

attitude that needs to be identified has made its way from the literary arena to grant-giving foundations to the media, and from the best universities and colleges into every branch of public education: it is the attitude that says I must agree with the prevailing view, or adhere to its theories and politics and agenda, in order to be properly acceptable, if acceptable at all. This attitude is, in substance, intolerant; it is prejudicial, and suggests the beginning of a new era of cultural imperialism. What is taking place in literary and academic circles as a matter of course is exactly what Dos Passos warned against and feared. It would not be prudent of me to accept an award that bears his name, I feel, without a reminder of what he stood for, on behalf of those disenfranchised others who have no forum, due to the present-day, exclusionary trend that is undermining American letters.

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## The Year in the Novel

David R. Slavitt

1991

What we have here—not even the President has had the effrontery to deny it—is an intellectual recession. I cannot think of a year in which more bad books received more serious attention. These weren't just lapses but a pattern, and one need not be paranoid to look for explanations. What people do is, mostly, what they want to do and intend to have done. And if the nonbook has been promoted to a new eminence, there must be some significant intention, however malign.

What we're talking about are the big books of the season—Norman Mailer's *Harlot's Ghost* (Random House), Harold Brodkey's *The Runaway Soul* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), and, in a slightly different and more traditional vein, Alexandra Ripley's *Scarlett* (Warner). I find myself in the bizarre position of having not only to admit but having to boast that I haven't read them. Anyone

dopey enough to slog all the way through these novels isn't smart enough to write intelligently about them. I've dipped and skimmed, browsed and sniffed, and held my not-so-delicate nose (in my needier years, I committed some best-sellers myself in order to keep my children's rapacious bursars at bay). It was ridiculous, not just a matter of three random disasters but a conspiracy of discontented, misanthropic, dyspeptic crazies in New York who are trying to get back at literature itself for having betrayed them. These are English majors, most of them, who know nothing about literature or business and who find themselves working for much less than they would be making in any other industry (if, indeed, they were employable in any other industry). And they hate it, hate the books, and hate the readers, and want to get even, which they contrive to do by forcing down the gullets of a retching public these scabrous libroid monstrosities.

These volumes are printed in large numbers, shipped, reviewed, sold, displayed on shelves and coffee tables, but never (one supposes, or one hopes) actually read. My guess is the breakthrough title was Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, which proved, almost ten years ago, that one could sell vast quantities of a volume nobody would read—because nobody could. This was a text about 10 percent in Latin, and most readers in this Jacobin society have only the loosest grip on English. But the concept was enticing—the display book, the unreadable book, the book as a pure piece of merchandising rather than literature. Indeed the worse a book is as literature, the better and purer it is as an act of merchandising.

This perversity is not new but seems to have reached a new intensity last year. And Mailer and Brodkey are the appropriate heroes of this antiliterary ecstasy. Mailer for years has been doing a kind of Mexican hat dance on the broad brim of his talent, as if to invite us to share the joke he has learned to be amused by—that it is absurd to be gifted in a time when nobody notices gifts, and quality counts for nothing or can't be distinguished from arrant fakery and trumpery. He will then, sometimes ruefully and sometimes with ebullience, devote his talent to foolishness and fatuousness, thus reclaiming the initiative from his operating editor, Jason Epstein, and making the game his own.

Brodkey, meanwhile, seems to be an invention of the *New Yorker* on the one hand and Gordon Lish on the other, and has been running an amazing scam, claiming to have been working on this book for 27 years! (Wonderful! Excellent! Superb! One more year, and he'd have doubled Flaubert's stint on *Madame Bovary*!) Just think what it would mean for the literary world if all authors took this long to spin out their sentences. There'd be so much less on the table. John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates, and their like just don't get it—that people don't like to read, find it a good deal of work to get through one book, let alone a slew of them, and rather resent it when they are put in the dreadful position of turning pages as fast as they possibly can and nevertheless falling perceptibly behind.

