikes us most about these far-off autumn tones is that fiction has become urban. Sidewalks have replaced the countrysides. Of one thing, we are sure: the South no longer holds center stage in American fiction. California and New York, with all their urban tensions, against easily interchangeable backgrounds, like assembled and movable stage properties, are the prime subjects. Of what country does

Norman Mailer speak? Of a geography? Of a mapless culture?

Is it forcing a conclusion to suggest that this general disappearance of settings in fiction is attributable to the fast currents of our time, to the growing armies of uprooted, who claim no home? And feel no responsibility for any one piece of earth?

Freed of emotional ties to place, of stabilizing perspectives, what happens to a man's sense of responsibility? What substitutes receive his loyalties? If we accept Edith Assaff's observation as true that "the values that people develop begin with emotional responses to the world around them." We are quite properly led to ask what effects a long period of "not belonging" will have on character itself? It is hard to contemplate a neutralized state in which no accountability is felt for law or land.

I suppose the answer is that his is a new accountability to a far different order of things. Perhaps this is the heart of the theme. What happens to character if it is sustained exclusively by the superficially gratifying upon a perpetually changing scene? Can we not believe that identification with, or responsibility for, place or idea, lends direction to character?

Our emotional capabilities for adjustment to change, so urgently, so endlessly forced, are not inexhaustible. After all,

NOTICE TO OUR READERS

Dr. Blyden Jackson's paper "A Survey Course in Negro Literature," delivered November 3, 1973 before the Biennial Conference, will appear in a later issue. The paper was accepted for publication by *College English* before its delivery to NCLA. Therefore we have sought and received permission to co-publish the paper so long as it does not appear in these pages substantially before publication in *College English*.

change or flexibility, has meaning only in terms of the unchanged, or of what is abandoned.

What we have to face is the rather surprising evidence that contemporary fiction has not succumbed to the neutralizing currents, the mobility, the reach of television, to the ever-stretching influence of schools. It is still true that background, as Mary McCarthy pointed out, is disappearing in fiction, as a functional force, but it is also true that never before, to my knowledge, has fiction reflected such fragmentation of experience and conviction as it currently does.

It would seem that the forces which eliminate regional lines and effectively erase provincialisms, would tend to broaden backgrounds geographically. But the prime subject in fiction appears to be toward a narrowing, even toward a break-up, of experience. In the short story and the novel, more often than not, we follow continuities in which there is no cause and effect, in which the experience is taken out of context and portrayed for the sake of experience itself.

I was asked a while ago to talk before a writers' group on the death of the novel. A subject of this type, of course, has imposed limitations. But a trend did become apparent in the review. It was a discovery of the withdrawals of so many writers from any sustained view of a place, or a time, or even of a character — any sustained view, that is, which would require of them the exercise of moral judgment.

Narrowing of focus isn't what is to be expected in fiction in a day that exceeds all others in spreading more news faster than ever before, in controlling by advertising heretofore untouched areas of taste and behavior.

How, then, are we to reconcile with so many unifying tendencies this splintering of subject matter?

Is it forcing the issue to suggest that these same leveling forces appear in themselves as threats to individuality, as threats to loss of identity? And that the cry in much of the fiction is that of the lost man in the masses?

We don't have to look far to discover, even on an international scale, the desperate re-assertions of nationalist cultures, the desperate returns to familiar and dividing borders.

We are witnessing a rush of fresh claims for ethnic backgrounds, for old places of origin. We are declarations of attachment, manifest in dress and manners, to lost spots of earth, from which the descendants have been long severed. The pattern is repeated in all major cities. More urgently than ever before, people are looking for the smallest unit of their race, their culture. In New York alone there are by their own choices of division, the boundary lines of all Europe. Old loyalties to old countries are strong forces in our time. Old loyalties to old countries are casting longer shadows than ever before. And so within the broadest frame-

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works of national boundaries, smaller and smaller separations begin to appear — the region, the clan and, finally, the countless sub-cultures. These separations convey the effect of freshly blacked lines on old maps.

I was interested to read recently an article in the *New York Times* written by a Harvard professor on the subject, "the Black Experience at Harvard." The Black student population at Harvard numbers about 600, which is a sizable body. In the early sixties, less than ten years ago, it was somewhat less than 50. But Mr. Kilson, the Professor of Government who made this study, calls this Black group at Harvard a sub-community. Apparently, it maintains complete independence from the white student body. It is a closed unit within the larger framework. Why?

Kilson answers ". . . it enables the Negro student to realize a new self-concept and identity, presumably superior to the way the Negro had previously thought of himself. . . ."

