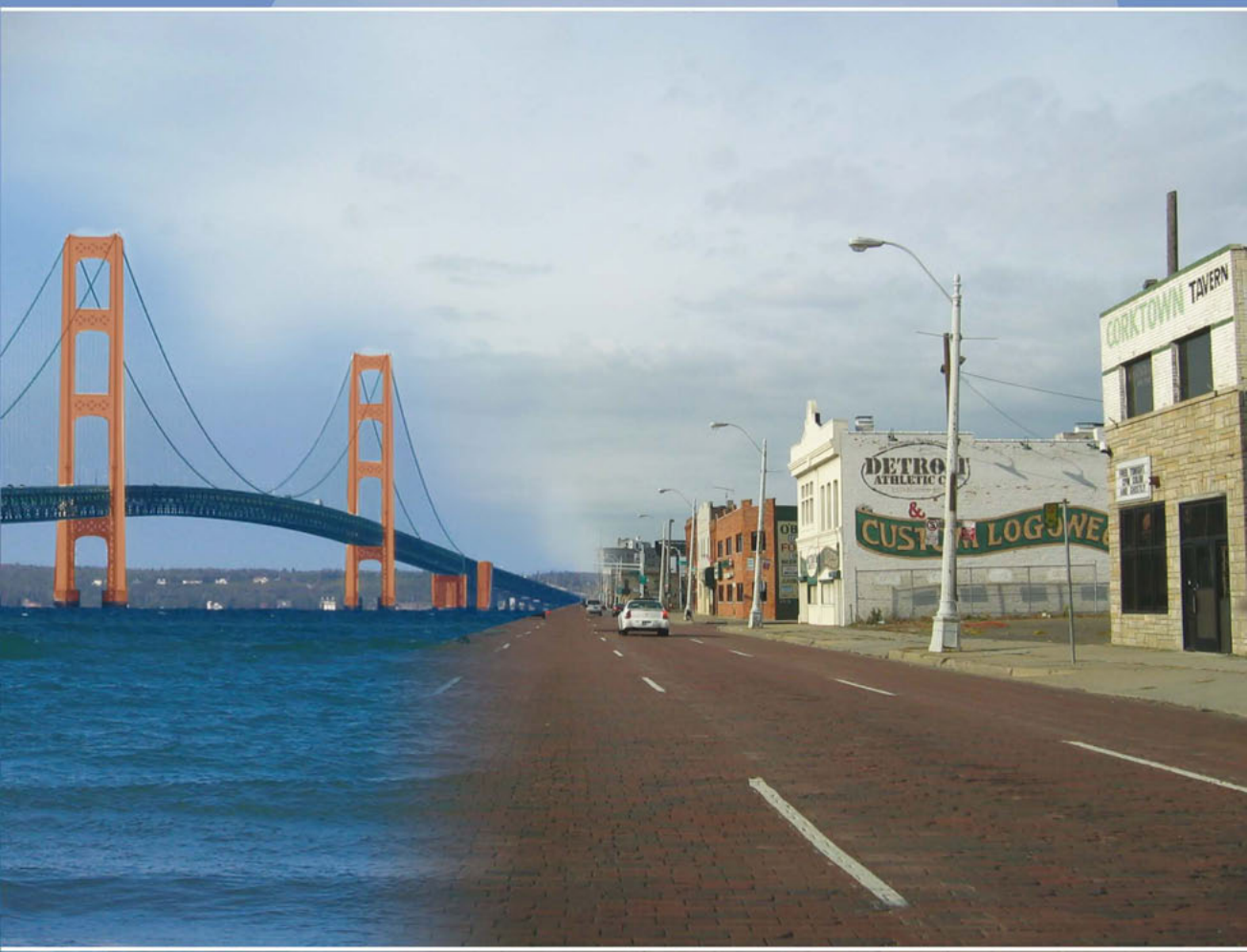


Krzysztof Kowalczyk-Twarowski

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The Suburban Fiction
of John Cheever, John Updike
and Richard Ford



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Déjà vu was still a problem in the area. A toll-free hotline had been set up. There were counsellors on duty around the clock to talk to people who were troubled by recurring episodes. Perhaps déjà vu and other tics of the mind and body were the durable products of the airborne toxic event. But over a period of time it became possible to interpret such things as signs of a deep-reaching isolation we were beginning to feel. There was no large city with a vaster torment we might use to see our own dilemma in some soothing perspective. No large city to blame for our sense of victimization. No city to hate and fear. No panting megacenter to absorb our woe, to distract us from our unremitting sense of time. ...

Although we are for a small town remarkably free of resentment, the absence of a polestar metropolis leaves us feeling in our private moments a little lonely.

Don DeLillo, *White Noise*

Introduction

The present book studies the development of American suburban fiction from its inception in the 1940s to the early twenty first century. The main subjects of inquiry are: 1) portrayal of the suburb from the socio-spatial perspective; 2) investigation of the suburban lifestyle and mentality in the fiction of John Cheever, John Updike and Richard Ford. In order to ensure balanced proportions, I decided to include all of the novels and selected short stories of John Cheever, the Rabbit tetralogy by John Updike and Richard Ford's Frank Bascombe cycle.

As suburban literature tends to engage with the realist tradition while exposing its protagonists to social and political tensions, the work of two critics, Lionel Trilling and John Gardner, treating of the interface, will be invoked. The former's concept of "reality" as well as both Trilling's and Gardner's understanding of realism will come under scrutiny along with liberal (Trilling) and conservative (Gardner) conceptions of art *vis-à-vis* society in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century American fiction. In analyses of Cheever's, Updike's and Ford's texts, relations between the middle class and materialism/consumerism will be interrogated.

This Introduction is divided into three sections: 1) an outline of the history of the suburb in the context of American civilization; 2) a discussion of Lionel Trilling's concept of adversarial criticism; 3) a discussion of John Gardner's "moral fiction".

1. The Suburb

The pastoral mode in Western literature, with its twin *topoi* of innocence-corruption, nature-worldliness, progress-backwardness is predicated on the dichotomy between the country and the city. Adumbrated by Theocritus, it received its mature form in Virgil's *Eclogues*, the rhetorical writings of Quintilian and Juvenal's satires, reflecting the rise of Rome as a metropolis conceived of as an independent organism, distinctly different from the countryside, which nonetheless lent itself to interpretation through bucolic discourse.¹ This essentially dualistic vision was inherited by American culture but the late eighteenth century saw an important twist to the pattern. Following the lead of Robert Beverley's ambiguity about the myth of the garden in relation to America, a frequent ambiguity in colonial literature, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur and Thomas Jefferson formulated their modulations of pastoral. For Crevecoeur in *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), the ideal and most habitable area is the "middle settlement" between the sea ports and the wilderness, between the over-refinement of Europe and the barbarity of the frontier. Jefferson's version of the myth (*Notes on the State of Virginia*, 1781) is a rural scheme with a self-sufficient husbandman, a rational yeoman farmer at the centre.²

However, it was more than a century later that a workable idea appeared in Ebenezer Howard's *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (1898) of uniting country and city. He discusses a third alternative, besides town and country, the garden city, situated on the outskirts of urban centres whose primary economic attraction (he calls it a "magnet") would be the combination of drawing high wages in a city occupation and paying low rents in the surrounding countryside. This middle landscape was to be placed between the city and Crevecoeur's perfect rural settlements. In other words, suburbia was beginning to take shape.³

The appearance of the first suburbs in the USA was caused by the post-Civil War economic boom. Between Appomattox and the end of the nineteenth century New York's population increased by 200 per cent, Chicago grew tenfold, Cleveland — sixfold, Philadelphia had become a city of one

¹ R. Williams: *The Country and the City*. New York: Oxford University Press 1975, p. 46.

² L. Marx: *The Machine in the Garden. Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. New York: Oxford University Press 1967, pp. 114 and 122. Jefferson's attitude to this Virgilian conception of America underwent considerable modification, especially in his late life, after the two terms of office as president, when he came round to accept the prospect of moderate industrialization as a prerequisite for national sovereignty.

³ S. Donaldson: *The Suburban Myth*. New York: Columbia University Press 1969, pp. 26–27.

million inhabitants. The pressure to leave the congested downtown districts was enormous. In consequence, suburban settlements began to ring, at first, Boston, New York and Philadelphia. The process accelerated in the 1920s but it was after Second World War that it became a planned activity reaching massive proportions emblemized by Abraham, William Jaird and Alfred Levitt of the Levitt and Sons contracting firm.

In the early 1940s the company obtained a government contract to build 1600 war workers' houses in Norfolk, Virginia.⁴ After the war they returned to Long Island where they had started in 1929 and in 1946 built 2250 houses in Roslyn (the price range was \$17,500 to \$23,500). Simultaneously, however, they began to buy up land in the Town of Hempstead for what was to become the largest housing project in US history. After greatly extending their operations, coordinating (vertical integration of subsidiary companies; exclusive subcontracting) and mechanizing work, they completed Island Trees, renamed Levittown, not much later, in the autumn of 1947. It was initially intended for war veterans renting and/or buying their first homes under the terms of the GI Bill. The basic model was a two-bedroom Cape Cod house of 750 square feet, plain and practical, not meant to excite refined taste but to provide accommodation at the most affordable price. Soon there were scarcely any left for rental, since their price of \$7,990 made purchase possible for most middle-class families (ranch houses in the same development sold for \$9,500). Levittown became a community of 17 400 detached, single-family houses and 82 000 residents for whom much more was provided than just shelter. Curvilinear streets contributed to the desired effect of a garden community; trees were planted; village greens, swimming pools, baseball diamonds and as many as sixty playgrounds provided leisure time facilities. Many cultural critics refused to grant the place merit, Lewis Mumford disliked the idea of social uniformity in a place where most people belong to the same income bracket, both he and Paul Goldberger found the design backward and ugly. Yet the residents were enthusiastic, and the Levitts proceeded to build another Levittown in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, and a third one in Willinboro, New Jersey, both within commuting distance to Philadelphia.