The *New York Times Book Review* has figured this out and proclaims the message in a not-so-subtle way almost every Sunday with a bottom-half-of-the-first-page essay, which is *not* a book review and which therefore doesn't even put us at risk of having to read yet another thick, fat, square book. The subjects of these essays are often revealing: "Books I've Never Finished" or "Writer's Block." If there were more writer's block, think how much less time we'd have to spend reading those books, after all.

Brodkey is probably the champion blocked writer. Past 60 now, he has made a career—and a living—with this book in progress, which is of course the best place for a book to be, for once it is down on paper, the editors' dreams for any literary work begin to come undone. It isn't a piece of high art that will sell a jillion copies and then move to the backlist and do well in university survey courses forever, but merely another title, a commodity like any other that one must pitch to the sales force, send out to unappreciative reviewers, and then try to sell to a fickle and anyway dense public. The dream book is the "supreme fiction" of Wallace Stevens' title. It is not embarrassed by any advance orders from which to figure a first print run, and there isn't an advertising and publicity budget that seems not only un-dream-like but actually constrained. Unwritten books are the ones the industry lives on, by, and for.

But after 27 years of throat clearing, even a Brodkey must turn in something to someone, because there are only so many excuses, postures, and dodges with

which to put off editors who have authorized checks and are responsible to corporate executives. The CEOs, who may be pleased to list these oneiric assets but object after a time to the paying of so much interest, aren't Milkens or Keatings after all—which is not exactly a compliment: they're no more scrupulous but lack the nerve, the sheer brashness of those pirates.

So I'm all for Brodkey for taking publishers to the cleaners for as much as possible and as long as possible. It's only that eventually even he had to hand in a manuscript. And they get (and we get in turn) this . . . first novel actually, a vastly pretentious and even more vastly boring, tiresome, all but incoherent hodgepodge that gets respectful treatment in the *New York Times Book Review*, and prominent space in the *New York Review of Books* and the *Times Literary Supplement*. In the *New York Review*, Brodkey is on page three with a David Levine caricature—the other caricatures in the issue are Jacques Derrida, Nadine Gordimer and Adrienne Rich, and Alexander Hamilton. That's fairly grand treatment for what seems essentially a prank, a demonstration that taste is dead and intelligence has turned upon itself, that, with a sufficiently intimidating headwaiter, one can serve up whale slunk, pass it off as milk-fed veal, and get away with it.

Indeed, the outrageous unreadability of the book is probably a part of its success—the notion being that art isn't merely entertaining but ought to uplift, ought to be serious, difficult, and, not to put too fine a point on it, boring. If it feels bad enough, it must be—like church, medicine, or aerobic exercise—good for you. Thus, in a review in the *TLS* that turns out to be finally unfavorable, Gabriel Jospovici feels obliged to register his credentials by making comparisons, or invocations, or allusions to “the greatest modernist novels, from *A la recherche du temps perdu* to Proust's *La vie, mode d'emploi* and Yaakov Shabtai's *Past Continuous*,” which he says “have found a means of sailing between the Scylla of plot and the Charybdis of total plotlessness.”

Is it necessary to trot out all that just to say that in these 835 pages, there isn't any basic narrative? What we have here is the collected outtakes from Brodkey's short stories and has to do one way or another with the same Brodkey-like figure, a poor orphaned boy who goes to

Harvard, discovers women, but then finds out that there's also literature to screw around with. To suggest that this is an almost incoherent, mostly maundering, often even ungrammatical book ought not be so intimidating that a reviewer feels the need to gird himself up, get defensive, and allude to Proust and Shabtai to let us know that he was, in the first grade, in the bluebird group of fast readers and is still pretty good at it.

The only other interesting thing to remark about *The Runaway Soul* is its runaway price—it is the second novel in the history of American publishing to come out with a list price of thirty dollars. The first, only a few weeks earlier, was, naturally enough, Norman Mailer's *Harlot's Ghost*. This was noted on the business news pages of the *Times*, which is where the project ought properly to be discussed. Mailer's book and Brodkey's have a lot in common, actually, for Mailer's novel is also big, dopey, but grandly ambitious, and clearly IMPORTANT. It is so big that it doesn't even end but only indicates that this is “To Be Continued,” which is more of a threat, I think, than a promise. It's so big that nobody at Random House had either the nerve or the energy to edit any of it. There is a dangling participle in the first sentence that would not pass muster in the bonehead composition course of any cow college, and, for the rest of the long way, we get paragraphs that start out with first person pronouns and wander distractedly through syntactical thickets to end up astonishingly in the second person.

