

6-21-1988

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Recommended Citation

O'Connell, Shaun (1988) "Recommended Readings, 1988," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol4/iss2/8>

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Recommended Readings, 1988

Shaun O'Connell

Among the works discussed in this essay:

Vestments, by Alfred Alcorn. 276 pages. Houghton Mifflin Company. \$17.95.

Libra, by Don DeLillo. 456 pages. Viking. \$19.95.

The Radiant Way, by Margaret Drabble. 408 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. \$18.95

Oscar Wilde, by Richard Ellmann. 680 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. \$24.95.

The Tenants of Time, by Thomas Flanagan. 824 pages E. P. Dutton. \$21.95.

Quinn's Book, by William Kennedy. Viking. 289 pages. \$18.95.

Beloved, by Toni Morrison. 275 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. \$18.95.

Good Hearts, by Reynolds Price. Atheneum. 275 pages. \$18.95.

The Bonfire of the Vanities, by Tom Wolfe. 659 pages. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. \$19.95.

Returning: A Spiritual Journey, by Dan Wakefield. 250 pages. Doubleday. \$17.95.

S., by John Updike. 279 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. \$17.95.

As the Church's power to generate and discharge guilt fades, the writer, I suggest — the representative of the dark and inky world of print — has replaced the priest as an admonitory figure.

— John Updike¹

During the Democratic National Convention in July, I was shocked to learn, from an essay by Garry Wills, that Michael Dukakis “is not given to meditation, to reading books for their own sake, to what he dismisses as ‘introspection.’”² Kitty Dukakis said of her husband, “I have never seen him read a novel.”³ The Democratic party's nominee for president evidently feels no need to have his imagination stirred by the art of fiction, by what Henry James called “the great form” and “the great anodyne.”⁴ Dukakis moved toward election day undeterred by introspection's pale cast of thought; he moved, as Wills put it, “toward his chosen target, like a humming bullet.”⁵

Perhaps I should not be shocked, for no recent president, after all, has been a reader of imaginative literature. Dwight Eisenhower read simplistic westerns; John F. Kennedy read Ian Fleming's sportive entertainments of sex and intrigue; Ronald Regan, not widely

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known as a reader, called Tom Clancy's novel *The Hunt for Red October* a good yarn. Each president's preference in subliterate told us much about his personal and political values. Clancy, for example, whose books have also been praised by Caspar Weinberger, wrote perfect parables for the Reagan administration. In August, when Clancy was on the cover of *Newsweek*, Evan Thomas described his "techno-thrillers": "America's warriors are always brave and true, the weapons always work and the 'good guys' always win."⁶ In *Patriot Games*, Clancy's hero Jack Ryan is the prototype for Reagan's hero Oliver North; both men are Marines and are linked to the CIA, and both are charming, uxorious patriots who bend the law to destroy paramilitaries. Unlike North, however, Ryan battles evildoers without the aid of gunrunners, lawyers, a paper shredder, or a sexy secretary. While North in fact was conned by Middle Eastern arms dealers, in the fictional world of *Patriot Games* Ryan and the Prince of Wales join forces to foil Irish terrorists!⁷ How life constantly fails, as Oscar Wilde might say, when it seeks to imitate art.

Still, it is surprising to discover that Michael Dukakis — an articulate, otherwise well read, intelligent man — does not read fiction. Perhaps he has been too busy governing Massachusetts and running for higher office. Or he may not have wished to confront some of the implications raised by serious works of the imagination, works that force us to face mysteries in the world and in ourselves. "Dukakis is enigmatic precisely because he seems to contain no mysteries," concludes Wills.⁸ However, such mysteries should be faced and contained, even by presidents. Therefore, I offer a few suggestions to Michael Dukakis for his postcampaign reading: a personal list of works of fiction and biography that confront mystery and stir wonder.

Along with instruction and delight, reading provides autobiographic revelation: we are what we read. The texts I chose to review, because I liked an author's turn of style or mind, I now discover, gravitate to several large categories:

- Books with a deliberate sense of place, particularly those that focus on cities, places that symbolize the states of several nations: England, Ireland, and America.
- Books with a conscious sense of history.
- Books that show characters in crisis, characters, lost in the woods, who set forth on spiritual quests through symbolically significant places and periods.
- Books that promise enlightenment in worthy prose, ranging from lucid to lyric.

Margaret Drabble's *The Radiant Way* and Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* "do" two great cities of our time, London and New York City, at their apogees, just as these cities commence their decline and fall. Both novels offer representative characters from their respective cultures: upper-middle-class men and women, newly rich or educated, who encounter threats to their station from discontented members of the dispossessed.

The urban natives are restless. In the London of *The Radiant Way* a killer cuts off women's heads. England, too, is headless and heartless.

These were the years of inner city riots, of race riots in Brixton and Toxteth, of rising unemployment and riotless gloom: these were the years of a small war in the Falklands (rather a lot of people dead), and of the Falklands Factor in politics.⁹

In the New York of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Manhattan towers gleam while a few miles away the Bronx opens like an abyss. In the fragmented perception of the novel's satirical foil, Sherman McCoy, an investment banker, the Bronx is

— *astonishing*. Utterly empty, a vast open terrain. Block after block — how many? — six? eight? a dozen? — entire blocks of the city without a building left standing. . . . Here and there were traces of rubble and slag. The earth looked like concrete, except that it rolled down this way . . . and up that way . . . the hills and dales of the Bronx . . . reduced to asphalt, concrete, and cinders . . . in a ghastly yellow gloaming.¹⁰

The American wasteland. In Wolfe's New York City and in Drabble's London, class tensions occur on disputed turf. Each novel explores the issue of inheritance. Who owns the city, the nation?

For all their similarities — each novel is a long, straightforward, realistic narrative that places its characters in tense social contexts — these novels approach the art of fiction differently. Wolfe dances, stylishly; Drabble plods, searchingly. Drabble's novel is a work of higher seriousness but less success than Wolfe's deliberately flip satire. Wolfe's novel is a deftly shaped artifice, sly and manipulative, comic and acerbic, while Drabble's novel is blowzy, ruminative, meandering, rich in possibilities, but tatty with loose ends.

The Radiant Way traces the lives of three English women during the early 1980s, the early phase of the Thatcher years: Liz Headleand, Alix Bowen, and Esther Breuer. Each woman comes from the provincial North of England; they met at Cambridge, twenty-five years before the novel opens at the 1979 New Year's Eve party, a party for two hundred guests, hosted by Liz and Charles Headleand. "New Year's Eve, and the end of a decade. A portentous moment, for those who pay attention to portents."¹¹ A novel, then, of portents, loomings, significances, forced and underlined.

Liz, an incorrigible analyst, is a psychiatrist with an office and a vast home in Harley Street. Alix, high-minded, teaches young women in prison. Esther, a dabbler, studies an obscure Renaissance artist and flirts with an Italian anthropologist. Each character has, like her astrological sign, a dominant humor: Liz wants "to understand," Alix wants "to change things," and aesthetic Esther wants "to acquire interesting information."¹² None is successful.

Oxbridge, and all that that term implied, was the route out of the hinterlands for these young women with great expectations. "These three women, it will readily and perhaps with some irritation be perceived, were amongst the *crème de la crème* of their generation."¹³ They blur into a type: "one cannot, really, wholly differentiate these three women."¹⁴ Drabble frets over their fates. What should a woman do?

Drabble is at her most assured when she portrays the Headleand party. Liz mistakenly thinks of the gathering as a farewell party for Charles, who will be going to New York without her, where he will pursue his telecommunications business.

Liz, looking around the confusion she had summoned into being, the scattered earth, the scattered people, the murmuring, the singing, the clustering, thought, yes, this was a party, yes, this was living rather than not living, this was permitted, this was planned disorder, this was cathartic, this was therapeutic, this was admired misrule.¹⁵

Part Molly Bloom, part Clarissa Dalloway, Liz, like all the people at her party, stands at the edge of a rude awakening, a radical turn and falling-off in her life, a coming-of-age.

She suddenly learns that Charles is leaving her for another woman. Personal pains parallel public crises.

At the same time, in “Northam, that figurative northern city” that serves as a counterpoint to London, more temperate celebrations are under way.¹⁶ There, in the village-suburb of Breasbrough, lives Liz’s sister, stuck with her family and her mother, as Liz was not. She celebrates New Year’s Eve with her husband, who is in the wing-mirror business; that is, he manufactures emblems of retrospection. All over England people are looking their last on all things lovely. Old England’s waning traditions are evident in the planned disorder of this New Year’s Eve.

