

## *Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young*

David Foster Wallace

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*Note:* I first discovered this essay through its mention in Steven Moore's essay *The First Draft Version of Infinite Jest*, in which he wrote:

[...] I had read *The Broom of the System* when it was published in 1987 and had been very impressed; even if not an entirely successful novel, it struck me as written by someone possessed of genius. A few months later I was invited to guest-edit a special issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* to be called "Novelist As Critic." It amounted to little more than inviting my favorite novelists to contribute an essay on any literary topic, the working assumption (which I still hold) being that novelists write better criticism than most professional critics. Since all of the authors I invited were well along in their careers, I thought I should have at least one emerging writer, so I wrote to Wallace in care of his publisher and invited him to submit something, an offer he found "intriguing" (he had never written an essay for publication before). His "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young" appeared in the fall 1988 issue and confirmed my impression that he was brilliant. (Our typesetter, on the other hand—a wonderful middle-aged woman who had her doubts about much of the stuff we published—thought he sounded snotty.)

[[http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/8175/ij\\_first.htm](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/8175/ij_first.htm)]

I immediately began searching online for this "brilliant" essay, but found even the University of Washington's large libraries only had electronic copies dating back to the early nineties. Undeterred, I borrowed the archived paper copies, OCR'd them, and then painstakingly re-typeset the document to match the original. I provide this not to steal from the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, but merely because I don't think most people would have access to it any other way.

— Evan Martin, March 2004

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THE METRONOME OF literary fashion looks to be set on *presto*. Beginning with the high-profile appearances of David Leavitt's *Family Dancing*, Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights*, *Big City* and Bret Ellis's *Less Than Zero*, the last three-odd years saw a veritable explosion of good-willed critical and commercial interest in literary fiction by Conspicuously Young<sup>1</sup> writers. During this interval, certain honored traditions of starvation and apprenticeship were inverted: writers' proximity to their own puberties seemed now an asset; rumors had agents haunting prestigious writing workshops like pro scouts at Bowl games; publishers and critics jockeyed for position to proclaim their own beardless favorite "The first voice of a new generation." Too, the upscale urban young quickly established themselves as a bona fide audience (and market) for C.Y. fiction: Ellis and McInerney, Janowitz and Leavitt, Simpson and Minot enjoy a popularity with their peers unknown since the relative popular disappearance of the sixties' hip black humor squad.

As of this writing, late 1987, the backlash has been swift and severe, if not wholly unjustified. Many of the same trendy reviewers who in the mid-eighties were hailing the precocity of a New Generation now bemoan the proliferation of a literary Brat Pack. The *Village Voice*, which in 1985 formalized the apotheosis of McInerney in a gushy cover story, this autumn uses a scathing review of some McInerney disciples as occasion to headline the news that THE BRAT PACK SPITS UP, with crudely cut-out

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<sup>1</sup>Hereafter abbreviated "C.Y."

faces of Janowitz, McInerney, Ellis et al. pasted on photos of diaper models. Nineteen eighty-seven saw the staff and guests of the *New York Times Book Review* suddenly complaining of a trend toward “world-weary creative writing projects,” a spate of “Y.A.W.N.S. (Young Anomic White Novelists),” an endless succession of flash-in-the-pan “short-story starlets.” In its October 11 issue, no less an *éminence grise* than William Gass administers “A Failing Grade For the Present Tense”:

You may have noticed the plague of school-styled [writers] with which our pages have been afflicted, and taken some account of the no-account magazines that exist in order to publish them. Thousands of short-story readers and writers have been released like fingerlings into the thin mainstream of serious prose. . . . Well, young people are young people, aren't they . . . Adolescents consume more of their psyches than soda, and more local feelings than junk food. Is no indulgence denied them? . . . I read [a recent Leavitt-edited anthology of C.Y. fiction] as a part of my researches. It is like walking through a cemetery before they've put in any graves.

What's caused this quick reversal in mood? Is it capricious and unfair, or overdue? Most interesting: what does it imply?

In my own opinion, the honeymoon's end between the literary Establishment and the C.Y. writer was an inevitable and foreseeable consequence of the same shameless hype that led to many journeyman writers' premature elevation in the first place: condescending critical indulgence and condescending critical dismissal inhabit the same coin. It's true that some cringingly bad fiction gets written by C.Y.'s. But this is hardly an explanation for anything, since the same is true of lots of older artists, many of whom have clearly shot their bolts and now hang by name and fashion alone.

More germane is the frequent charge of a certain numbing *sameness* about much contemporary young writing. To a certain extent anyone who reads widely must agree with it. The vast bulk of the vast amount of recently published C.Y. fiction reinforces the stereotype that has all young literary enterprises falling into one or more of the following three dreary camps:

- (1) Neiman-Marcus Nihilism, declaimed via six-figure Uppies and their salon-tanned, morally vacant offspring, none of whom seem to be able to make it from limo door to analyst's couch without several grams of chemical encouragement;
- (2) Catatonic Realism, a.k.a. Ultraminimalism, a.k.a. Bad Carver, in which suburbs are wastelands, adults automata, and narrators blank perceptual engines, intoning in run-on monosyllables the artificial ingredients of breakfast cereal and the new human non-soul;
- (3) Workshop Hermeticism, fiction for which the highest praise involves the words “competent,” “finished,” “problem-free,” fiction over which Writing-Program pre- and proscriptioins loom with the enclosing force of horizons: no character without Freudian trauma in accessible past, without near-diagnostic physical description; no image undissolved into regulation Updikean metaphor; no overture without a dramatized scene to “show” what's “told”; no denouement prior to an epiphany whose approach can be charted by any Freitag on any Macintosh.