Irrespective of developer and financing plan involved, the post-Second World War II (between 1945–1973) housing projects reveal a number of shared characteristics. The first is peripheral location — mass production technology made it cheaper to build out of town than to revitalize inner-city lots. Second, the new developments were characterized by low density as even row houses fell out of fashion and detached houses surrounded by their own plots became the order of the day. The third characteristic

⁴ The discussion of Levittown is based on: K.T. Jackson: *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press 1985, pp. 234–245.

was architectural uniformity. Until the 1920s most American regions had recognizable local styles, but in the years following the Great War the Cape Cod became the first national house model; coast to coast, American subdivisions were beginning to look very much alike. The improved Cape Cod won the day after the Second World War, to be soon replaced by the split-level, the ranch, the modified colonial — a succession of styles that had one thing in common: they were national, not regional. Fourth, mass production, large-scale government financing, economic prosperity resulting in high wages and low interest rates rendered house purchase more easily available. The fifth common characteristic was economic as well as racial uniformity. The former was ensured by the prices, the latter by realtors and community authorities. William Levitt officially refused to sell to black customers until the early 1960s making it clear that either the housing problem is solved or an attempt is made to solve the racial problem, but combining the two is impossible. (Ironically, as the original residents moved up and out, the Levittown of New Jersey had become a largely black suburb [38 per cent of the population in 1980]). In most American cities such decisions created latter-day racial segregation reinforced by automobile ownership, i.e. an additional economic factor. Although zoning had first been introduced in New York in 1916 to limit land speculation and congestion, it was subsequently used to protect affluent residential districts from intruders (mostly blacks and poor people) and industry.

The most exhaustive study of suburbia from the anthropological standpoint is *Crestwood Heights: A Study of the Culture of Suburban Life* by Elizabeth Loosley, David Riesman, John Seeley and Alexander Sim.⁵ The suburb in question is situated in central Canada and is meant by the researchers to be representative of similar places in all of North America. In selecting it for scrutiny they decided that "[t]he community should be (1) close to Big City, (2) autonomous with respect to its school system, (3) of a high degree of literacy and (4) economically well off".⁶ Since it is located in the neighbourhood of a large university, as well as for reasons stated above, the sort of suburb discussed here is substantially different from a lower middle class one, like the Long Island Levittown. Crestwood Heights is a separate municipality within a larger urban area but it is also a community in the sense of a network of human relations as they are revealed in the operation of the many local institutions: family, civic centre, church, school, club, charity organization, Women Voters' League and so on.

Relations between the suburb and Big City are of crucial importance. The names given to suburbs, such as Spruce Manor or Maple Dell, indicate

⁵ E.W. Loosley, D. Riesman, J.R. Seeley and R.A. Sim: *Crestwood Heights: A Study of the Culture of Suburban Life*. New York: Basic Books 1956.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 428.

closeness to nature and a quality of homeyness, with a possible spot of exoticism thrown in in Spanish names like Buena Vista Park.⁷ In the Chicago metropolitan area there are as many as twenty-four communities with either “Park” or “Forest” in their names, including a Park Forest and a Forest Park. The names are not supposed to provide accurate description, instead they are intended to evoke bucolic imagery (East Paterson, New Jersey became Elmwood Park and East Detroit — Erin Heights). “That name [Crestwood Heights — K.K.-T.] suggests, as it is clearly meant to do, the sylvan, the natural and the romantic, the lofty and serene, the distant but not withdrawn; the suburb that looks out upon, and over the city, not in it or of it, but at its border and on its crest”.⁸ A Crestwood Heights address connotes a great deal of prestige; it betokens a distant, superior location while involving the practical but highly desirable consequence of being within reach of metropolitan facilities. Obviously, commuting is a basic consideration. The distance between home and office must be sufficient to render the former a refuge, yet not too large lest traveling to work become a serious liability. Time and energy must be managed sensibly so as to make the best of both worlds: downtown occupation and suburban residence.⁹ Since such a community as Crestwood Heights is a privileged one by many standards, the element of aspiration, ambition is vital. A suburb like this does not reflect American reality, it chases the American Dream.

However, there is a twist to the Dream. Since the community consists of transient nuclear families, and social status cannot be measured by kinship or other traditional ties of belonging, there is an increased tendency to seek prestige through material prosperity. This is revealed in both material objects (house, automobile, furniture, works of art) and in non-material status indices (“stocks, bonds, membership in exclusive clubs, attendance at

⁷ Inevitably, street names in such developments will follow suit, as in Garrison Keillor’s satire: “The *streets!* Harold has readers on Melody Lane, Flamingo Way, Terpsichore Terrace, West Danube Pass, Ventura Vista, Arcadia Crescent, Alabaster Boulevard — look at the checks, it’s as if everyone who left town resolved never to live on a numbered street or an avenue named for a President or a common plant, nor on a Street or Avenue *period*, but on Lanes, Circles, Courts, Alleys, Places, Drives, Roads, Paths, Rows, Trails, with names like Edelweiss, Scherzo, Galaxy, Mylar, Sequoia, Majorca, Cicada, Catalpa, Vitalis, Larva, Ozone, Jasper, Eucalyptus, Fluorine, Acrilan, Andromeda — an atlas of the ideal and fantastic, from Apex, Bliss, and Camelot through Kenilworth, Londonderry, Malibu, Narcissus, to Walden, Xanadu, Yukon, and Zanzibar, plus all the forestry variations, Meadowglade, Meadowdale, Meadowglen, -wood, -grove, -ridge”. G. Keillor: *Lake Wobegon Days*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber 1991, pp. 251–252. Kenneth Jackson concurs with Keillor’s satire when he points out that beginning in the 1920s American residential developers started to abandon the grid plan and “name rights-of-way with utter disregard for topography, function and history”. K.T. Jackson: *Crabgrass Frontier...*, p. 273.

⁸ E.W. Loosley *et al.*: *Crestwood Heights...*, pp. 4–5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 26–27.

private schools"¹⁰). Yet vying for status is not supposed to indicate just vanity and greed. Suburbanites claim they pursue the Dream for the sake of their children. Life is centred around children, the reward of the good life is there all the time, since the adults see their children grow and participate in the joys of family life, but it is also constantly deferred. Living in Crestwood Heights is in itself a reward, but it is hardly a blithe life. Privilege means constant exertion and sacrifice, and the Crestwooders are prepared to pay the price with anxiety and struggle.¹¹ The suburban frame of mind has to reconcile the dialectic pressures of competition with neighbourliness, family-oriented life with vigorous participation in community affairs, the craving for consumption of material abundance and deeply felt advisability of deferring some satisfactions for children's sake (I shall return to the place of children in the suburban life style when discussing William Whyte's study).

Despite the fact that most residents are certain they will live in a succession of houses, each of those dwelling places must meet the same basic requirements. Size is crucial. "The house ... must be large enough to ensure privacy and symbolize success — but not so large as to chill contact or to make maintenance crippling".¹² Although it is customary to underline that one's is a "home", not merely a "house", a Crestwood residence keeps careful equilibrium between privacy and display. The areas set aside for hospitality and display: the living-room, dining-room, in some houses the hall or reception room, the "rumpus" room are kept strictly apart from the more private upstairs rooms (in some houses the kitchen and the householder's study belong to yet another realm — there are infinite degrees of privacy).¹³ However, should the visitor venture upstairs, s/he is accompanied on the first trip and carefully instructed which door to enter in order to spare her/him the embarrassment of having to knock on the bathroom door, entering a bedroom or laundry room. To be on the safe side, "[t]he bedroom doors are so hung that they can be left ajar, for the tightly closed door in the emancipated house should not be necessary, but at the same time they should screen the bed and dressing table from the casual glance".¹⁴

This aspect of self-conscious theatricality of living is best exemplified by the picture window. Since it is not located at the back, overlooking the garden, but in the front, its function is both to give the view of the street (though for this function alone a much smaller window would be sufficient) and to allow the observer to look in. "The window is spacious, but it will not open; it is large, but it is often hooded by heavy drapes; it reveals an

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 7.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 6.

¹² Ibid., p. 26.

¹³ Ibid., p. 49.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 55.

interesting room, but the revelation merely encourages the imagination to speculate on all others".¹⁵ There is obvious coquetry in that.

In consequence of the above arrangements, lifestyles and living standards in Crestwood Heights are matters of nuance. Although convention dictates general rules of proper conversation, such as avoidance of controversial topics or repressing true emotions for the sake of amiability and entertainment of the guests, what is actually talked about differs depending on those present, and thus a suburbanite may conform to people slightly higher or lower than themselves in status, but the difference should not be too large. Questions of social position, as well as taste, however, are highly volatile. There is a great deal of anxiety about some material possessions, like works of art, with which the house is decorated. Lacking the necessary wealth and/or judgment, sometimes also the desire, to buy paintings of very famous artists, the suburbanite acquires objects which are supposed to provide him with pleasure and confirm his status. "Rather than a Renoir, Crestwooders will buy an Emily Carr, a William Winter, an Arthur Lismer; or, at a lower economic level, good reproductions of modern artists. But these purchases pose nagging questions. Is the object still in style? Is it *passé*? Or is it already 'coming back'?"¹⁶ In a very mobile society these are difficult questions. Residents of Crestwood Heights are too transient to be able to confer prestige on their own possessions; instead, they desire for these possessions to attest to their status.

