THE STATE OF THE NOVEL: DYING
ART OR NEW SCIENCE?

The novel is regularly said to be dying—and now it is
said with perhaps more justification than at any other
time. In fact it is difficult now even to speak of the novel
as a generic art form. If one uses as a criterion the familiar
features of the traditional novel—plot, scene, characterization,
action, denouement, development of character and so on—it
is hard to find a worthy example of the ancient art. Anything
can and does pass for a novel now. A novel is what you call
something that won’t sell if you call it poems or short stories.
Autobiography is novel. History is novel. Sociology is novel.
Tirade is novel. I am not complaining. For the undeniable fact
is that non-novels which pass as novels now are usually better
than novels which look like novels. Love Story and Oliver’s
Story, which look like novels—have characters, good people,
bad people, love, action and so forth—are not very good. In
fact the less said about them, the better. Celine’s novel, Castle
to Castle, which has no nice people at all and resembles a
novel less than it does a cobra striking repeatedly, one venomous
assault after another, is memorable and somehow astringent.
After reading it, one feels revolted perhaps but also purged.
After reading Love Story and such memorable lines as “Love
means never having to say you’re sorry,” the reader needs a
purge. He certainly doesn’t need an emetic. Maybe there are
times when an honest hatred serves us better than love corrupted
by sentimentality, meretriciousness, sententiousness, cuteness.
Beckett’s novels where nothing much happens, people say very
little, and what they say is usually misunderstood, are more honest, bracing, less depressing than eventful good-story Harold Robbins novels. In Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* nothing happens, yet it is somehow more eventful than a Jacqueline Susanne novel where everything happens. The last great conventional novel may have been *War and Peace* or perhaps *Middlemarch*. *Gone with the Wind* bears a certain resemblance to a great novel but what it really is is a very good soap opera.

Here I am making a couple of assumptions which I shall not bother to defend, since they seem to me self-evident. One is that if we take the novel seriously, it follows that it is an art form just as a poem or a painting or a symphony is an art form. And if this is the case, it follows that while it is true that a novel should have an action, it does not suffice for it to be "a good story." That is to say, it is a good thing to tell a good story or to hear a good story, but it doesn't necessarily follow that a good story is good art. Good art tells some home truths about the way things are, the way we are, about the movement or lack of movement of the human heart. In great ages, when people understood each other and held a belief in common, great stories like the *Iliad* or *War and Peace* were also great art because they affirmed the unspoken values which a people held in common and made it possible for a people to recognize themselves and to know who they are. But there are other times when people don't know who they are or where they are going. At such times story-telling can become a form of diversion, perhaps even a waste of time—like the prisoners facing execution Pascal talks about who spend their time crapshooting instead of trying to figure out how they got in such a fix and what is going to happen to them.

So my main assumption is that art is cognitive, that is, it discovers and knows and tells, tells the reader how things are, how we are, in a way that the reader can confirm with as much certitude as a scientist taking a pointer-reading.

A corollary to the proposition that art in general and the novel in particular is cognitive is that the stance of the novelist in the late twentieth century is also diagnostic. The implication
is that something has gone wrong, which it certainly has, and that the usual experts cannot tell us what it is—and indeed that they may be part of the problem.

Something, it appears, has gone wrong with the Western world, and gone wrong in a sense far more radical than, say, the evils of industrial England which engaged Dickens. It did not take a diagnostician to locate the evils of the sweatshops of the nineteenth century Midlands. But now it seems that whatever has gone wrong strikes to the heart and core of meaning itself, the very ways people see and understand themselves. What is called into question in novels now is the very enterprise of human life itself. Instead of writing about this or that social evil from a posture of consensus from which we agree to deplore social evils, it is now the consensus itself and the posture which are called into question. This state of affairs creates problems for the novelist. For in order to create a literature, whether of celebration or dissent, a certain shared universe of discourse is required. It is now these very shared assumptions which are called into question. Forty years ago Steinbeck had an easy job writing about the Okies and the dustbowl. It is a different matter now when the novelist confronts third-generation Okies in California who have won, who seem to have everything they want—and yet who seem ready any minute to slide physically and spiritually into the Pacific Ocean.

So the novelist today is less like the Tolstoy or Fielding or Jane Austen who set forth and celebrated a still intact society, than he is like a somewhat bemused psychiatrist gazing at a patient who in one sense lives in the best of all possible worlds and yet is suffering from a depression and anxiety which he doesn’t understand.