Mean, but unfortunately fair—except for the fact that, like most generalizations, these apply validly only to the inferior examples of the work at hand. Ironically for the critic who wants both to bemoan invasions and pigeonhole the invaders, the very proliferation of C.Y. fiction, with its attendant variety, raises the generation's cream above stereotype. The preternatural smarts with which a Simpson or Leavitt can render complex parental machinations through the eyes of thoroughly believable children; the gritty white-trash lyricism of Pinckney Benedict's *Town Smokes*; the wry, bitchy humor of a good Lorrie Moore or Amy Hempel or Debra Spark story; the political vision of William Vollmann's *You Bright and Risen Angels*; the conscientious exploration of *motive* behind Yuppie dissolution in McInerney's *Bright Lights*—these transcend Camp-following and, more important, merit neither head-patting nor sneers. See for yourself. Among the C.Y. writers who do, yes, seem to crowd the last half of this decade, there are some unique and worthy talents. Yes, all are raw, some more or less mature, some more or less apt at transcending the hype the hype-mills crank out daily. But more than a couple are originals.

But it's weird: all we C.Y. writers get consistently lumped together. Both lauds and pans invariably invoke a Generation that is both New and, in some odd way, One. Unfamiliar with the critical fashions of past decades, I don't know whether this perception has precedent, but I do think in certain ways it's not inappropriate. As of now, C.Y. writers, the good and the lousy, are in my opinion A Generation, conjoined less by chronology (Benedict is twenty-three, Janowitz over thirty) than by the new and singular environment in and about which we try to write fiction. This, that we are agnate, also goes a long way toward explaining the violent and conflicting critical reactions New Voices are provoking.

The argument, then, is that certain key things having to do with literary production are radically different for young American writers now; and that, fashion-flux aside, the fact that these key things affect our aesthetic values and literary choices serves at once to bind us together and to distance us from much of an Establishment—literary, intellectual, political—that reads and judges our stuff from their side of a . . . well, generation gap. There are, of course, uncountable differences between the formative experiences of consecutive generations, and to exhaust and explain all the ones relevant here would require both objective distance and a battalion of social historians. Having neither at hand, I propose to invite consideration of just three specific contemporary American phenomena, viz the impacts of television, of academic Creative Writing Programs, and of a revolution in the way educated people understand the function and possibility of literary narrative. These three because they seem at once powerfully affective and normatively complex. Great and grim, tonic and insidious, they are (I claim) undeniable and cohesive influences on this country's "New Voices."

Stats on the percentage of the average American day spent before small screens are well known. But the American generation born after, say, 1955 is the first for whom television is something to be *lived with*, not just looked at. Our parents regard the set rather as the Flapper did the automobile: a curiosity turned treat turned seduction. For us, their children, TV's as much a part of reality as Toyotas and gridlock. We quite literally cannot "imagine" life without it. As it does for so much of today's developed world, it presents and so defines our common experience; but we, unlike any elders,

have no memory of a world without such electronic definition. It's built in. In my own childhood, late sixties, rural downstate Illinois, miles and megahertz from any center of entertainment production, familiarity with the latest developments on "Batman" or "The Wild, Wild West" was the medium of social exchange. Much of our original play was a simple reenactment of what we'd witnessed the night before, and verisimilitude was taken very seriously. The ability to do a passable Howard Cosell, Barney Rubble, CoCo-Puff Bird, or Gomer Pyle was a measure of status, a determination of stature.

Surely television-as-lifestyle influences the modes by which C.Y. writers understand and represent lived life. A recent issue of *Arrival* saw critic Bruce Bawer lampoon many Brat-Packers' habit of delineating characters according to the commercial slogans that appear on their T-shirts. He had a scary number of examples. It's true that there's something sad in the fact that Leavitt's sole description of some characters in, say, "Danny in Transit" consists of the fact that their shirts say "Coca Cola" in a foreign language—yet maybe more sad that, for most of his reading contemporaries, this description *does the job*. Bawer's distaste seems to me misplaced: it's more properly directed at a young culture so willingly bombarded with messages equating what one consumes with who one is that brand loyalty is now an acceptable synecdoche of identity, of character.

This schism between young writers and their older critics probably extends to the whole issue of strategic reference to "popular culture" in literary fiction. The artistic deployment of pop icons—brand names, television programs, celebrities, commercial film and music—strikes those intellectuals whose consciousness was formed before the genuine Television Age as at best frivolous tics and at worst dangerous vapidities that compromise fiction's "seriousness" by dating it out of the Platonic Always where it properly resides. A fine and conscientious writing professor once proclaimed to our class that a serious story or novel always eschews "any feature that serves to date it," to fix it in history, because "Literary fiction is always timeless." When we protested that, in his own well-known work, characters moved about in electrically lit rooms, propelled themselves in autos, spoke not Anglo-Saxon but post-WWII English, inhabited a North America already separated from Africa by continental drift, he amended his ruling's application to those explicit references that would date a story in the transient Now. Pressed by further quibbling into real precision, his interdiction turned out really to be against what he called the "mass-commercial-media" reference. At this point, I think, trans-generational discourse breaks down. For this gentleman's automobilized Timeless and our F.C.C.'d own were different. Time had changed Always.

