



Rebirth of the Nouveau Roman: 9/11 as a Crisis of Confidence in American Literary Aesthetics

by Daniel Davis Wood

On September 11, 2001, with the Twin Towers reduced to rubble, the novelist Jay McInerney fled to the home of his friend and fellow novelist Bret Easton Ellis. On September 15, with McInerney's 1984 debut *Bright Lights, Big City* billed as "the definitive modern New York novel," *The Guardian* asked him to consider the literary implications of '9/11.' To that end, he recalled his conversation with Ellis:

'I'm glad I don't have a book coming out this month,' I said - a selfish and trivial response to the disaster, but one I thought he would understand. Nobody was going to be talking about fiction this week. [...] 'I don't know how I'm going to be able to go back to this novel I'm writing,' I said. The novel is set in New York, of course. The very New York which has just been altered forever. 'I know exactly what you mean,' he said. (2001)

But what exactly *did* he mean? Underpinning McInerney's lament are several assumptions in need of explication - assumptions about the nature of literary fiction; about its relationship to social, political, and cultural actuality; and about what readers of literary fiction expect of those who write it - which have informed not only his own fiction after 9/11 but also the fiction of many of his contemporaries.



In this essay, I chart the differing responses to those assumptions amongst those who share them and those who do not - writers and readers alike. My intention, however, is not to produce a work of literary criticism that analyzes various post-9/11 fictions in order to identify their reliance on those assumptions, but to contribute to the literary history of post-9/11 fiction with the suggestion that there is a particular mode of fiction which occupies an important place in that history even though it has not been included in literary-historical scholarship thus far. It has been overlooked, I think, because it refuses to explicitly address 9/11 as a subject, even though it implicitly addresses 9/11 via its literary *form*; and so I suggest that as publishers, reviewers, and readers have been increasingly attracted to this particular mode of fiction, they have revealed a widespread dissatisfaction with the dominance of post-9/11 fiction by literary realism and have thereby offered a counter-narrative to the view that post-9/11 fiction necessarily and exclusively consists of those works that address 9/11 itself.

My approach is threefold. First I explicate McInerney's assumptions and survey the responses he elicited in making them, and I suggest that the ensuing debate between opponents and supporters of his position discloses a crisis of confidence in the value of fiction in post-9/11 American culture. Then I align myself with Camilla Nelson, author of the most thorough analysis of that debate yet published, before I update her analysis with an account of developments that have taken place since its appearance in 2008. Finally I argue that growing numbers of American readers have sensed a failure amongst American writers to adequately address this crisis of confidence, and have thereby been drawn to - and created a fledgling market for - fiction that situates itself within a particularly European literary tradition. This fiction, I suggest, has become the unlikely beneficiary of post-9/11 American literary aesthetics by virtue of readers who find that the problem with contemporary American fiction is not its failure to address the crisis realistically enough, but the attempt to address it realistically at all. Post-9/11, in short, readers have been beset by a disillusionment with realism as a credible mode of fiction, and so they have come to embrace fiction from a literary tradition whose approach to realism has historically ranged from ambivalence to outright hostility.

A CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE

Jay McInerney's fear that he could not return to his work in progress after 9/11 rests on the assumption that his task as a novelist is to represent social, political, and cultural actuality. His belief that popular interest in literary fiction would diminish in the wake of 9/11 rests on the assumption that his capabilities as a novelist had just been outrun by actuality itself. In combination, these two assumptions betray his crisis



of confidence: he feels an obligation to respond to 9/11 even as 9/11 undercuts his ability to respond as he believes he must. He is not the only novelist to have voiced this crisis. 9/11, for Don DeLillo, “was so vast and terrible that it was outside imagining even as it happened. We could not catch up to it. [...] The writer wants to understand what this day has done to us. Is it too soon?” (2001: 39). “[O]n September 12,” Martin Amis concurred, “all the writers on earth were reluctantly considering a change of occupation. [...] Work in progress had been reduced, overnight, to a blue streak of pitiable babble” (2002).

Three weeks after publishing McInerney’s lament, *The Guardian* featured a response by the critic James Wood (2001). At that time, Wood was still riding the wave of acclaim he received for a year-old essay in which he identified an emerging genre of fiction he called “hysterical realism” (Wood 2000: 41). Naming Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and David Foster Wallace as the genre’s founders and Zadie Smith as its latest practitioner, Wood described these authors’ “big contemporary novel[s]” as “perpetual-motion machine[s]” wherein “[s]tories and sub-stories sprout on every page” and “conventions of realism are not being abolished but [...] exhausted, and overworked” (ibid.: 41). By this he meant that these authors were casting a veil of verisimilitude over a sort of literary cartoon, exhibiting the realists’ affinity for carefully observed character traits and worldly details but including an overwhelming excess of those qualities in order to produce a narrative that was deliberately and consciously beyond credibility. As such, Wood saw something intemperate and thus “inhuman” in hysterical realism, and in *The Guardian* he argued that McInerney’s brand of social realism now seemed comparably inhuman because too temperate, too staid, to adequately engage with the quotidian incredibility of his post-9/11 *milieu*.

