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Vantage Points: Prose Parables of the Republic

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Shaun O'Connell

Among the works discussed in this essay:

Firebird, by James Carroll. 448 pages. E. P. Dutton, 1989. \$18.95.

Where I'm Calling From: New and Selected Stories, by Raymond Carver. 393 pages. The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988. \$19.95.

Paris Trout, by Pete Dexter. 306 pages. Random House, 1988. \$17.95.

Selected Stories, by Andre Dubus. 476 pages. David R. Godine, Publisher, 1988. \$22.50.

Jack Gance, by Ward Just. 279 pages. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988. \$17.95.

A Writer's America: Landscape in Literature, by Alfred Kazin. 240 pages.

Alfred A. Knopf, 1988. \$24.95.

Spence + Lila, by Bobbie Ann Mason. 176 pages. Harper & Row, 1988. \$12.95.

A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam, by Neil Sheehan.

861 pages. Random House, 1988. \$24.95.

Breathing Lessons, by Anne Tyler. 327 pages. Alfred A. Knopf, 1988. \$18.95.

Given the terrors of our time, it comes as no surprise to be told that “most postwar novels search for a vantage point from which life will not appear so irremediably painful.”¹ Many recent American novelists respond to our age of anxiety by designing useful fictions that confront the shock of the new and provide myths of qualified redemption. The fate of a troubled republic is at issue in several stories of representative American men and women discussed here. While our politicians offer balloons and blarney, some of our writers tell us not only the way we live now but also how we might survive.

Late 1988 was a worrisome time. The presidential election had been marked by fatuity and frivolity. “This election isn’t about ideology; it’s about competence,” said Michael Dukakis, whose campaign demonstrated neither.² Addressing the Economic Club of Chicago before election day, George Bush, whose campaign was marked by demagoguery and flag-waving slogans, demonstrated his range of rhetoric and reasoning when he said, “Let’s cut through the demagoguery. America is No. 1.”³ After the fall election, Americans commemorated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the assassination of John F. Kennedy with that special passion we reserve for lost hope and glory. Again and again the film of the assassination ran, in blurry colors, on our television screens: a buoyant president sitting in an open convertible beside his beautiful wife, waving at adoring fans, in Dallas,

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at high noon. Then, suddenly, everything changed, utterly. At Kennedy's death, like Hopkins's Margaret, in his poem "Spring and Fall," we began by grieving over Golden-grove (or Camelot) and learned that it was something in ourselves that was left behind in Dallas, or wherever we were, on November 22, 1963.

It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.⁴

John Kenneth Galbraith wanted to say nothing in mourning, but only to recall Jack Kennedy's wit and warmth. Galbraith appeared on *The Ten O'Clock News* on WGBH-TV in Boston on the eve of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the assassination to talk about Kennedy with Chris Lydon, the program's host. Lydon wondered what Kennedy would be reading if he were alive today. Galbraith thought that Kennedy would have been interested in Neil Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie*. Galbraith thought Sheehan's book would have made Kennedy reflect on the mistakes he had made in allowing American troops to become involved in Vietnam.

There was, then, no escape from recrimination, no release from an abiding sense of loss and regret. Even Galbraith's imaginary John F. Kennedy — at age seventy-one he would be more tempered and reflective — would be destined, as are we, to remember what might have been, if all had not gone wrong. Wordsworth named our states of mind and heart:

Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?⁵

Our novelists have served us better than our politicians in clarifying our condition. George Bush told us to "read my lips" and to look for "a thousand points of light"; Michael Dukakis repeated slogans: "Good jobs at good wages" and "I'm on your side." Our novelists would not have had to go far to offer more compelling messages on the state of the nation, but they did. The novelists describe Americans — in political, professional, and private lives — who are wiser and more resilient than our patronizing presidential candidates imagined. These novelists — and Neil Sheehan, a reporter who, paradoxically, appropriates the devices of fiction to authenticate his work — portray, with amazing energy and inventiveness, how Americans bear up under siege.

Jack Gance by Ward Just and *Firebird* by James Carroll are political parables. In each novel, a bright, idealistic young man from America's heartland — each novel's hero is caught up and swept away by enthusiasm for public service during the Kennedy years — comes to learn of a secret government that really runs things in America. Though Just deals with Chicago's political machine and Carroll with Washington's FBI, both novels are reinforced by the cynicism of the Iran-Contra scandal, which demonstrated that a group of fanatical patriots in the National Security Council conducted foreign policy without regard either to the law or to Congress and, we are asked to believe, without the knowledge of the president or vice president. Just and Carroll extend our political suspicions back in time and outward to other governmental areas, validating our political paranoia. *Jack Gance* and *Firebird*: two fine examples of muckraking fiction.

"By a political novel I mean a novel in which political ideas play a dominant role or in which the political milieu is the dominant setting," writes Irving Howe in *Politics and the Novel*.⁶ By those criteria, both *Jack Gance* and *Firebird* qualify. Further, they illustrate

another of Howe's requirements, that political fiction be about "the *idea* of society, as distinct from the mere unquestioned workings of society."⁷ Just and Carroll design plots to enmesh their wide-eyed lads in illegal machinations so that these young men from the provinces might come of age, shed their simple patriotic innocence, and wise up to the ways of the world. An idea of a society in crisis is present in both works. The image of America that emerges from these fictions is tarnished and fragile.

At the conclusion of *Jack Gance*, the title character has become a U.S. senator from Illinois. At the request of a political backer, he speaks to a group of prep school seniors from Chicago's North Shore in his Capitol Hill offices. He tells these young Americans, with some editing, how government works; then he invites them to consider "a career in government, public service."⁸ Jack has come a long way from Chicago's Near North Side to Washington and he wants these students to learn some of the lessons he so painfully learned. "The essence of public life was compromise," lectures Jack.⁹ *Loyalty* was the single most important character requirement, the essential trait for success. However, he would rather not tell these students that loyalty, Chicago and Washington style, is to be exacted at the price of one's character. Washington "was a great city, always giving more than it received," says Senator Gance. "It gave and gave and gave and gave and expected nothing in return but loyalty."¹⁰ These closing words of *Jack Gance* reveal the novel to be a study of the making of a political hack, a selling out by a promising young man who learns that he must go along to get along, the insider's credo.

Jack's father had stood alone against Chicago's machine pols and he was crushed: convicted and sent to prison for tax evasion. Chicago Mayor Ed Kelly "said that Chicago was a place where bulls and foxes dine very well, but lambs end up head down on the hook."¹¹ The Chicago lesson, then, finally learned by Jack Gance: don't be a lamb. Compromise! Deal! Be loyal! Survive!

Jack starts out as a midwestern Billy Budd, an innocent seeking a noose, but he learns his lessons by being both coaxed and slapped around. In the 1950s, a young German woman who survived World War II tells him of horrors that transcend his capacity to imagine; when she dies in an absurdist auto accident, Jack begins to believe in her version of the world. "I had come to see Chicago in a new way, as a dark and dangerous city, a city of killer nightmares no less than Berlin. Its furious commercial spirit produced a kind of moral vertigo; and I had to figure that out for myself."¹² When Jack goes to work for a Daley machine hack, doing secret polling just before the Kennedy election (an election in which the Chicago vote count played a suspicious part), he learns confidentiality — how to speak under his arm, as the wise guys say on the street — and, of course, he learns *loyalty*. No outsider like his father, Jack becomes one of the boys.