Nor, please, is this stuff a matter of mere taste or idiosyncrasy. Most good fiction writers, even young ones, are intellectuals. So are most critics and teachers (and a surprising number of editors). And television, its advertising, and the popular culture they both reflect and define have fundamentally altered what intellectuals get to regard as the proper objects of their attention. Those cognoscenti whose values were formed before TV and advertising became psychologically pandemic are still anxious to draw a sharp distinction, à la Barbara Tuchman, between those sorts of things that have genuine "quality" and are produced and demanded by people with refined tastes, on one hand, and those sorts of things which have only "popularity" or "mass appeal," are demanded by the Great Unwashed and cheerfully supplied by those whom egalitarian capitalism has whored to the lowest of denominators, the democratic market, on the

other. The enlightened older aesthete, erudite and liberal, weaned let's say between 1940 and 1960, is able to operate from a center of contradiction between genuine refinement and genuine liberalism, advertising scholars like Martin Mayer had already begun to deride by the fifties' end:

The great bulk of advertising is culturally repulsive to anyone with any developed sensitivity. So are most movies and television shows, most popular music, and a surprisingly high proportion of published books. . . . But a sensitive person can easily avoid cheap movies, cheap books, and cheap art, while there is scarcely anyone outside the jails who can avoid contact with advertising. By presenting the intellectual with a more or less accurate image of the popular culture, advertising earns his enmity and calumny. It hits him where it hurts worst: in his politically liberal and socially generous outlook—partly nourished on his avoidance of actual contact with popular taste.

I claim that intellectuals of the New Generation for whom C.Y. writers are supposed to be voices can no longer even wrap their minds around this kind of hypocrisy, much less suffer from it. Not that this "enlightenment" is earned, or even necessarily a good thing. Because it's not as though television and advertising and popular entertainments have ceased to be mostly bad art or cheap art, but just that they've imposed themselves on our generation's psyches for so long and with such power that they have entered into complicated relations with our very ideas of the world and the self. We simply cannot "relate to" the older aesthete's distanced distaste for mass entertainment and popular appeal: the distaste may well remain, but the distance has not.

And, as the pop informs our generation's ways of experiencing and reading the world, so too will it naturally affect our artistic values and expectations. Young fiction writers may spend hours each day at the writing table, performing; but we're also, each and every day, part of the great Audience. We're conditioned accordingly. We have an innate predilection for visual stimulation, colored movement, a frenetic variety, a beat you can dance to. It may be that, through hyper- and atrophy, our mental capacities themselves are different: the breadth of our attentions greater as attention spans themselves shorten. Raised on an activity at least partly passive, we experience a degree of manipulation as neutral, a fact of life. However, wooed artfully as we are for not just our loyalty but our very *attention*, we reserve for that attention the status of a commodity, a measure of power; and our choices to bestow or withhold it carry for us great weight. So does what we regard as our God-given right to be entertained—or, if not entertained, at least stimulated: the unpleasant is perfectly OK, just so long as it *rivets*.

As one can see popular icons seriously used in much C.Y. fiction as touchstones for the world we live in and try to make into art, so one might trace some of the techniques favored by many young writers to roots in our experience as consummate watchers. E.g., events often refracted through the sensibilities of more than one character; short, dense paragraphs in which coherence is often sacrificed for straight evocation; abrupt transitions in scene, setting, point of view, temporal and causal orders; a surfacy, objective, "cinematic" third-person narrative eye. Above all, though, a comparative indifference to the imperative of mimesis, combined with an absolute passion for narrative

choices that conduce to what might be called “mood.” For no writer can help assuming that the reader is on some level like him: already having seen, ad nauseum, what life looks like, he’s far more interested in how it *feels* as a signpost toward what it means.

The technical coin, too, has a tails. For instance, it’s not hard to see that the trendy Ultraminimalism favored by too many C.Y. writers is deeply influenced by the aesthetic norms of mass entertainment. Indeed, this fiction depends on what’s little more than a crude inversion of these norms. Where television, especially its advertising, presents everything in hyperbole, Ultraminimalism is deliberately flat, understated, “undersold.” Where TV seeks everywhere to render its action either dramatic or melodramatic, to move the viewer by displaying constant movement, the Minimalist describes an event as one would an object, a geometric form in stasis; and he always does so from an emotional remove of light years. Where television does and must aim always to *please*, the Catatonic writer hefts something of a finger at subject and reader alike: one has only to read a Bret Ellis sex scene (pick a page, any page) to realize that here pleasure is neither a subject nor an aim. My own aversion to Ultraminimalism, I think, stems from its naive pretension. The Catatonic Bunch seem to feel that simply by inverting the values imposed on us by television, commercial film, advertising, etc., they can automatically achieve the aesthetic depth popular entertainment so conspicuously lacks. Really, of course, the Ultraminimalists are no less infected by popular culture than other C.Y. writers: they merely choose to define their art by opposition to their own atmosphere. The attitude betrayed is similar to that of lightweight neo-classicals who felt that to be non-vulgar was not just a requirement but an assurance of value, or of insecure scholars who confuse obscurity with profundity. And it’s just about as annoying.

Not that the Catatonic’s discomfort with a culture of and by popularity isn’t understandable. We’re all at least a little uncomfortable with it—no?—probably because, as technicians like Mayer foresaw thirty years ago, escape from it has gone from impossible to inconceivable. That is, since today’s popular TV culture is by its nature *mass*, *pan-*, it’s of course going to impact the styles and choices and dreams not just of a few fingerling artists and their small readerships, but of the very human collectivities about which we try to write. And this impact has been overwhelming; the new Always has changed everything. I’m going to argue that it’s done so in ways that are bad and have costs. “Bad” means inimical to many of the values our communities have evolved and held and cherished and taught. “Costs” means painful changes and losses for persons. Because, see, a mysterious beast like television begins, the more sophisticated it gets, to produce and live by an antinomy, a phenomenon whose strength lies in its contradiction: aimed ever and always at groups, masses, markets, collectivities, it’s nevertheless true that the most powerful and lasting changes are wrought by TV on *individual persons*, each one of whom is forced every day to understand himself in relation to the Groups by virtue of which he seems to exist at all.