And thus, all over Northam, all over Britain, ill-remembered, confused, shadowy vestigial rites were performed, rites with origins lost in antiquity; Celtic, Pict, Roman, Norse, Anglo-Saxon, Norman, Elizabethan, Hanoverian, Judaic rites: mistletoe dangled from the drawing pins and picture rails, golden stars shone on the Christmas Tree of Prince Albert and geese and haggis and hams lay heavy on the digestion of some, while others laughed themselves silly or sick on rum and coke at the Maid Marian New Year’s Superdisco.¹⁷

Terrible things happen to English men and women in this novel. A young girl wanders “out alone into Vanity Fair, into Sodom and Gomorrah, into Sin City, into the arms of pushers and parasites, pimps and pornographers,” where she is killed.¹⁸ Lives break apart and even nature seems doomed when Liz and Esther see thousands of dead fish in a canal. “‘Maybe it’s a sign of the end of the world,’ said Liz, staring at the poor innocent fish in the hot afternoon; this is where the apocalypse would announce itself.”¹⁹ However, Drabble’s three women cope with their own traumas and carry on into a precarious future, though they know neither where they are going nor why. As these three women, Drabble’s version of Chekhov’s three sisters, walk the fields of Somerset, the sun shines, “with a red radiance. It sinks. Esther, Liz and Alix are silent with attention.”²⁰

What has all of this motion and reflection, by the author and her characters, meant? Drabble, a circumlocutious, ditzy, and overbearing narrator, invokes Jane Austen as a model, for contrast. Both novelists write about class tensions, but Austen could focus on a few families in a country village, in a coherent era, while Drabble has to deal with intersecting lives of directionless characters over greater gaps of time, place, and social station in an age of anxiety. The irony that results from comparing the two novels works to Drabble’s disadvantage. Austen satisfies us with her perfect pitch, clarity of mind, and ironic style. But irritation seems the only reasonable reader response when Drabble admits she cannot control her material. For example, she confides that she has no idea what secret Liz is hiding from herself. “But what is it? Does she know what it is? Do you know what it is? Do I know what it is? Does anybody know what it is?”²¹ Drabble admits that she cannot even remember which characters matter. At one point Drabble introduces a character whom she quickly drops, saying, “forget I mentioned him. Let us return to Liz, Alix, and Esther.”²² All this is meant to be disarming, to authenticate her tentative narrative voice, to reflect in the novel’s presentation the same confusions her representative modern women confront in their lives, but it is also mannered, self-conscious, irritating. The novel, like Liz’s party, offers a design of admired misrule but suffers a nervous breakdown.

Drabble’s title is taken from a child’s primer of the 1930s; it marks the distance her characters have traveled, with pointed irony. Late in her novel, when everything seems to

be coming apart, Liz finds the primer and is drawn to a page that portrays “two children, a boy and a girl, running gaily down (not up) a hill, against a background of radiant thirties sunburst.”²³ *The Radiant Way* is effective at portraying England’s lost age of certainty and a newfound sense of freedom and danger for its citizens, particularly its educated women. However, as her representative women do not know what to do with their lives in post-mod London, Drabble does not know what to do with them. Does anybody know? After invoking a radiant background, *The Radiant Way* runs down (not up) a hill.

Tom Wolfe knows exactly what to do with his antihero in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. Wolfe runs him, like a rat through a maze of city streets, to see how much he can take. Sherman McCoy, thirty-eight, cannot live on his yearly income of \$1,000,000. This unreal McCoy seems to have it all, but Wolfe has his numbers; WASP lineage, a Yale degree, a fourteen-room Park Avenue co-op that he bought for \$2,600,000 (\$1,800,000 borrowed), on which he owes “\$21,000 a month in principal and interest, with a million dollar balloon payment due in two years,” a high-risk venture.²⁴ Yet McCoy has spent \$980,000 in the last year. He imagines himself a “Master of the Universe,” but Wolfe contrives an intricate plot to show McCoy as a fool of fortune, a representative man of contemporary New York, “a city boiling over with racial and ethnic hostilities and burning with the itch to Grab It Now.”²⁵

Wolfe treats all this with high irony and low comedy. His mock-heroic style — rhetorical inflation designed to level his characters’ pretensions — shows New Yorkers, from all boroughs, classes, races, and ethnic backgrounds, to be greedy, self-seeking, pretentious, prejudiced residents of Vanity Fair. McCoy conducts his business in the midst of a “rousing sound of the greed storm.”²⁶ “*Make it now!* That motto burned in every heart like myocarditis.”²⁷

The novel’s plot turns on a telling encounter between the powerful and dispossessed of New York. Sherman drives his \$48,000 Mercedes to Kennedy Airport to pick up Maria, his mistress. He ignores the abandoned, stripped cars he passes, emblems of urban ravage. On the Triborough Bridge he thrills at the view of Manhattan, “the Rome, the Paris, the London of the twentieth century, the city of ambition, the dense magnetic rock, the irresistible destination of all those who insist on being *where things are happening* — and he was among the victors!”²⁸ Returning from the airport, he takes a wrong turn and, terrified, drives through the ravaged Bronx. On a ramp his car is blocked by barrels and is approached by two black youths. Sherman and Maria panic. She takes the wheel and hits one of the young men before they escape to “White Manhattan.”²⁹ Out of this ambiguous encounter comes Wolfe’s *American Tragedy*.

However, Wolfe’s plot echoes Fitzgerald more than Dreiser. In *Bonfire*, as in *The Great Gatsby*, a woman drives the opulent car of a wealthy man, with whom she is having an extramarital affair, in the dangerous territory of another class or race. In this valley of ashes setting, each woman commits a hit-and-run accident, striking down a have-not. In each case the woman’s lover gallantly takes the blame and is punished for the crime. Though both authors develop similar incidents to show the callousness of the rich, Fitzgerald treats the event as tragedy, for noble Gatsby is killed by the victim’s husband, while Wolfe treats it as farce, for McCoy, more craven than heroic, becomes the sacrificial victim of those who discover political advantage in, as the mayor says, putting “the Wasp to the wall.”³⁰

A Bronx D.A., up for reelection, spends most of his days prosecuting blacks, so he needs to prosecute McCoy, a rich white man, to win the black vote. An assistant D.A. in

the Bronx is “tired of watching *other people* lead . . . The Life,” so he goes after Sherman.³¹ A corrupt black minister uses the hit-and-run case to gain money and power, manipulating the media. An alcoholic reporter for a scandal sheet, owned by a Murdoch-like publisher, finds his career transformed when the minister uses him to run stories against McCoy. Sherman McCoy becomes enmeshed in the slow but inexorable system of Dickensian “justice” in New York.

Surprisingly, as the walls close in upon him, McCoy grows more genuine. At a cocktail party — he briefly becomes a fashionable conversation piece, an item of reactionary chic — he says, “as soon as you’re caught in the machinery, just the *machinery*, you’ve lost.”³² However, in losing everything, he wins. At the beginning of the novel Sherman is a wimp, bullied by his wife and mistress, even his vile dog, as he sneaks around, vulnerable to loss, buoyed by delusions of grandeur; at the end of the novel he has lost all his emblems of power and he is tough, ready to stand up for himself, in a bizarre world of jail and courts.

For all his wealth and power, before his fall Sherman was an innocent who becomes wise to the ways of the world, a contemporary Joseph Andrews. Indeed, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* — such a cumbersome and sententious title — resembles the picaresque novels of Henry Fielding. Wolfe’s roguish hero, like Fielding’s heroes, has a series of serio-comic encounters that satirize the venality and pretention of his day. Wolfe’s language, like Fielding’s, is full of sportive inflation, though Wolfe avoids Fielding’s chummy direct address, a style of chat-up that attracts Drabble. Rather, Wolfe parodies his characters’ hyperbolic thoughts, as he does when the assistant D.A. thinks about the Bronx County Building, the Bleak House of New York City, as little more than an elaborate “island fortress of the Power, of the white people, like himself, this Gibraltar in the poor Sargasso Sea of the Bronx.”³³

Wolfe’s satirical art depends on stereotypes and caricatures, in the farcical tradition of the picaresque. No ethnic, racial, or regional group escapes his mockery, from the black boys who walk with “a pumping gait known as the Pimp Roll” to the New Yorkers who tell you “Gedoudahere” in their own graceless social discourse.³⁴ The novel is consistently antimob, whether that “mob” be black community activists, the press, or the various sectors of the WASP world. It may be fashionable to repress racial and ethnic slurs in upper-middle-class circles, but this is still how people think, implies Wolfe. On the other hand, the evidence of his plotting and characterizations tends to confirm these stereotypes: his Irish-Americans, for example, not only are called *donkeys*, they act like donkeys. A detective embodies “Irish” traits: vulgarity, bravery, loyalty.³⁵ “Irish machismo — that was the dour madness that gripped them all,” thinks the assistant D.A., with just cause.³⁶

However, the snap and dash of Wolfe’s satire is well worth the price he exacts in offended sensibilities. Wolfe, after all, does not discriminate; he shows us what fools all mortals, at least all New York City mortals, can be. We would not want to be deprived of his take-down of a posh East Side dinner party because he caricatures the guests. (Fitzgerald similarly mocked Gatsby’s partygoers.) All the men are rich and old, but the women fall into two types: thin, older women, “starved to perfection,” and “so-called Lemon Tarts,” younger women “who were the second, third, and fourth wives or live-in girlfriends of men over forty or fifty or sixty (or seventy), the sort of women men refer to, quite without thinking, as *girls*.”³⁷ Indeed, the rich might be different from you and me, but they can be classified and satirized by Wolfe.