Ward Just is excellent on the determining character of place, particularly Chicago. Chicago, that enclosed, self-referential city. Chicago, that somber city, previously owned by tough-guy novelist James T. Farrell and reality-instructor novelist Saul Bellow, here treated by Ward Just with the political savvy and insider trading of columnist Mike Royko. Indeed, Chicago — what it is and what it teaches — is the real hero of the novel. The machine hack's version of Chicago is a local wisdom that Jack Gance adopts: "a city of plenty. . . . No one was excluded, except for the sons of bitches who refused to contribute, who wanted a free ride. . . . The hell with them."¹³ The world is divided between honest grafters, as Tammany's George Washington Plunkitt would say, and fools.¹⁴

Jack Gance, then, is a young man on the make who is willing to pay the price. He is on a prosaic quest for mastery of the quotidian, not a man in search of beauty and truth. "I was

interested in what was ordinary and true, not what was splendid and virtuous.”¹⁵ The triumph and the tragedy of his life is that Jack Gance gets exactly what he wishes.

Ward Just writes in a summary, analytical, associative style, seldom scenic or poetic, a forward-thrusting prose designed to propel Jack Gance through four decades of sex and politics: the 1940s–1980s. The novel’s narrator stresses meaning more than scene. Occasionally a style of hyperbole overtakes the novel, as though Just wishes to simulate in language the great moment and purpose of American political events and power centers. Just’s Washington, for example, in 1961, is “a regent culture, . . . part clubhouse, part Park Avenue, with the dizzier aspects of Mayfair and Harvard Yard thrown in.” Washington, that Forbidden City under Eisenhower, a city then liberated by Kennedy, a city here hyped by Just.¹⁶ Perhaps too often this portentous style is in complicity with Jack Gance’s inflated sense of his own importance.

Though *Jack Gance* has the structure of moral satire, the hero’s education in the ways of the world goes far in justifying his code of compromise. That is, Just’s plot — narrative as vision — conspires to confirm Jack Gance’s cynical vision. Though we certainly know better than those prep school seniors who listen with rapt attention to the pious musings of a U.S. senator, we are also persuaded of the truth in Jack Gance’s sermonette on the need for compromise and loyalty in public life. That, as they say, is how the system works. We hang out together or we hang separately; one hand washes the other; give a little and take a lot — that’s the way things are, so get smart or get lost! In holding out no other option, Just’s novel goes too far in justifying the life of a man who lacks a moral center. However, it also goes far in explaining America’s amoral political climate. In *Jack Gance* Ward Just writes the most convincing novel of hard-nosed, pig-butchered Chicago — its class and political structures, its territorial distinctions, its smug provincialities, and its leg-breaker codes — since Dreiser’s *The Titan*.

James Carroll’s *Firebird* also presents a callow, midwestern innocent who is agog in the Oz of Washington. In 1949 Chris Malone arrives by train from Kansas City as though he has fallen into a dream world. Crossing the Potomac River, glimpsing the Capitol, he realizes that “Washington had always been a dream city to him, and even now he had images of its monuments, plazas and statues vividly in mind.”¹⁷

Like Jack Gance, Chris Malone will wake from his dream to discover, behind Washington’s glittering facades, a secret government: labyrinthine, conspiratorial, paranoid, exacting in its demands of loyalty, vicious when crossed. Like Gance, Malone will be educated, smartened up to the hard ways of the world, ways of compromise not covered in high school civics texts. He too will be instructed by a sexy European woman, with whom he falls in love, another young survivor of the horrors of World War II. Gance is taught hard-nosed lessons by the Chicago political machine; Malone is taught what’s what by the Bureau: J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI. Gance buys into the system, but Malone opts out. Either way, Ward Just and James Carroll offer parables that confirm our suspicions about government’s manipulations of our lives. By setting their works in the recent past, they are saying that the Watergate cover-up and the Iran-Contra conspiracy are nothing new.

In *Firebird* young agent Malone is called in from the field because of his special skill — safecracking, learned from his father — so he might break into the Soviet mission’s code room in Washington to copy the Soviet codebook. The FBI thinks the codebook will reveal the name of the spy who sent America’s A-bomb secrets to the Russians. When Malone claws his way up an elevator shaft and sweats his way through heating ducts to

enter the Soviet code room, only to find the safe wide open, he realizes that he is not in Kansas anymore.¹⁸

The first half of *Firebird* — up to Malone's discovery of that open safe door — is a parable of patriotic purpose. But the second half of Carroll's novel is nothing less than a marvelously constructed tale of multiple conspiracies that bring Malone and the reader face to face with America's enemy within: *not* the Red Menace, but our obsessive commitment to the specter of threat from the Evil Empire, a self-serving, simplistic myth that corrupts American democracy.

Malone becomes aware of the melodramatic morality play that constitutes ordinary life in Hoover's black-and-white world. Malone, investigating the alleged Rosenberg conspiracy, finally finds a deeper, darker treachery at the heart of all that matters to him.

Firebird opens a door into the dark side of the American dream for Chris Malone and for the reader, because we too are carried along on his climb up that embassy elevator shaft, his plunge into a torrid romance with a mysterious Russian woman, his leap from easy faith in the sanctity of the FBI, his fall from grace in Hoover's Bureau, and, finally, his development of moral and political consciousness. *Firebird*, then, is a novel of intrigue driven by James Carroll's skill as a storyteller, his political savvy, and his exemplary moral passion.

Ward Just and James Carroll, it might be said, are also novelists who suffer from post-Vietnam stress syndrome. That is, they have not put aside — as urged repeatedly by Ronald Reagan, George Will, and others on the political right — the sense of moral outrage and abiding suspicion engendered by that undeclared war. Indeed, Just and Carroll demonstrate that the lies we heard during the Vietnam years — all those lights at the end of all those tunnels — had their source in post-World War II politics and patriotism. The representative men of Just and Carroll, those bright and naive young men who came East, following the tracks of Scott Fitzgerald's romantic lads and lasses of another day, experience a shock of recognition that teaches them, to paraphrase Thoreau, that the world is wider than their former romantic views of it. In following the coming of age of these young men, Just's and Carroll's readers also see anew their Republic and ask for what it stands.

As novelists look away from urban hot spots and power centers, the stories they tell become less frenzied; their heroes and heroines turn out to be ordinary Americans — not shakers and breakers, not plotters and pols, but plain folks who try to get along, to make ends meet. Two of our best novelists construe their latest fictions in just that pattern: Anne Tyler and Bobbie Ann Mason tell tales of aging and elderly couples who are trying to get from here to there, people who are attempting to figure out what their journeys mean.¹⁹ Tyler's *Breathing Lessons* is strung along the plot line of an elderly couple's trip — from Baltimore to Deer Lick, Pennsylvania, and back — to and from a funeral. Mason's *Spence + Lila* is framed by a drive through western Kentucky — from a farm to a hospital in Paducah and back — during which an aging couple and their family face up to death and loss. Such stories might seem undramatic and dour, but each of these novels is filled with intensity, humor, and hope. They stand as redemptive myths.

In *Breathing Lessons*, Maggie and Ira Moran are on the road to attend the funeral of Max, a man who had been long married to Maggie's friend of forty-two years Serena. Ira — long-suffering, caustic, withdrawn — does not want to go, but Maggie — a bit of a ditz, big-hearted, chatty — is on a mission, as Ira suspects. He knows Maggie is “not a

straight-line kind of person.”²⁰ Ira believes in hard evidence, but Maggie believes in luck, good and bad. She hopes to get lucky on her way back from the funeral by stopping off to visit their daughter-in-law, Fiona, who is estranged from their feckless son, Jesse. Maggie, an incorrigible matchmaker, schemes, on a day of loss and remembrance, to patch up her son’s marriage.