Think, for instance, about the way prolonged exposure to broadcast drama makes each one of us at once more self-conscious and less reflective. A culture more and more about *seeing* eventually perverts the relation of seer and seen. We watch various actors who play various characters involved in various relations and events. Seldom do we think about the fact that the single deep feature the characters share, with each other and with the actors who portray them, is that they are *watched*. The behavior of the actors, and—in a complicated way, through the drama they’re inside—even the char-

acters, is directed always at an audience for whom they behave . . . indeed, in virtue of whom they exist as actor or character in the first place, behind the screen's glass. We, the audience, receive unconscious reinforcement of the thesis that the most significant feature of persons is *watchableness*, and that contemporary human worth is not just isomorphic with but rooted in the phenomenon of watching. Precious distinctions between truly being and merely appearing get obfuscated. Imagine a Berkleyan *esse-est-percipi* universe in which God is named Nielsen.

Then consider that well-known, large, "ignorant" segment of the population that believes on a day-to-day level that what happens on televised dramas is "real." This, the enormous volume of mail addressed each day to characters and not the persons who portray them, is the iceberg's extreme tip. The berg itself is a generation (New) for whom the distinction between (real) actor artificially portraying and (pretend) character genuinely behaving gets ever more tangled. The danger of the berg is badness and cost—a shift from an understanding of self as a character in a great drama whose end is meaning to an understanding of self as an actor at a great audition whose end is *seeming*, i.e., being seen.

Actually there are uncountable ways in which efficiently conceived and disseminated popular entertainment affects the existential predicaments of both persons and groups. And if "existential" seems too weighty a term to attach to anything pop, then I think you're misunderstanding what's at stake. You're invited to consider commercial dramas that deal with violence and danger and the possibility of death. There are lots, today. Each drama has a hero. He's purposely designed so that we by our nature "identify" with him. At present this is still not hard to get us to do, for we still tend to think of our own lives this way: we're each the hero of our own drama, others around us remanded to supporting roles or (increasingly) audience status.

But now try to recall the last time you saw the "hero" die within his drama's narrative frame. It's very rarely done anymore. Entertainment professionals have apparently done research: audiences find the deaths of those with whom they identify a downer, and are less apt to watch dramas in which danger is creatively connected to the death that makes danger dangerous. The natural consequence is that today's dramatic heroes tend to be "immortal" within the frame that makes them heroes and objects of identification (for the audience, VCR- and related technology give this illusion a magnetic reality). I claim that the fact that we are strongly encouraged to identify with characters for whom death is not a significant creative possibility has real costs. We the audience, and individual you over there and me right here, lose any sense of eschatology, thus of teleology, live in a moment that is, paradoxically, both emptied of intrinsic meaning or end and quite literally *eternal*. If we're the only animals who know in advance we're going to die, we're also probably the only animals who would submit so cheerfully to the sustained denial of this undeniable and very important truth. The danger is that, as entertainment's denials of the truth get even more effective and pervasive and seductive, we will eventually forget what they're denials *of*. This is scary. Because it seems transparent to me that, if we forget how to die, we're going to forget how to live.

And if you think that contemporary literary artists, of whatever stature, are above blinking at a reality we all find unpleasant, consider the number of serious American fictional enterprises in the last decade that have dealt with what's acknowledged to be the single greatest organized threat to our persons and society. Try to name, say, two.

Maybe the real question is—how serious can people who have a right to be entertained permit “serious” fiction to be anymore? Because if I claimed above that the C.Y. writers’ intellectual fathers held dear a contradictory blend of cutting-edge politics and old-guard aesthetics, I’m sure most of us would gladly trade it for the contradictions that are its replacement. Today’s journeyman fiction writer finds himself both a lover of serious narrative and an ineluctably conditioned part of a pop-dominated culture in which the social stock of his own enterprise is falling. What we are inside of—what *comprises* us—is killing what we love.

Hyperbole? It’s important to remember that most television is not just entertainment: it’s also narrative. And it’s so true it’s trite that human beings are narrative animals: every culture countenances itself as culture via a story, whether mythopoeic or politico-economic; every whole person understands his lifetime as an organized, recountable series of events and changes with at least a beginning and middle. We need narrative like we need space-time; it’s a built-in thing. In the C.Y. writers today, the narrative patterns to which literate Americans are most regularly exposed are televised. And, even on a charitable account, television is a pretty low type of narrative art. It’s a narrative art that strives not to change or enlighten or broaden or reorient—not necessarily even to “entertain”—but merely and always to *engage*, to *appeal to*. Its one end—openly acknowledged—is to ensure continued watching. And (I claim) the metastatic efficiency with which it’s done so has, as cost, inevitable and dire consequences for the level of people’s tastes in narrative art. For the very *expectations* of readers in virtue of which narrative art is art.

