

## BACK TO REALIST GROUNDS: AN INTERVIEW WITH RUSSELL BANKS

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In 1992 critic Tony Hilfer ended one of the chapters of his book *American Fiction Since 1940* (New York: Longman) posing a suspicion about the near future of American fiction. «It would be premature to declare,» he wrote, «who the coming writers of the 1990s will be but there is reason to suspect that most will be realist» (1992, 187). In the same volume Hilfer also affirmed the increasing critical importance of realist writer Russell Banks, whose novel *Affliction* (1989) goes back to explore American family life and its most anguishing effects—in this case— of divorce, alcoholism, loss of a child, and mental illness. Although his name is not listed yet in the literary anthologies between Baldwin and Baraka, Bank's importance has been increasing in later years. More than a dozen books, including his successful *Continental Drift* (1986) and *The Sweet Hereafter* (1991), have earned him, among other things, a chair at Princeton to teach creative writing, a position that he shares with another member of his literary generation, Joyce Carol Oates. But, in this literary generation we are dealing with is realism effectively striking back? That was my first question and, from the beginning, Banks appeared to have very clear views on the issue:

R. BANKS.- As you probably know, American writers entered a period in the 1960s and 1970s where they seriously questioned the premises of realism, and attacked those premises by and large. If you were a young writer coming up in that period as I was, it was difficult not to participate in that. But having gone through that anti-realist period, having questioned traditional realism, we are now undergoing a useful return, I think, to realist premises, freshened and informed by that inquiry of the 60s and 70s, so I don't feel so much that what we now have in American fiction is a return to realism as such. It is a resumption of the realistic project, but informed by a period of serious self-scrutiny and practice in the experimental 60s and 70s primarily. It isn't that kind of unconscious, in a way, passive realism of a younger generation of writers, but rather something which is more formally self-conscious. This explains that American writers

of my generation -who might be realist authors like Robert Stone, Joyce Carol Oates, Don DeLillo, or even Toni Morrison to some degree-, nonetheless are writers who have read and applied some self-conscious formal structures to their work, formal structures that they would have not used had not intervened that period of self-critique I mentioned before. So I resist saying that we are involved in a return so much as in a continuation, freshened by the insights, the contradictions gained through our earlier practice.

F. COLLADO.- There is a label that literary critics have, perhaps, invented for that. Would you be happy to label your narrative style as *postmodern realism*? Within this postmodern realism, one of the characteristics that is usually being commented on by critics is that the human subject —the self as such— has dissolved, it is not a stable entity any longer. Or, to focus it from another perspective, perhaps what is being dissolved is not so much the human subject or the human mind but the event itself, that which everybody interprets in a different way. There seems to be no more grounds for objectivity in this new postmodern realism. In a way a novel like *The Sweet Hereafter* is a very good example of this ambiguous approach to reality.

R. BANKS.- Well, I didn't feel that. What I was after in that novel was to avoid, if I could, the notion of a classical hero defined, as usual, through the struggle between his ego and the universe. In *The Sweet Hereafter* I tried to make a description of the universe that was more of a communal effort than the one applied to a single individual vision. In fact, I was interested in exploring the possibilities of the community as hero and trying to diffract the qualities or the virtues that we normally attach to the single hero and test them on a body of people which turned up to be four people, which seemed to be a large enough number in order to suggest a much larger set, the whole community if you want. But I'm not comfortable with the notion that there is no stable subject in the type of literature I write.

F. COLLADO.- Perhaps the notion has been simply invented by the critics?

R. BANKS.- Right, it could be that. It is perhaps a way of describing the enterprise that, I would think, applies more to mannerism and mannerists, than to writers like myself. I feel very much attached to the subject in a classical sense, in a very American Whitmanesque sense.

F. COLLADO.- In a humanist sense? You think that humanist values are still operative both in American life and in your novels?

R. BANKS.- Yes, very much so, and very much in a Whitmanesque sense. I am not particularly comfortable with this notion of the dissolution of the subject. Although I also have to tell you that I mistrust deeply the ways in which humanist values and humanist assumptions have been dramatized in fiction, conventionally. I think that these notions have to be re-invented, freshly. The language has to be re-appropriated and the forms and conventions of dramatic fiction have to be re-appropriated by the writer. That means that the literary project itself has not remained the same. In my case, something of interest here is the re-appropriation of the very notion of narrative, for instance with the use of omniscience in the narrative through means that are highly

artificial and self-conscious and which draw attention to those relations in order for myself, for my own project, to reappropriate the right to tell a story. It's my own private personal enterprise. I mean, anyone can generalize, I suppose, and see other writers engaged in a similar enterprise, although differently expressed; like Paul Auster, with his very neutralized white prose and highly rigorous and disciplined pattern-making. In this way he is doing something similar, but this is differently expressed by each individual writer, I think. Maybe you can generalize much more easily than I, to be sure, but I'm much more concerned with my own enterprise than anybody else.

