

Two Major Works on the Contemporary American Novel

Alfred Kazin's *Bright Book of Life* is now happily made available in paperback (New York: Dell, 1974). It is, after Tony Tanner's *City of Words* (New York: Harper, 1971), the best book about the contemporary American novel. Each book would be valuable as an introduction to this literature; both are more valuable as a perspective of it as a whole. They both devote discussion to one or two principal works of each writer, but Tanner generally gives a chapter to each, in an order developing his thesis, whereas Kazin's book has the advantage of looking at groups which more or less belong together.

In a chaos of dull criticism that makes homework such a chore both books are delights to read. Both men are fine stylists. Tanner gives lucid interpretations of individual books and fine insights about a writer's body of work. Kazin is an artist in criticism; one meets ideas now articulated which had been fuzzy in the back of one's mind. Many critics have helpful insights about Faulkner; Kazin is wise. This brings up an interesting point: in *On Native Grounds* Kazin was keen about Faulkner, but in 1942 though Faulkner had then produced most of his great work his real stature was recognized hardly anywhere. Among these authors since Faulkner many are very interesting, but no one towers like him, or Melville, or Twain. Tanner has been criticized for not doing more evaluating, but Tanner and Kazin are too close to these writers to evaluate much except in declaring what is worth our attention.

One reviewer has suggested that *Bright Book of Life* is a sequel to Kazin's *On Native Grounds*. It both is and is not. *On Native Grounds* is a masterly study of American fiction and literary scholarship from the end of the nineteenth century through the 1930's. It searches out the evolution of the American mind in each decade. *Bright Book of Life* is much less ambitious; in it Kazin considers only novelists, but moreover he suggests no definite ideas about whether there is any pattern, anything definitely going on among the whole group of books he discusses. This is a shame because he did just that so well in *On Native Grounds*, but more, because the book certainly suggests a definite pattern.

One of the virtues of Tanner's book is that it tries directly to state what is going on. His thesis is that the contemporary writer is horrified by entropy, the loss of energy from our world, and the consequent collapse into chaos. But the alternatives to chaos seem to be rigid patterns of various totalitarian systems which the artist must reject or lose his identity. The artist tries to compensate for the world's chaos with his own patterns, cities of words. But he is afraid of the rigidity even in these, and his novels become word games which are continually turning on themselves.

Now one senses all this in Kazin's book, where it is perhaps all the more unsettling for being unspoken. Kazin begins with Hemingway and ends with Nabokov, treating some obvious groups along the way: Southern writers, war writers, Jewish writers, women writers, critics of New Journalism, absurd writers. And all along there is a more or less unspoken progression, not chronological, but in matters of style, of tone, and I think, of moral imagination. The first chapter is titled "A Dream of Order"; the writers of the Hemingway era, including Fitzgerald and Cummings thought that literature could give order to the world. While they rejected the mess the world was in "they still believed in civilization" (p. 15). The chapter titled "The Secret of the South" reveals that "the Southern writer's secret is still to believe that the world is moral, historical, meaningful" (p. 67). But when Kazin moves to more contemporary writers he

reveals less and less of a belief in civilization, until in Nabokov the belief is in a "Personal Sense of Time" (the chapter title) and a personal sense of space—a city of words.

Beyond the excellent interpretations of individual writers the most exciting thing about these books is the questions they raise about what is happening to American fiction. *Bright Book of Life* suggests, though it does not emphasize, that there is a real change in the manner of perceiving and representing reality. It is significant that Kazin concludes with Nabokov, whereas Tanner begins with him. Hemingway and Faulkner believe in the real world out there, messy and outrageous, but something to be dealt with. Hemingway heroes want a separate peace, but Hemingway's style also does wonderful justness to things in their thinginess. Nabokov is representative of writers who reject the world out there to create their own reality.

The whole issue was raised specifically in Richard Poirier's *A World Elsewhere* (1966) in which he argues that the American artist, like Huck Finn, is lighting out, but not for the territory, but for a world which can be achieved only through style. Tanner argues that American writers have always been doing this, creating cities of words. He points out that *Moby Dick* does not begin with "Call me Ishmael" but with "Etymology." He has other examples, and still more come to one's mind. Tanner acknowledges the great change from the world of *Moby Dick* to that of Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America*, while he beautifully reveals the linkages. But he emphasizes the idea of the city of words. I think Kazin suggests that the change is more radical; I wish he had been more specific, for I feel that there has been a real and great shift in the way American novelists look at the world.

That shift might be epiphanized in the moment in *Huckleberry Finn* when the steamboat crashes through the raft. Leo Marx uses this image in *The Machine in the Garden* as representing the order of industrial society invading the pastoral world. The pattern in *Huckleberry Finn* is that the world represented by the raft, which celebrates the natural world (as Marx beautifully demonstrates in his explication of Twain's treatment of dawn on the river) is destroyed by society. And the result is that the book culminates in Tom Sawyer's silly games. This foreshadows Twain's ultimate attempt to escape the burden of reality in the conclusion of *The Mysterious Stranger*: "Life is only a vision, a dream . . . Nothing exists save empty space—and you!" Nabokov's first American book, *Bend Sinister*, ends with a similar trick. After the worst imaginable atrocities the protagonist is pulled out by his author; Nabokov comments (in his introduction): "Krug, in a sudden moonburst of madness, understands that he is in good hands: nothing on earth really matters, there is nothing to fear, and death is but a question of style, a mere literary device, a musical resolution." How different is the climax of James's *The Ambassadors*. Strether who has perceived himself all day as within the frame of a picture sees the picture completed as a boat with two figures appears. But then the boat veers; the ethical has invaded the aesthetic, as it always will in life. It seems that recent writers are trying to have it the other way; the aesthetic "world elsewhere" takes over from a real world which is subsiding in entropy.

Tanner and Kazin properly do not entertain the question of whether the trends in contemporary novels are good or bad. They describe and interpret with great wisdom and clarity what is going on. And it is well worth exploring.

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