Television’s greatest appeal is that it is engaging without being at all demanding. One can rest while undergoing stimulation. Receive without giving. It’s the same in all low art that has as goal continued attention and patronage: it’s appealing precisely because it’s at once fun and easy. And the entrenchment of a culture built on Appeal helps explain a dark and curious thing: at a time when there are more decent and good and very good serious fiction writers at work in America than ever before, an American public enjoying unprecedented literacy and disposable income spends the vast bulk of its reading time and book dollar on fiction that is, by any fair standard, trash. Trash fiction is, by design and appeal, most like televised narrative: engaging without being demanding. But trash, in terms of both quality and popularity, is a much more sinister phenomenon. For while television has from its beginnings been openly motivated by—has been *about*—considerations of mass appeal and L.C.D. and profit, our own history is chock full of evidence that readers and societies may properly expect important, lasting contributions from a narrative art that understands itself as being about considerations more important than popularity and balance sheets. Entertainers can divert and engage and maybe even console; only artists can transfigure. Today’s trash writers are entertainers working artists’ turf. This in itself is nothing new. But television aesthetics, and television-like economics, have clearly made their unprecedented popularity and reward possible. And there seems to me to be a real danger that not only the forms but the *norms* of televised art will begin to supplant the standards of all narrative art. This would be a disaster.

I’m worried lest I sound too much like B. Tuchman here, because my complaints about trash are different from hers, and less sophisticated. My complaint against trash fiction is not that it’s plebeian, and as for its rise I don’t care at all whether post-



industrial liberalism squats in history as the culprit that made it inevitable. My complaint against trash isn't that it's vulgar art, or irritatingly dumb art, but that, given what makes fiction art at all, trash is simply *unreal, empty*—and that (aided by mores of and by TV) it seduces the market writers need and the culture that needs writers away from what *is* real, full, meaningful.

Even the snottiest young *artiste*, of course, probably isn't going to bear personal ill will toward writers of trash; just as, while everybody agrees that prostitution is a bad thing for everyone involved, few are apt to blame prostitutes themselves, or wish them harm. If this seems like a non sequitur, I'm going to claim the analogy is all too apt. A prostitute is someone who, in exchange for money, affords someone else the form and sensation of sexual intimacy without any of the complex emotions or responsibilities that make intimacy between two people a valuable or meaningful human enterprise. The prostitute "gives," but—demanding nothing of comparable value in return—perverts the giving, helps render what is supposed to be a revelation a transaction. The writer of trash fiction, often with admirable craft, affords his customer a narrative structure and movement that *engages* the reader—titillates, repulses, excites, transports him—without demanding of him any of the intellectual or spiritual or *artistic* responses that render verbal intercourse between writer and reader an important or even *real* activity. So when our elders tell our graduate fiction class (as they liked to do a lot) that a war for fictional art's soul is being waged in the 1980s between poetry on one side and trash on the other—to this admonishment we listen, at this we take pause. Especially when television and advertising have conditioned us to equate net worth with human worth. Sidney Sheldon, a gifted trash-master, owns jets; more people in this country write poetry than read it; the annual literary budget of the National Endowment for the Arts is less than a third of the U. S.'s yearly expenditures on military bands, less than a *tenth* of the three big networks' yearly spending on Creative Development.

Sidney Sheldon, by the way, was the Creative, Developing force behind both "I Dream of Jeannie" and "Hart to Hart." Oprah Winfrey asks him in admiration for the secret behind his success in "two such totally different media." I say to myself, "Ha," watching.

It's in terms of economics that academic Creative Writing Programs<sup>2</sup> offer their least ambiguous advantages. Published writers (assuming they themselves have a graduate writing degree) can earn enough by workshop teaching to support themselves and their own fiction without having to resort to more numbing or time-consuming employment. On the student side, fellowships—some absurdly generous—and paid assistantships in teaching are usually available to almost all students. Programs tend to be a sweet deal.

And there are more such programs in this country now than anywhere anytime before. The once-lone brow of the Iowa Workshop has birthed first-rate creative departments at places like Stanford, Houston, Columbia, Johns Hopkins, Virginia, Michigan, Arizona, etc. The majority of accredited American I.H.E.s now have at least some sort of formal academic provision for students who want vocational training in fiction writing. This has all happened within the last fifteen years. It's unprecedented, and so

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<sup>2</sup>These words are capitalized because they understand themselves as capitalized. Trust me on this.

are the effects of the trend on young U.S. fiction. Of the C.Y. writers I've mentioned above, I know of none who've not had some training in either a graduate or undergraduate writing department. Most of them hold M.F.A.'s. Some are, even as we speak, working toward a degree called a "Creative Ph.D." Never has a "literary generation" been so thoroughly and formally trained, nor has such a large percentage of aspiring fiction writers eschewed extramural apprenticeship for ivy and grades.

And the contributions of the academy's rise in American fiction go beyond the fiscal. The workshop phenomenon has been justly credited with a recent "renaissance of the American short story," a renaissance heralded in the late seventies with the emergence of writers like the late Raymond Carver (taught at Syracuse), Jayne Anne Phillips (M.F.A. from Iowa), and the late Breece Pancake (M.F.A. from Virginia). More small magazines devoted to short literary fiction exist today than ever before, most of them either sponsored by programs or edited and staffed by recent M.F.A.s. Short story collections, even by relative unknowns, are now halfway viable economically, and publishers have moved briskly to accommodate trend.

More important for young writers themselves, programs can afford them time, academic (and parental!) legitimacy, and an environment in which to Hone Their Craft, Grow, Find Their Voice,<sup>3</sup> etc. For the student, a community of serious, like-minded persons with whom to exchange ideas has pretty clear advantages. So, in many ways, does the fiction class itself. In a workshop, rudiments of technique and process can be taught fairly quickly to kids who might in the past have spent years in New York lofts learning basic tricks of the trade by trial and error. A classroom atmosphere of rigorous constructive criticism helps toughen young writers' hides and prepare them for the wildly disparate responses the world of real readers holds in store. Best of all, a good workshop forces students regularly to formulate consistent, reasoned criticisms of colleagues' work; and this, almost without fail, makes them far more astute about the strengths and weaknesses of their own fiction.