There are similarities, I think, between these two branches of art and science, that is, novel-writing and psychiatry. There is also an intriguing difference between the points of view of the two professions. The issue between science and art is of perennial interest to me since I started off in science in college, in medicine, was headed for psychiatry and ended up writing novels—and so I hope it will also have general interest as an
example of culture-crossing and perhaps as an occasion also of shedding some light on what the two cultures of art and science have to do with each other.

It is all the more intriguing in this case because at first sight it would appear that the two points of view are directly opposed. If the novelist is right, the psychiatrist is deceiving himself. If the psychiatrist is right, the novelist is crazy.

If the latter is the case, then novelists stand in need of psychiatrists—as in fact they often do. But it may also be the case that psychiatrists and other non-novelists stand in need of novelists and that it is the novelist who is peculiarly equipped to locate such elusive phenomena and answer such odd questions as: what is pathological and what is “normal” in the last quarter of the twentieth century?

More often than not, however, novelists and psychiatrists find themselves either talking at cross purposes or upstaging each other from carefully prepared vantage points. Some psychologists and psychiatrists profess to understand such things as creativity which I do not understand. Novelists on the other hand often find psychiatrists easy prey in their novels. The long-term goals which psychology erects, such large abstractions as emotional maturity, meaningful intersubjective relations and so on, do invite a certain satirical treatment.

This is all in good fun. But what is important to notice is that the hero or anti-hero of the contemporary novel hardly qualifies under any of these conventional mental health canons—emotional maturity, autonomy, and so forth. Indeed he, and more recently she, is more often than not a solitary, disenchanted person who is radically estranged from his or her society, who has generally rejected the goals of his family and his peers, and whose encounters with other people, friendships and love affairs, are regularly attended by misunderstandings, misperceptions, breakdowns in communication, aggressions and withdrawals, all occurring in a general climate of deflated meaning. People in novels meet, talk, make love, and go their separate ways without noticeable joy or sorrow. Indeed the main emotion one encounters in contemporary fiction is a sense of
unreality, a grayness and flatness, a diminished sense of significance. Relations between people take the form of silences, misunderstandings, impersonal sexual encounters.

If someone were to propose to the hero of modern fiction that he undergo psychotherapy to make his life more meaningful and to improve his interpersonal relations, one can imagine his response.

Now of course the issue can be settled very quickly in favor of psychology if we make the obvious inference—that the hero of the contemporary novel is the way he is because that’s the way the novelist is, a difficult, unhappy, cut-off sort of person. Might it not indeed be the case that the novelist writes novels precisely because of his sombre view of the world and his own difficulties with people? Like the poet in Allen Tate’s definition, is he not a shaky man who steadies and affirms himself by the creative process?

To a degree this diagnosis is probably correct. We are dealing here with several half-truths. Most novelists and those poets who have not yet suicided would probably agree—with an important reservation. The poet may admit to being a wounded man, yet point out that the wounded man often has the best view of the battle. The novelist or poet may in his own perverse way be a modern version of the Old-Testament prophet who, like Hosea, may have a bad home life, yet who nevertheless and despite himself finds himself stuck with the unpleasant assignment of pointing out to his fellow citizens that something is wrong, that they are on the wrong track.

What I am suggesting is that art and science, in this case the novel and psychology, have different ways of approaching the truth and different truths to tell. Contradictions appear only when one discipline invades the territory of another.

But let me get down to cases. Perhaps one example from current fiction will suffice to convey the special flavor of a commonly encountered fictional view of the dislocation of modern American life.

In the novel *Something Happened* Joseph Heller writes about Bob Slocum and his family. Slocum is a successful middle-aged
executive who works in New York and lives in Connecticut. He is the current version of the John Marquand character a generation ago who suffered a kind of gentle disenchantment with life. But things seem to have gotten worse since. None of the Slocums is noticeably neurotic. On the contrary, they are a gifted, attractive and intelligent lot, the best of an affluent, upward mobile upper-middle-class northeast exurban society. But Bob Slocum is unhappy, his wife is unhappy, his son is unhappy, his daughter is unhappy. Everyone is afraid of at least one other person. When the family assembles at mealtime, the traditional social celebration of all past civilizations, the occasion is a disaster of misunderstandings, sarcasms, put-downs and uproar. “Can’t we get through one meal in peace?” somebody asks. No, they can’t.

Bob’s wife drinks. Bob chases office girls and prostitutes without enthusiasm. Yet he succeeds in his profession. Like Marquand’s hero, he gets his promotion, buys a new house in Connecticut. This is how he feels about the new house:

All of us live now—we are well off—in luxury . . . in a gorgeous two-story wood colonial house with white shutters on a choice country acre in Connecticut off a winding picturesque asphalt road called Peapod Lane—and I hate it. There are rose bushes, zinnias and chrysanthemums rooted about, and I hate them too. I have sycamores and chestnut trees in my glade and my glen, and pots of glue in my garage. I have an electric drill with sixteen attachments which I never use. Grass grows under my feet in back and in front, and flowers come into bloom when they’re supposed to . . . . Families with horses for pets do live nearby, and I hate them too, the families and the horses . . . . I hate my neighbor and he hates me.