We might expect of a large novel about the CIA a certain degree of political savvy, some historical background, a sense of what has been going on in the world. If Gore Vidal had written such a book, a good part of the fun of it would have been in his impish suggestions about which country did what and to whom and for what reason. Indeed, if John le Carré had written such a book, we'd have at the very least mordant entertainment about the psychological tribulations of spying and the philosophical stresses of the bad faith that spies not only encounter but are required to enact, themselves. These are ambitions that Mailer doesn't condescend to acknowledge, let alone fulfill. What he gives us is a father-son story, an Oedipal farrago onto which he grafts his own peculiar (one might also say, loony) metapsychology of the yin and

yang of things that he labels “alpha” and “omega.”

It isn't all dreadful. There are pages, even whole scenes here and there, in which Mailer's tendentious silliness disappears because he has latched onto some piece of action too good to let go, and where his craftsmanly experience takes him onto firm narrative ground in spite of the arrant dumbness of the book's grand strategy. I found these passages not only not redemptive but actually distressing, for I took them as evidence of what our novelist could have been doing had he any shred left of the modesty and humor that keep most writers from making fools of themselves.

The trouble is that Mailer is smart enough to have understood that his real relation with his audience has nothing to do with his writing. He can produce a good book like *Executioner's Song*, or a windy and insane one like *Ancient Evenings*, and it makes no difference at all. He gets the same media attention either way, achieves the same impressive sales, and thus for his next book can command the same hefty advances. At the end of last year, some 185,000 copies of *Harlot's Ghost* had been shipped, and the newspapers were reporting that Random House, although indifferent to the content of the novel, had been much concerned about its cover. The core beliefs of publishing are diametrically opposite to those most of us hold. Lightning always strikes in the same place, they assume, and one should always judge a book by its cover. Therefore, the rather handsome, dark gray dust jacket with “CIA” as an overall design and the author's name and the title in striking embossed white letters was judged by the merchandisers as too somber. Another jacket in raspberry was whipped up for the Christmas season in the hope of greater sales.

There is no room for any gloss on this, and surely no need for one. But I am reminded of the observation of an old teacher of mine who lives in Washington and finds it depressing to see, each year, another generation of bright young men and women arrive from colleges and graduate schools, all of them filled with some degree of idealism and the wish to do good. They are socialized, however, by the bureaucratic system and learn—in the State Department, the Justice Department, or wherever else—not to take any initiative, never to incur risks, never to follow their

instincts but always to implement the policies of higher-ups—until their naive but precious idealism has been finally extinguished and it is too late for them to dream about doing anything that may have consequences for good in the world.

Well, it happens in publishing, too, evidently. The love of literature that drew these young men and women to be English majors has to be killed before they can be trusted to run even modest amounts of capital. Hard lessons must be learned about quality counting for nothing. They must be made to realize that this is a business, a series of feats of merchandising, a kind of fraud practiced upon a public that deserves nothing better because it demands nothing better.

Which leads us, at last, to *Scarlett*, the other big book of the fall 1991 season. Or big nonbook, one might better say, an expensive rehash of the lower-middlebrow nonsense of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. That was—let us not kid ourselves—a more or less stupid exercise, a feminist tract *avant la lettre* with a predictably romantic setting in the South of the Civil War and the Reconstruction period. The film was rather better than the book, mostly because Clark Cable and Vivian Leigh and Trevor Howard imposed their personalities on it and gave it a schlocky sheen—so that this sequel, once the Mitchell heirs could be brought round, was an attractive, or at least economically viable, proposition.