At issue in *Breathing Lessons*, not a straight-line kind of fiction, are contending visions of life: those held by Ira and by Maggie. Ira has an eye for life’s limitations, while Maggie has a heart full of hope for life’s possibilities. They hold each other responsible for how Jesse turned out. “Maggie blamed Ira; he was too harsh. Ira blamed Maggie; she was too soft.”²¹ Ira is a disappointed man; he had wanted to be a doctor but he has had to spend his life taking care of his family: his invalid father, his shut-in sisters, his unrealistic wife, and his disappointing children. Now he wants to cut his losses, let go of all the ties that bind, except for Maggie. When Maggie insists on helping a stalled motorist, “Ira wondered why Maggie always had to be inviting other people into their lives. She didn’t feel a mere husband was enough, he suspected.”²² But Maggie is on a quest to bring back precious things she is losing. Her best friend’s husband is dead. Their distant daughter, Daisy, will be off to college the next day. Jesse has lost his wife, Fiona, and child, Leroy, and has moved out of their house. “I feel like we’re just flying apart! All my friends and relatives just flying off from me like the . . . expanding universe of something!”²³ Maggie is determined to seize the day, to restore her family, to reverse universal patterns of dispersal.

This, then, is Tyler territory: the tatty streets of Baltimore, a lower-middle-class America symbolized by a nursing home, where Maggie works, and a picture framing store, which Ira runs. These are disappointed lives lived inland, across the tracks, far from the glitzy world of Baltimore’s Harborplace. This is not the America of disposable properties and people; here relationships endure, whatever they cost. Ira is struck by the truth in Jesse’s description of his parents’ marriage as the “same old song and dance.”

Same old arguments, same recriminations. The same jokes and affectionate passwords, yes, and abiding loyalty and gestures of support and consolations no one else knew how to offer; but also the same old resentments dragged up year after year, with nothing ever totally forgotten.²⁴

Maggie had believed that marriage would transform her life. It did not, but she still seeks transformation. Will Tyler’s world confirm or deny such hope?

Tyler’s talent allows her to see things convincingly from both Ira’s and Maggie’s vantage points. (Her previous novel, *The Accidental Tourist*, also focused on a dour man and an off-the-wall woman whose courage and charm granted him “a sudden view of his life as rich and full and astonishing.”²⁵ In *Breathing Lessons*, Ira will not be so easily convinced.) Seen from Ira’s angle, their circular journey accomplishes nothing. He and Maggie bicker throughout the trip; Maggie’s friend Serena gets angry at them at the reception following the funeral; Fiona and Jesse remain apart. But seen from Maggie’s view, the trip is worth the trouble, for she sings at the funeral, just as she did at the wedding of Serena and Max. She also entices Fiona and Leroy to come to dinner in Baltimore with Jesse, though the family reunion breaks down. (As in Tyler’s *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, family members arrive at reunion dinners, but they all do not stay to eat.)²⁶ Maggie even manages to draw a bit of compassion out of Ira, who comforts his wife in her time of grief. He is touched when she says, “Oh, Ira, what are we going to live for, all the rest of our lives?”²⁷ But Maggie soon perks up; she will just keep going, knowing that the

next day she and Ira face another long car trip, to take their daughter to college. They have miles to go before they can or should sleep.

Anne Tyler imagines stories full of lessons, prosaic parables of the American scene. Maggie recalls how close she had been to her daughter-in-law during Fiona's pregnancy, when Maggie urged the girl to do her exercises and take her breathing lessons. Fiona: "'Breathing lessons — really,' she said, dropping to the floor with a thud. 'Don't they reckon I must know how to breathe by now?'" But Maggie, like Tyler, knows that no one is really taught how to do the most important things in life. We are given lessons in unimportant things, "but driving a car is nothing, nothing, compared to living day in and day out with a husband and raising up a new human being."²⁸

The circular motion of *Breathing Lessons* teaches us a lesson articulated in Eliot's "East Coker":

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living. . . . In my end is my beginning.²⁹

Tyler's characters, who have little use for high culture, might not recognize Eliot, but Tyler acknowledges not only her people's quiet desperation but also their purposeful determination to set forth on life journeys and insists on their significance.

At Max's funeral, Maggie is reluctant to sing, as Serena requests, "Love Is a Many Splendored Thing." Maggie thinks the song inappropriate for a funeral; she knows its lyrics lie and she is angry because Ira refuses to sing it with her, as he joined her in song so long ago, at Serena and Max's wedding. However, Maggie finally overcomes her own objections, stands, and sings. "You had to sort of *step forth*, she decided, and trust that the words would follow."³⁰ Her trust is rewarded, under the guidance of Anne Tyler, who steps forth beautifully and purposefully in *Breathing Lessons* to construe a parable that acknowledges Ira's realistic pessimism but that also sustains Maggie's romantic hope and supports her determination to hold on in the face of certain loss.

In Bobbie Ann Mason's *Spence + Lila*, Lila Culpepper, an aging farm wife who has to have a cancerous breast removed, takes pills to help her breathe. Mason, like Tyler, knows how difficult life's ordinary tasks can be. Maggie and Ira face loss and the idea of death, but Lila and Spence confront a possible death in the family. The novel begins on a mundane level — Spence and Lila, in their VW Rabbit, on a 20-minute drive to Paducah — with large implications: theirs is a pilgrimage toward revelation. The opening sentences establish the motion of this novel as a quest for meaning, undercut by folksy irony. "On the way to the hospital in Paducah, Spence notices the row of signs along the highway: WHERE WILL YOU BE IN ETERNITY? Each word is on a white cross. The message reminds him of the old Burma-Shave signs."³¹

Bobbie Ann Mason designs a fictional parable even more reassuring than the tale of qualified hope we find in Tyler's novel. Spence and Lila survive her hard time; the plot carries them from farm to hospital in Paducah — a passage and a trial — and then back to their farm, where Lila and Spence return to her garden. There, usually taciturn Spence finally expresses his love and fears in ways that would be impossible for repressed Ira.

"These cucumbers is ready for pickling," Lila says.

"You sure were gone an awful long time," Spence says, his lips puckering up. "I

thought to my soul you never *was* going to come home.” He takes some of the vegetables from her. “I’ve got a cucumber that needs pickling,” he says.³²

Tyler’s story line ends on the determination of her characters to carry on, despite evidence of life’s diminishments; Mason’s story pushes beyond endurance to celebration. Lila laughs at her husband’s randy joke: “Her cough catches her finally and slows her down, but her face is dancing like pond water in the rain, all unsettled and stirring with aroused possibility.”³³

Bobbie Ann Mason writes about the plain people of western Kentucky, her original home ground, with the same missionary zeal that James Agee brought to his description of southern tenant farmers in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. “I feel that my characters are on the threshold of possibility,” Mason says.³⁴ In *Shiloh and Other Stories* and *In Country* her characters glimpse the wide world beyond their backwater towns and hick shopping malls.³⁵ The heroine of *In Country* — she is eighteen and her father was killed in Vietnam — comes to realize that “she has post-Vietnam stress syndrome,” so she seeks remission in a pilgrimage to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington.³⁶ Mason’s characters live lives of economic and cultural impoverishment — they *like* television, they move to the rhythms of rock and roll, and they are sustained by junk foods — but they *step forth*, as Tyler’s Maggie would say, to confront the issues of their lives, their culture.

Spence + Lila shows Mason returning to what is stable and enduring in her good country people. Having taken a young heroine out of the sticks and into the heart of the matter of war guilt in *In Country*, Mason focuses in *Spence + Lila* on an elderly couple who never leave their native grounds; this novel is “my journey back home,” says Mason.³⁷ Spence knows about contemporary America — he cooks his bacon in a microwave oven, he enjoys rock music, and he learns about exotic places from cable television — but he represents an older, rooted America. A World War II veteran who never wanted to leave home again after what he had seen in the South Pacific, Spence has never flown in an airplane; he does not believe in borrowing money; he hates the waste of malls; he loves best his lifelong wife and his seventy-three acre farm.