Transience indeed appears to be one of the chief characteristics of the suburban way of life. In his celebrated *The Organization Man* William Whyte focuses on a different kind of community, an apartment court tract housing development, his main case study being Park Forest, Illinois. The dominant group of residents at the time of Whyte's research were young executive trainees in the 26–35 age bracket and their families. Because of their age and very high upward mobility they tended to look on Park Forest as a way station.¹⁷ As corporate policy involves frequent transfers, the suburbanites are eager for stability, or at least tokens thereof. Whyte found them touchy on the subject of annual turnover rate, running in Park Forest between 35 per cent for the rental apartments and 20 per cent for the homes area.¹⁸ In Levittown, Pennsylvania, this anxiety manifested itself in a very emblematic manner. In one Protestant church with a growing congregation the minister decided to introduce cathedral chairs instead of fixed pews. This was resented by many church members and it was only after some effort that the clergyman was able to ascertain that what they specifically disapproved

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁷ W.H. Whyte: *The Organization Man*. Harmondsworth: Penguin 1967, p. 259.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 279, 263.

of was the fact that the chairs moved, suggesting transience. Once kneeling stools were added to hold the chairs firm, the complaints stopped.¹⁹

What Whyte emphasizes is that life in the package suburb is communal, with analogies pointed out by residents themselves, variously, to the early colonial settlements, the frontier, the college dormitory ("sorority house with kids"), the Army post.²⁰ One of the consequences is the fever of participation in civic organizations. Although they may stress they are not joiners, they feel compelled to assert their belonging. Additionally, volunteering for the Elks, the Husanwif Club, the League of Women Voters, the Rotary Club, the Great Books Course or the Protestant Men's Club is enforced by the fact that one's neighbours belong to so many organizations that they impose a standard of civic involvement. Since the court way of life is predicated on exchange, even rotation of many possessions (children's bikes, toys, silverware, books), a premium is put on group acceptance.²¹ In consequence, the court breeds pressure to conform in things large and small. In some cases, for instance, residents of an area agree to unify the design and colour scheme for garages, and lack of adjustment is frowned on in so many subtle ways any *Kaffeeklatsching* society has at its disposal that the result is either toeing the line or nervous breakdown.²² Indeed, the court residents sometimes admit to a feeling of imprisonment in the group, yet they persevere since they regard their immersion in the group as a moral duty. The group becomes both a tyrant and a friend, participation binds the community members even as it cramps their freedom. Thus in a way the communitarian tyranny is self-imposed, the suburbanites are bullied by their own sense of normalcy and the only way to cope with the situation is to recognize the predicament for what it is — the inevitable consequence of belonging. The more benevolent the pressure, the more important it is to realize its true nature.²³ Thus the court imposes intimacy, forcing the residents to open up; it is even possible to trace spatial lines along which friendships are made in package suburbs, some friendships are almost inevitable because of certain predictable patterns of social life.²⁴

Despite all that, suburbanites are strongly egalitarian and adamant in their belief in the classlessness of suburbia. Though personal backgrounds differ and a sizable proportion are no more at first than aspirants to the middle class, the suburb is indeed a powerful leveller. Whyte goes as far as

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 347.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 258–259. It should be pointed out that Park Foresters' sophistication enables them to analyze sociological implications of their way of life.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 264–265.

²² Ibid., pp. 330–331.

²³ Ibid., pp. 333–336.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 323 and 304.

to call it “the second great melting pot”,²⁵ which is especially true of political attitudes — the tendency is for people to become more conservative, newcomers to suburbia from former metropolitan Democratic wards turning Republican. The putative classlessness becomes problematic when it comes to approving and financing relative luxuries, such as the Aquacentre pool in Park Forest, which turned out to be a socially stratifying factor contributing to the emergence of a country-club set of sorts.²⁶ Another situation in which the egalitarian spirit was put to the test was the possibility of admitting Negroes. A minority were idealistic enough to embrace the idea, many, particularly former downtown Chicago residents who left precisely because the inner city was being taken over by blacks, were against it. Eventually, like in Levittown, the residents voted to drop the plan. The very introduction of the project proved divisive, leaving a festering wound especially in moderate Park Foresters by exposing them to a conflict of ideas they could not resolve.

However, the suburb is not all about egalitarianism and its failings, the suburban temper combines the egalitarian spirit with a pronounced tendency to climb the ladder. Dwellings are constantly modified, but purchasing household appliances and furniture is subject to careful consideration. Buying a dishwasher when most of one’s neighbours do not have one may be regarded as showing off and sour the relations; conversely, lagging behind with acquisition of a state-of-the-art television set is bound to be noted. In other words, “[i]t is the group that determines when a luxury becomes a necessity”,²⁷ precarious balance must be preserved at all times between keeping up and keeping down with the Joneses. The only steady aspect of the process is its upward tendency. In both Park Forest and Levittown, Pennsylvania, as Whyte demonstrates, a tendency made itself felt to go upmarket in customers’ tastes and shopping habits. Indeed, so rapid is the revision of what constitutes the acceptable living standard that many suburban mall operators find it difficult to keep up with the dynamics of patrons’ buying patterns.²⁸ However, this process has its internal logic and duration.

Because small differences are magnified in suburbia, people can upgrade themselves in one location just so long; after they reach a certain income level, there is a strong pressure on them to move, for they cannot otherwise live up to their incomes without flouting the sensibilities of the others.²⁹

²⁵ Ibid., p. 276.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 286–287.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 289.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 291.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 292.

And conversely, the most serious aspect of suburban vulnerability is the danger of falling below a certain income level that makes keeping up possible. The magnifying glass effect brings great pressure to bear upon residents who may find it hard to endure especially if they are newcomers to the middle class. Tottering on the brink of the suburban good-life standard is acceptable for a limited time only, in the long run it is bound to meet with disapproval as “[s]uburbia does not condone shabby gentility”.³⁰ The community will not allow its self-image and quality of life to suffer — either you keep up or you move out.

The process of suburbanization is seen by some social critics as a pernicious phenomenon. Kenneth Jackson, for instance, views it as part of the fragmentation of the modern city in the USA pointing out a shift in how the very word “suburb” has been used. Originally, it indicated a relationship between the city and its periphery, nowadays it implies a distance and distinction from it.³¹ With the exception of Indianapolis, Memphis, Jacksonville, Oklahoma City, Houston, Phoenix, and Dallas, most American cities in the late twentieth century were unable to extend their boundaries through annexation of outlying areas. Instead of consolidation and urban development, suburbanites “are worried about real-estate values, educational quality, and personal safety”.³² In all three respects cities as such, particularly the inner city, compare unfavourably to suburbia whose residents choose not to be absorbed into Big City.

Their resolution manifests itself in the distance from the city centre and the means to defeat the distance — the automobile. However, availability of cars, useful as they are to the individual, has dire consequences for people’s civic participation and sense of belonging. According to Kenneth Jackson

[a] major casualty of America’s drive-in culture is the weakened “sense of community” which prevails in most metropolitan areas. I refer to a tendency for social life to become “privatised”, and to a reduced feeling of concern and responsibility among families for their neighbors and among suburbanites in general for residents of the inner city.³³

This is certainly true, although one cannot help observing that apart from the processes of urban alienation and fragmentation there is a simple shift of sensibility at work here which has more to do with size than civic attitudes: many cities have grown so large that it is very difficult to identify with them. Once the metropolis becomes too extensive and complex to un-

³⁰ Ibid., p. 284.

³¹ K.T. Jackson: *Crabgrass Frontier...*, p. 272.

³² Ibid., p. 276.

³³ Ibid., p. 272.

derstand, let alone circum-ambulate, dwindling human scale begins to account for social anomie. But even that needs to be qualified — as has been said earlier, the suburbanite is apt to participate in an inordinate number of social activities but they have to be based in the local community, the Greater Chicago or the Los Angeles metropolitan region are too unwieldy and abstract concepts to evoke loyalty. On the other hand, such critics as Kenneth Jackson or Robert C. Wood are correct in pointing out suburban resistance to urban culture in America.

What is striking in the lives of most residents is the frequency with which they choose not to avail themselves of the variety of experiences the metropolis affords, the manner in which they voluntarily restrict their interests and associations to the immediate vicinity, and the way in which they decline contacts with the larger society.³⁴

Yet this phenomenon must be viewed in the context of the tremendous technological changes affecting American civilization since the late nineteenth century.

Front porch life and sidewalk social intercourse have largely disappeared as a result of some modern inventions. The sociability of the past was in a way enforced by bad ventilation and heat. Before window screening was introduced in the late 1880s, gnats, flies and mosquitoes moved freely through living quarters; the veranda lifestyle, prevalent in the USA until the Second World War, which encouraged and facilitated meeting friends, courting as well as kitchen activities such as shelling peas, arose largely because the climate rendered indoor life difficult. The advent of the automobile decreased interest in some of these aspects of social intercourse, since one no longer had to wait for things to happen on the sidewalk and could drive to the theatre or a meeting with friends. Subsequently, the invention of the phonograph, radio, television encouraged people even more to move indoors; so did the telephone. The lethal blow to the communal intercourse of front-porch life was delivered by the introduction of air-conditioning, invented by Willis H. Carrier in 1906, making life so much easier, more hygienic, family-oriented, besides making it possible to reclaim waste land to build new towns and cities.