At this dinner party, a visitor offers a benediction on the *beau monde*, whose values had

set up Sherman McCoy for his fortunate fall. We can reasonably infer that Wolfe agrees. Lord Buffing, British poet, who is dying of AIDS, tells the assembled guests of the Poe story in which party guests dance with Death.

They are bound together, and they whirl about one another, endlessly, particles in a doomed atom — and what else could the Red Death be but some final stimulation, the *ne plus ultra*? So Poe was kind enough to write the ending for us more than a hundred years ago.³⁸

The Bonfire of the Vanities is Tom Wolfe's camp version of "The Masque of the Red Death."

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison dramatizes the lasting effects of another kind of living death, slavery in America, in a novel set in Ohio more than a hundred years ago. In *The Tenants of Time* Thomas Flanagan meditates on events in Ireland during the last half of the nineteenth century, a period of famine, oppression, and failed rebellion. Both works place the reader inside the minds of the oppressed, American slaves and Irish peasants, and both works, in original fictional structures, brood on the ways the past is remembered. Both works fulfill one of Georg Lukács's central requirements of the "real historical novel": to "rouse the present, which contemporaries would experience as their own prehistory."³⁹ In *Quinn's Book*, something of a historical romp, William Kennedy attempts and achieves less; his novel covers the lives and time of Irish-Americans and other citizens of Albany in the same period.

In "Decay of Lying," Oscar Wilde was perhaps too quick to sacrifice history and fiction to the art of aphorism.

The ancient historians gave us delightful fiction in the form of fact; the modern novelist presents us with dull facts under the guise of fiction.⁴⁰

Morrison, Flanagan, and Kennedy show that the form still has resonant possibilities.

Beloved opens in 1873, in post-Civil War Ohio. The prose-poetry of its narrative weaves backward and forward between that time and the last years of slavery, presenting events from various points of view, through the inclusion of meditations, songs, and stories. The novel centers on Sethe, an escaped slave, and her family. For Sethe the past is, literally, a living, haunting presence. She would agree with the Quentin Compson of *Absalom, Absalom!*, who said, "*maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished.*"⁴¹ Toni Morrison allows the narrative of her novel to follow the dream logic of this proposition. We wonder, as does she, whether Sethe can come to terms with her horrific past — though we see events from her past only in brief, confusing flashes — and then make a new life that will ensure a future for herself, her family, and, by implication, her race, for Sethe is a black earth mother whose nurture is necessary for their survival. The novel is nothing less than a myth that describes the brutal shattering and heroic re-formation of the black family.

Beloved is filled with mystery and magic. Sethe has "to live out her years in a house palsied by the baby's fury at having its throat cut," we learn in the novel's opening pages.⁴² The reader is mystified by this and similar statements, so, as with many Faulkner novels, we read on as much to discover what has happened as to see what will happen. Time past is contained in time present for reader, author, and her heroine, who is as distinguished by her capacity for thought as for action. Sethe wants to forget but cannot. "Her brain was

not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day.”⁴³

Sethe lives with Denver, her daughter, born during her escape from slavery, and Baby Suggs, her mother-in-law, until this old preacher-woman dies. In the course of the novel, Sethe’s painful past comes into focus. She escaped from Sweet Home, the plantation on which she had been enslaved, and joined Baby Suggs, but a slave catcher found Sethe and, rather than have her baby become a slave, Sethe kills the baby; Sethe marked her daughter’s headstone with the name “Beloved.”

Whites might dirty *her* all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing — the part of her that was clean. No undreamable dreams about whether the headless, footless torso hanging in the tree with a sign on it was her husband or Paul A; whether the bubbling-hot girls in the colored-school fire set by patriots included her daughter; whether a gang of whites invaded her daughter’s private parts, soiled her daughter’s thighs and threw her daughter out of the wagon. *She* might have to work the slaughterhouse yard, but not her daughter.⁴⁴

Later, Sethe’s sons ran off, to escape “the ghost that tried them so.”⁴⁵ Denver fears Sethe. “I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I’m scared of her because of it.”⁴⁶

Then Paul D, a former slave from Sweet Home, arrives. Paul D has memories of being chained in a box, with other slaves, in a ditch of rising water, after he tried to kill a white man, but he wants to put that past behind him and make a future with haunted Sethe. The trauma of her history emerges, under his gentle hand, little by little. Sethe tells Paul D that white boys held her down and took her milk when she was pregnant with Denver. However, Sethe cannot be released until she faces her worst memory: the brief life and sad death of Beloved. Magically, a young woman then appears; she calls herself Beloved, the living presence of what Sethe’s dead daughter would have been, a ghost made visible by Sethe’s compelling need. Morrison moves her plot into realms of mystery. “Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved’s eyes.”⁴⁷ Beloved, embodying the dead’s grip on the living, soon holds everyone in the house under her spell as daughter, sister, and seductress.

After Beloved’s eerie appearance, the novel settles into a struggle of wills for the possession of Sethe. Paul D holds out the promise of a renewed family life, but Sethe must come to terms with all her daughters, actual and metaphoric. Denver at first allies herself with Beloved, “this sister-girl.”⁴⁸ Then Denver shifts sides, works to release her mother from the thrall of the living dead by mobilizing the community of black women. When they learn the news — “Sethe’s dead daughter, the one whose throat she cut, had come back to fix her” — this community chorus of thirty black women sets out to save Sethe with whatever magic or Christian prayer they have in the way of spiritual cures. Sethe and Denver leave Beloved and join the singing black women. Finally Beloved is forgotten; Sethe forgives herself.⁴⁹

Beloved is a spiritual parable. Under horrifying conditions, a mother kills her daughter to keep her from experiencing slavery, a fate worse than death. Sethe needs all the help she can get, mainly from women, white and black, to survive, then to exorcise this appalling past. Then, with a renewed family, she can carry on, live for her own and her race’s future.

However, this analysis of *Beloved* simplifies and overclarifies, perhaps even distorts the experience of reading the novel, for Toni Morrison has created a work that releases readers from the world as it is usually known and plunges them into a world where mysterious and dreadful things are commonplace, as ordinary as slavery in America. The novel may

lack final coherence — Sethe's murder of Beloved and her dead child's reappearance are never wholly explained — but it resonates, in Morrison's evocative prose, with significance and wonder.

Ireland, its history and its imagery, is a challenge to the restorative imagination for Thomas Flanagan, whose two novels, *The Year of the French* (1979) and *The Tenants of Time* (1988), focus on obscure but crucial moments in Irish history: the Mayo rising of 1798 and the West Cork Fenian rising of 1867.⁵⁰ His novels spread out from those spots of time, backward and forward, to compose a compelling and richly detailed vision of Irish history as fragmented, ironic, nightmarish, tragic, and, on occasion, ennobling. To accomplish this, Flanagan uses the full resources of the art of fiction: a rhetorical command of meditative, evocative language; a range and depth of character types; and, most important, a mastery of the articulation and manipulation of various points of view, voices that reflect and refract the many histories of Ireland, from bogside peasants to Anglo-Irish landlords — those, then as now, who create, in choral counterpoint, separate Irelands, as much from their imaginations as from their observations.

In *The Tenants of Time* Flanagan traces, through imagined and historical characters, the root and branch of Irish life in the latter half of the nineteenth century, his hidden Ireland. Flanagan dramatizes public history: the famine background; emigration; the Fenian rebellion in Kilpeder, a West Cork village, an event that passed “from grubby fact into legend, myth, a constellation in the heavens,” according to one of its participants, an ironic village schoolmaster; then the Land Wars; finally, Parnell's rise and fall.⁵¹ Further, Flanagan makes credible the private worlds of memorable Irish citizens, whose secret lives counterpoint great events.

This novel opens in the united effort of Catholics to fight British imperialism during the Fenian risings of the 1860s. They fail, but Catholics join with Anglo-Irish Protestants, as Michael Davitt and Charles Stewart Parnell combined forces, to win large concessions during and after the Land Wars; they nearly win Home Rule. However, the fall of Parnell in 1890 turns the Irish against each other. All of this public drama has its private parallels and consequences, particularly for the young men who took up arms in 1867, in Kilpeder, the imaginative center of this novel; these representative Irishmen then found and lost their ways through subsequent, turbulent events, illustrating the meandering course of Irish history.