*Something Happened* is the title of Heller’s novel. Something has happened all right. Actually nothing much happens in the novel but something must have happened before, something dreadful, but what is it? How did these good people get in such a fix? What happened? We are not sure, but whatever it was, it was not a single event in the usual sense of events in traditional novels, like the fatal wounding of Prince Andrey in *War and Peace*, or even a tragic historical event like America importing
slaves from Africa. It is more like some aboriginal disaster, the original sin of the twentieth century. But where do we locate the disaster? What was the nature of the Fall? Has something dreadful happened to Bob Slocum or to the society in which he lives? or both?

Fictional examples could be multiplied. Indeed the twentieth century novel might be set forth as one or another aspect of disenchantment ranging from the gentle disillusion of the Marquand character to the derisive wise-acre disgust of Bob Slocum, with stopovers at the restiveness of the Hemingway expatriate, the metaphysical anxiety of the European existentialists, the apathy of Camus' Meursault, the rampaging gallows humor of a Portnoy.

Someone has in fact characterized the change in direction of the great body of poetry and fiction for the past hundred years as the Great Literary Secession, meaning that poets and novelists have, for whatever reason, registered a massive dissent from the modern proposition that with the advance of science and technology and education, life gets better too.

This issue, I would suppose, must sooner or later be confronted by anyone, scientist or artist or layman, interested in trying to figure out how things are and how to make life more tolerable both for oneself and for other people. Do we not indeed have the sense that the question grows daily more urgent? that there is a cumulative sense of crisis which allows us less and less room for temporizing? Something has happened all right. But perhaps something worse is about to happen.

Perhaps the issue can be clarified by making it both more concrete and more hypothetical. Given the unhappiness of Bob Slocum, let us assume the added circumstance, admittedly unlikely in this case, that Bob Slocum has submitted himself to science to diagnose and correct his pathology. Since he is unhappy, he goes like many Americans to the expert of unhappiness to find out what is wrong. He goes to a psychiatrist. Now what kind of therapeutic goals do we envision for him? How would we like to see him change? Or would he like to change? Suppose we imagine his future in terms of the conven-
tional abstractions used to define such goals, namely, that he become more creative, autonomous, productive and so forth; that he become more integrated in the life of his community. These goals seem worthy and unexceptionable, but do we not have a sense of misgiving when we picture such a Bob Slocum in the future, no longer unhappy and derisive, but, as they say nowadays, being “into” this or that, into ceramics or folk-dancing, or working for the political party of his choice? And if we secretly like him better the way he is, how do we articulate and justify a preference for his unhappiness?

The possibility I want to raise is whether from the novelist’s point of view there may be at least two kinds of distresses to which people fall prey.

One is a distress with which one can surely deal as straightforwardly as a surgeon dealing with abdominal pain. It too is pain pure and simple, that is, suffering without referent or redeeming qualities, anguish, sadness, conflict, terror which cripples and paralyzes. People hurt and come for relief to friends and experts who specialize in this kind of hurt, and friends and experts try to help them.

Such distress, in short, can be understood as a malfunction of the psyche which can be addressed from the traditional posture of the medical sciences, that of an observer who recognizes a class of disorders to which he applies a class of techniques.

But another kind of distress engages us, that is, us novelists. It is the ironic disaffection of Bob Slocum in *Something Happened*, the suicide of Quentin Compson in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, the loneliness of Ivan Karamazov, the anxiety of Roquentin in Sartre’s novel, the flatness and banality experienced by J. Alfred Prufrock, the bemusement of Joan Didion’s solitary heroine cruising the freeways of Los Angeles.

As different as are these fictional disorders, they share certain features in common. They are manifested by characters who are not only not portrayed as sick people but who rather are put forward by their creators, the novelists and poets, precisely because they are held to possess certain insights into the way
things are, insights not yet shared or perhaps only dimly shared by most of their fellow denizens of the Western world. Yet it is these latter who by virtue of their freedom from symptoms, it would seem, would be judged by all the traditional criteria of mental health to be better off, happier and healthier than the dislocated fictional hero.

It appears indeed that science and art are taking here directly opposed views, that what science regards as normal, art regards as somehow the failure or coming short of the self, and that what art regards as an appropriate response to the age we live in, science sees as anti-social or aberrant behavior.

