

New American Fiction and All Things Skeptical.

Marc Chenetier, *"Beyond Suspicion. New American Fiction since 1960"* (*Dincolo de suspiciune. Noua literatura americana din anii '60 incoace*), translated into English by Elizabeth A. Houlding, Liverpool University Press, 1996 (reprinted in 2023)

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Chenetier is academically astute in his endeavour. Indeed, his is a comprehensive and compelling study of the main trends and tenets of American fiction since the 60s. The rationale of this book first published in 1996 taps into issues of what he terms 'suspicion', read skepticism, in and beyond the Lyotardian vein. Skepticism as regards the validity of genres, *inter alia*. As Chenetier puts it,

How many full-length portraits in "realist" texts never descend below the waist? But, beyond these earlier realizations and modernism's subsequent engagement with them, the relationship between narrative, characterization, chronology, the reader, the narrator and the author were profoundly questioned by Ricardou, Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, and many others, united as they were in their refusal of what Stephane Mallarme had termed "the old forms that poets inherit from one another like mistresses." For example, Sarraute tells us that the evolution in methods of characterization "testifies"

"on the part of both author and reader, to an unusually sophisticated state of mind. For not only are they both wary of the character, but through him, they are wary of each other. He had been their meeting ground, the solid base from which they could take off in a common effort toward new experiments and new discoveries. He has now become the converging point of their mutual distrust, the devastated ground on which they confront each other." (Chenetier 2023: 36)

Not only does Chenetier tackle experimental writing here, but also the intricate relationship between author, character and reader, in all skepticism (in a post-Barthian world):

And if we examine his present situation, we are tempted to conclude that it furnishes a perfect illustration of Stendhal's statement that "the genius of suspicion has appeared on the scene." We have now entered upon an age of suspicion." (...) The French brand of suspicion inspired various reactions in the United States, ranging from restorative attempts, to a broadening of the concept into an entire genre by means of a "So be it" that opens on to the core of our subject here. If the novel must die, fiction can and should be reborn from its ashes. Many American writers would no doubt be quick to say that the novel is quite dead, if by this we mean the literary form historically designated by the term, an inheritance from the schools of realism and naturalism, who had themselves stolen the term from the 'fantasists' denounced as irresponsible by both eighteenth-century moralists and by the early Victorians. Protean by nature – as Bakhtin demonstrated – the novel's functions are too diverse for the periodical announcement of its death to prevent it from living on. (Chenetier 2023: 36)

A perusal of the chapters and sub-chapters thereof yields concepts such as hedonism, moralisms, derision, myth and suspicion, language and reality, cultural tradition, mass culture, the avatars of voice, intertextuality, utterance and verbal universe etc. Indeed, an array of overarching concepts and subsequent themes that is food for thought for the critically-inclined. All this, Chenetier argues informs postmodern American fiction. The 'grist for one's critical mill', as Chenetier himself names it, is the dialectical tension between what is generally acknowledged as 'high culture', which, according to some, should be the fodder of literature and 'the tastings of the familiar', of the mundane, of cultural artifacts that pertain to everyday life, which, Chenetier argues, have equally become the subject-matter and indeed the medium for literature in America.

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What stands out as a pervasive paradigm in Chenetier's study is the subtle interplay between voracity and veracity (as one of the sub-chapters is titled) *i.e.* between excess and the 'less is more' mantra of postmodern fiction. Minimalism with a pinch of salt, that's what Chenetier advocates, therefore relinquishing the temptation to overlay, to allow space for incremental accruing, otherwise, he argues, "superannuated perfumes will give you a headache" (Chenetier 2023: 37). At the other end of the continuum, the '*connoisseurs* of chaos' that can discern amid competing paradigms, indeed in the midst of excess get referred to and analyzed here.

Precariousness, opaqueness, a sense of the ethereal and the evanescent, all the amalgam thereof is what Chenetier identifies as the overarching paradigm of postmodern American fiction. In his words,

Just as Don Quixote arose from the ashes of the novels of chivalry that had run their course, contemporary American fiction, vigorous as ever, phoenixed out of the novel's ruins. While the form had been challenged by the New Novelists, American writers felt under no obligation to follow the same French itinerary. Strivings toward the universal, toward coherence and the ineluctable linkages of causality could not outlive the overriding sense of precariousness, impotence, unreality, and opaqueness that characterized the period inaugurated by the 1960s. (Chenetier 2023: 36-7)

As the quotation above abundantly shows, Chenetier is adept at shedding light on the arcane. All in all, a rewarding read indeed.