From the rise, he looks out over his place. This is it. This is all there is in the world — it contains everything there is to know or possess, yet everywhere people are knocking their brains out trying to find something different, something better. His kids all scattered, looking for it. Everyone always wants a way out of something like this, but what he has here is the main thing there is — just the way things grow and die, the way the sun comes up and goes down every day. These are the facts of life. They are so simple they are almost impossible to grasp. It’s like looking up at the stars at night, seeing them strung out like seed corn, sprinkled randomly across the sky. Stars seem simple, even monotonous, because there’s no way to understand them. The ocean was like that too, blank and deep and easy.³⁸

Lila is his true mate, for she too recoils from the easy ways of contemporary America.

She tries to go along with anything new, but she is afraid that inside she hasn’t changed at all. It still hurts her to see liquor kept in a house where there are children, to see farmers out spreading manure on their fields on Sundays, to see young people fall away from the church.³⁹

Mason rewards this stability, this loyalty, this courage not only to bear up under life’s burdens but to make the most of what is left. When Mason finally flies, in his neighbor’s crop duster, he sees his beloved home from a new vantage point, one that places it and

their lives in a wider perspective. Aloft, he sees the details of his holdings “lose definition and become small parts of something much bigger.”⁴⁰

Spence plus Lila equals a loving, lasting marriage, a rare thing in American literature, though perhaps slightly more frequent in American life. Bobbie Ann Mason’s art — too casually categorized as “K-mart realism” or “blue-collar chic” — serves to honor a core of strength and integrity in the American character.⁴¹ Like Anne Tyler’s, her fiction convincingly takes heart, but Bobbie Ann Mason’s fiction, of equal art, offers greater hope.

Of course, both Tyler and Mason have left themselves open to the charges of sentimentality in constructing fictions of salvific design, centered on struggling and noble elders. These novelists’ characters are as much defined by their roles and their circumstances as by their characters, so it is easy to be moved when we see them as victims struggling against the determinations of fate. However, just *that* seems to be the writers’ point: attention must be paid to American lives of quiet desperation, heartland Americans who take life as it comes, pay their taxes, try to do decent things, wonder at change — “Spence can’t imagine what the world is coming to” — try to hold their families together, and figure out what it all means.⁴² Perhaps it is worth being guilty of a certain sentimentality — both Tyler and Mason, no detached modernists they, *do* love their characters — to have such redemptive fictions as *Breathing Lessons* and *Spence + Lila*.

Andre Dubus’s *Selected Stories* and Raymond Carver’s new and selected stories in *Where I’m Calling From*, remind us that some of the most artistically and thematically uncompromising writing of our time occurs in shorter forms.⁴³ In their stories and novellas, Dubus and Carver focus on another America, remote from political and commercial power centers, detached even from middle-class proprieties, inhabited by a marginal underclass of American losers — characters who are divorced, alcoholic, between jobs, knocked askew by shattering events, lost in grief, tied down by guilt and remembrance — who, it seems, are best seen in narrative fragments, stories artfully tattered and broken off, like the emblematic American lives they portray. For all that, Dubus and Carver, men who have known their own hard times, present fiction collections that, launched upon a sea of American miseries, bottle surprising messages of hope. Dubus and Carver write useful fictions that seek vantage points from which life appears less irremediably painful. Lionel Trilling has written:

the questions asked by our literature are not about our culture but ourselves, if we are saved or damned — more than with anything else, our literature is concerned with salvation. No literature has been so intensely spiritual as ours.⁴⁴

Dubus and Carver write about people who think they are damned, but their brief, artful fictions are designed to show these lost Americans and demonstrate to all of us that there is hope.

For Thoreau the Merrimack River represented a myth of freedom. Unlike the placid Concord River, the Merrimack, formed in New Hampshire’s White Mountains, runs rapidly: through Lowell, east past Newburyport and Plum Island, to the sea. In *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Thoreau recalled his 1839 trip with his brother upriver to the Pawtucket Falls, where they encountered the mighty Merrimack. “We now felt as if we were fairly launched on the ocean-stream of our voyage, and were pleased to find that our boat would float on Merrimack water.”⁴⁵

The characters who appear in the world of Andre Dubus mostly live along the Merrimack River, a century and a half after Thoreau launched his canoe upon it, but Dubus's characters know neither freedom nor passage route from their place of stasis to any ocean of opportunity. They are landlocked, place-bound, down-and-outers who appear never to have heard of the American dream, though many of them nevertheless conduct their desperate lives with dignity. His characters cannot forgive themselves; indeed, they cannot believe in a universe in which sins are forgiven. Dubus approaches them neither to praise nor to blame but to understand, sympathize, and forgive. His fiction constitutes an act of contrition, a granting of remission of their sins.

"It was long ago, in a Massachusetts town on the Merrimack River."⁴⁶ So is set the story "Rose," which sounds like a fairy tale, told in naturalistic setting and prosaic language: Dubus's characteristically Dreiserian style of high-density prose in support of his deterministic vision. On a drunken night in Timmy's, a bar near the Merrimack, Rose, a worker in a leather factory, tells the narrator her story of alcoholism and marital chaos, particularly of her former husband's abuse of their children. She tolerated her husband's terrors by numbing herself with booze and remorse, until one day she briefly took hold and rescued the children from a fire he set; then, escaping her husband's clutches, she ran him over with a car, killing him. "She redeemed herself, with action," concludes the narrator, "and with less than thirty minutes of it. But she could not see that, and still cannot. She sees herself in the laundromat, the supermarket, listlessly drunk in a nightclub where only her fingers on the table moved to the music."⁴⁷ Rose is near numb, but the narrator is driven to seize on any slight sign of life — even her moving fingers.

Dubus is a prose poet of an American place in decline. In "Townies," a security guard reflects on regional decay.

He had lived all his life in this town, a small city in northeastern Massachusetts; once there had been a shoe industry. Now that was over, only three factories were open, and the others sat empty along the bank of the Merrimack. Their closed windows and the dark empty rooms beyond them stared at the street, like the faces of the old and poor who on summer Sundays sat on the stoops of the old houses farther upriver and stared at the street, the river, the air before their eyes.⁴⁸

He had been a stitcher and then he delivered bread, but both jobs were eliminated by new technology and changing social habits, much to his puzzlement. Now he discovers the body of a dead college girl — she was murdered by another townie — and he confronts even deeper mysteries.

Dubus's people stand baffled by a world that has passed them by. Guilty, divorced fathers try to make up to their children in sad outings; other fathers seek to cover up their children's crimes or attempt to right wrongs inflicted on their children. In "Killings," a father buries his son in a grave on a hill overlooking the Merrimack. His son had been having an affair with a married woman whose estranged husband killed him. The boy's father and a crony kidnap the son's murderer, drive him past the closed Dairy Queens and lobster restaurants, through the poisoned marshlands, into the woods of southern New Hampshire, where they murder for revenge; then they suffer remorse of conscience.