Suburban life, boosted by increased home ownership and the flourishing do-it-yourself industry, has shifted to the back yard. The modern suburban ideal is a three- or four-bathroom house provided with “a patio or a swimming pool for friendly outdoor living. Many back yards are overequipped, even sybaritic, with hot tubs, gas-fired barbecue grills, and

³⁴ Ibid., p. 279.

changing cabanas".³⁵ Leisure-time activities have become focused around the house. In that sense the suburban spirit is indeed homebound and indifferent to the allure of urban life.

Kenneth Jackson makes one more important assertion. Although he is able to demonstrate the draining away of middle- and upper-income urban dwellers to the outer boroughs and later to suburbia in historical perspective, he claims that the process was not inevitable. The coming of the automobile did precipitate the process, but even that is not sufficient to explain its massive proportions and enormous impact on contemporary social life. Although many urban professionals still have to rely on downtown offices and operations centres to conduct their business, the modern American city, due to a number of highly idiosyncratic socio-historical circumstances, has become segregated by income and race.³⁶ In terms of the general standards of civilization, suburbia has benefited from this shift, the inner city has become the loser and the traditional social structure of the city has had to be redefined. A new type of man has emerged, along with a specific lifestyle.

A number of sociologists and journalists, most of them women, have focused on the gender aspect of the rise of suburbia. Margaret Marsh, who studies the phenomenon in the Progressive Era, the 1920s and after the Second World War, emphasizes that although the original form of the suburban ideal revolved primarily around men, involving questions of property ownership while attempting to retain the graces of the agrarian lifestyle, the early twentieth century saw the emergence of a new ideal which included the concept of domesticity.

Animated by vast socioeconomic and technological changes, which included new gender roles and new attitudes toward childrearing, upper-middle class women and men alike looked to the suburbs as the appropriate place to develop a new kind of family life. In the years before the United States' involvement in World War I, middleclass suburbanites took up the idea of marital togetherness, husbands became intensely involved in the day-to-day domestic lives of their families, and both parents interested themselves in childrearing. For many of the suburbanites themselves, suburban life did seem almost idyllic. But the idyll was costly to others, and the price of suburbia was the exclusion of heterogeneity.³⁷

By the 1920s, this connection between conjugal togetherness and suburban life had congealed into an almost inseparable unity. The myth, however, modulated from the initial model of almost complete masculine domestic-

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 275.

³⁷ M. Marsh: *Suburban Lives*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 1990, p. 182.

ity to one in which men were beginning to lose interest whereas women were running the affairs at home, organizing events for the whole family, including the husbands, to participate in as well as assuming the responsibility for keeping romance alive.³⁸

The suburban discourse of the 1950s harked back to the 1920s. The central idea was still marital togetherness, involving participation in housework (keeping the garage clean, lawn mowing, playing with children), yet a mutual sense of entrapment was making itself felt. As suburbia burgeoned, becoming accessible to larger segments of the society, notably the skilled white working class, home ownership climbed while double income families proliferated. Pressure on women began to rise; "...to buy the washer and dryer, to acquire a second car so that the children could be driven to the Girl Scouts or baseball games, women continued to hold down jobs outside the home".³⁹ At the same time, the Eisenhower era saw a different phenomenon, relating mainly to upper-middle class families.

In her famous *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan discusses the large-scale movement to the suburbs in terms of the idea of seeking fulfilment in the home, a momentous shift in the social consciousness of college-educated American women. Leaving the city for suburbia, women in upper-income families usually decided to become full-time housewives.⁴⁰ Friedan argues that some time after the birth of the first or the second child, the mystique of fulfilment in the home "hits" American women so that they are ready to give up their jobs and move to the suburbs in order to provide a better environment for the children to grow up in. In the case of families where the wife intends to follow an independent career, the family is more likely to remain in the city where university evening courses as well as abundant cleaning help and day-care centres facilitate work towards a graduate degree and pursuit of professional life.

In suburbia, these highly qualified women gradually abandon ambitions in community life so that most volunteer jobs are taken by men. The excuse customarily made is that a housewife cannot take time away from her family. However, Friedan demonstrates, the mechanism is different: once she has taught herself not to seek commitment outside the home, "she evades it by stepping up her domestic routine until she is truly trapped".⁴¹ Even the open plan of the split-level house or the "ranch", which effectively does away with woman's privacy by ensuring that she is never separated from the children, does not make it necessary to keep expanding the housework. According to Friedan, "housework is not the interminable chore that wom-

³⁸ Ibid., p. 184.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 186.

⁴⁰ B. Friedan: *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Dell 1970, p. 233.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 235.

en claim it is".⁴² Brainwashed by the feminine fulfilment idea, the suburban housewife is no longer able to conceive of her life in any other capacity.

As the process of suburbanization of the USA continued, however, it was beginning to be obvious that the very idea of suburb was undergoing dramatic changes. One, starting in the 1960s, was the impact of feminist thought which promulgated alternative concepts of feminine fulfilment while dismantling the myth of the exceptional suitability of suburbia for childrearing. This in turn was made possible because the bedroom suburb was not a suburb anymore, it had become a "technoburb" (Robert Fishman's term), an entirely new kind of city, with fully independent facilities and institutions. The logic of decentralization of housing, education, industry, population transfer, has run its course. The ties with Big City, at first only weakened, have been severed. An era has ended. Margaret Marsh foresees a moment in the near future when the middle-class suburb of the mid-twentieth century filled with Cape Cod detached houses, like Levittown, will become a museum artifact, like Monticello or Williamsburg.⁴³

Students of suburbia in the USA are almost inevitably its harsh critics. The bulk of literature on the suburb is hostile to its subject matter, the socio-political perspective is for the most part liberal, generalizations made are very often grossly irrelevant. From William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* to Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, studies of the subject are barely able to conceal their own bias. The suburb's greatest sins supposedly include: uniformity; relentlessly middle-class character; excessive civic activity; transience; inordinate focus on childrearing; female domination; suburbs are "Beulah lands of return to religion; political Jordans from which Democrats emerge Republicans".⁴⁴ Some critics, such as John Keats or Max Lerner, praise the town of the past (their own past; obviously, a Paradise Lost of their privileged upper-middle class childhoods) and condemn contemporary suburbia, seldom stopping to reflect that the majority of people in those well-nigh prelapsarian times could not afford the kind of life Keats and Lerner eulogize. The suburbanite is accused of excessive conformity and moulding his opinion after his friends and neighbours (as if it were possible to be entirely independent in one's values) or too individualistic and competitive. Likewise, scholars present suburban life as a mess: schools are either inadequate or surreptitiously streamed to accommodate only the most gifted students; even church attendance is viewed as a corollary of the vile middle-class ways — on weekdays one shops for groceries, on Sunday for redemp-

⁴² Ibid., p. 238.

⁴³ M. Marsh: *Suburban Lives...*, p. 188.

⁴⁴ S. Donaldson: *The Suburban Myth...*, p. 5.

tion.⁴⁵ Such criticism fails to account for the fact of suburbs being very different from each other; charging all with the problems of some renders the critical process absurd.

The view frequently taken by some critics, for instance Hal Burton and John Keats, is that get-rich-quick developers ravage the country erecting shoddy residential estates which will inevitably degenerate into little better than slums in next to no time. They blame the builders for cupidity while blithely ignoring the fact that the USA at the peak of the suburban boom of the late 1940s and 1950s was starved of affordable housing. Similarly, standardization of design, so often made repugnant, results from the attempt to keep construction costs down, not from attraction to ugliness. Furthermore, the common tendency of many suburban home owners to introduce alterations is discounted as irrelevant. For many social commentators

[t]he point is that all these alterations and redecorations are not efforts to express individuality at all, but merely attempts to keep up with the Joneses. The suburbanite, clearly, can't win. If he leaves his home as he found it, he is accused of standardization and conformity; if he attempts to alter his home, he is accused of a shallow competition for status.⁴⁶

Given the social and political bias of most critics of suburbia, it is only to be expected that their solution to the problems, real or imaginary, of the suburb: uniformity and ugliness, will be in more enlightened supervision, specifically, more planning. What they seem to overlook, however, is that case studies in their own books, like Levittowns across the USA or Park Forest, Illinois, are communities which had the benefit of very thorough planning and still they came under very severe criticism.⁴⁷

Even the practice of friendship and neighbouring incurs the critics' scorn. From Max Lerner to John Keats to J.D.J. Sadler one comes across images of suburban socializing as silly and stifling. As has been said earlier, in the discussion of Crestwood Heights and in the account of *The Organization Man*, there may be an element of compulsion in the patterns of social relationships in some communities at some times. Yet reducing all suburban bonding to *Kaffeeklatsching* in the morning, bridge playing in the evening, in short, meaningless contacts based on mere spatial proximity, limiting one's possibilities for individual growth, is by far an inadequate and unjust description.⁴⁸ Besides, if there is so much neighbouring going on it becomes difficult to fully accept the grim vision of some feminist studies in which

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 7.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

one of the most serious indictments of suburbia is woman's loneliness.⁴⁹ It takes plenty of ill will to vilify the suburb so much.

Similarly, the picture of the suburbanite usually involves one of the two extremes: he is either portrayed "as an apolitical animal, apathetic, unintelligent, nonparticipating"⁵⁰ or else as too dedicated, too politically conscious, but always misguided in his archaic allegiance to the local community instead of the metropolitan area; what is even worse, he is likely to vote conservative. In this classic no-win situation he is either accused of escaping his social obligations in choosing not to identify with the whole urban organism (that is the line taken by Peter Blake in *God's Own Junkyard*), however large and difficult to identify with, or conceived of as a sinister, egoistic schemer (C.W. Griffin's stance).