The key word here is *identity*. For it is this need for self-recognition for Blacks and whites, which seems to be one of the pressing counter forces to the multiple standardizing forces of the era.

This isn't to suggest that the splintering of experience in fiction is caused solely by prevailing currents directing manners and moralities. For this breakdown of experience there are probably many causes. This enlarged world of ours is too much for a steady vision. It is too fast, it is infinite in its complexity. For an endlessly extended view of things, we haven't been prepared, emotionally or otherwise.

And, as strange as it seems, the fact remains that two great social pulls of our time are apparently irreconcilable. We have a vastly extended view of the world, and yet we have a remarkable withdrawal to privacy.

For whatever reasons, much current fiction achieves its effects in intensity of vision, not in breadth.

Time is fragmented, place is fragmented; experience is depicted, freed from narrative sequence, as if it were an end in itself.

In my own experience with young short story writers, the prevalent tendency is to project emotion for story, mood for narrative, and the subjective, answerable to no law, for the objective. In addition to this, the prevailing will is to offer no moral judgment. Young writers seem especially reluctant to commit themselves to anything except experience itself.

Earlier, we looked briefly at some of the hazards of the broad view, a homogenous culture, without any region, without any local habitation or name. Now it is necessary to look to the consequences of the withdrawal of the individual, the consequences of his retirement to the subjective self.

In regard to this withdrawal, Max Picard answers, "spirit has been divided, fragmented — one breaks the whole up into parts; and as always happens when one separates the part from the whole — one magnifies the tiny part, making it ridiculously important, so that no one may notice that the tiny part is not the whole."

If, then, this is the intellectual climate of our time, there is no wonder that our literature and humanistic studies have been fragmented, that they are written and are judged in terms of relevancy. I don't believe we can build any durable system in society upon the unrelated phenomena of experience or upon self-seeking, short-range views.

So, in this flight of our decade from the long-range view, we are severing the very continuities which provide any steadiness of vision.

But, in concluding, perhaps a statement of clarification is needed. With a few exceptions, fiction doesn't make history. One notable exception you'll remember is Lincoln's remark on meeting Harriet Beecher Stowe. "And so this is the little lady who started the big war."

But more often than not, fiction is *after* the fact. Its chief end is interpretative.

It cannot possibly expect response, recognition even, from conflicting interests in divided times. If it tries to serve all, it probably serves none. Fiction can answer only to itself.

I remember that when I was a student

in a northern university, I found myself from the beginning put on the defensive about the South. I found myself in the role of spokesman, and defender, for what appeared to my friends there as a completely anachronistic culture. I'm sure, with all my provincial loyalties aroused, that I was ardent in defense. But I think one thing was accomplished. I was compelled to look objectively, too, and at a distance, at my own homeland. In those days Ellen Glasgow of Richmond was in the world of letters the *Grande Dame* of the South. She had of course inherited the whole burden of the reconstruction South. And she had lived through an era of excessive nostalgia, self-pity, and romanticizing. I think it was her remark in defiance of this provincialism, that caught my attention. She said that the literature of the South had never matured because it lacked the courage to offend.

It is this remark, it seems to me, that points up the problem that most writers, sooner or later, have to face.

If it's true, as we suggested a little earlier, that with a few exceptions, fiction can't create the world but the world has to create fiction, the writer has to deal with what he inherits.

His dilemma, then, today, to follow our argument, is in facing, on one hand, the influences that tend to uproot, disposses, and render homeless, and, the

opposing needs, on the other hand, that tend to draw him into the dark interiors of privacy.

But hasn't this always been the problem of the writer, or, for that matter, for the mature man in coming to terms with himself?

I'd like to end by quoting from Irving Howe's book on Thomas Hardy. For Hardy was preeminently the writer who projected the regional, the broad view and the narrow, for all the world to see.

"A regional consciousness, left to itself, seldom results in anything but tiresome romanticizing of the past. In the modern era, serious writing seems to require some rupture of faith and connection and if the novelist of provincial rootedness is to achieve an art of universal interest he must choose (or be driven) to uproot himself. Still, the 'attachment to the soil of one particular spot' can be a starting point for that stringent and self-conscious nostalgia which animates the work of Hardy, George Eliot and Faulkner, thereby making possible an interplay between past and present in which each becomes a premise for the criticism of the other. This nostalgia, so different from the indulgence usually passing under that name, is available to the writer only upon reaching the point of sophistication at which he can surrender the fantasy of returning home."

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