Ground down by the low expectations of their class, surrounded by urban blight, circumscribed by a dour Catholicism that reinforces their sense of sin and shame, often hooked on some addiction (food, booze, love) that holds them on a leash, Dubus's characters need absolution, a sudden infusion of grace. In "If They Knew Yvonne," a boy from Louisiana, who was taught Catholic guilt by the Christian Brothers, suffers from his

compulsion to masturbate, from what the Brothers call the sin of “self-abuse.” A compliant girl, Yvonne, releases the boy from this habit, but they have sex to the near exclusion of all else, and therefore they form no human bond. Finally, as a young man he is liberated, at long last, from both a sense of sexual “sin” and from exploitative sensuality by a compassionate and witty Catholic clergyman, who hears his confession and forgives his sins. This is a parable of redemption, a narrative of qualified hope, by Andre Dubus, a devout Catholic and longtime resident of the Merrimack Valley, a writer who believes that something of value can yet be found within the circumscribed values and landscapes of imagination assigned to his neighbors.

Dubus composes a fictional world filled with tedium — often his stories are over-tailed case histories — relieved by flashes of violence, eruptions of rage and flurries of passion, followed by long regrets. His people can imagine no world elsewhere. In “The Pretty Girl,” Polly, a young woman, fearful of being abused by her estranged husband, thinks of moving away from tatty Haverhill, perhaps to nearby Amesbury or Newburyport, upscale seaside towns, but she does not really believe that even this small change in her life is possible. “Maybe even to Boston,” Polly tells a friend. “I don’t know why I said Boston. Isn’t it funny it’s right there and nobody ever goes to live there?”⁴⁹ Instead she stays and confronts her husband, who again returns to rape her, but this time she stops him with a bullet. This story stands, as do so many of Dubus’s stories, as testimony to Merrimack Valley residents’ constriction of imagination and courage to tough out their hard lives. Dubus offers understanding and encourages them to seek a better life, though he promises only qualified hope that transformation will be possible. “I have to love my characters,” he says.⁵⁰ Dubus’s often didactic fictions derive as much from his interventionist’s impulses of compassionate counseling as they do from his realist’s desire to reveal. The tension between those drives creates the narrative energy and emotional heat of his memorable, dour stories. Dubus dramatizes the wondrous ways of the world and asks us to trust in the ultimate beneficence of God’s providence.

As does Dubus himself who, like his characters, has had no easy time of it. In his early fifties, a resident of Haverhill, Massachusetts, Dubus is recovering from a bizarre highway accident in which he lost a leg, an injury for which he has undergone twelve operations. The accident would seem to confirm his version of an unjust fate, for he was struck after stopping to assist a motorist in distress. Further, Dubus has seen three marriages collapse and he has suffered a heart attack. However, amazingly, he is neither bitter nor defeated. He sees his children, and his writing is honored. In 1988 he was awarded a MacArthur Foundation fellowship, which acknowledged his literary importance and will relieve him of financial pressures for years. He has, he believes, undergone a spiritual passage and he writes now to tell others that we, as is he, should be grateful for what we have. The fiction of Andre Dubus contains his artful rendition of characters for whom no sin or good deed goes unpunished; characters who are caught in briar patches or are lost in the woods; characters, in Dubus’s eyes, who should nevertheless be grateful for the qualified blessings of their not so wonderful lives.

Raymond Carver, who died in the summer of 1988 at age fifty, author of many bleak stories of misguided American lives, a writer who has been called “America’s foremost practitioner of the contemporary short story,” learned to count his blessings as well.⁵¹ Though he suffered years of poverty, a failed marriage, alcoholism, and premonitions of an early death, he insisted that his last decade, a time of public honors and personal gratifications, had been “Gravy,” in a poem published posthumously.

No other word will do. For that's what it was. Gravy,
Gravy these past ten years. Alive, sober, working, loving and
being loved by a good woman.⁵²

As in this poem, Carver's stories are pared down to minimalist essentials — withdrawn people in tense situations learn how life works, usually against them — in stories told in stripped-down, plain-style prose that is occasionally heightened by the sudden appearance of mysterious symbols (a peacock on display, a moon in full light) that suggests the existence of a spiritual realm beyond the bleak world they describe. The most recent stories in *Where I'm Calling From* reveal Carver's determination to show his characters that they too must make the most of what they have and not waste their lives in idle complaint. One day at a time — a guiding principle of Alcoholics Anonymous — not only defines Carver's philosophy but also articulates his aesthetic principles as an artist: to catch the telling moments of lives in crisis, in clean, unadorned language that points up a lesson: to go the twelve steps from powerlessness to helpfulness. In "Errand," the volume's concluding tale, we are urged to take heart at Chekhov's dignified decline into death; his widow, Olga, remembers the peace that settled around the moment. "'There were no human voices, no everyday sounds,' she wrote. 'There was only beauty, peace, and the grandeur of death.'"⁵³ If in the midst of life we find death, in death we can find beauty.

In the story that gives this volume its title — a story first published in *Catherdral*⁵⁴ — Carver catches the offhanded eloquence of a drying-out drunk at the end of his rope, a man moving obliquely toward revelation by telling about another drunk's life.

J.P. and I are on the front porch at Frank Martin's drying-out facility. Like the rest of us at Frank Martin's, J.P. is first and foremost a drunk. But he's also a chimney sweep. It's his first time here and he's scared. I've been here once before. What's to say? I'm back. J.P.'s real name is Joe Penny, but he says I should call him J.P. He's about thirty years old, younger than I am. Not much younger, but a little.⁵⁵

J.P. recounts the mystery of his life to the narrator: how he fell in love with and married Roxy, a chimney sweep, whose kiss transformed him; how he too became a chimney sweep and briefly had a happy family life; how he turned to booze, he knows not why; how he inflicted pains upon Roxy. He beat her; he even cut her wedding ring off her finger during one of his drunken rages. She fought back, broke his nose. Then J.P. wound up at the drunk farm.

All this seems to validate the narrator's desire to withdraw into an affectless state. He goes to the pay phone on New Year's morning, but he decides he wants to talk neither to his wife nor to his girlfriend. The narrator of "Where I'm Calling From," taking his lesson from J.P.'s life, would agree with a crazed Vietnam veteran of another Carver story, "Vitamins," who cries out in a bar to a man who is about to commit adultery: "It ain't going to do no good! Whatever you do, it ain't going to help none!"⁵⁶ Indeed, nothing helps characters in "Vitamins," where relationships come to nothing more than mutual victimization. What's to say?

However, in "Where I'm Calling From" the narrator, this "wet brain," has more to learn from Carver, who has more to say. The narrator sits on the porch, watching J.P. greet his visiting wife; she walks arm in arm with her husband, in an epiphany of informing purpose. The narrator is amazed. "This woman broke a man's nose once. She has had two kids, and much trouble, but she loves this man who has her by the arm. I get up from the chair."⁵⁷ The narrator — seeking transformation, despite the daunting lesson of J.P.'s losses — asks Roxy for one of her magical kisses, which she grants, an act of grace.

Roxy's kiss releases the narrator into a stream of memory and desire: images of happiness from his lost life. Roxy's forgiving love shows him he has, after all, another chance. Probably things will go badly, because that's how life works in Carver's world; however, we have no other life but this one, this long disease, to live, so why not make what we can of it? That, finally, the wisdom of a truism, is what Carver wants his characters to see. The narrator of "Where I'm Calling From" decides to begin again, one gesture at a time, first by calling his wife and wishing her a happy New Year. "After I talk to her, I'll call my girlfriend. Maybe I'll call her first. . . . 'Hello, sugar,' I'll say when she answers. 'It's me.'"⁵⁸ Perhaps he can learn to say of his life, as Carver says of his to a friend who weeps for Carver's fast-approaching death, "Don't weep for me. . . . I'm a lucky man."