A dedicated and sensitive archeologist, Flanagan unearths, sorts, reassembles, and, through a leap of the imagination, restores life to these long-gone times of “dark passions,” when Ireland moved, despite its failed rebellion and lost leader, from a medieval to a modern society, from rule by lords of the manor to management by the new gentry: not rebels, but Catholic, middle-class “gombeen” men of business.⁵² Flanagan refracts these events, great and small, through the mind of an Anglo-Irish historian, who, after the turn into the twentieth century, tries to reconstruct the buried or distorted past, link the circuits of logic and responsibilities. “In England,” reflects Patrick Prentiss,

history was a benign sea creature, its movements sluggish and elaborate, its girth expanding layer by layer, iridescent plates. Irish history, his own history, was scraps, fragments, the tumbled stones of ruined abbeys, castles.⁵³

Finally, Prentiss can make no sense of events that began in a Kilpeder skirmish and climaxed in Parnell's funeral procession. Bound by his class perspective and blocked from crucial knowledge — the shadow of a gunman obscures his view of the informer, those central archetypes in any modern myth of Ireland — Prentiss finds no revealing

pattern. Prentiss comes to agree with Hugh, the schoolmaster, who says that history is a poem — “a whim, a trope, as the poets would say. A flight of fancy” — with all sorts of links, but no “reason or law or design.”⁵⁴ However, the reader, who can see these years from all the angles of vision that Flanagan evokes, knows better than Prentiss or Hugh. The chronology of *Tenants* begins in a pathetic expense of spirit — the Kilpeder rising by idealist Catholic lads — and ends in a tragic, absurdist murder — one of the rebels kills another — a waste of shame. While characters cannot see beyond their own conditioned perspectives, the novel becomes an informing parable. That is, more effectively than individual memories or historical inquiries, fiction integrates and illuminates the past, foreshadows the future.

Patrick Prentiss, like Faulkner’s Quentin Compson — each character quests through consciousness for his personal and regional identity — treats history as a cryptogram to be solved. Hugh sees history as a poem and a secret; Lionel Forrester, a gentleman novelist, supplies the Big House angle: in 1904, he says, “the events of the eighties are long distant, of course, but here memories cling to the soil itself, almost, and the very rocks and trees remember.”⁵⁵ Finally, Kilpeder, like each of its citizens, has its own story to tell, its own imposing power, its own sense of the past. *The Tenants of Time*, then, is more than a historical romance. As in the historical fictions of Stendhal and Tolstoy, Flanagan’s novel meditates on the ways we know what we think we know. It foreshadows the way we live now. If, as Flanagan says, there is “no solution” to Ireland’s troubles, past and present, his fiction shows that victories in Ireland are won through the actions of art, not politics.

Though the hero of *Quinn’s Book*, Daniel Quinn, gets what he wants — the love of Maud, a beautiful young woman — and William Kennedy fulfills his intentions — to write a historical saga of Albany — no one is victorious in this lesser example of historical fiction. The point and purpose of the novel are never made clear. Kennedy’s picaresque hero is never truly involved in his era and its events. Quinn moves through his times like a tourist, reflecting Kennedy’s own detachment from the circumstances of his novel. The combination of passionate engagement and imaginative release that made Kennedy’s *Ironweed* so wonderful is missing in this campy, facetious, stylistically showy novel.

Both Quinn and Kennedy work up only a passing interest, for example, in the flood of Irish immigrants who arrive in Albany during the 1850s. Quinn writes to Maud about them; he tours Canal Street, the neighborhood called Gander Bay, “a place of dread and danger, of woe and truculence.”⁵⁶ He witnesses the battle between the Irish and the Know Nothings. However, Dan never feels one of them, nor does Kennedy place him in a meaningful Irish-American context. He sets his hero apart from history. Unlike the victimized Irish, Quinn controls his own fate. “I was not destined to be a passive pawn of exterior forces.”⁵⁷ While they try merely to survive, he is on a romantic quest for “the verification of freedom.”⁵⁸ Soon the homeless Irish are driven out of the city and out of the novel’s frivolous plot, which resumes its romps through melodramatic and farcical matters: rescues, seductions, and resurrections.

Book One, “A Cataclysm of Love: Albany, Winter & Spring 1849–1850,” follows just that pattern. The novel opens in December 1849 on the scene of a river crossing by ferry skiff, from Albany to Greenbush, by Magdalena Colon (La Ultima), “a woman whose presence turned men into spitting, masturbating pigs.”⁵⁹ When the skiff sinks in a storm, Daniel Quinn — he is fifteen, an orphan, and his family has been swept away by cholera — rescues one of the shipwrecked. While his master, John the Bawn, rescues La Ultima, though she is presumed drowned, Quinn saves the lively young Maud (age thirteen).

(He loves her all his life, but it takes until 1864 and the novel's final page before they make love. This is a novel with a climax!)

If storm and rescues were not enough for an opening plot move, more fantastic things occur. "An instant Albany iceberg that never was before and probably never will be again" appears.⁶⁰ The central characters, living and dead, retire to the eerie mansion of Mrs. Hillegond Staats. There we witness a lewd and ludicrous resurrection, when randy John mounts the corpse of La Ultima, who, like Finnegan at his wake, wakes to join the fun. This opening sequence is a black humor fairy tale: an apparent drowning, a rescue of maiden in distress, a sudden eruption of nature, the return to a witch's house, necrophilia, and resurrection. At this point, all of the novel's seriousness of purpose disappears. When Toni Morrison brings *Beloved* back to life she is articulating the terms of a myth — to live, freed blacks must bury their dead — but when William Kennedy brings La Ultima back to life with intercourse he shows that he is only fooling around.

Quinn's Book follows the pattern of conventional historical romances. Love preoccupies his characters in the novel's foreground, while large historical events serve as background counterpoint to their thwarted passions: the settlement of the Dutch, the condition of the Irish immigrants, the underground railroad, a cholera plague, the Civil War. Though Kennedy includes some vivid descriptions of these events, each is quickly dropped so we can get back to the coming of age of Daniel Quinn, the embodiment of innocence and wonder.

I was bewildered. Nothing seemed to conclude. I was in the midst of a whirlwind panorama of violence and mystery, of tragedy and divine frenzy that mocked every effort at coherence.⁶¹

Finally, *Quinn's Book* is about its own making, the effort to tame the fantastic with words, as is made clear when Dan becomes a writer, Kennedy's alter ego. Another character writes a Pynchonian book about secret societies. Dan is grateful that he revealed "the significance of the word," for he was "a maestro of language, a champion of the heroic sentence."⁶² Making this his own goal, Dan, like Kennedy, uses style for its own performance possibilities, not as a plot conveyer — never a Kennedy strength — or a revelation of character and value. The novel is an exercise in imaginative association, the making of metaphor. Dan is fascinated by "linkage":

and from the moment I was able to read that word I became a man compelled to fuse disparate elements of this life, however improbable the joining, this done in a quest to impose meaning on things whose very existence I could not always verify: a vision, for instance, of a young girl holding a human skull with a sweetly warbling red bird trapped inside, the bird visible through the skull's eye sockets.⁶³

This trite image, associated with bad film treatments of Poe stories, hardly justifies his claims for "linkage." *Quinn's Book* disappoints because Kennedy's imagination, so vital in his Albany trilogy,⁶⁴ fails him. The linkages between characters and events, between style and subject, between past and present are at once extravagant and weak. This novel, like that instant Albany iceberg, never was before and never should be again.

If fiction portrays characters, derived from the novelist's imagination, characters whose crises and quests illuminate our lives, then biography is a closely related form, for it describes significant characters, derived from history, whose lives serve as models and fall

into informing patterns. The literary biographer tracks his subject's life but also examines the mystery of his translations of life into art. Several admirable literary biographies have recently appeared. I recommend Scott Donaldson's *John Cheever: A Biography* for its thoroughness in developing the details of the enigmatic writer's life, particularly the destructive elements, bisexuality and alcohol, of his worst years. However, Cheever turned his life around, stopped drinking, and wrote two more books before he died. John Updike affirmed Cheever's "willed act of rebirth" of his final seven years at memorial services in Norwell, Massachusetts, after Cheever's death in June 1982.⁶⁵

Garry O'Connor's *Sean O'Casey: A Life* also presents a writer whose life was a series of rebirths that empowered his art. "Sean O'Casey, slum dramatist and guttersnipe, hob-nail-booted labourer and communist freethinker, who disdained a tie and thumbed his nose as conventional bourgeois behavior, painstakingly created himself out of the real life John Casey."⁶⁶ Cheever and O'Casey, we learn, were driven to create myths of themselves as passionately as they were dedicated to their arts.