Insights, I suggest, are what the novelist has in mind, insights into the way things are. But what things? And where? Certainly we are talking about a pathology. Something has happened all right, something has gone wrong, but what? Is it a psychic disorder which can be diagnosed from a scientific, therapeutic stance? Or is it something else? Is it the final passing of the age of faith? Are we talking about a post-Christian malaise, the sense of disorientation which presumably always comes whenever the symbols and beliefs of one age are no longer taken seriously by people in a new age?

Clearly we are talking about a species of alienation, the traditional subject matter of psychiatrists, the original alienists. But notice that the novelist is raising a Copernican issue and standing the question on its head. Who is alienated? And from what? And is one better off nowadays alienated or unalienated?

Toward the end of identifying what the novelist is up to, I would like to go a bit deeper into this matter of literary alienation, deeper than Heller’s character, Bob Slocum, who after all might be put down as yet another projection of yet another novelist, American novelists in particular being by the very nature of their calling and their peculiar place or nonplace in the culture a perverse and dislocated lot. Bob Slocum, like Alexander Portnoy, can after all be read as a convenient satirical vehicle by means of which the novelist practises a kind of double-edged therapy, on the one hand flailing away at all those features of U.S. society he doesn’t like, and on the other hand
exposing and, he hopes, exorcizing his own personal demons. And has a good time doing both. Both novels are very funny, funny enough to give the reader leave not to be too seriously challenged and engaged.

Other novels are not so easily disposed of. I'll choose one, a classic of sorts, though not necessarily the best, toward the end of shedding some light on what I consider the peculiar diagnostic role of the novel in this century.

I have in mind Sartre's *Nausea*. It is germane to our purpose, I think, not because it somewhat self-consciously sets forward certain of Sartre's philosophical theses, which do not directly concern us here, but as an onslaught on the "normal" or what is ordinarily taken for the normal. Unlike Sartre's later political novels, it is interesting because the attack is phenomenological, not political, an examination, that is, of the way things are.

What interests us about Roquentin, the protagonist of *Nausea*, in the present context is his conscious and deliberate alienation from those very aspects of French culture which by ordinary standards one would judge as eminently normal, for example, the apparently contented lives of the provincial bourgeoisie and the successful lives of the savants of the academy of science.

Roquentin is an historian. He lives a quiet life in the provincial city of Bouville, a routine existence consisting of research in the local library, solitary walks, eavesdropping on conversations between strangers, a mechanical sexual relation with the patron of a cafe.


Yet he observes objects and people in the minutest detail, a scrap of newspaper in the gutter, people sitting in cafes, people strolling in the street, people who seem to fit into the world, who talk and listen to each other and give every appearance of understanding themselves and the world.

His favorite diversion is walking downtown on Sunday morning and watching whole families dressed in their Sunday best promenade and greet each other after Mass.
Sartre's point seems to be the paradox that although the bourgeoisie seem happy and all together, there is nevertheless something wrong with them. Their lives are a kind of masquerade, an impersonation; they are not themselves. Sartre calls it bad faith. Roquentin with all his dislocation appears to know something they don't know—yet seems worse off for his knowledge, at first simply out of it, isolated, then at length overtaken by attacks of anxiety and nausea at what he takes to be a revelation of the true nature of things, a highly unpleasant glimpse into being itself.

It is important to notice that Nausea is no ordinary free-thinking rationalistic-skeptical assault on the Catholic bourgeoisie. For Roquentin (and Sartre) have as little use for the opposition, the other triumphant sector of French society, the anti-clerical members of the academy, famous doctors, generals and politicians. Roquentin is equally repelled by the rational believer and the rational unbeliever like Renan.

Roquentin visits the Bouville museum where there are displayed a hundred and fifty portraits of the famous. He stops at the portrait of Dr. Parottin, member of the Academy of Science.

Now I stood before him and he was smiling at me. What intelligence and affability in his smile! His plump body rested leisurely in the
hollow of a great leather armchair. This unpretentious wise man put people at their ease immediately.

It did not take long to guess the reason for his prestige: he was loved because he understood everything; you could tell him everything. He looked a little like Renan, all in all with more distinction.

Now what are we to make of Sartre's and Roquentin's alienation? Can we lay it to the literary acrobatics of French intellectuals who ever since Descartes are well known for their ability to hit on a single philosophical thesis and use it for a yardstick to measure the whole world? Or shall we trace it to the social malaise of the French between two great wars?

Or is Sartre saying something of value about the condition of Western man in the twentieth century or perhaps about the human condition itself?

Or is Sartre's existentialism to be understood as only a way station in his transit from a bourgeois intellectual to a Marxist ideologue?