The uncritically liberal position most critics of the suburb assume provides a partial explanation of this lopsided vision. However, as Scott Donaldson argues, underlying the bitterness of the attack is something more profound: unrealistic, inflated expectations. Put together, what these various critiques of suburbia come down to is nothing less than failure to realize the collective American dream — the almost rural community of enlightened responsible yeomen, i.e. an essentially eighteenth-century concept updated to include the best modern civilization has to offer.⁵¹ If some people expected so much, they were bound to be disappointed. The problem of the suburb is not that it is irresponsible, ungenerous, too old-fashioned or too modern, the problem lies in the overblown expectations of most critics and some suburbanites. A myth founded on so contradictory hopes must fail.

2. Lionel Trilling's Adversarial Criticism

The impact of Lionel Trilling's work on American literature will be evaluated here from the perspective of three problem areas: 1) the notion of reality; 2) liberalism; 3) his mode of criticism in general and criticism of the novel specifically. *The Liberal Imagination* (1950) remains his most influential work, and within it the essay called "Reality in America". Trilling's polemic with V.L. Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought*, in particular, the legacy of the latter's view of reality constitutes the bulk of the essay. According to Trilling, this view, predicated on middle class presuppositions about

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 20.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 16.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 2–3, 22.

culture, opposes “the genteel and the academic” and is “in alliance with the vigorous and the actual”.⁵² Parrington supposedly believes in an immutable, external, irreducible reality; the artist’s supreme task and skill is this reality’s competent, sincere reflection whereas his great sin consists in “turning away from it”, hence his mistrust of the fantastic/unreal/romantic.⁵³ In other words, *Main Currents in American Thought* endorses “the chronic American belief that there exists an opposition between reality and mind and that one must enlist oneself in the party of reality”.⁵⁴ In another essay Trilling adds that “[t]he word *reality* is an honorific word and the future historian will naturally try to discover our notion of its pejorative opposite, appearance, mere appearance”.⁵⁵ He deprecates Theodore Dreiser’s writing, its “awkwardness, the chaos, the heaviness which we associate with ‘reality’”. In the American metaphysic reality is always material reality, hard, resistant, unformed, impenetrable, and unpleasant”.⁵⁶ This scathing reading of Dreiser is meant simultaneously to be a vindication of Henry James, one of the critic’s favourite novelists.

Arguing against such simplistic positivism, Trilling asserts that “to miss the primacy of complication — of ambiguity, variousness, difficulty — is to fail to grasp the very nature of America’s everyday actuality”.⁵⁷ Against Parrington, he insists, for instance, that Hawthorne’s rendering of reality, the *substantial* reality, the ideas, is competent and beautiful. According to Phillip Barrish, in this kind of argument

Trilling both explains his taste for Hawthorne and demonstrates his own critical acumen by pointing us toward the *real* earthiness in Hawthorne’s work, a substantial actuality that is in itself constituted by epistemological difficulty and which a critic such as Parrington, for all his talk about hard realities, cannot locate.⁵⁸

His taste allows him to dismiss the validity of the rough, material, “down-below” (Stuart Hall’s word) conception of reality, or, to put it differently, interrogate its purchase on real reality and argue not only his own vision of the relative merits of such writers as Henry James or Nathaniel Hawthorne, but also joust for prestige that accrues to a critic capable of impos-

⁵² L. Trilling: *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society*. Middlesex, England and Victoria, Australia: Penguin 1970, p. 17.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁵⁷ P. Barrish: *American Literary Realism, Critical Theory and Intellectual Prestige, 1880–1995*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001, p. 134.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

ing his own terms of debate, particularly those defining the fundamental categories like reality. What is at stake is the consensus on the prerequisites for relevant criticism.⁵⁹ Thus when Trilling contests Parrington's accolades for Dreiser, he insists on a more complex vision of reality while asserting his own superior ability to distinguish, name and mediate it. On the other hand, the authority he seeks, the authority of competent assessment of the intricacies of cerebral fiction, is reinforced by his involvement in radical criticism in the 1930s.

Throughout Trilling's career, this hey!-reality-is-right-in-front-of-your-eyes move does play a less prominent role in his criticism than does the reality-is-too-complicated-for-your-simplistic-epistemology move, but at key moments he employs the former to supplement the latter. And, at every juncture Trilling insists that to better grasp the nature of literature's constitutive reality, however he at that moment defines it, is also to have better taste.⁶⁰

Shuttling between these two stances: exhortation to literal, ingenuous reading of reality and dropping excessive sophistication that stands in our way of such an attitude; and denial of the authority of down-to-earth, visceral, non-pretty reality as cognitively false, Trilling establishes a virtually unsailable critical position in that he controls how reality is understood in the criticism of realist literature.

His second major preoccupation is liberalism and liberal literary criticism. Trilling believes that liberalism is America's only intellectual tradition, conservatism and reaction being incapable of producing viable ideological systems. However, while discounting the systemic feebleness of the right, he is aware that liberalism is "a large tendency rather than a concise body of doctrine",⁶¹ a sentiment rather than an idea. This sentiment, although primarily political, relates to a certain vision of life, upholding specific emotive attitudes, hence the connection between politics and literary criticism.

The place of emotion in liberal sensibility is complex. Liberalism values some emotive concepts, such as happiness, and endeavours to organize them into a system but in the process it reduces its worldview to what it can effectively explain, developing protocols of knowledge which rationalize the reduction. Thus in an attempt to enhance life, freedom and rationality, it limits its concept of the human mind to mechanical reflexes.⁶² This unwitting, subconscious simplification constitutes one of the great dangers of

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 132.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 137.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 10.

⁶² Ibid., pp. 12–13.

modern liberal discourse. It is the task of literary criticism, Trilling asserts, "to recall liberalism to its first essential imagination of variousness and possibility, which implies the awareness of complexity and difficulty".⁶³ Literature is especially well suited to this job since contemporary writing so often engages with politics, but also because it gives the most complete account of the various intellectual challenges mentioned above.

In accordance with these multiple tasks Trilling's critical *oeuvre* contains only one extensive study, his doctoral dissertation published as *Matthew Arnold* and two short books: on E.M. Forster and S. Freud, the bulk of it being essays, articles and reviews (they make up his most influential books *The Liberal Imagination* [1950], *The Opposing Self* [1955] and *A Gathering of Fugitives* [1956]). It is then tempting to go along with his own opinion that his concerns were diverse, the texts being mostly ordered by publishers. W.M. Frohock disagrees with this view, identifying in Trilling's work what he terms "a unity of concern".

About the most scattered and disparate subjects he is forever asking the same questions: about the moral implications of our arts, about the ideational substructure of politics, about the position or predicament of an intellectual class in an anti-intellectual world, about the impact of our discoveries of the irrational and subrational, about the relation of fiction to the structure of society, about the nature of culture itself.⁶⁴

Most of the above questions appear irrespective of what problem or subject Trilling is addressing and most constitute the central concerns of post-Second World War liberalism.

Douglas Tallack points out that in *The Liberal Imagination* "Trilling calls for a less complacent, more self-critical liberalism than that of the 1920s and 1930s".⁶⁵ In this period, while rejecting psychoanalysis as a remedy, he nonetheless formulated his conception of tragic realism on the basis of Freud's rendering of humanity's basic dilemmas, particularly that of inevitable limitations. At the same time, by the late 1940s, having found Marxism irrelevant in the face of the complexities of the modern society and Trilling had come under the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr's Progressive-Pragmatist existentialist theology, especially Niebuhr's trope of irony in understanding the problems of the USA as a liberal superpower wielding weapons of mass destruction as well as his view of the historical relativity of the unity of the

⁶³ Ibid., p. 14.

⁶⁴ W.M. Frohock: *Strangers to This Ground: Cultural Diversity in Contemporary American Writing*. Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press 1961, p. 21.

⁶⁵ D. Tallack: *Twentieth-Century America: The Intellectual and Cultural Context*. London and New York: Longman 1991, p. 231.

self.⁶⁶ Trilling's radicalism before the Second World War granted him the experience and authority needed to refashion Popular Front progressivism in a way which would be acceptable to the New York intelligentsia. According to Alfred Kazin,

[p]art of Lionel Trilling's importance on the American literary scene is probably explained by the fact that he has solidified, both in his novel of ideas, *The Middle of the Journey*, and in criticism like *The Liberal Imagination*, that reaction against the false liberalism of the thirties that most intellectuals will accept only from someone whose own experience has been on the left.⁶⁷

This project of "solidification" was partly made possible by "the deep-seated conservatism of Popular Front aesthetics",⁶⁸ as it was revealed in *Partisan Review*, particularly, by Philip Rahv and William Phillips in the late 1930s. When the literary right had shed its loyalties to the established order and the left's radicalism had eroded, "culturally oriented criticism ... perforce gravitated toward the various models of the 'alienated' avant-garde",⁶⁹ Gerald Graff explains. Left and right began to modulate into a community of tastes and ideas which tilted at all systems no matter what their ideological provenance. Trilling's "adversary culture" changed meaning from subverting the established order from inside or opting out of it to denote a sort of "apolitical politics of alienation".⁷⁰ Subsequently, a self-serving ideology of modern individualism emerged from this fusion.