While social realism “strives to capture the times [and] to pin down an entire writhing culture,” Wood wrote, 9/11 offered a reminder “that whatever [fiction] gets up to, the ‘culture’ can always get up to something bigger” (2001). “[W]ho would dare to be knowledgeable about politics and society now?” he asked. “It ought to be harder, now, either to bounce around in the false zaniness of hysterical realism or to trudge along in the easy fidelity of social realism” (ibid.). As an alternative, he called for “works of fiction [whose] foci are human and metaphysical before they are social and documentary [...] stories, above all, about individual consciousness [...] novels that tell us not ‘how the world works’ but ‘how somebody felt about something’” (ibid.). What he wanted, in short, was psychological realism: not a retreat from realism in general, but realism with less emphasis on the convoluted nature of social, political, and cultural actuality and more emphasis on the human experience thereof.



Of course, there was little new about the divide between McInerney and Wood, nor about the debate that ensued along it. A full 40 years earlier, Philip Roth had lamented the difficulty of the novelist's ostensible obligation to "understand, describe, and then make credible much of American reality" (1961: 224). More than 20 years earlier, with Roth having reluctantly come down in favor of psychological realism, Tom Wolfe used Roth's diagnosis of the novelist's obligations to champion social realism instead (1989: 45-56); and just five years earlier, Jonathan Franzen had argued for some combination of the two (1996: 35-54). Rather than retracing each step in the evolution of this debate, I refer interested readers to Camilla Nelson's superb analysis of it (2008: 50-54, 57-59) and I reiterate her key findings. 9/11, Nelson argued, did not spark a new crisis of confidence in American literary aesthetics so much as it renewed a crisis already in progress: it did not ignite a fresh debate about the relationship between fiction and actuality so much as it rekindled a debate long underway.

THE DISENCHANTMENT WITH REALISM

Skip to 2008, when Nelson published her analysis. "[T]wo wars, and a series of world-changing events later," she wrote, "a growing number of literary works addressing the global fallout post September 11 [have] enter[ed] the public domain" (2008: 58). The titles named by herself and by other critics of post-9/11 fiction include Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children*, Ken Kalfus' *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*, John Updike's *Terrorist*, Jay McInerney's *The Good Life*, and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (see Nelson 2008; Gray 2008: 130; Miller 2008: 32; Jones and Smith 2010: 933). But insofar as each of these novels was written in the context of the above tension between psychological realism and social realism, each one tends to favor either of those varieties of realism without rejecting realism altogether. Despite a preference for psychological interiority over social externality or vice-versa, each one is similarly "set in a disenchanted modern cityscape inhabited by middle- or lower-middle-class characters" as it strives towards some conception of post-9/11 verisimilitude, plausibility, and thus credibility (Jones and Smith 2010: 934). Only since 2008, however, have critics and readers of these novels begun expressing misgivings about such a recourse to realism as a means of conveying the crisis of 9/11 - which is to say that Nelson's survey is now in need of an update as reader responses to the above works have since taken the debate she surveyed in a direction as yet uncharted.

Fittingly, the first complaints against the recourse to realism came from Zadie Smith, whose *White Teeth* was cited by James Wood as a textbook case of hysterical realism. In a long review of Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, a classically realist portrayal of intercultural relations in post-9/11 New York (2008), Smith declared that "realism has



had the freedom of the highway for some time [...] with most other exits blocked," but that, with *Netherland*, it had reached - and breached - a sort of critical mass:

For *Netherland*, our receptive pathways are so solidly established that to read this novel is to feel a powerful, somewhat dispiriting sense of recognition. It seems perfectly done - in a sense that's the problem. It's so precisely the image of what we have been taught to value in fiction that it throws that image into a kind of existential crisis. (2008)

For Smith, O'Neill's attempt to convey the consequences of 9/11 by striving toward verisimilitude was flawed - not credible - insofar as that very striving is predicated on the novelist's failure to internalize the crisis of 9/11. An internalization of that crisis would necessarily preclude any recourse to realism, so that, in approaching the event and its aftermath without fundamentally altering his literary practice, O'Neill failed to register and to convey an experience of the crisis it ignited. As Smith saw it, post-9/11 realism attempted to *contain* rather than convey the crisis, and so essentially distanced itself from the very thing with which it maintained a pretense of engaging.