One of the great examples of literary biography, about one of the most inventive literary self-creators, appeared in 1988: Richard Ellmann's *Oscar Wilde*, amplified by Ellmann's *Four Dubliners*, essays on the lives and arts of Oscar Wilde, James Joyce, W. B. Yeats, and Samuel Beckett. Ellmann's achievement comes as no surprise, for he has, of course, written a first-rate biography of W. B. Yeats and set the standard in the form of literary biography with his life of James Joyce.⁶⁷ What did come as a shock was Ellmann's recent death, a loss to the world of letters only slightly mitigated by the legacy of his achievements. At the end of his life, Yeats acknowledged that man could not know the truth, but he might embody it. Richard Ellmann's works embody the truths of many significant Irish lives.

Ellmann places his subjects in informing contexts of family and society, so we see his Irish writers shaping their lives against strong cultural pressures. Of his four dissimilar Dubliners, for example, Ellmann discovers a common core of values, derived from their similar urban backgrounds.

They posit and challenge their own assumptions, they circle from art to anti-art, from delight to horror, from acceptance to renunciation. That they should all come from the same city does not explain them, but they share with their island a tense struggle for autonomy, a disdain for occupation by outside authorities, and a good deal of inner division.⁶⁸

It might come as a surprise to some to think of Oscar Wilde — who said "My Irish accent was one of the many things I forgot at Oxford" — as a self-defined Irishman.⁶⁹ But his mother, Lady Wilde, who called herself "Speranza" in her tracts, and his father, William Wilde, a famous surgeon, were both Irish nationalists who infused their son with a love of his native place.⁷⁰ Though Oscar Wilde composed himself into the persona of the quintessential Londoner, he always remained a loyal Irishman, with republican sympathies. For example, after the Invincibles killed Lord Frederick Cavendish and another British official on May 6, 1882, in Phoenix Park, murders that shocked most Englishmen and Irishmen, Wilde was not apologetic. "We forget how much England is to blame. She is reaping the fruit of seven centuries of injustice."⁷¹

Ellmann's emphasis on Wilde's Irishness helps explain the playwright's ambivalence toward English culture, to which he pandered and which, in turn, he parodied. When Wilde left Trinity College, Dublin, for Oxford, he entered enemy territory, laying siege with his best weapons, his disarming persona and his powers of language. "For Irishmen, Oxford is to the mind what Paris is to the body," says Ellmann.⁷² At Oxford Wilde, attend-

ing to the conflicting messages of Pater and Ruskin, became an aesthete, though he also flirted with Catholicism, “the perfumed belief.”⁷³ (In 1878 Wilde nearly entered the Catholic church. Later he would insist he had no religion: “I am an Irish Protestant.”)⁷⁴ At Oxford and throughout his life, Wilde enjoyed “half-choice” more than commitment, Ellmann makes clear.⁷⁵ Wilde’s meteoric rise and fall in London are made more explicable by Ellmann’s shrewd understanding of the aggressiveness beneath Wilde’s wonderful wit. “I’ll be a poet, a writer, a dramatist,” insisted Wilde. “Somehow or other, I’ll be famous, and if not famous, notorious.”⁷⁶ He became, of course, famous *and* notorious.

Wilde’s homosexuality, for Ellmann, was more than a personal inclination; it was also an affirmation of the man hiding behind the mask of the divine Oscar, the dandified face with which he met the world. In “The Truth of Masks” Wilde articulates the principle of paradox behind his art, as it is artfully embodied in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and his life: “A truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true.”⁷⁷ Homosexuality allowed Wilde to live a life that doubled and redoubled in complexities, like those intricate misunderstandings in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. “Contradictoriness was his orthodoxy,” says Ellmann.⁷⁸ Associate of Parnell and Gladstone, solicitor of street boys, husband and father, Wilde, like Whitman, whom he met and kissed, contained multitudes. “Homosexuality fired his mind. It was the major stage in his discovery of himself. . . . Ironical frivolity, with dark insinuation, was the compound through which he now sought to express himself.”⁷⁹

Wilde’s life was a drama in the mode of excess. “Where there is no extravagance there is no love, and where there is no love there is no understanding,” wrote Wilde.⁸⁰ His greatest triumph, the production of *Earnest* in 1895, occurred at the beginning of his long fall: the two trials that would result in his conviction and imprisonment (two years at hard labor) for illegal homosexual acts, followed by his early death, in 1900, at age forty-six.

It is Ellmann’s challenging contention that “Wilde is one of us.”⁸¹ But few could claim to match Wilde’s talent for paradoxical epigram. In “The Decay of Lying” he wrote, “life is the mirror, and art the reality.”⁸² Few possess his sly wit. Greeting Bernard Berenson, a disciple, Wilde said, “Tell me at once. Are you living with the Twenty Commandments?”⁸³ Few possess his courage, acknowledged by Yeats, another disciple: “He was an unfinished sketch of a great man, and showed great courage and manhood amid the collapse of his fortunes.”⁸⁴ Just here is where Ellmann discovers Wilde’s contemporaneity, for Ellmann’s Wilde, too, was an unfinished sketch, a man who dangled between worlds — Ireland and England, heterosexual and homosexual, aristocratic and base — like a high-wire walker, testing his limits until he was shaken down. The victim of a “berserk passion” for unworthy men, a passion that he did nothing to resist, Wilde set himself up as a target for those, like Henry James, who saw him as an “unclean beast.”⁸⁵ Romantically naive, Wilde thought he could live life on his own terms but discovered he could not; he then accepted his fate with dignity. Through it all he produced one perfect play, *Earnest*, another nearly as good, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, and several more that are worthy. His criticism, which made the critic into a cocreator of the text, which saw works of art as self-contained artifices, still has influence — “The primary aim of the critic is to see the object as it is not” — and his confession, *De Profundis*, has moments of grandeur.⁸⁶ It only speaks well of us, then, when Ellmann says that Wilde belongs “to our world more than to Victoria’s.”⁸⁷

Ellmann treats Wilde’s life and times with intelligence and sympathy. Though he admires Wilde, Ellmann is particularly eloquent on the pains Wilde inflicted on his wife, a mystified, loving, and forgiving woman, dead at age forty. Perhaps Ellmann claims too

much for Wilde as a moral thinker and an influence when he writes that “Wilde was a moralist, in a school where Blake, Nietzsche, and even Freud were his followers.”⁸⁸ However, inspired by Wilde’s exhilarating style, Ellmann’s book flashes with epigrammatic insights that place the reader in sympathetic but critical relation to Wilde. Here is Ellmann, for example, on Wilde’s marriage to Constance Lloyd in 1884: “A wife would save him from the moralists, and a rich one from the moneylenders.”⁸⁹ Three years younger than Wilde, Constance was “intelligent, capable and independent,” though, Ellmann adds, “she could never quite compass his strain of near-nonsense.”⁹⁰ On Wilde’s tragic and silly passion for Lord Alfred Douglas, Ellmann writes with understanding, disapproval, and Wildean wit. “Wilde wanted a consuming passion; he got it and was consumed by it.”⁹¹ Douglas claimed, melodramatically, “I am the love that dare not speak its name,” but Ellmann deflates his pretensions by adding a qualification: “In fact, Douglas spoke about it a good deal.”⁹²

Wilde once told Yeats, “I think a man should invent his own myth,” which they both did.⁹³ Ellmann respects Wilde’s myth of himself but reaches beyond Wilde’s persona as the aesthete who became the victim of Victorian hypocrisy. Ellmann grants Wilde the dignity of complicity in his own fate. In this sense, Richard Ellmann makes Oscar Wilde one of us.