The book is not readable, is even duller and more mawkish than Mitchell's, and seems to be rather prudish. (The estate, in a high-minded way, wanted to protect the "property" from vulgarization and insisted that there be no explicit sexuality in the sequel, as if there had been no changes at all in public taste and standards since the 1930's. These restrictions only guaranteed a different and more serious kind of vulgarity.) But to talk about the text of the novel is entirely to miss the point. The publishers knew quite well that literary quality was irrelevant, and that the writing and editing were merely preliminary chores annoyingly prerequisite to the real business of selling books and subsidiary rights. I am reliably informed that the editor, a bright young woman sent down by Warner for the first look at Ms. Ripley's manuscript, had a good dinner and a night's rest, and then, in the morning, was left alone for some

hours with the manuscript and a pot of coffee. When she got up to stretch and take a turn around the garden, she was asked what she thought, and her reaction, after the first couple of hundred typescript pages, was: "It's very Southern."

It turned out that she had never actually read *Gone with the Wind*. She had not seen the film either. She had no clear idea, then, what she was looking at. But never mind. The book sold a record number of copies in its first month in the stores, and producer Robert Halmi in partnership with CBS put up \$8 million for the film rights. An all-time record, even making allowances for inflation. Not only was *Scarlett* the number one title on the best-seller list, it even dragged Margaret Mitchell's old book back onto the hardcover list (at \$21.95) and onto the paperback list too (at \$5.99). It is therefore difficult to try to maintain that these cynics in publishing are wrong. All one can do is gnash one's teeth and mutter how they are all villains, churls, fools, knaves, rogues, swine, dogs, vermin . . .

And if they knew writers and readers were doing this? They would delight, exulting and enjoying every moment of what they would take as an acknowledgment of their triumph—because, as I have suggested, they detest their own old and foolish notions about quality. They understand that publishing is a business, that in the marketplace of ideas, ideas are the last things that readers can bear. On a best-seller list toward the close of the year, *Scarlett* was followed by a Stephen King horror story, a Tom Clancy high-tech novel, a Ken Follett suspense story, a Dick Francis horse story, a couple of novels by Sidney Sheldon and Barbara Taylor Bradford, and then an Anne McCaffrey science-fiction work in the "Dragonriders of Pern" series. What claptrap! What a monumental disgrace! It is a triumph of kitsch over art, of the *demos* over the *aristoi*. If we do not see this as an indictment of the folly of free, universal, compulsory education, it is at the least a mordant demonstration of entropy in the sphere of culture. The minions of these publishing houses learn to delight in their ability to manipulate such offenses against good taste to produce, from time to time, impressive results on the real books—which are those the accountants keep. There has to be a perverse delight these editors take in what they're doing,

a kind of blithe nihilism or a literary *Schadenfreude*.

Real publishing, what little there is left, is mostly by inadvertence—good books young editors sneak through on small budgets—or is elsewhere, out in the sticks where the little presses seem not to have been informed of the death of civilization and are reading manuscripts, printing the best books they can find, and are if anything surprised that so many works of such high quality are coming out to the silos and bayous and log cabins where they are stashing their hordes of good writing. Twenty years ago, there was a kind of coherence to the lit biz, and Knopf, Random House, Viking, and Farrar, Straus & Giroux were doing a reasonable enough job so that one could ask why there was such a need for small presses. Today, the question is reversed, and one looks to Dalkey Archive, the University of Chicago Press, Louisiana State University Press, Story Line Press, Coffeehouse Press, and such operations, and one wonders what it is that Knopf, Random House, Viking, and Farrar, Straus & Giroux suppose themselves to be doing. Or, given what they are doing, we might better ask, who needs them anyway?

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## Who Is Henry Galt?

by Justin Raimondo

### Ayn Rand and Plagiarism

Can it be that a fraud has been perpetrated on the readers and admirers of novelist-philosopher Ayn Rand—a literary and intellectual swindle that veers perilously close to plagiarism? That such a charge could be leveled at the author of *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* is irony bordering on farce. For the spirit that animated the feisty little Russian woman, who preached a philosophy of individualism, capitalism, and "rational egoism," would seem to rule out such behavior. After all, in *The Fountainhead*, a major crime of one of the chief villains is to take credit for the hero's work. The whole spirit of the Randian creed was best expressed in that novel, in an exchange between the