After Smith presented her complaints to the broad readership of *The New York Review of Books*, they found an echo in academe when the scholars Richard Gray and Michael Rothberg reissued them in *American Literary History*.

Writing in late 2008, Gray contended that post-9/11 fiction needed to better acknowledge the crisis of 9/11 by disclosing "a recalibration of feeling so violent and radical that it resists and compels memory, generating stories that cannot, yet must, be told" (2009: 129). But, citing Don DeLillo's "beautifully structured" *Falling Man* as an example, he complained, like Smith, that "the structure is too clearly foregrounded [and] the style excessively mannered" in a way that left DeLillo ameliorating the severity of the very crisis he was purportedly compelled to convey (ibid.: 132). Finding the same to be true of the other novels cited above, Gray wondered "just how new, or at least different, the structures of these books are," and concluded: "for the most part, not at all. [...] They] simply assimilate the unfamiliar into familiar structures. The crisis is, in every sense of the word, domesticated" (ibid.: 134).

In early 2009, Gray's diagnosis elicited Rothberg's assent. "While American novelists have [...] announced the dawn of a new era following the attacks on New York and Washington D.C.," wrote Rothberg, "the *form* of their works does not bear witness to fundamental change" (2009: 152).



Crucially, though, neither he nor Gray went on to reject realism outright but only to advocate another readjustment of its foci. Gray asked for a blend of psychological and social realism that would reveal the interiority of the ethnic minority citizens of an America in crisis as the outside world intrudes upon it. Rothberg asked for a similar blend revealing the interiority of the citizens of other nations who watch the American crisis unfold at a distance and yet sense its influence on their own societies - and, as a prime example of that sort of fiction, he praised Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, the very novel Zadie Smith dismissed.

Critics of realism thus agreed that 9/11 rendered realism problematic, but they reached no agreement on what exactly a less problematic post-9/11 fiction would look like. If, for James Wood, neither social realism nor hysterical realism can adequately convey the crisis of 9/11; and if, for Gray and Rothberg, neither pure social realism nor pure psychological realism can do so; and if, for Zadie Smith, no mixture of social and psychological realism can do so, then what alternative remains? Is fiction even capable of adequately conveying the crisis at all; and, if so, how?

REBIRTH OF THE *NOUVEAU ROMAN*

Despite their differing opinions on *Netherland*, Smith, Gray, and Rothberg all found something newly dissatisfying about the hitherto satisfying staples of characterization and conflict, drama and *denouement*, which now seemed to evade rather than engage the inexpressibility of post-9/11 social, political, and cultural actuality. However, only Smith proposed an alternative that seems to me to have genuinely struck a chord with readers who shared her dissatisfaction. In her review of *Netherland*, she contrasted it with, and ultimately celebrated, the English writer Tom McCarthy's debut novel *Remainder*. Opening with its narrator being crushed by "something falling from the sky," perhaps airplane parts (McCarthy 2007: 5), and closing with the narrator hijacking a plane to embark on a suicide flight, *Remainder* implicitly invokes 9/11 and so positions itself as a work of post-9/11 fiction. In the narrative interim, though, it explicitly refuses verisimilitude in a way that rebukes and ridicules those who strive toward it. The narrator receives a fortune in compensation from the company that owned whatever 'something' fell from the sky and hit him, and he uses his payout to employ actors to re-enact a series of banal events he remembers from his past. In doing so, he himself strives toward verisimilitude - orchestrating increasingly detailed, complex, and supposedly accurate re-enactments - but to no avail, as there is no way for him to fully and faithfully evoke the actuality he remembers. At the same time, he shows no interest in his own social, political, and cultural actuality - "I got an urge to go and check up on the outside world," he says: "Nothing much to report" (ibid.: 154-5) - and so he grows increasingly obsessed with



superficially reconstructing an actuality that is lost to him. In a sense, then, *Remainder* finds a way to embody the crisis of 9/11: it acknowledges the irreclaimability of actuality and writes that very irreclaimability into its own aesthetics.