This was a literary season in which several works of fiction and confession focused narratives on exemplary lives, significant places, and informing historical moments. In *Good Hearts*, a novel by Reynolds Price, set in the contemporary South, a man, twenty-eight years married, suddenly leaves his wife and sets out on a search for he knows not what. In *Vestments*, a novel by Alfred Alcorn, set in Boston, a young man sacrifices his positions and possessions to be free to look for God. In *Returning: A Spiritual Journey*, a confession by Dan Wakefield that climaxes in Boston, another writer achieves a willed act of re-birth.⁹⁴

In “At the Heart,” an essay first published in 1987, Reynolds Price identifies himself as an orthodox Christian: born, reared, and still believing. His statement of faith has implications, aesthetic and behavioral, for his fiction. “I believe finally that the history of our universe is an infinite *story* told to himself and, in part, to us by the sole omnipotent creative power.” The world is a stage and we are actors playing our assigned roles in a quasi-allegorical drama:

the lethal agonies of cruelty and disaster that are such steady features of the plot are apparently didactic, literally educational — intended by God to enrich and strengthen us, to deepen both our humanity and our comprehension of his unfathomable power and diversity and our own inexplicable failures of mind and body.⁹⁵

Life, for Price, is a gradual realization of God’s purpose of our missions. Thus Price’s novels move from realism to allegory, as his characters’ random lives are shaped by his (His?) designing hand and they come to realize their destinies. Price’s fictions begin in the landscape of *Tobacco Road*, his characters possessed by lust, but end in the allegorical territory of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, his characters in quest of God or reconciliation with the world they have fled. This design, with individual variations, also informs the prose narratives of Alcorn and Wakefield. The works by these writers deal with heroes who have won their places in the world but now are lost in the woods, characters who set out on quests, who hit bottom, who shed their old lives, who transcend the world or return to it

renewed. They are versions of Joseph Campbell's modern hero who finally seeks the voice of God within his own heart. Campbell concludes *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* with this apt injunction: "And so every one of us shares the supreme ordeal — carries the cross of the redeemer — not in the bright moments of his tribe's great victories, but in the silences of his personal despair."⁹⁶

Rosacoke (Rosa) and Wesley Beaver, who appeared in Price's first novel, *A Long and Happy Life*, reappear in *Good Hearts*, after twenty-eight years of marriages.⁹⁷ Suddenly Wesley leaves Rosa in Raleigh and goes to Nashville. While he is away, Rosa is assaulted by a man who thinks women want him to rape them. Price's characters immediately realize that Wesley is on a quest. When Rosa returns to the family home, Rosa's elder brother says that Wesley's "leaving is a sermon, commencement address and the twenty-third damned psalm all together."⁹⁸ Rosa realizes that their marriage was not enough: "we turned out not to know what to do alone together."⁹⁹ Wesley feels dead at heart, so he seeks renewal. Rosa has a new life thrust on her by the rapist.

When Wesley's consciousness takes over the narrative, we learn that he thought he heard God's voice telling him he was nearing death, so he left Rosa. In a motel room he reads the Gideon Bible and realizes "he was meant to have lighted his own light. The tower and the spiral ladder were provided, the mirror was polished in place, he had never lit the fire."¹⁰⁰ He blames Rosa, who worshiped him, for missing his chance. Another Rabbit Angstrom — like Updike's hero of *Rabbit, Run*, Wesley will return to his marriage — Wesley finds God embodied in a sexy woman: Joyce, a twenty-six-year-old radiology technician who lives in her trailer, which she bought with money from her second divorce. Their sexual union is wondrous and intense, until she suddenly tells Wesley to get a divorce or get out.

Gratefully, Wesley returns to his given life, the life Rosa never wanted to leave. Even the rapist, a character out of Flannery O'Connor's Gothic world of twisted faith, comes to realize that Rosa does not need rescue from her ordinary existence. Both husband and wife have encountered extramarital shocks; Rosa and Wesley are finally ready to renew their covenant, to accept the world as it is and their places in it. After he phones Joyce to tell her he will not be back, Wesley meditates on his suddenly spirit-infused life and reaffirmed bond with Rosa:

Whatever the sky was — at least the cause of birth and death (all hardness and ease) — it had secretly honored the unlikely choice of two normal creatures to work again at a careful life. They could not know they were safe till their endings, which would be hard and slow a long way off. This modest house would be home till then. It had room enough for the small calm pleasures that would not be rare. They would live here till death. Death would find them with ease.¹⁰¹

The parable of Wesley and Rosa confirms Price's vision of life as a series of chastening encounters that painfully reveal God's purpose. His characters, however, are not doctrinaire Christians. These are good country people, living in a region that has obliterated much of its rural, Southern roots, groping in the half-darkness of their lives for spiritual light. They find there is no world elsewhere more blessed and wondrous than the world, for all its ordinariness, that God has already granted them. As Dan Wakefield wrote, in his review of *Good Hearts*, "this everyday sense of the sacred, of religion as a natural element of life, is present in all of Price's work, and gives it a dimension that is lacking in the cramped landscape of most contemporary fiction."¹⁰² Price's brooding, evocative prose

honors and elevates his characters' quests; his metaphorical richness empowers his characters' beliefs that extraordinary worlds exist, somewhere, even near at hand. Finally, Wesley and Rosa light their own lights through their physical and spiritual union.

When he returns, Wesley tells Rosa, "I'm trying to mend something good I broke."¹⁰³ In Alfred Alcorn's *Vestments* Sebastian (Bass) Taggart, a man in the midst of a life of loud desperation, is trying to break his tawdry ties so he can find something good. Sebastian is a dangling man, despite his flashy job as an editorial writer for a Boston television station, his classy girl, his smashing condo, along Cambridge's Memorial Drive, which he shares with his significant other and their postmodern furnishings. "They were, he was loath to admit, the quintessential young urban professionals."¹⁰⁴ She wants marriage and a baby, but he cannot commit. "Marriage. It would be like death, living death. He'd never be free again."¹⁰⁵ Instead, he seeks transformation through faith in God. His quest begins in calculation — he dons a clerical collar to reassure his dying aunt, who, in her dotage, thinks he is a priest — but ends in a sincere imitation of Christ.

The world is too much with Sebastian, late and soon, though Alcorn firmly *places* his hero in contemporary Boston, where ordinary things have a nimbus of spiritual possibilities. Boston offers Bass a world of history (the Freedom Trail), wealth (a posh office), sex, and style, a consumer's paradise, though he sees it as a sterile trap.

Sebastian turned from the faces on his desk [photos from the "Smile of Boston" contest, which he judged] to gaze down through the sealed Thermopane at the tableau of lowlife moving in the slow motion of distance in front of the Old State House. In the mellow sunlight of late summer, derelicts, panhandlers, the ambulatory crazy, and pimps and pushers up from the Combat Zone mingled with the tourists who had come to walk the Freedom Trail. Sebastian envied the bums their freedom right then. They hadn't sentenced themselves to the voluntary servitude of an office job, to a life term of canned existence in a cubicle with Styrofoam ceiling and fluorescent lights. Well, not him, damn it, not him. He was his own freedom trail. He was going to be rich. Rich and free. He got up and began to pace like a cat in its cage.¹⁰⁶

At this point Bass thinks he will inherit vast sums, money that will make him "free," from his aunt, whose terminal illness drives him to impersonate a priest. Garbed as a priest, Bass sees a different world. In the Museum of Fine Arts he views painting with a fresh eye, looking for meaning and wonder. Gauguin's *D'ou'venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Ou'allons-nous?* speaks directly to his life: "Where do we come from? Where are we? Where are we going?" Childe Hassam's *Boston Common at Twilight* "made him feel nostalgic for a Boston he had never known."¹⁰⁷ Bass seeks a transcendent world of wholeness, harmony, and radiance beyond the boundaries of Boston or any actual place.

In a long, sometimes hilarious and always painful process, which Alcorn details with artful care and compassion, Sebastian moves through states of euphoria and depression, altruism and alcoholism, before he makes his separate peace with the world and comes into a greater inheritance: possession of his true life, a sense of divine direction.

Vestments, it might be said, is an AIDS era novel, in full retreat from the sexual revolution, driven by the newly rediscovered satisfactions of renunciation. But it is more. Alcorn offers a plausible hero who wants to put the world — at least the world of achievements, possessions, and status pretensions — behind him. Though he might never make it, he hopes to emulate Sister Vincia, mother superior of a nursing home, a model of selflessness, who told Bass, "I do what I do in the imitation of Christ and the worship of

almighty God.”¹⁰⁸ Other American men, appearing in purposeful prose narratives, heard and took to heart similar words.

Though autobiography rather than fiction, Dan Wakefield’s *Returning* follows a similar pattern. Again the central character learns by going where he has to go, sets forth on a quest to discover his purpose in God’s design. Wakefield’s book originated in a course on “religious autobiography” in the King’s Chapel parish house in Boston.

It was there that for the first time I began to understand how my life could be viewed as a spiritual journey as well as a series of secular adventures of accomplishment and disappointment, personal and professional triumph and defeat. I started to see the deeper connections and more expansive framework offered the sense of our small daily drama in relation to the higher meaning that many people call God.¹⁰⁹

Wakefield’s journey of consciousness takes him back to the point of crack-up, when all seemed lost. He was forty-eight in 1980, in Hollywood, drinking heavily, in a failed relationship, out of luck and out of hope. On an impulse of nostalgia for a place in which he had once been happy, he suddenly returned to Boston. “Walking the brick streets of my old neighborhood on Beacon Hill, I felt in balance again with the universe, and a further pull to what seemed the center of it, the source of something I was searching for, something I couldn’t name that went far beyond the satisfaction of scenery or local color.”¹¹⁰ In Boston Wakefield found sanctuary, home, the presence of grace.