Trilling's evolution from Popular Front radicalism in the 1930s to liberalism in the 1940s to neoconservatism two decades later reflects a more general pattern in many pre-war socialists. On the other hand, his orthodox Jewish family background as well as the fact that until 1931 he was on the board of the *Menorah Journal* point to something different. Trilling was the first Jewish faculty member in the English Department at Columbia, but twelve years elapsed between his MA in 1926 and Ph.D. in 1938, and another ten before he became Professor of English.⁷¹ The respective stages of his belated academic career must have contributed to his ideological growth, at first accounting for his radicalism, later inclining him to turn right.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 229–230.

⁶⁷ A. Kazin: *On Native Grounds. An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc. 1956, p. 409.

⁶⁸ D. Tallack: *Twentieth-Century America...*, p. 232.

⁶⁹ G. Graff: "American Criticism Left and Right". In: *Ideology and Classic American Literature*. Eds. S. Bercovitch, M. Jehlen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987, p. 97.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ D. Tallack: *Twentieth-Century America...*, p. 410.

By the late 1950s Trilling's perception of the relation between literature and social stability, at first Arnoldian in character, had become more and more sceptical. The cultivation of the adversarial self, estranged from society and indifferent to moral good, that he witnessed in post-war America, disturbed him as "from his secular perspective, the social relationship [was — K.K.-T.] the only source of obligation and authority".⁷² Clinging to the earlier belief in the generally beneficial influence of great literature on man's moral imagination and social awareness he found that modern literature recurrently repudiated the connection. His discomfort at this realization can be seen in *A Gathering of Fugitives* (1956) where he identifies "the anti-catharsis, the generally antihygienic effect of bad serious art, the stimulation it gives to all one's neurotic tendencies, the literal, physically-felt depression it induces".⁷³ In his later texts he questions the idea that art can be of any social use. In *Beyond Culture* (1965) he voices his anxiety about the joint effect of modernist literature and expansion of higher education: the detachment of "the reader from the habits of thought and feeling that the larger culture imposes",⁷⁴ which results in perverse fulfilment of the subversive potential of "adversary culture" that consists in exhortation to "the transgression of limits and the cultivation of experience".⁷⁵

The next point to be considered here is Trilling's conception of the novel *vis à vis* reality. In the essay "Manners, Morals and the Novel", following D.H. Lawrence and Henry James, he identifies the basic substance of the novel to be manners of the American middle class, or to be more precise "the attitude toward manners of the literate, reading, responsible middle class of people who are ourselves".⁷⁶ Trilling believes that a society's view of manners reveals its concept of reality. He studies the place of money in fiction, snobbery, ambition, to observe that the American novel "diverges from its classic intention which ... is the investigation of the problem of reality beginning in the social field".⁷⁷ He points out, accurately, that most American fiction writers of genius in the past were only "tangentially" interested in social reality. Trilling praises Henry James for being the only major author who was aware of the necessity of basing fiction on "the ladder of social observation"⁷⁸ or, as he puts it elsewhere, "it is inescapably true

⁷² S.L. Tanner: "Literary Study and Social Order". *Humanitas* 1999, 12 (2), p. 48.

⁷³ L. Trilling: *A Gathering of Fugitives*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich [1956] 1978, p. 99.

⁷⁴ L. Trilling: *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning*. Harmondsworth: Penguin 1967, p. 12.

⁷⁵ D. Tallack: *Twentieth-Century America...*, p. 314.

⁷⁶ L. Trilling: *The Liberal Imagination...*, p. 210.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

that in the novel manners make men".⁷⁹ Yet even here the question of taste in conjunction with social class is paramount — Steinbeck's "doctrinaire affection" for plebeian characters is as lambasted as his prejudice against the middle class.⁸⁰

Trilling raises the dilemmas of moral realism; he claims that his times are unique in attaching enormous significance to moral righteousness.⁸¹ However, he asserts, there are few American books that endeavour to go beyond determinist analysis of living conditions and lauding progressive sensibility in their depiction. What he finds lacking is the investigation of self-congratulatory attitudes, earnest attempts to interrogate "moral indignation" as "the favourite emotion of the middle class".⁸² The need for moral realism is barely a question of undue refinement, it is called for by social intercourse. It is the novel that has performed the greatest service to mankind in being "the most effective agent of the moral imagination",⁸³ a means to teach people about "the extent of human variety and the value of this variety".⁸⁴ Differing in social emphasis, Trilling echoes here again the main drift of D.H. Lawrence's argument.

The final point about Trilling I want to make concerns a certain blind spot in his body of thought. When he criticizes writers like Theodore Dreiser, dismantling the latter's claim to authentic colloquialism, he may be venting his irritation with Dreiser's diction but there are two more important things at stake. As has been said earlier, Trilling objects to the sort of writing which targets primarily the seamy side of life on aesthetic grounds yet when he deplores the novelist's cultivation of his lower-class background he may also be waging a personal war. Pointing out that each writer is a product of their milieu and that what is more important is how the writer succeeds in transcending these limitations, Trilling expresses his repugnance to the determinist/naturalist literary attitude, be it sincere or merely posturing, while hinting at himself as an example to the contrary. Yet what this opposition overlooks is the very scope of American culture, "the variations of regional taste and their power over what has been written in America".⁸⁵ In other words, tilting at Midwestern philistinism or plebeian crudeness Trilling fails to understand that his own purchase on "the American reality" constitutes only a segment of it, that to embrace the values of New York liberalism may entail the inability to appreciate other areas of experience

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 218.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 219.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 221.

⁸² Ibid., p. 222.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 223.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ W.M. Frohock: *Strangers to This Ground...*, p. 34.

and styles of expression. An element of combativeness in his writing may be to blame, perhaps also the self-vindication of an ethnic who overcame great adversity in establishing himself as one of the most magisterial voices in the American criticism of the twentieth century.

3. John Gardner's Moral Writing

John Gardner's *On Moral Fiction* was published in 1978 to a chorus of bewilderment and denunciation evoked partly by the radicalism of the book's theoretical principles and partly by the critical account of the work of many contemporary novelists. A common reading of Gardner's study was to regard it as a reaction to the excesses of postmodernism, setting the book against John Barth's "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) or Ronald Sukenick's *The Death of the Novel* (1969). Although I will later argue against too easy an acceptance of this approach, as a working hypothesis it certainly is viable. In Part I "Premises on Art and Morality" Gardner claims that many current forms of culture relegate to a peripheral position what should remain at the centre: "Some, like 'conceptual art', evade or suppress the moral issue. Others, like 'post-modernism', accidentally raise the issue of art's morality and take the wrong side".⁸⁶ "Taking the wrong" side means indulging in false relativity or assuming postures of fashionable despair, attitudes which appear to have the support of modern science and philosophy. Gardner is immune to this sort of fashionable logic, he refuses to yield to despair and asserts that the more disheartening the scientific vision is, the more scope there is for serious intellectual and moral restoration.⁸⁷

Obviously, he is no Moral Majority preacher, his carefully thought-out argument engages with art as well as modern society.

That art which tends towards destruction, the art of nihilists, cynics, and merdistes, is not properly art at all. Art is essentially serious and beneficial, a game played against chaos and death, against entropy. ... Art asserts and reasserts those values which hold off dissolution, struggling to keep the mind intact and preserve the city, the mind's safe preserve. Art rediscovers, generation after generation, what is necessary to humanness.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ J. Gardner: *On Moral Fiction*. New York: Basic Books 1978, p. 55.

⁸⁷ D. Cowart: *Arches and Light: The Fiction of John Gardner*. Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press 1983, p. 10.

⁸⁸ J. Gardner: *On Moral Fiction...*, p. 6.

As David Cowart points out, in almost all Gardner ever published art constitutes part of the scheme to combat *Weltschmerz* and death.⁸⁹ Moral art always seeks to enhance life, it endeavours to uphold truth. Through references to such writers as Edgar Allan Poe, Marcel Proust and Wallace Stevens, Gardner comes to formulate the core of his artistic creed: "Truth, Goodness, and Beauty are thus, in varying degrees, the fundamental concerns of art and therefore ought to be the fundamental concerns of criticism".⁹⁰ Otherwise, he concludes, criticism risks irrelevance. Thus the questions raised by Gardner, besides addressing problems of moral philosophy or ethics, "advocated a return to a judgmental as opposed to a purely or largely exegetical criticism".⁹¹ In a larger perspective, what he emphasizes is utilitarian criticism.

Gardner is impatient with false intellectualism manifesting itself in a predilection for obscurity. Since most readers want to find in a work fiction characters they can identify with or at least understand and accept, he argues,

an academic striving for opacity suggests, if not misanthropy, a perversity or shallowness that no reader would tolerate except if he is one of those poor milktoast innocents who timidly accept violation of their feelings from a habit of supposing that they must be missing something, or one of those arrogant donzels who chuckle at things obscure because their enjoyment proves to them that they are not like lesser mortals.⁹²

Fake elitism combined with inflated appreciation for avant-garde rhetoric was particularly disagreeable to him because it indicated not only cheap literary taste of the contemporary writer and reader alike but also insecurity of the latter faced with the ever-increasing pace of artistic production that has lost balance and strives to cater to the merely fashionable, closing the vicious circle. "The widespread and growing feeling of sympathy for the freakish, the special, the physically and spiritually quirky"⁹³ may in itself be valuable as it broadens the scope of contemporary sensibility yet this extension has its price: in the process of partisan inquiry into the bizarre we tend to dismiss the questions of wisdom and the artist's craft, valorizing oddity instead.⁹⁴

⁸⁹ D. Cowart: *Arches and Light...*, p. 12.