Still, I think it's the Program-sword's other edge that justifies the various Establishments' present disenchantment with C.Y. fiction more than anything else. The dark side of the Program trend exists, grows; and it's much more than an instantiation of the standard academic lovely-in-theory-but-mangled-in-practice conundrum. So we'll leave aside nasty little issues like departmental politics, faculty power struggles that summon images of sharks fighting for control of a bathtub, the dispiriting hiss of everybody's egos in various stages of inflation or deflation, a downright unshakable publish-or-perish mentality that equates appearance in print with talent or promise. These might be particular to one student's experience. Certain problems inherent in Programs' very structure and purpose, though, are not. For one thing, the pedagogical relation between fiction professor and fiction student has unhealthiness built right in. Writing teachers are by calling writers, not teachers. The fact that most of them are teaching, not for its own sake, but to support a separate and obsessive calling, has got to be accepted, as does its consequence: every minute spent on class and department business is, for Program staff, a minute not spent working on their own art, and must to a degree be resented. The best teachers seem to acknowledge the conflict between their vocations, reach some kind of internal compromise, and go on. The rest, according to

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<sup>3</sup>On these, too: they are to Programs what azan are to mosques.

their capacities, either suppress the resentment or make sure they do the barely acceptable minimum their primary source of income requires. Almost all, though, take the resentment out in large part on the psyches of their pupils—for pupils represent artistic time wasted, an expenditure of a teacher's fiction-energy without fiction- production. It's all perfectly understandable. Clearly, though, feeling like a burden, an impediment to *real* art-production, is not going to be conducive to a student's development, to say nothing of his enthusiasm. Not to mention his basic willingness to engage his instructor in the kind of dynamic back-and-forth any real creative education requires, since it's usually the very-low-profile, docile, *undemanding* student who is favored, recruited, supported and advanced by a faculty for whom demand equals distraction.

In other words, the fact that creative writing teachers must wear two hats has unhappy implications for the quality of both M.F.A. candidates and the education they receive in Programs. And it's very unclear who if anyone's to blame. Teaching fiction writing is darn hard to do well. The conscientious teacher must not only be both highly critical and emotionally sensitive, acute in his reading and articulate about his acuity: he must be all these things with regard to precisely those issues that can be communicated to and discussed in a workshop *group*. And that inevitably yields a distorted emphasis on the sorts of simple, surface concerns that a dozen or so people can talk about coherently: straightforward mechanics of traditional fiction production like fidelity to point-of-view, consistency of tense and tone, development of character, verisimilitude of setting, etc. Faults or virtues that cannot quickly be identified or discussed between bells—little things like interestingness, depth of vision, originality, political assumptions and agendas, the question whether deviation from norm is in some cases OK—must, for sound Program-pedagogical reasons, be ignored or discouraged. Too, in order to remain both helpful and sane, the professional writer/teacher has got to develop, consciously or not, an aesthetic doctrine, a static set of principles about how a “good” story works. Otherwise he'd have to start from intuitive scratch with each student piece he reads, and that way the liquor cabinet lies. But consider what this means: the Program staffer must teach the practice of art, which by its nature always exists in at least some state of tension with the rules of its practice, as essentially an applied system of rules. Surely this kind of *enforced* closure to further fictional possibilities isn't good for most teachers' own literary development. Nor is it at all good for their students, most of whom have been in school for at least sixteen years and know that the way the school game is played is: (1) Determine what the instructor wants; and (2) Supply it forthwith. Most Programs, then, produce two kinds of students. There are those few who, whether particularly gifted or not, have enough interest and faith in their fiction instincts to elect sometimes to deviate from professors' prescriptions. Many of these students are shown the door, or drop out, or gut out a couple years during which the door is always being pointed to, throats cleared, Fin. Aid unavailable. These turn out to be the lucky ones. The other kind are those who, the minute fanny touches chair, make the instructors' dicta their own—whether from insecurity, educational programming, or genuine agreement (rare)—who row instead of rock, play the game quietly and solidly, and begin producing solid, quiet work, most of which lands neatly in Dreary Camp #3, nice, cautious, boring Workshop Stories, stories as tough to find technical fault with as they are to remember after putting them down. *Here* are the rouged corpses for Dr. Gass's graveyard. Workshops *like* corpses. They *have*

to. Because any class, even one in “creativity,” is going to place supreme value on not making mistakes. And corpses, whatever their other faults, never ever screw up.<sup>4</sup>

I doubt whether any of this is revelatory, but I hope it’s properly scary. Because Creative Writing Programs, while claiming in all good faith to train professional writers, in reality train *more teachers of Creative Writing*. The only thing a Master of Fine Arts degree actually qualifies one to do is teach . . . Fine Arts. Almost all present fiction professors hold something like an M.F.A. So do most editors of literary magazines. Most M.F.A. candidates who stay in the Business will go on to teach and edit. Small wonder, then, that older critics feel in so much current C.Y. fiction the tweed breeze that could signal a veritable storm of boredom: envision if you dare a *careful, accomplished* national literature, mistake-free, seamless as fine linoleum; fiction preoccupied with norm as value instead of value’s servant; fiction by academics who were taught by academics and teach aspiring academics; novel after critique-resistant novel about tenure-angst, coed-lust, cafeteria-*schmerz*.