Wakefield’s meditation tracks two time lines. In the foreground we witness his physical and spiritual recovery — he exercises, diets, and renounces alcohol — to gradual involvement in King’s Chapel’s version of the transcendent life. (Alcorn’s hero moves through a particularly Catholic landscape, where guilt, atonement, and the sins of the flesh are well-marked routes. Wakefield’s “road map” of his life is marked by the signs of American Protestantism: baptism, loss of faith, false gods, and rebirth.)¹¹¹ In the background we witness Wakefield’s picaresque life history from his youth in Indianapolis to his coming of age in New York, where he learned to scorn religions and learned to write. Sex, alcohol, and psychotherapy, a holy trinity for many of his generation, were his anodynes for life’s pains. (His chapter “The Couch” on his prolonged and unsatisfying involvement with two psychoanalysts, whose only contribution to his mental health was to urge him to “go on” talking, is at once comic and painful.)¹¹² Though Wakefield was a successful writer of essays, novels, and screenplays, something was missing until he found his *place*, in Boston, in church. He even discovered that one of his ancestors, John Wakefield, is buried in Boston’s Granary Burial Ground, a sign that the author had arrived at his true home. “Knowing that the ancestors of my genealogical family were in the very ground of the place to which I had been so naturally drawn seemed part of the whole intricate pattern of my journey and return.”¹¹³

Returning is a successful confession, for it is guided by a sustaining vision that draws the fragments and disjunctions of a man’s life into a coherent design. In a previous autobiographical statement — written in the mid-1960s, when Wakefield thought he could sustain himself on his talents, with a little help from his drinking friends — he had developed a different persona, more disparate and dissolute. Presenting himself in the third person in *Between the Lines*, Wakefield invited readers to “see him go then, spinning like a top toward the muddle-headed events of his time, botched and blemished and slightly suicidal, romantic sentimental idealist with a wild and penetrating giggle; bemused and often bourbon-filled, I give you, between his printed lines, your reporter.”¹¹⁴ In *Returning*, the mature

Wakefield presents his misadventures with a wit that does not mitigate the seriousness of his life and literary missions: to see the apparently chaotic events of his life in “the whole intricate pattern.” *Returning* shows Dan Wakefield, guided by faith, on the line of a coherent life.

In our time, self-help groups flourish, people cheerily confess astonishing things — deeds for which, not long ago, they might have been arrested — on television and radio talk shows, and New Age mystics fill sports arenas with their version of “the salvatory fads that sweep America like foreign flus,” as the cynical hero of *Vestments* puts it.¹¹⁵ Actress Shirley MacLaine, in *Out on a Limb* and other autobiographical writings, has had wide success at promoting faith in reincarnation. Such works have drawn telling criticisms.¹¹⁶ Perhaps, though, it is too easy to dismiss the authentic needs for community and salvation behind these often bizarre manifestations.

Certainly there is no doubt about the seriousness of intent behind the books of Price, Alcorn, and Wakefield, narratives in which muddled central characters bravely try to change their lives. These books articulate, with requisite art and thought, literary parables in which representative American men and women seek certainty at a time when the center has not held.

John Updike’s *S.*, a novel that echoes Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, combines a sensitivity to place with a sense of history; both of these elements help shape the character and quest of the novel’s heroine, a latter-day Hester Prynne. Updike’s epigraph, containing two citations from *The Scarlet Letter*, defines the concerns of *S.* One stresses Hester’s beauty and dignity as she awaits judgment; the other points up the way she has translated passion and feeling into thought: “The world’s law was no law for her mind.”¹¹⁷ Again we see a character in the midst of life, in crisis, searching for certainty.

In his trilogy of novels based on *The Scarlet Letter* — *A Month of Sundays*, *Roger’s Version*, and *S.* — and also in *The Witches of Eastwick*, Updike echoes Hawthorne’s belief in a world of spirit.¹¹⁸ In his essay “Hawthorne’s Creed,” Updike writes:

He believed, with his Puritan ancestors, that man’s spirit matters; that the soul can be distorted, stained, and lost; that the impalpable exerts force against the material. Our dreams move us: this is a psychological rather than a religious truth, but in a land where, as Emerson said, “things are in the saddle,” it gives the artist his vote.¹¹⁹

However, where Hawthorne treated Hester’s story as tragedy, Updike treats the story of Sarah Worth, Hester’s descendant, satirically. Hester had the courage of her convictions; Sarah makes herself up as she goes along.

“The story concerns Sarah Worth, a latter-day Hester Prynne who has become enamored by a Hindu religious leader called Arhat.”¹²⁰ *S.* is an epistolary novel — letters are interspersed with tapes from Sarah’s Seiko minicassette tape recorder — from the point of view of Sarah, forty-two years old in 1986, who left her Swampscott, Massachusetts, home and Charles, her husband of nearly twenty-two years — “twenty-two years’ worth of distractions and genteel pretense” — for an Arizona ashram.¹²¹ The ashram recalls Hawthorne’s Brook Farm, only slightly disguised in the *The Blithedale Romance*, another idealistic retreat-commune that did not free its residents from work, ego, or competition.

Sarah writes and talks in a style of run-ons and free associations, sudden lurches of thought, a style that shows her as much a Molly Bloom as another Hester Prynne. As the novel goes on, Sarah becomes increasingly open, witty, denunciatory, high-handed, as,

perhaps, only a New England woman of old family can be. She loves to give advice, warning her mother against selling her stock, warning her husband against allowing the lawn boys to scalp their lawn or blow dead leaves under the bushes.

"I must be tired all my commas are dropping away," she writes to her daughter, Pearl, a student in England, who will marry a wealthy Dutchman.¹²² Sarah is a ditzy Hester, swept away, for example, by the cute way the Arhat says "love."¹²³

Yet the novel is driven by her resentments and regrets for lost worlds of promise, from landscape to relations: the failed American dream. As she says, plaintively, on a tape to an old friend, "the ocean must be full of sails by now on the weekends, and the tulips are everywhere. I've missed the daffodils, the apple blossoms, and the hawthornes."¹²⁴ Sarah is on a quest. "Our guru says that we travel most when standing still."¹²⁵ She bears the burdens and expectations of her culture, as did Hester, who came back to Boston to tell troubled women that their community would be redeemed by a woman. Updike returns to the chastening, inspiring example of Hawthorne's novel, to Hester's passionate involvement and spiritual journey at the fag-end of the Puritan tradition. He propels a latter-day quest, another errand into the wilderness. As Sarah wrote to Myron, her college lover,

Puritanism in my parents had dwindled to a sort of housekeeping whose most characteristic gesture was to take something to the attic because it was undistinguished or vaguely reminiscent of some relative we preferred to forget.¹²⁶

We see that Sarah has led a disappointed life, a life of quiet though comfortable desperation, which has led her to rashly choose the ashram, run by a bogus guru. Sarah did not do what Hester did: give herself to the man she loved, hold to her subversive beliefs, and damn the consequences. Sarah bent to the expectations of her family. In the most moving moment in Sarah's correspondence, she tells Myron, "I loved you then and would love you now and am truly sorry I didn't have the courage to defy my family and all that inherited silver and go off with you and be your woman forever."¹²⁷

Updike's Sarah Worth is, in every way, a diminished version of the dignified and courageous Hester Prynne.¹²⁸ It is difficult to take either Sarah or her quest seriously. The novel is full of jokey allusions: Sarah writes to a Mrs. Blithedale, who is trying to get her money out of the ashram. Sarah and Charles bought their house from a Mrs. Pyncheon. All of this increase the fun of *S.* but diminishes the novel to the level of entertainment, just as Sarah's ashram stay might be seen as another experience in the consumer culture.

However, all this may be just Updike's point: that a serious spiritual life is even more elusive in contemporary America than it was in Hawthorne's or Hester's day. At the end of her journey, suburban home and ashram far behind her, Sarah arrives on the Caribbean isle Samana Cay, where, she writes to Myron, some believe Columbus really landed. Like Hester at the end of her days, Sarah lives alone, in a house by the ocean, contemplating the promises of American life. Hester saw liberated women redeeming the American dream, but Sarah — a willfully liberated woman, perhaps even Updike's parodic example of women's liberation — has more calculating and mundane dreams. Perhaps, she writes, she will go to Holland to help Pearl bear her grandchild. She decides to will her silver, carefully hidden from both her husband and her acquisitive guru, to Harvard's Houghton Library! She wishes she had, in her cottage by the sea, the wing chair in which she once sat monogramming place mats given to them by one of Charles's aunts at their wedding. "I think I did only three plus of one more *W* over the course of twenty-two years."¹²⁹ Sarah Worth could not sew like Hester, who converted her badge of shame into a work of art that

daunted the world. Updike here implies, with humility, that his fictional design, too, is a lesser thing. But, then, certainty and purpose, in life and art, is more difficult to discover in our time.