In reviewing *Remainder*, Zadie Smith recognized its literary lineage when she repeatedly named as its progenitor the work of the novelist and literary theorist Alain Robbe-Grillet. As well as the fiction he produced in the 1950s and 1960s, Robbe-Grillet's lasting achievement has been his advocacy for the *nouveau roman*, a type of avant-garde fiction which rejects verisimilitude in favor of formal innovation, which engages rather than evades its own inadequacies as a means of representing actuality, and which thus holds a fascination with its own poetics over and above any concern with 'the real world.' In 1957, writing against the dominance of both the social realism of Balzac and the psychological realism of Flaubert - and, post-World War II, writing in the thick of the Modernist crisis of authority (see Britton 1992) - Robbe-Grillet called for "writers [to be] aware [...] that the systematic repetition of the forms of the past is not only absurd and sterile, but can even become harmful" (1957: 45). Thus championing an abandonment of characterization and story (ibid.: 59-65) and of social, political, and cultural commentary in fiction (ibid.: 65-70), he asked, in short, for something like *Remainder*: a novel that revels in plotlessness, that undermines characterization, that fetishizes stasis, and that does not reflect on social, political, and cultural actuality so much as it self-reflects on the limitations of its own ability to reflect on such things.

In the mid-twentieth century, the *nouveau roman* flourished amongst the European avant-garde, from Robbe-Grillet's contemporaries Maurice Blanchot, Nathalie Sarraute, Marguerite Duras, Michel Butor, and Claud Simon, through to later figures such as Thomas Bernhard in Austria, W.G. Sebald in Germany, Italo Calvino in Italy, Enrique Vila-Matas in Spain, and Ann Quin in England. Comparatively few practitioners emerged in America, however, with the possible exceptions of Gilbert Sorrentino and David Markson. American avant-garde readers largely preferred the freewheeling postmodernism of Thomas Pynchon, the minimalist absurdism of Donald Barthelme, and the metafiction of John Barth and Robert Coover, while mainstream readers continued to prefer realism such that, in 2000, the arch-realist John Updike could claim without much dissent that "a writer at his peril strays too far from realism [...] especially in [America], where realism is kind of our thing" (Gardner 2000). Now, though, it seems to me that one of the consequences of the realists' failure to internalize the crisis of 9/11 has been an American embrace of the *nouveau roman* - not just insofar as a hitherto untapped readership has been attracted to it, but insofar as a whole institutional apparatus of publishers and critical venues has developed for the purposes of producing it, promoting it, evaluating it, and calling for more of it.



Dissatisfied with the failure of American writers to internalize the crisis of 9/11, American readers have turned to a literary tradition whose formal aesthetics represent an internalization of crisis broadly conceived, even when dealing with subjects other than 9/11.

As I see it, this turn began in 2001 with the founding of Melville House Publishing, an outgrowth of the literary weblog 'Moby Lives' dedicated to fostering original avant-garde fiction. Then, in 2005, the critic Scott Esposito founded the online journal *The Quarterly Conversation* as a forum through which to call attention to avant-garde fiction in general and the European avant-garde in particular; and, in 2006, the University of Illinois acquired and rejuvenated the Dalkey Archive Press - founded in 1984 as a partner of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, a journal of avant-garde criticism - specifically in order to bring translated European fiction to America. At that point, the institutional structures were in place for the *nouveau roman* to garner its current readership - and, since 2008, the strength of those structures and that readership has been underscored by a number of attacks against them.

In early 2010, the novelist David Shields published *Reality Hunger*, a Zadie Smith-style assault on contemporary realism which concluded, contrary to Smith, that writers of fiction need to allow "larger and larger chunks of 'reality'" into their work via the inclusion of memoir and reportage (2010: 3). At about the same time, Ted Genoways, editor of the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, took to *Mother Jones* to share Shields' view - "[G]iving two shits about the world," he wrote, "has gotten crushed under the boot sole of postmodernism" (2010) - and then the *New York Observer* critic Lee Siegel rounded out this emerging triumvirate of aggressive realists when he lamented that, nowadays, "no one goes to a current novel or story for the ineffable private and public clarity fiction once provided" (2010). It wasn't long, though, before *The Quarterly Conversation* devoted more than 5,000 words to opposing this triumvirate by upending Shields' manifesto with the suggestion that "our hunger for reality is the biggest fiction of all" (Brown 2010), which followed a similar excoriation in *The Guardian*, several months before *Reality Hunger* went to press, written, of course, by Zadie Smith (2009a: 2).