Railing against occluded subject matter and tradition-tested style is one thing. A larger issue is whether Writing Programs and their grinding, story-every-three-weeks workshop assembly lines could, eventually, lower all standards, precipitate a broad-level literary mediocrity, fictional equivalents of what Donald Hall calls “The McPoem.” I think, if they get much more popular, and do not drop the pose of “education” in favor of a humbler and more honest self-appraisal—a form of literary patronage and an occasion for literary community—we might well end up with a McStory chain that would put Ray Kroc to shame. Because it’s not just the unhealthy structure of the Program, the weird creative constraints it has to impose on instructors and students alike—it’s the type of student who is attracted by such an arrangement. A sheepheaded willingness to toe any line just because it’s the most comfortable way to survive is contemptible in any student. But students are just symptoms. Here’s the disease: in terms of rigor, demand, intellectual and emotional requirement, a lot of Creative Writing Programs are an unfunny joke. Few require of applicants any significant preparation in history, literature, criticism, composition, foreign languages, art or philosophy; fewer still make attempts to provide it in curricula or require it as a criterion for graduation.

Part of this problem is political. Academic departments of Creative Writing and “Straight Literature” tend to hold each other in mutual contempt, a state of affairs that student, Program, and serious-fiction audience are all going to regret a lot if it continues to obtain. Way too many students are being “certified” to go out there and try to do meaningful work on the cutting edge of an artistic discipline of whose underpinnings, history, and greatest achievements they are largely ignorant. The obligatory survey of “Writers Who Are Important to *You*” at the start of each term seems to suggest that Homer and Milton, Cervantes and Shakespeare, Maupassant and Gogol—to say nothing of the Testaments—have receded into the mists of Straight Lit; that, for far too much of this generation, Salinger invented the wheel, Updike internal combustion, and

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<sup>4</sup>Only considerations of space and legal liability restrain me from sharing with you in detail the persistent legend, at one nameless institution, of the embalmed cadaver cadged from the medical school by two deeply troubled young M.F.A. candidates, enrolled in a workshop at their proxy, smuggled pre-bell into the seminar room each week, and propped in its assigned seat, there to clutch a pencil in its white fist and stare straight ahead with an expression of somewhat rigid good cheer. The name of the legend is “The Cadaver That Got a B.”

Carver, Beattie and Phillips drive what's worth chasing, Forget Allan Bloom gnashing his teeth at high-school students who pretend to no aspirations past an affordable mortgage—we're supposed to want to be *writers*, here. We as a generation are in danger of justifying Eliot at his zaniest if via a blend of academic stasis and intellectual disinterest we show to the dissatisfaction of all that culture is either cumulative or it is dead, empty on either side of a social Now that admits neither passion about the future nor curiosity about the past.

The fact that we Aspiring Voices as a generation show so little intellectual curiosity is the least defensible thing of all. But it could well be that the very thing that makes our anti-intellectualism so obscene renders it also extremely temporary. Thing in question: our generation is lucky enough to have been born into an artistic climate as stormy and exciting as anything since Pound and Co. turned the world-before-last on its head. The last few generations of American writers have breathed the relatively stable air of New Criticism and an Anglo-American aesthetics untainted by Continental winds. The climate for the "next" generation of American writers—should we decide to inhale rather than die—is aswirl with what seems like long-overdue appreciation for the weird achievements of such aliens as Husserl, Heidegger, Bakhtin, Lacan, Barthes, Poulet, Gadamer, de Man. The demise of Structuralism has changed a world's outlook on language, art, and literary discourse; and the contemporary artist can simply no longer afford to regard the work of critics or theorists or philosophers—no matter how stratospheric—as divorced from his own concerns.

Crudely put, the idea that literary language is any kind of neutral medium for the transfer of \_\_\_\_\_<sup>5</sup> from artist to audience, or that it's any kind of inert tool lying there passively to be well- or ill-used by a communicator of meaning, has been cast into rich and serious question. With it, too, the stubborn Romanticist view of fiction as essentially a mirror, distinguished from the real world it reflects only by its portability and mercilessly "objective" clarity, has finally taken it on the chin. Form-content distinctions are now flat planets. Language's promotion from mirror to eye, from *organikos* to organic, is yesterday's news (except in those two lonely outposts, TV and the Creative classroom) as the tide of Post-Structuralism, Marxism, Feminism, Freudianism, Deconstruction, Semiotics, Hermeneutics, and attendant -isms and -ics moves through the ("Straight") U.S. academy and into the consciousness of the conscious American adult.

The crux being that, if mimesis isn't dead, then it's on life-support courtesy of those who soon enough will be.

And what a row C.Y. writers can see among its heirs! Only about eighty years after visual-arts movements like Dada and Cubism supplanted "referential" art (no camera inventions to threaten the sovereignty of literary mimesis, see), the literature of the referent, of "psychological glow," of illusion has finally come under constructive attack from angles as disparate as they are dazzling. The refracted world of Proust and Musil, Schulz and Stein, Borges and Faulkner has, post-War, exploded into diffraction, a weird, protracted Manhattan Project staffed by Robbe-Grillet, Grass, Nabokov, Sor-

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<sup>5</sup>Take your pick of Tolstoy, Schopenhauer or Richards and insert "feeling," "freedom from phenomena," or "relevant mental condition," respectively, in the space provided.

rentino, Bohl, Barth, McCarthy, García Márquez, Puig, Kundera, Gass, Fuentes, Elkin, Donoso, Handke, Burroughs, Duras, Elkin, Coover, Gombrowicz, LeGuin, Lessing, Acker, Gaddis, Coetzee, Ozick. To name just a few. We, the would-be heirs to a gorgeous chaos, stand witness to the rise and fall of the *nouveau roman*, Postmodernism, Metafiction, The New Lyricism, The New Realism, Minimalism, Ultraminimalism, Performance-Theory. It's a freaking maelstrom, and the C.Y. writer who still likes to read a bit can't help feeling torn: if the Program is maddening in its stasis, the real world of serious fiction just *won't hold still*.