⁹⁰ J. Gardner: *On Moral Fiction...*, p. 144.

⁹¹ D. Cowart: *Arches and Light...*, p. 18.

⁹² J. Gardner: *On Moral Fiction...*, p. 69.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁹⁴ This is one of the places in Gardner's argument which lend themselves to a larger reading than just a critique of postmodernism — the quote above may be understood as a description of Gothic writing or grotesque.

Reasons for this shift are complex, the most profound being “commitment to sincerity rather than honesty (the one based on the moment’s emotion, the other based on careful thought)”.⁹⁵ Dividing classic American literature into escapist, i.e. conformist and conservative, and serious, marked by individualism, Gardner is appalled to see that the pattern is undergoing a twist — escapist fiction becomes more and more cynical and nihilistic, despair has become the order of the day, the reader is more apt nowadays to admire chic suicide than celebration of life. He grants that at the root of it all is a failure of American democracy: “...in reaction against stultifying conformity, we have learned not only not to scorn the moral freak but to praise him as somehow superior to ourselves”.⁹⁶ To focus Gardner’s argument one more time: it is not bad that the new sensibility has emerged, but it is wrong that modern civilization has adopted it as its chief mode of expression.

We need to differentiate between true morality, Gardner points out, which upholds life and compassion (his Christian approach is often in evidence), and discreditable moral fashion. Once civilized people fall prey to intellectual whim, it becomes possible to regard well-publicized murderers as interesting, thus yielding to confusion; one “may begin to feel guilt ... for possessing a moral code at all”.⁹⁷ Again, this is not to say that Gardner rejects the liberal notion of guilt altogether, on the contrary, he concedes that the moral progress of humanity rests on developing refined ideas of personal as well as communal guilt. However, one has to tread with caution, especially the moral artist who, unless he wants to become paralyzed with debilitating doubt, “must guard against taking on more guilt than he deserves, treating himself and his society as guilty on principle. If everyone everywhere is guilty — and that seems to be our persuasion — then no models of goodness, for life or art, exist; moral art is a lie”.⁹⁸ On the other hand, if, following in Rousseau’s footsteps, we assume that the society is always to blame, we abolish personal guilt; either way, we make a grave error of logic while evading our moral obligation. If the artist is so riddled with doubt that he is uncertain of the existence of unquestionable virtues, he can only give us inferior art. Still, this is better than exhorting the reader to emulate the despicable. Art instructs, we are reminded, it does so with varying degrees of validity, but the crux of the problem is that on the one hand we are unable to embrace religion as its underlying principle, on the other hand the secular explanation of art’s impact lands us in an irresolvable difficulty of having to prove the correctness of somebody’s notion of truth over somebody else’s. Expanding on Yeats’s vision in “The Second Coming”, Gardner

⁹⁵ J. Gardner: *On Moral Fiction...*, p. 43.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

asserts: "In the name of democracy, justice, and compassion, we abandon our right to believe, to debate, and to hunt down truth".⁹⁹ Rightly conceived, art seeks truth out of responsibility to the human community.¹⁰⁰ As Gardner says in his elegy to the memory of his friend, the sculptor Nicholas Vergette, the moral artist's great challenge is "flooring the ancient abyss with art",¹⁰¹ it is by far not enough to just reflect "the ancient abyss". Whether the anomie and vacuity perceived be real or imagined, they have to be overcome. In the face of general intellectual defeatism he advocates affirmation of life and a literature with a firm moral underpinning, one that exceeds the shallowness of the mental code of the middle class.¹⁰²

Thus Gardner repeatedly takes up the problem of what he views as true art, which he sometimes refers to as "moral", sometimes as "classical". His attitude is partly prescriptive, and although *On Moral Fiction* is a book of criticism, its author is also a creative writer, which renders his position awkward.

[I]t is true that art is in one sense fascistic: it claims, on good authority, that some things are healthy for individuals and society and some things are not. Unlike the fascist in uniform, the artist never forces anyone to anything. He merely makes his case, the strongest case possible. He lights up the darkness with a lightning flash, protects his friends the gods — that is, values — and all humanity without exception.¹⁰³

Following the lead of Percy Bysshe Shelley, he believes that the true (enlightened) artist is an unacknowledged legislator of the world. Under his guidance, man can mould his character and destiny, a vision in which Gardner evinces a nearly Romantic belief in man's unbounded capacity for personal growth.¹⁰⁴

His postulates receive their most succinct formulation when he claims that "real art creates myths a society can live instead of die by".¹⁰⁵ By this he does not mean cheery, breezy, uplifting tales but myths of profound reflection. Although he finds the luridness of modern art objectionable, he

⁹⁹ Ibid., pp. 41–42.

¹⁰⁰ D. Cowart: *Arches and Light...*, p. 1.

¹⁰¹ J. Gardner: *Poems*. Northridge, California: Lord John Press 1978, pp. 22–25.

¹⁰² D. Cowart: *Arches and Light...*, p. 13.

¹⁰³ J. Gardner: *On Moral Fiction...*, p. 101. The term "fascist" appears also in John Barth's "The Literature of Exhaustion" in a passage in which he discusses the idea of "the controlling artist" in such terms. See also: R.E. Morace: "New Fiction, Popular Fiction, and John Gardner's Middle/Moral Way". In: *John Gardner: Critical Perspectives*. Eds. R.E. Morace, K. VanSpanckeren. Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press 1982, p. 134.

¹⁰⁴ D. Cowart: *Arches and Light...*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁵ J. Gardner: *On Moral Fiction...*, p. 126.

does not oppose the tendency to make the world of fiction more realistic than in the past. However, he cannot accept the creative attitude in which the more cruel and offensive the language of a book, the more genuine the book is believed to be. True art can guard against such debasement. Even though an artist is always in a way egotistic, Gardner admits, the true artist craves “noble achievement and good people’s praise”, whereas the false artist seeks power and his cronies’ flattery.¹⁰⁶

Despite numerous affinities, “moral fiction” is not coextensive with realism. Gardner was aware of serious limitations of realist literature, his own novels demonstrate a variety of narrative approaches, but he reiterates that the question of truth matters more in realistic art than it does in more imaginative writing.¹⁰⁷ Understood as grounded in verifiable factuality, truth, or verisimilitude, is central to Gardner’s view of the relations between art and human behaviour.

Gardner and the realists have the same goal — truth in fiction — but go after it each in his own way. The realists reacted against sentimentalism and espoused “real life”. Gardner has reacted against the very different kind of realism implicit in, for example, the existentialism of Sartre and has espoused the philosophic idealism that began to go out of fashion in the nineteenth century. What is more important is their agreeing that “Art makes people do things”. Several recent studies which have explored what John Cawelti calls the “complex relation” between popular literature and individual behavior have supported both the assumption shared by Gardner and the realists that art does influence life and his contention that art is a major factor contributing to social unity.¹⁰⁸

Construed along these lines, so different from Wilde’s witticisms about art’s essential amorality that underlie contemporary cultural attitudes, the dialectic operative between life and literature brings in again, from a different perspective, the momentous question of the artist’s responsibility to the community. In an interview for *Atlantic Monthly* published in the same year *On Moral Fiction* came out, Gardner reaffirmed his position: “If we celebrate bad values in our arts, we’re going to have a bad society; if we celebrate values which make you healthier, which make life better, we’re going to have a better world”.¹⁰⁹ However, according to Gardner the problem of responsibility relates to the problem of technique. Retreat into sophistication and

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 120.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 141.

¹⁰⁸ R.E. Morace: “New Fiction, Popular Fiction, and John Gardner’s Middle/Moral Way”..., p. 144.

¹⁰⁹ D. Edwards, C. Polsgrove: “A Conversation with John Gardner”. *Atlantic Monthly* May 1977, p. 44.

indulging in technique for technique's sake — the mistake that postmodern fabulists make — dooms literature to irrelevance. Robert A. Morace finds this exhortation to truth and responsibility exhilarating as it comes from a popular writer with considerable reputation as an innovative fictionist.¹¹⁰

The relations between experiment and tradition as well as responsibility and imaginative freedom constitute the fundamental tension of Gardner's thought. In the *Atlantic Monthly* interview referred to above he identifies himself as "on the one hand a kind of New York State Republican, conservative. On the other hand ... a kind of Bohemian type".¹¹¹ It is for such candour that Gardner incurred a great deal of criticism from liberal quarters. When in 1980 John Barth cavilled at a resurgence of the "family novel" and more generally traditional literary values, he articulated an irritation with the new cultural climate of the commencing Reagan era, but when he sarcastically identified Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority with the impending doom of Moral Fiction in American letters, he clearly targeted John Gardner.¹¹² The attack is understandable in personal terms, since *On Moral Fiction* contains a deprecatory account of Barth's fiction from *The Sot-Weed Factor* on, but the charge of preachy conservatism in politics is unwarranted. Gardner does not approve of didactic art (he finds "didacticism and true art ... immiscible"¹¹³), either; nor does he espouse social causes congenial exclusively to the Grand Old Party electorate (his 1976 novel *October Light* presents such phenomena as the civil rights movement and feminism in a liberal fashion¹¹⁴). However, Gardner angered many others besides Barth, provoking their response in kind: Joseph Heller finds his criticism dull and carping, John Updike sneers at his affirmation of life as naïve, Bernard Malamud blames him for insensitivity.