I've had ten years longer than I or anyone
expected. Pure gravy. And don't forget it.⁵⁹

It is hard to forget any of these stories by Raymond Carver, but his latest are hopeful as well as memorable. In "Cathedral" a narrator overcomes his cynicism and is taught to see an imaginary world, the shape of the cathedral, by a blind man; that is, a suspicious, worldly narrator — he thinks blind men don't use cigarettes because they cannot see the smoke — undergoes a religious conversion: his eyes closed, he *sees* the cathedral, *believes* in imagination, *senses* God.

Carver's stories focus on characters caught in constricted lives, lives with no available exit but death. Often things go from worse to worse. Wives turn bitter and leave their boozy husbands; feckless husbands lose their jobs and embed themselves in sofas to stare at vapid television programs; children die, suddenly and senselessly. However, occasionally, most frequently in his last stories, Carver's narratives carry us beyond bitterness; he brings his characters to temporary shelters, momentary stays against life's exacting cruelties. In "Intimacy," for example, in what appears to be an autobiographical reflection, Carver dramatizes the anger of a divorced woman against her former husband, who has become a successful writer of stories that portray incidents of their marital pains. "She says, Let go of the past, for Christ's sake. Those old hurts. You must have some other arrows in your quiver, she says," reports the writer.⁶⁰ The wife, venting her wrath on her former husband, who has arrived unannounced for a visit, goes on to say that she wishes she had killed him with that knife he once took away from her during a fight. Overcome, the writer drops to his knees before her, holding the hem of her dress. The stunned wife tells him to get up, but he cannot. "She says, Did you hear what I said? You have to go now. Hey, stupid. Honey, I said I forgive you."⁶¹ Granted absolution — that resonant "honey" — and her gift of grace, the writer leaves, reenters a transformed world.

So she walks me to the front door, which has been standing open all this while. The door that was letting in light and fresh air this morning, and sounds off the street, all of which we had ignored. I look outside and, Jesus, there's this white moon hanging in the morning sky. I can't think when I've ever seen anything so remarkable.⁶²

The writer in "Intimacy," Carver's close alter ego, is released from his guilty past by the woman he loved, hated, and wronged. After all, the world is not without its remissions, its faint hopes. He is struck by wonder at the white morning moon and he experiences an unbearable lightness of being.

The epigraph for Carver's collection is taken from Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: "We can never know what to want, because, living one life, we can neither compare it with our present lives nor perfect it in our lives to come."⁶³ Carver,

particularly near the end of his own life, wrote stories in which characters glimpse another, better life beyond the one to which they had been sentenced for their sins. Like those by Andre Dubus, Raymond Carver's stories tell us the worst, but they also ask us to hope for the best, to seek understanding, forgiveness, blessings, the gravy.

Two reporters won National Book Awards in 1988: Pete Dexter, columnist for the *Sacramento Bee*, for his novel *Paris Trout* and Neil Sheehan, formerly a reporter for the *New York Times*, for his study of the Vietnam War, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*. From radically different vantage points, each book treats a crisis in America's culture and character. Dexter tells a story of American racism, perversion, and violence in a Georgia town. Sheehan relates a history of American obsession, delusion, and violence in Southeast Asia. Both writers force us to confront American arrogance and injustice in vividly told narratives, stories embedded in symbolically resonant details of American experiences. However, Dexter's novel lacks the power, plausibility, and vision of Sheehan's history. *A Bright Shining Lie* stands as one of the finest literary achievements in 1988. It is an anti-epic: a saga — not, like traditional epics, about the founding of a civilization — about the decline of the American empire.

Certainly *Paris Trout* comes to our attention with the shimmer of high expectations. William Styron compared Dexter's knowledge of the Deep South with Flannery O'Connor's, and Willie Morris endorsed the novel.⁶⁴ Many reviewers were also impressed, but I had difficulty understanding their enthusiasm. Though I grant that *Paris Trout* has its fascinations — it contains murders, a trial, a psychopath, an array of dangerous rednecks, sexual abuse, infidelity, alcoholism, a shoot-out accompanied by more murders; the novel even contains whiffs of magnolia in the southern nights and the aroused passions of a long, hot summer — the novel seems to me a rough translation and conflation of far better southern novels and stories I read long ago. If *Paris Trout* is "one of the best [books] to come out of the American South in a long time," as Willie Morris claims, then I declare the long-standing Southern literary renaissance officially over.

Paris Trout is set in a small, rural southern town — "COTTON POINT — GEORGIA'S ANTEBELLUM TOWN" is the town banner — just after World War II.⁶⁵ The narrative centers on the murder of a fourteen-year-old black girl by Paris Trout, a white store owner and moneylender, a man who believes he has done nothing wrong. Trout, who is eccentric and rich, intimidates the white citizenry, who are forced to weigh their powerful racial loyalties against their faint commitments to law and justice. The townfolk are further tested when Trout abuses his wife, Hanna Trout, a woman of overt strength and repressed sexuality. "In the week that followed the killing of that child," Hanna tells Harry Seagraves, Trout's defense lawyer, "Mr. Trout assaulted me three times. He forced me to eat rancid food, he attempted to drown me in my own bath, he abused me in an unmentionable way with a bottle."⁶⁶

Does any of this sound familiar? I think Trout's motiveless malignancy derives from a Flannery O'Connor character, the Misfit, a psychopath in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," a man who also kills to repudiate the world. Dexter's wise, semi-alcoholic, garrulous lawyer figure, Harry Seagraves, derives from Faulkner's windy lawyer Gavin Stevens. Trout, a shopkeeper and moneylender, recalls Faulkner's Flem Snopes in *The Hamlet*; Trout's sexual assault on his wife with a bottle, fully dramatized by Dexter, is in imitation of Faulkner's Popeye, who inflicted a corn cob on a virgin in *Sanctuary*. What was terrifying and provocative in O'Connor and Faulkner is titillating and mannered in Dexter's derivative fiction.

Paris Trout is a model of neonaturalism. Characters are driven to perverse or dangerous acts — Trout kills a black girl and assaults Hanna; later his lawyer has an affair with Hanna — in a world of passions that carry its citizens not only well beyond reason but past their own self-interests. In the opening pages of the novel the black girl, a pure victim, is bitten by a rabid fox; late in the novel Trout, a pure victimizer, sensing his own entrapment, watches a snake commit suicide.

She was a copperhead, as thick as a man's arm, mashed where a tire had hit her, and stuck to the highway in her own gum. She lay still, except for a twitching in the tail, until Trout was a few yards away. Then, without warning, her head came up off the asphalt, striking slowly in Trout's direction, again and again. Trout stayed where he was — a few yards away — and then the snake suddenly turned on herself and struck, three times, just in front of the spot where she was mashed.⁶⁷

Paris Trout learns life's basic lesson from the snake: kill and die. Such a stark vision makes for an arresting narrative; in *Paris Trout*, such simplicities do little for our capacity for thought. Pete Dexter's America is worse than damned; it is mindless.

Neil Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* is a far more purposeful and persuasive parable of American self-destructiveness, a passion play in prose, an achieved work of military and political reportage that appropriates, for dramatic purposes, the methods of fiction: Sheehan tells his story of a flawed hero in a mistaken war by employing a tense narrative, by forming rounded characterizations, by using shifts in time and perspective, by sustaining all of these with an assured and impassioned rhetoric, and finally by possessing a compelling analytical and moral vision. This, then, is what has been called a nonfiction novel — a promotional designation formed by Truman Capote after he composed *In Cold Blood* — a mode in which implausible events are reimagined in fictional terms so that readers might at last believe the incredible things that happen.

John Paul Vann is the flawed hero of Sheehan's anti-epic: his Quixote or Ahab, his representative man. A man of hubris, Sheehan's Vann is a combination of the American innocent abroad and the confidence man.