If Sartre is correct, then things have indeed been turned upside down. For in his novel the apparently well are sick and the apparently sick are onto the truth. But is the truth an unpleasant business we would do well to avoid? Roquentin thinks he knows something other people don't know, that he has made an unpleasant discovery which scarcely makes for happiness but allows him to live with an authenticity not attained by the happy bourgeoisie and the triumphant scientists. Anxiety, a sense of unreality, solitariness, loss of meaning, the very traits which we ordinarily think of as symptoms and signs of such and such a disorder are here set forth as appropriate responses to a revelation of the way things are and the way people really are.

If this were the case and things are indeed turned upside down, there is nothing much that psychiatrists could do about it—or would want to. It is hardly feasible for therapists to treat people who don't think they are sick, whether they are the happy bourgeoisie or the unhappy existentialist.

What I have in mind, however, is the intermediate case, someone located, as perhaps most of us are, between the intact
bourgeoisie and the triumphant scientists on the one hand and the alienated hero of the novel on the other—a character who, let us say, falls somewhere between Roquentin and his existential despair and Bob Slocum and his comic disgust.

What, in short, are we to make of the widespread sense of malaise experienced by a great many people in these times and of the diametrically opposed views of this malaise taken by scientists and artists?

I'm afraid I cannot give a clearcut answer to the question, who is crazy, novelists or scientists? Rather will I content myself with a more modest yet, I think, significant goal. It is to return to my original assumption, that art is cognitive, as cognitive and affirmable in its own way as science, and that in the case of the current novel what it cognizes, discerns, knows and tells is of a unique order which cannot be grasped by the scientific method. It is an elementary axiom that the truth which science tells about things and events is a general truth. The scientist is only interested in a molecule of sodium chloride or a supernova or an amoeba or even a patient insofar as it resembles other molecules, other supernova, other amoebae and even other patients sharing the same disorder. But the peculiar fate of the human being is that he is stuck with the consciousness of himself as a self, as a unique individual, or at least with the possibility of becoming such a self. The paradox of the triumph of science and technology is that to the degree that a person perceives himself as an example of, a specimen of, this or that type of social creature or biological genotype, to precisely this same degree does he come short of being himself. The great gap in human knowledge to which science cannot address itself by the very nature of the scientific method is, to paraphrase Kierkegaard, nothing less than this: what it is like to be an individual, to be born, live and die in the twentieth century. If we assume, consciously or unconsciously, that science can answer such questions, we will never even be able to ask the questions, let alone answer them. Who then can address himself to the question? The individual person of course, who while accepting the truth and beauty of science, retains his sovereignty.
over himself. But someone else also speaks to the same issue: it is of course the artist who finds himself in league with the individual, with his need to have himself confirmed in his predicament. It is the artist who at his best reverses the alienating process by the very act of seeing it clearly for what it is and naming it, and who in this same act establishes a kind of community. It is a paradoxical community whose members are both alone yet not alone, who strive to become themselves and discover that there are others who, however tentatively, have undertaken the same quest.

There is, I would think, a puzzle here for many American readers in the so-called novel of alienation. I know from experience that many young readers find themselves put off and perhaps with good reason by the sombre view of life portrayed by so many novelists, both European and American, and I never argue with the reader who tells me that he is happy and that things are, after all, not so bad. But if the novelist is correct in his apparent dissent from the traditional American proposition and if it is true, as I suggest, that the contemporary novel at its best is cognitive and exploratory, in its own way as scientific as nuclear physics, perhaps some light can be shed on our confusion by taking note of the more familiar dilemmas of science in general and psychiatry in particular. We are all aware, I think, of the dangers of the passive consumership of technology, confronted as we are by the dazzling credentials of science. A certain loss of personal sovereignty occurs when a person comes to believe that his happiness depends on his exposure to this or that psychology or this or that group encounter or technique.

There is a similar danger attendant upon literature and art—what Kierkegaard might have called the perils of the esthetic sphere. If it is true that the poet and novelist are in the vanguard in their foreboding that something has gone badly wrong and in their sketching out of the nature of the pathology, let the reader both rejoice and beware, rejoice that the good novelist has the skill to point out the specters which he, the reader, had been only dimly aware of, but beware in doing so of surren-
dering the slightest sovereignty over himself, if one happens to be a writer or a scientist and lucky enough occasionally to hit on the truth, or if one is a reader or a consumer and lucky enough to benefit from a great medical discovery or a novelistic breakthrough which excites him—well and good. Well and good, that is, as long as one never forgets that the living of one's life is not to be found in books, either the reading of them or the writing of them.

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