However, if the best defense is a good offense, then the strength of the support for the *nouveau roman* would come not from responses to its opponents but from alternatives to their arguments, and the first concerted alternative came from Dalkey Archive. Having already published early *nouveaux romans* by Ann Quin and Gilbert Sorrentino in the 1980s, Dalkey Archive inaugurated the *Best European Fiction* series in late 2009 to offer American readers an annual anthology of new work by writers from a literary tradition more respectful towards, and clearly influenced by, the *nouveau roman*. Tellingly, Zadie Smith wrote the preface to *Best European Fiction 2010* and asserted that none of the writers therein "mentions O. Henry [... o]r



Hemingway. Laurels are offered instead to the likes of John Barth and Donald Barthelme [... and] Beckett, Bernhard, Sebald, Claud Simon" (2009b: xii). *The Quarterly Conversation* ran a rave review and offered particular praise to the Icelandic author Steiner Bragi who, it was said, "cuts to the heart of and transcends the problem" - "that it's all a sham [and] verisimilitude is sleight of hand" (Elkin 2009).

Then, in late 2010, *Melville House* joined the effort when it published *The Canal*, the debut novel by Tom McCarthy's close friend Lee Rourke (2010a). Like McCarthy's *Remainder*, Rourke's *Canal* is implicitly a post-9/11 novel insofar as it features a long meditation on suicide bombing and the London attacks of July 7, 2005; yet it too rejects verisimilitude when its narrator similarly disengages from social, political, and cultural actuality in an effort to deliberately enter a state of almost catatonic stasis. Rourke had earlier taken to *The Guardian* to praise the *nouveau romancier* Ann Quin: he wondered why "no one else seem[s] to remember this writer from the front rank of Britain's literary avant-garde" and thanked Dalkey Archive, her American publishers, for keeping her in print (2007). Upon the release of his own *nouveau roman*, *The Quarterly Conversation* ran a rave review (Burse 2010) before Rourke and McCarthy jointly and publicly celebrated their particular literary tradition upon the publication of *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* by the critic Gabriel Josipovici (2010). In that book, Josipovici - himself a practicing *nouveau romancier* ever since he debuted with *The Inventory* (1968) - defines Modernist literature as literature self-aware enough to acknowledge its own inadequacies, and in doing so he offers great appreciation to Alain Robbe-Grillet and the *nouveau roman*. In *The Guardian*, his book won a rave review by Tom McCarthy (McCarthy 2010) and then won further acclaim when *The Guardian* published a conversation between McCarthy and Lee Rourke wherein they praised Josipovici, Blanchot, and other such *nouveau romanciers* (Rourke 2010b).

This year, the *nouveau roman* has thrived as Melville House followed up *The Canal* with Lars Iyer's *Spurious* (2011). Already the author of two books on Blanchot, Iyer has written a classic *nouveau roman* - a long, circumlocutory conversation between two navel-gazing academics obsessed with the minutiae of daily life - which name-checks various *nouveau romanciers* including Gabriel Josipovici. *The Quarterly Conversation*, of course, ran a rave review (Auerbach 2011), and, just after that review was published, Dalkey Archive announced that Melville House alumnus Lee Rourke will represent English literature in the forthcoming *Best European Fiction 2012* anthology. Another rave review in *The Quarterly Conversation* is, presumably, pending.



The path that connects the collapse of the Twin Towers to *Remainder*, *The Canal*, *Spurious*, and the *nouveau roman* more generally is, admittedly, long and winding. It would be foolish to pretend that the connection is an obvious one. But novels such as these would not have been written and published unless there were people out there willing to read them and critics willing to push them into readers' hands; and those people involved in the writing, production, distribution, and reception of such novels are largely motivated, I think, by a dissatisfaction with realism as a mode of fiction. Some of those dissatisfied with realism have blamed their dissatisfaction on the realists' failure to acknowledge the limitations of their mode of fiction - a failure brought to prominence, of course, in realist responses to the crisis of 9/11. As such, the attraction of readers to the contemporary *nouveau roman* as an alternative to post-9/11 realism positions the contemporary *nouveau roman* itself - including but not limited to the abovementioned titles - as a substratum of post-9/11 fiction deserving inclusion in the post-9/11 literary history, one whose refusal to explicitly address post-9/11 social, political, and cultural actuality is implicitly a response to that actuality and a statement on its relationship to fiction. In short, I think, we are witnessing the rebirth of a literary tradition originally born from a crisis that precedes 9/11 but that has nevertheless resulted in the literary internalization of crisis in general, thereby attracting the attention of American readers with a hunger for a more credible response to crisis than the response on offer in the polite realism of the American literary mainstream. In writing the literary history of post-9/11 fiction, then, we should accordingly broaden our definition of that phenomenon to make space for those works whose attempts at coming to grips with 9/11 involve acknowledging that the event and its aftermath are beyond their grasp.

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