By an obsession, by an unyielding dedication to the war, he had come to personify the American endeavor in Vietnam. He had exemplified it in his illusions, in his good intentions gone awry, in his pride, in his will to win.⁶⁸

Vann is an American Mr. Kurtz in the heart of darkness, Vietnam, though he is more plausible than the Brando caricature of the Conrad character who appears in the film *Apocalypse Now*. "The odds, [Vann] said, did not apply to him. . . . Just as, it was believed, history did not apply to America's intervention."⁶⁹ We read ourselves in this saga, this inward-turning tale of moral instruction, for Sheehan is, properly, most concerned with the self-inflicted wounds America committed in its undeclared war against Communist expansion in Southeast Asia.

Vann, an officer in the U.S. Army, was in Vietnam from March 1962 to April 1963. He returned in March 1965 as a provisional pacification representative for the Agency for International Development; by the end of 1966 he was chief of the pacification program for eleven provinces surrounding Saigon. In May 1971 Vann was made senior adviser to corps in and around the Central Highlands, with authority over U.S. troops. He died in Vietnam in a helicopter crash in 1972. Vann began his long tour as the objectification of

Kennedy's idealism-arrogance, Sheehan argues, and he died embodying Johnson's policy of outraged massive retaliation.

However, beneath the appearance of a gung-ho officer out to win an unpopular war lurked several levels of ambiguity in the character of John Paul Vann. Vann wanted to reveal the political and military corruptions of the South Vietnamese, so he told the truth to reporters, but he also lied about his own past. He was correct, personally as well as militarily, when he told an army historian, "We had also, to all the visitors who came over there, been one of the bright shining lies."⁷⁰ Not only did Americans, particularly General William Westmoreland, glaze the truth in their reports of war conditions, but Vann's dark personal history qualified his image as a bold, honest warrior.

Born an outcast, illegitimate, in 1924 in Norfolk, Virginia, rejected by his mother, without a father, then taken up by a minister who molested him, Vann later created a myth of a happier past for himself, his first useful fiction. Even later he stole another man's story to make his military record in Korea appear more heroic, though he was in fact a hero in that military action. Vann, a man driven by sexual compulsions, was routinely unfaithful to his wife. Accused of statutory rape of a fifteen-year-old at Fort Leavenworth, Vann induced his wife to lie for him at his trial. He even beat a lie detector test. Though the rape charges were dropped, he knew he would never be promoted to general with that stain on his record. In Vietnam, estranged from his wife and family, Vann managed to sustain two mistresses and he had fathered a child by one of them at the time of his death.⁷¹

Young reporters sent to cover Vietnam, particularly David Halberstam of the *New York Times* and Neil Sheehan, then of UPI, admired Vann. Halberstam, who profiled Vann in *Esquire* (November 1964) and in *The Making of a Quagmire* (1965), portrayed Vann as a man on his way up who risked a promising career to tell the truth, but Halberstam did not then know all that Sheehan later learned about Vann: essentially that Vann, after the rape charges, had no place to go in the military. Vann told the truth because he believed it was the right and patriotic thing to do — though he was furious at his friend Daniel Ellsberg for releasing the Pentagon Papers — but Vann also had little to lose. Unable to persuade Washington of the corruptions of the South Vietnamese regime and the dedication of the Viet Cong, Vann leaked more stories to reporters. For young Halberstam and Sheehan, Vann was a moral hero.

Like Halberstam, Sheehan became something of an Ishmael to Vann's Ahab.

In those years, like almost all Americans, I saw nothing wrong with shooting Communists and their "dupes." Not until much later did I learn enough about the campaign to understand its significance for the second war [against the U.S. Army] and the enormous consequences of the act that the United States committed in collusion with Diem and his family.⁷²

Sheehan, then, tells much more than the story of John Paul Vann, myth and reality, in Vietnam. He confesses his own coming of age, his increasing awareness of political and human complexities. Vann helped Halberstam and Sheehan hear the hard message beneath U.S. government deceits in Vietnam; now Sheehan comes to terms with the complexities and complicities of Vann the messenger.

Increasingly, Sheehan, having learned enough both in Vietnam and in his decades of research on Vann, takes over his own narrative, because Vann did not say what Sheehan wants us to remember about Vietnam. The March 1968 My Lai murder of 349 civilians elicits, for example, this eloquent passage of outrage from Sheehan.

The officers of the court-martial acted correctly in seeking to render justice in the case of Calley, and Richard Nixon shamed himself in frustrating them. Calley appears to have been a sadist, but his personality alone does not explain the massacre. What Calley and others who participated in the massacre did that was different was to kill hundreds of unarmed Vietnamese in two hamlets in a single morning and to kill point-blank with rifles, pistols, and machine guns. Had they killed just as many over a larger area in a longer period of time and killed impersonally with bombs, shells, rockets, white phosphorus, and napalm, they would have been following the normal pattern of American military conduct. . . . [The cheapening of Vietnamese lives and the war of attrition made the massacre] inevitable. The military leaders of the United States, and the civilian leaders who permitted the generals to wage war as they did, had made the massacre inevitable.⁷³

For Sheehan, Vann was the figure whose words and actions revealed the systemic disorder of American policy in Vietnam. As Halberstam has come to terms with the best and the brightest of the Kennedy-Johnson years, those Washington visionaries who sank us waist deep in the big muddy, so now has Neil Sheehan written a stern parable of national misguidance in this prose anti-epic. Though Sheehan may provide us with more details than we wish — on Vann's early life or on the various battles in the war — he tells us nothing less than we need to know, lest we forget what that most mysterious war meant.

But where is what I started for so long ago?
And what is yet unfounded?⁷⁴

So asked Walt Whitman in "Facing West from California Shores," a poem that articulates Americans' tireless quest for discovery, that asks us where we are going. Alfred Kazin concludes *A Writer's America: Landscape in Literature* — a critical evocation filled with shimmering visual illustrations, paintings and photographs, and luminous citations on the American experience — with Whitman's words. Who are we? Are we saved or damned? Where are we going?

Our recent writers present a troubled America. James Carroll and Ward Just portray a powerful and paranoid government that ravages American innocents. Anne Tyler and Bobbie Ann Mason show aging Americans barely muddling through, in part because they are far from the government's direct reach. Pete Dexter writes of a culturally impoverished southerner, Paris Trout, who delights in the destruction of the innocent and guilty, particularly those, like himself, who lack a sense of sin. Neil Sheehan writes of another culturally impoverished southerner, John Paul Vann, who embodied more redeeming American values — courage, perception, and patriotism — though he suppressed darker sides of his character and, in supervising a strategy of massive bombings against the enemy, became the Ugly American he had once opposed. In these fictions, Americans meet the enemy and find themselves.

"The books we read read us," says Josephine Hendin in her study of American fiction since 1945.⁷⁵ Our writers portray the American dream, found and lost, and they dream up their own Americas. "Nature not just *in* America but *as* America was a dream from the beginning," writes Kazin.⁷⁶ Jefferson saw America as "the world's best hope. . . . Kindly separated by nature and a wide ocean from the exterminating havoc of one quarter of the globe . . . a chosen country, with room enough for our descendants to the thousandth and thousandth generation."⁷⁷ Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American*

Farmer (1782) presents America as idyll, the Peaceable Kingdom found. "What then is the American, this new man? . . . Americans are the western pilgrims, who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigor, and industry which began long since in the east; they will finish the great circle," wrote Crèvecoeur.⁷⁸ Kazin's book traces the persistent effort of the American writers to come to terms with the landscape of imagination before them: the American scene.⁷⁹ *A Writer's America* provides a vantage point that reminds us of the undiminished promise of American life, eloquent evidence of our writers' and visual artists' faith in the dream of America, even as we read parables of diminished passion and purpose, exemplary tales composed by contemporary writers, stories in which we can take faint heart in the resiliency of the American character.