Reception of *On Moral Fiction* was conditioned by the strongly polemical character of the book. After all, Gardner does lay himself open to high-minded rebuttal by so outspokenly criticizing major American fiction writers of the 1960s and 1970s, especially those of the postmodern persuasion. However, this may be a superficial reading. In 1979 Stephen Singular put forward a good case for the bulk of the book having been completed as early as 1965, thirteen years before publication.¹¹⁵ Obviously, there are numerous references to the literature between 1965 and 1978, but that may

¹¹⁰ R.E. Morace: "New Fiction, Popular Fiction, and John Gardner's Middle/Moral Way"..., p. 145.

¹¹¹ D. Edwards, C. Polsgrove: "A Conversation with John Gardner..." p. 43.

¹¹² D. Cowart: *Arches and Light...*, pp. 16–18.

¹¹³ J. Gardner: *On Moral Fiction...*, p. 19; see also p. 137.

¹¹⁴ D. Cowart: *Arches and Light...*, p. 18.

¹¹⁵ S. Singular: "The Sound and the Fury Over Fiction". *New York Times Magazine* 8 July 1979, p. 34.

be partly beside the point. If the book's main line of argument was formulated by 1965, Gardner's concern must have been with much more than just the antics of such writers as William Gass in *Willie Master's Lonesome Wife*, E.L. Doctorow in *Ragtime* or John Barth in *Giles Goat-Boy*. What he seems to grapple with is a larger modern crisis of thought and form, a crisis affecting both life in the American republic and the state of its arts. "In literature, structure is the evolving sequence of dramatized events tending toward understanding and assertion; that is, toward some meticulously qualified belief".¹¹⁶ Otherwise, we end up reading somebody's opinion without drama, e.g. an essay, or poring over drama devoid of belief — the sad, degenerate form today's fiction takes in its deplorable attempt to offer its reader no more than technical skill for perusal. Either the triple postulate of Truth, Goodness and Beauty, or failure, both artistic and moral.

4. Concluding Remarks

Trilling's and Gardner's theories will be used selectively in analyses of Cheever, Updike and Ford as the three novelists belong to different areas of contemporary fiction. Although all three work in what can be viewed as aspects of realism, Cheever's recourse to fable, Updike's documentary technique and "mean-streak" protagonist as well as Ford's postmodern scepticism call for varying critical approaches. What they do share is the suburban substance of their works, hence references to the ideas discussed in the first section of Introduction will be made more evenly throughout this study. In textual readings emphasis will be laid on social, psychological and narrative aspects of suburban discourse as a conscious, willed doctrine of moderation, "a middle way", or the condition of being situated "on this isthmus of a middle state", Alexander Pope's formulation of the human place in the scheme of things (Epistle II of *An Essay on Man*).

Part One, "John Cheever's Wasp Fables", is divided into three chapters: the first constitutes an inquiry into the opposition between St. Botolphs and the modern subdivision in *The Wapshot Chronicle* and *The Wapshot Scandal*; in the second, a study of three other novels (*Bullet Park*, *Falconer* and *Oh What a Paradise It Seems*) is undertaken, the common denominator being the shared element of criminality; the third treats of the rhetoric of suburbia in the short stories. In Part Two, "John Updike: Life and Adventures of a Romping Rabbit", the first chapter, foregrounding the themes of life-as-

¹¹⁶ J. Gardner: *On Moral Fiction...*, p. 65.

maze and immaturity, is a reading of *Rabbit, Run*; the second studies the social upheaval of the 1960s in *Rabbit Redux*; the third is an investigation of the discourse of wealth and “plutography” in *Rabbit Is Rich*; and the fourth one focuses on the imagery of consumerism and death in relation to Florida in *Rabbit at Rest*. Part Three, “Richard Ford: On the Realty Frontier”, is divided into four chapters. Chapters One and Two study Haddam from the personal and community perspectives on the basis of *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*, respectively. In Chapter Three an analysis of the workings of capitalist land speculation in *The Lay of the Land* is conducted; finally, Chapter Four constitutes a comparative reading of babbittry in Updike and Ford.

Krzysztof Kowalczyk-Twarowski

„Ten przesmyk stanu średniego”.

Literatura przedmieść Johna Cheevera, Johna Updike’a i Richarda Forda

Streszczenie

Niniejsza praca stanowi studium rozwoju literatury suburbiów w USA, od zaistnienia tego gatunku w latach czterdziestych dwudziestego wieku do początku wieku dwudziestego pierwszego. Twórczość omawianych pisarzy: Johna Cheevera, Johna Updike’a i Richarda Forda usytuowana jest na tle zmian społecznych tego okresu, szczególnie rozwoju amerykańskich miast. Ze względu na związki tej literatury z tradycją realistyczną badane są przejawy realizmu w dziełach wymienionych autorów, od mityzujących tendencji prozy Cheevera, przez „rokokowy” realizm Updike’a, do Forda postmodernistycznej wizji miejsca jako produktu kapitalistycznej gospodarki. W tym kontekście mieszczą się również refleksje na temat związków pomiędzy klasą średnią jako formacją świadomości a kulturą masową i konsumeryzmem.

Krytycznym i teoretycznoliterackim punktem odniesienia dla tych rozważań są koncepcje Lionela Trillinga i Johna Gardnera. W przypadku pierwszego z nich omawiane są: jego teoria powieści jako gatunku traktującego o stratyfikacji społecznej, jego rozumienie realizmu oscylujące pomiędzy prawdą wizji intelektualnej i prawdą wizji społecznej, a także wykładnia liberalizmu jako postawy badawczej, akcentującej synkretyzm i sceptycyzm. Jeśli chodzi o Johna Gardnera, to uwaga poświęcona jest jego koncepcji „literatury moralnej”, a szczególnie konserwatywnej interpretacji kondycji literatury współczesnej. Postulując renesans potrójnego ideału Dobra, Piękna i Prawdy, próbuje on doprowadzić do integracji tego ideału z wrażliwością chrześcijańską.

Kwestią badaną w odniesieniu do trzech pisarzy wymienionych w tytule jest stosunek establishmentu intelektualnego, a szczególnie krytyki literackiej, do suburbiów. Tu ujawnia się pewne napięcie pomiędzy krytyką tej formy urbanistycznej jako wyjaławiającej duchowo i prowadzącej do filistynizmu połączonego z tendencją do nadmiernego konserwatyzmu z jednej strony, z drugiej zaś — faktem, iż większość Amerykanów, również elity artystyczne i naukowe, wychowała się i żyje na terenach podmiejskich. W odniesieniu do tej ambiwalencji omawiana jest postawa Cheevera, Updike’a i Forda do suburbiów jako takich, a także estetyka ich utworów, wizja społeczeństwa oraz psychologia postaci.

Krzysztof Kowalczyk-Twarowski

„Die Enge des Mittelstandes“.

Die Vorstadtliteratur von John Cheever, John Updike und Richard Ford

Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Arbeit ist eine Studie über die Entwicklung der Literatur von Suburbien in den USA von den Anfängen der literarischen Gattung in den 40er Jahren des 20. Jhs bis zum Anfang des 21. Jhs. Die Werke der hier genannten Schriftsteller: John Cheever, John Updike und Richard Ford betreffen die Gesellschaftsänderungen der damaligen Zeit und besonders die Entwicklung von nordamerikanischen Staaten. Da diese Literatur in realistischer Tradition tief eingewurzelt ist, werden hier hauptsächlich die Anzeichen des Realismus in den Werken von den genannten Autoren untersucht, von mythologisierten Tendenzen der Prosa von Cheever, über den „Rokokorealismus“ von Updike bis zu postmodernistischer Vorstellung von dem Ort als einem Produkt der kapitalistischen Wirtschaft. Der Verfasser verfolgt auch die Wechselbeziehungen zwischen der Mittelklasse als einer bewussten Formation, der Massenkultur und dem Konsumerismus.

Ein kritischer und literaturtheoretischer Bezugspunkt für vorliegende Überlegungen sind die Konzeptionen von Lionel Trilling und John Gardner. Der Verfasser bespricht Trillings Theorie des Romans als einer über die gesellschaftliche Stratifikation handelnden literarischen Gattung. Lionel Trilling versteht den Realismus als etwas zwischen der Wahrheit von der intellektuellen Vorstellung und der Wahrheit der gesellschaftlicher Vorstellung. Der Liberalismus ist für ihn eine solche Forschungseinstellung, die besonders stark den Synkretismus und den Skeptizismus hervorhebt. Wenn es um John Gardner geht befasst sich der Verfasser mit seiner Idee der „moralischen Literatur“ und besonders mit konservativer Beurteilung von dem Zustand der gegenwärtigen Literatur. Die Erneuerung des dreifachen Ideals von Gut, Schönheit und Wahrheit fordernd, versucht er das Ideal der christlichen Empfindlichkeit anzupassen.

Die drei oben genannten Schriftsteller werden auch hinsichtlich der Einstellung von dem intellektuellen Establishment und den Literaturkritikern zu Suburbien untersucht. Es wird hier eine gewisse Anspannung beobachtet zwischen der an den Suburbien geübten Kritik, dass diese Stadtplanungsform geistig auslaugt und zum übermäßigen Konservatismus führt, und der Tatsache, dass die meisten Amerikaner, darunter auch künstlerische und wissenschaftliche Eliten, in der Vorstadt aufgewachsen sind und dort bis heute leben. Diese Ambivalenz in Rücksicht nehmend bespricht der Verfasser die Einstellung der einzelnen Schriftsteller: Cheever, Updike und Ford zu Suburbien als solchen; er charakterisiert ihre Werke hinsichtlich deren Ästhetik, der Vorstellung von der Gesellschaft und der Psychologie der dort auftretenden Figuren.

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