If one can stomach a good dose of simplification, though, there can be seen one deep feature shared by all the cutting-edge fiction that resonates with the post-Hiroshima revolution. That is its fall into time, a loss of innocence about the language that is its breath and bread. Its unblinking recognition of the fact that the relations between literary artist, literary language, and literary artifact are vastly more complex and powerful than has been realized hitherto. And the insight that is courage's reward—that it is *precisely* in those tangled relations that a forward-looking, fertile literary value may well reside.

This doesn't mean that Metafiction and Minimalism, the two most starkly self-conscious of the movements that exploit human beings' wary and excited new attention to language, compose or even indicate the directions in which the serious fiction of "whole new generations" will move. Both these forms strike me as simple engines of self-reference (Metafiction overtly so, Minimalism a bit sneakier); they are primitive, crude, and seem already to have reached the Clang-Bird-esque horizon of their own possibility—self-reference being just a tiny wrinkled subset of aboutness. I'm pretty convinced, though, that they're an early symptom of a dark new enlightenment, that quite soon no truly serious C.Y. writer will be able to pretend anymore that the use of literary expression for the construction of make-believe is a straightforward enterprise. We are the recipients of a knife unprecedentedly vulnerable to its own blade, and all the Writing Program prizes and "Mary Tyler Moore Show" reruns in the world can't hide what's in our hands forever.

Exciting is also confusing, and I'd be distrustful of any C.Y. snot who claimed to know where literary fiction will go during this generation's working lifetime. It's obviously true that the revolution I've just gushed about has yielded changes in outlook that are as yet primarily destructive: illusions exposed, assumptions overturned, dearly held prejudices debunked. We seem, now, to see our literary innocence taken from us without anything substantial to replace it. An age between. There's a marvelously apposite Heidegger quotation here, but I'll spare you.

The bold conclusion here, then, is that the concatenated New Generation with whom the critics are currently playing coy mistress is united by confusion, if nothing else. And this might be why so much of the worst C.Y. fiction fits so neatly into the Three Camps reviewers consign it to: Workshop Hermeticism because in confusing times caution seems prudent; Catatonia because in confusing times the bare minimal seems easy; Yuppie Nihilism because the mass culture the Yuppie inhabits and instantiates is itself at best empty and at worst evil—and in confusing times the revelation of something even this obvious is, up to a point, valuable.

Well, but it's fair to ask how valuable. Of course it's true that an unprecedented num-

ber of young Americans have big disposable incomes, fine tastes, nice things, competent accountants, access to exotic intoxicants, attractive sex partners, and are still deeply unhappy. All right. Some good fiction has held up a mercilessly powder-smearing mirror to the obvious. What troubles me about the fact that the Gold-Card-fear-and-trembling fiction just keeps coming is that, if the upheavals in popular, academic and intellectual life have left people with any long-cherished conviction intact, it seems as if it should be an abiding faith that the conscientious, talented, and lucky artist of any age retains the power to effect change. And if Marx (sorry—last dropped name) derided the intellectuals of his day for merely interpreting the world when the real imperative was to change it, the derision seems even more apt today when we notice that many of our best-known C.Y. writers seem content merely to have reduced interpretation to whining. And what's frustrating for me about the whiners is that precisely the state of general affairs that *explains* a nihilistic artistic outlook makes it *imperative* that art *not* be nihilistic. I can think of no better argument for giving Mimesis-For-Mimesis'-Sake the chair than the fact that, for a young fiction writer, inclined by disposition and vocation to pay some extra attention to the way life gets lived around him, 1987's America is not a nice place to be. The last cohesive literary generation came to consciousness during the comparatively black-and-white era of Vietnam. We, though, are Watergate's children, television's audience, Reagan's draft-pool, and everyone's market. We've reached our majority in a truly bizarre period in which "Wrong is right," "Greed is good," and "It's better to look good than to feel good"—and when the poor old issue of trying to *be* good no longer even merits a straight face. It seems like one big echo of Mayer the fifties' ad-man: "In a world where private gratification seems the supreme value, all cats are grey."

*Except art*, is the thing. Serious, real, conscientious, aware, ambitious art is not a grey thing. It has never been a grey thing and it is not a grey thing now. This is why fiction in a grey time *may not be grey*. And why the titles of all but one or two of the best works of Neiman-Marcus Nihilism are going to induce aphasia quite soon in literate persons who read narrative art for what makes it real.

And, besides an unfair acquaintance with many young writers who are not yet Conspicuous and so not known to you, this is why I'd be willing to bet anything at least a couple and maybe a bunch of the Whole New Generation are going to make art, maybe make great art, maybe even make great art change. One thing about the Young you can trust in 1987: if we're willing to devote our lives to something, you can rest assured we get off on it. And nothing has changed about why writers who don't do it for the money write: it's art, and art is meaning, and meaning is power: power to color cats, to order chaos, to transform void into floor and debt into treasure. The best "Voices of a Generation" surely know this already; more, they let it inform them. It's quite possible that none of the best are yet among the Conspicuous. A couple might even be . . . *autodidacts*. But, especially now, none of them need worry. If fashion, flux and academy make for thin milk, at least that means the good stuff can't help but rise. I'd get ready.