Let the circle be unbroken. ♫

Notes

1. Josephine Hendin, *Vulnerable People: A View of American Fiction Since 1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 217.
2. Cited as the best and worst lines of the political season in Steven Stark, "Presidential Tote Board: Valedictory," *Boston Phoenix*, 18 November 1988, 7.
3. Cited in Hendrik Hertzberg, "Aroma of Bull," *New Republic*, 21 November 1988, 18.
4. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Spring and Fall: To a Young Child," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M. H. Abrams, vol. 2 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962), 1586–87.
5. William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 2, 210.
6. Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel* (London: Steven and Sons Limited, 1961), 17.
7. Howe, *Politics and the Novel*, 19.
8. Ward Just, *Jack Gance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989), 277.
9. Just, *Jack Gance*, 278.
10. Just, *Jack Gance*, 279.
11. Just, *Jack Gance*, 48.
12. Just, *Jack Gance*, 58.
13. Just, *Jack Gance*, 68–69.
14. William L. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1963).
15. Just, *Jack Gance*, 74.
16. Just, *Jack Gance*, 141.
17. James Carroll, *Firebird* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1989), 3.
18. Carroll wrote an essay, "My Life with the FBI" (*New England Journal of Public Policy* 2, no. 1), which is something of a working draft of *Firebird* and a key to his intentions behind that novel. "When I was a child, the FBI was everywhere in my world and I loved my world more for that," Carroll wrote. He did his small part during the Kennedy years, working summers for the FBI as a cryptanalyst's aide; he then heard of "black-bag jobs," or illegal "burglaries of embassies for the purposes of discovering cryptographic keys," but he thought they were justified. In short, Carroll was a Chris Malone in the making. However, one day Carroll crossed the courtyard that separated the FBI wing of the Justice Department building from the attorney general's wing to hear a speech by Robert Kennedy, who called on Americans to fight for civil rights. Suddenly Carroll wondered about Hoover's all-white bureau, which harassed civil rights demonstrators. Carroll

also discovered that agents feared Hoover more than they feared their ostensible enemies. "I understood that their worst nightmare — being caught in the code room, say, of the Soviet Mission up Sixteenth Street from the White House — represented at bottom the dread not of death or ignominious imprisonments for an officially denied crime, but of embarrassing the Bureau and drawing down the wrath of J. Edgar Hoover." What was good for the FBI or for Hoover was good for America. However, Carroll experienced a change of mind and heart when he became a radical Catholic priest, resisting the Vietnam War, and aided the same draft avoiders that his brother, an agent, was assigned to track for the FBI. That courtyard crossing was Carroll's passage through a symbolic door into another life. His world turned upside down, he was even questioned by FBI agents in his office at Boston University, where he was Catholic chaplain at the height of the antiwar movement. Taken together, the two parts of Carroll's novel offer a balanced picture of the FBI: "if the FBI isn't the sinister monolith of Hoover's critics, neither is it the bastion of American invincibility some of us once revered."

19. Anne Tyler, *Breathing Lessons* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988); Bobbie Ann Mason, *Spence + Lila* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).
20. Tyler, *Breathing Lessons*, 162.
21. Tyler, *Breathing Lessons*, 227.
22. Tyler, *Breathing Lessons*, 148.
23. Tyler, *Breathing Lessons*, 10.
24. Tyler, *Breathing Lessons*, 157–58.
25. Anne Tyler, *The Accidental Tourist* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 285.
26. Anne Tyler, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982).
27. Tyler, *Breathing Lessons*, 327.
28. Tyler, *Breathing Lessons*, 182.
29. T. S. Eliot, "East Coker," in *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1958), 129.
30. Tyler, *Breathing Lessons*, 73.
31. Mason, *Spence + Lila*, 13.
32. Mason, *Spence + Lila*, 175.
33. Mason, *Spence + Lila*, 176.
34. Cited in Mervyn Rothstein, "Homegrown Fiction," *New York Times Magazine*, 15 May 1988, 108.
35. Bobbie Ann Mason, *Shiloh and Other Stories* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982).
36. Bobbie Ann Mason, *In Country* (New York: Perennial Library, 1986), 229.
37. Cited in Rothstein, "Homegrown Fiction," 108.
38. Mason, *Spence + Lila*, 132–33.
39. Mason, *Spence + Lila*, 139.
40. Mason, *Spence + Lila*, 164.
41. Cited in Rothstein, "Homegrown Fiction," 98.
42. Mason, *Spence + Lila*, 58.
43. Andre Dubus, *Selected Stories of Andre Dubus* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1988); Raymond Carver, *Where I'm Calling From: New and Selected Stories* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988).
44. Lionel Trilling, "On the Modern Element in Modern Literature," in *The Idea of the Modern in Literature and the Arts*, ed. Irving Howe (New York: Horizon Press, 1967), 64.

45. Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, in *Henry David Thoreau* (New York: Library of America, 1935), 65.
46. Dubus, "Rose," *Selected Stories*, 211.
47. Dubus, "Rose," 232.
48. Dubus, "Townies," *Selected Stories*, 360.
49. Dubus, "The Pretty Girl," *Selected Stories*, 106.
50. Cited in Bruce Weber, "Andre Dubus's Hard-Luck Stories," *New York Times Magazine*, 20 November 1988, 50.
51. Gail Caldwell, "On the Other Side of Despair," *Boston Globe*, 4 August 1988, 69, 72.
52. Raymond Carver, "Gravy," *New Yorker*, 8 August 1988.
53. Carver, "Errand," *Where I'm Calling From*, 388.
54. Raymond Carver, *Cathedral* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983).
55. Carver, "Where I'm Calling From," *Where I'm Calling From*, 208.
56. Carver, "Vitamins," *Where I'm Calling From*, 195.
57. Carver, "Where I'm Calling From," 219.
58. Carver, "Where I'm Calling From," 221.
59. Carver, "Gravy,"
60. Carver, "Intimacy," *Where I'm Calling From*, 332.
61. Carver, "Intimacy," 336.
62. Carver, "Intimacy," 337.
63. Cited in Carver, *Where I'm Calling From*, Epigraph.
64. Comments by Styron and Morris appear on the novel's dustjacket. Pete Dexter, *Paris Trout* (New York: Random House, 1988), 3.
65. Dexter, *Paris Trout*, 264.
66. Dexter, *Paris Trout*, 135.
67. Dexter, *Paris Trout*, 248.
68. Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 3.
69. Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 43.
70. Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 385.
71. Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 486.
72. Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 191.
73. Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 689-90.
74. Cited in Alfred Kazin, *A Writer's America: Landscape in Literature* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 228.
75. Hendin, *Vulnerable People*, 11.
76. Kazin, *A Writer's America*, 7.
77. Cited in Kazin, *A Writer's America*, 15.
78. Cited in Kazin, *A Writer's America*, 30.

- 79: In a thoughtful review, "The Place of the Word" (*New Republic*, 30 January 1989, 36-38), Andrew Delbanco faults Kazin's book for ignoring current criticism and presenting images from American literature as "a panorama suitable for the sort of film one sees in national pavilions at World's Fairs — merely picturesque," a Conran's coffee table book, mainly decorative. However, I think Kazin's book does have an unstated critical agenda: to renew the general reader's interest in the much-assaulted American literary canon and to renew our faith in the promise of American life, as articulated by our finest writers. *A Writer's America* is, as Delbanco admits, a "laudable effort to recapture the optative spirit of American writing."