In *Libra* Don DeLillo creates a shocking fictional vision out of events surrounding the “humming bullet” that stopped John F. Kennedy in Dallas on November 22, 1963. Through an invented alter ego, Nicholas Branch, retired senior analyst for CIA, investigator of the Kennedy assassination for fifteen years, DeLillo broods on the implication of that act. “We will follow the bullet trajectories backwards to the lives that occupy the shadows, actual men who moan in their dreams.”¹³⁰ *Libra* leads us into the subterranean world of American conspiracies, where obsessed men dream and scheme to change the world through sudden acts of violence, acts intended to validate their desperate lives. I offer my copy, with marginalia, to the Camp David library, for the next president’s sleepless nights.

Libra mixes fact and fiction, actual and imaginary characters, speculations and fabrications, to capture some amazing events in our time. In 1960, long before the Kennedy assassination initiated many Americans into conspiracy theories of history, Philip Roth wrote, “the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one’s meager imagination.”¹³¹

One of the ways American novelists have chosen to make American reality plausible is to blur the conventional distinction between fact and fiction, as William Styron did with a slave rebellion in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* or Robert Coover did with Richard Nixon’s early career in *The Public Burning*, works that blend history and biography into original fictional designs.¹³² When extraordinary public events and implausible public figures are shaped to the requirements of fiction they become coherent, imaginable.

Don DeLillo’s *Libra*, as he explains in an “author’s note,” provides “a way of thinking about the assassination without being constrained by half-facts or overwhelmed by possibilities, by the tide of speculation that widens with the years.”¹³³ Rather than exploit the Kennedy assassination for its lurid or theatric possibilities, DeLillo’s novel exposes the plots, subplots, and counterplots surrounding that event so that Americans might come to terms with their worst national fears. Where the Warren Commission Report muffled inquiry and fostered paranoia, *Libra* illuminates through creative speculation; its effect is salvific.

On the novel’s opening page we discover Lee Harvey Oswald, in the early 1950s, riding the subway from the Bronx to Manhattan, linked to fields of force and power, validated by his connection to a thrust and energy that compensate for his own vacuity. He thrills at the secret world of tunnels beneath the city, “this secret power, rising to a shriek, this secret force of the soul in the tunnels under New York.”¹³⁴ He rushes to meet his fate.

Other men will see that Oswald keeps his appointment in Samarra. Former CIA officials and paramilitaries who had been involved in the failed Bay of Pigs invasion wonder what they can do to renew hostilities between Washington and Cuba. One of them decides that the anti-Castro forces will revive if an attempt is made on JFK’s life, an attempt that can be traced to the Cubans. The plan has the logic of “a dream whose meaning slowly becomes apparent.”¹³⁵ The plotters not only have to plan the shooting, they also must leave clues and create suspects that will lead investigators back to Castro. Oswald — with his

erratic military career, his stay in Russia, his defense of Cuba, and his attempt on the life of General Edwin Walker — becomes their dupe: if Oswald had not existed, they would have had to invent him. Walter (Win) Everett, Jr., principal plotter, a figment of DeLillo's imagination, is enthralled by the art of his plausible fiction. "His gunmen would appear behind a strip of scenic gauze. You have to leave them with coincidence, lingering mystery. This is what makes it real."¹³⁶

The plotters' original plan was to have "a spectacular miss," but plots have a life of their own, so they devise a new plan that will have even greater impact.¹³⁷ "Plots carry their own logic. There is a tendency of plots to move toward death."¹³⁸ The rest, as they say, is history.

DeLillo makes history plausible, a nightmare from which we can awake, by creating authentic characters, whether they derive from the realms of fact or imagination. Mobster Carmine Latta, for example, is furious at Robert Kennedy for ordering Justice Department harassment. Latta combines vengeance with nostalgia for the loss of mob activities in Havana, which he expresses in plausible street lingo.

I like to see a room where the dealers wear a tux. Plus there's action all over town.
Your cockfights, your jai alai. At the track you play roulette between races. I mean tell me where it went.

Latta then turns suddenly ominous, speaking of JFK, "You cut off the head, the tail doesn't wag."¹³⁹ In a few sentences DeLillo rounds a character, who is convincing if not necessarily true, into the design of his plot.

All of DeLillo's characters brood on secrets, hidden links, plots, conspiracies, and all are correct. His novel's plot — the inner working of a larger myth of public sacrifice, JFK's assassination, the details of which many of us know better than our own lives — centers on assorted plotters. There is a metafictional dimension to *Libra*, for the major characters are self-reflexive, watching themselves act, imagining how their lives will be retold. Each is involved in creating a useful fiction, a persona. Each seeks to enlarge the significance of his life by linking himself to forces of history, as though it were a third rail that would send current, energy, power, light, death, and transfiguration through his body. DeLillo presents a novel and a world about "men in small rooms," men who imagine plots into being and other men who try to figure out hidden correspondences, after the fact.¹⁴⁰ We all plot useful and destructive fictions from the events of our lives. The imaginatively stunted men involved in Kennedy's assassination took the metaphor of plot literally.

In *Libra* we confront a world beyond reason. Clay Shaw, an actual playboy on the edge of the conspiracy, asks Oswald, as DeLillo imagines, the date of his birthday.

"October eighteen," Lee said.

"Libra. A Libran."

"The Scales," [David] Ferrie said.

"The Balance," Shaw said.

It seemed to tell them everything they had to know.¹⁴¹

Here rationality dissolves into dreams, discourse into paralanguage. We have entered a realm where everything corresponds but nothing means: where patterns without significance prevail; where we cannot tell the dancer from the dance. We are all — characters, historical investigators, novelist, and readers — enclosed within a mystery, as was the plaintive Marina Oswald, who was stunned at seeing herself, Lee, and their daughter,

June, on television, in a Fort Worth department store showroom window. "She kept walking out of the picture and coming back. She was amazed every time she saw herself return."¹⁴²

For Henry James, fiction provided "an image in the mirror."¹⁴³ Don DeLillo's fictional image is a collage of shards and fragments, mirrors pocked by bullets, in which we can see our refracted selves and our dislocated times. Yet DeLillo's art also provides an antidote, for it makes events coherent, if not plausible. In *Libra* we discover a daunting yet clarifying parable of the American experience.

In his acceptance speech before the Democratic National Convention, Michael Dukakis spoke of "an idea as powerful as any in human history, . . . the idea of community." He cited John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts, who said, "we must be knit together as one."¹⁴⁴ Of course, Michael Dukakis meant to offer a positive, hopeful vision of the American future. Nearly twenty-eight years before, John F. Kennedy had also drawn on Winthrop's "city upon a hill" sermon, in Kennedy's election eve address at Boston Garden: "the kind of society we build, the kind of power we generate, the kind of enthusiasm we incite, all this will tell us whether, in the long run, darkness or light overtakes the world."¹⁴⁵ In retrospect, Kennedy's imagery (the release of forces, power and enthusiasm; the struggle of light and dark) seems more ominous than it did at the time, when it was a text awaiting interpretation. DeLillo, it might be said, develops Kennedy's implications in his fiction. DeLillo and others show us in their works of imagination and introspection that we are joined — as Hawthorne's fiction shows America's early settlers to have been — by more constricting and killing ties that bind. Such books tell us who we are; they provide necessary images for those who wish to inspire a vision of what we might become. ♀

Notes

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4. Henry James, *The Future of the Novel* (New York: Vintage, 1956), 41.
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8. Wills, "Born to Bustle," 28.
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12. Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, 89.
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14. Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, 112.

15. Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, 37.
16. Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, 49.
17. Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, 67.
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19. Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, 251.
20. Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, 408.
21. Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, 149.
22. Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, 92.
23. Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, 397.
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25. Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 12, dustjacket.
26. Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 65.
27. Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 59.
28. Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 77.
29. Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 91.
30. Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 564.
31. Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 34.
32. Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 560.
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47. Morrison, *Beloved*, 57.
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53. Flanagan, *Tenants*, 145.
54. Flanagan, *Tenants*, 602.
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62. Kennedy, *Quinn's Book*, 102.
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67. Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Knopf, 1988); *Four Dubliners* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987); *Yeats: The Man and the Mask* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1948); *James Joyce: New and Revised Edition* (1959; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).
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69. Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 38.
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113. Wakefield, *Returning*, 224.
114. Dan Wakefield, "The Shadow Unmasked," in *Between the Lines: A Reporter's Personal Journey Through Public Events* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1966), 23.
115. Alcorn, *Vestments*, 19.
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125. Updike, S., 64.
126. Updike, S., 242.
127. Updike, S., 247.
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