F. COLLADO.- A realist enterprise, as you have said. Realism tries to depict or transcribe the kind of reality that we perceive through our senses, it involves the old concept of *mimesis*. However, many people in the twentieth century, especially scientists and philosophers, have been reaffirming again and again that the reality our senses perceive is not satisfactory enough. We are frustrated by our poor capacity to know the world. Is it then worthwhile to be a realist writer again?

R. BANKS.- Yes; absolutely. What you have said is true, life is evidently more complex, and any portrait that we can manage, any process we can write about should point to the limitations of the process itself, to the necessarily subjectivity of the process. The writer has to conceive that limitation, but having conceived that you still go on, like Beckett. I still go on, I have obviously realized that truth is limited, but then I have also thought that this is something probably irrelevant and nevertheless I go on. I think that a literary work that doesn't reflect this human impossibility to ever reach absolute truth is basically a work which is not very conscious and not very interesting as a result. But to go back to what I was saying originally, it would be impossible perhaps, or difficult, very difficult, to be conscious of all this had it not been for this whole generation of writers in the 60s and 70s, writers like Barthelme, Gass, Barth and so forth. They seriously questioned all those premises, raised them up, took them as far as you can take them, but then they began to repeat themselves. Having done that much must have taken a while, and it was very beneficial: I think that a culture has to do it periodically, it has to question the means by which to tell stories, it is a historical process.

F. COLLADO.- Let's talk a little bit more about those experimental writers you have just mentioned. Do you still perceive in the country the existence of a gap between this type of highly experimental literature that, if I may say so, can be labeled as already canonized, and this other type of realist literature that is perhaps more popular?

R. BANKS.- Yes. Well, you know, writers like Barth and Gass are canonized mainly in Europe, they are really not as canonized here as they are there, as happens in France certainly, and in England too. This is the case with experimental writers like Coover, Barth, Gass, Doctorow... you can also add Thomas Pynchon, although Pynchon is still publicly regarded as a great writer here, almost something approaching God, probably because of his invisibility. But in America these writers are regarded as primarily academic writers, who mainly appeal to literary critics and scholars whose concerns are narrow and esoteric, with relatively nothing to do with life. Although, in a sense, they

were also anticipatory of the main flow of serious fiction that just comes now, in the 80s and 90s: but there is a generational break-off point here that has not been fully acknowledged or described, as far as I know, especially in Europe. There people are probably less conscious than we are here in America, but now we have a generation of writers coming into full maturity, that is to say, authors in their late 40s or early 50s, who grew up in the 1960s, so their first experiences of society were, by and large, informed by the Vietnam War, by the Civil Rights Movement and the turbulence and social awareness of the 60s. And the writers that preceded them, the experimental writers we were talking about, were primarily male, primarily white, many of them were Eastern educated, primarily with graduate degrees, university degrees. They were writers who grew up and started to mature in the postwar years, in the 50s, and the lives that they have been living have been conditioned, in many ways, by the universities: their relation to writing has been, to a considerable degree, informed by that experience, which somehow explains why in the 60s and 70s the work they do doesn't seem to have any particular connection to the work of the next younger generation. There are almost no prominent writers I can think of in my generation, for instance, who would regard Barthelme, Gass, Barth, etc. as their teachers; we practically leap over this whole generation. My generation may be influenced by Latin American writers, or by French writers, but we by-pass that experimental generation of our own writers. Despite the fact that I am conscious of their experimentation, if you take myself as example, I also leap over them and go to writers like Norman Mailer or Richard Wright. I jumped over preceding writers. I think Joyce and Faulkner did the same with the great realists of the early part of the century. Older writers matter much more than the preceding generation and I think it has a lot to do with something that is generational, with a radical difference in the experience of society and literature in your period, in our case the period was the 1960s. We were young men then, and we are influenced by that experience in much the same way as the generation that produced writers such as Hemingway or Fitzgerald were influenced by World War I. They were young, they were 20 or 21 years old when they first went out into the world. I think that is generally true for writers; what happens to them when they first enter the larger world becomes more important than their family or their university.

F. COLLADO.- So, you essentially defend the existence of a generational gap between early experimental writers and your own generation, a gap mainly motivated by the effects produced in you by the social events of the 1960s...

R. BANKS.- Exactly, and by the values and priorities of writers, men and women, black and white,...

F. COLLADO.- Would you include in your generation the figure of Thomas Pynchon despite the fact that he is also experimental? He has even dedicated a book, *Vineland*, to the events of the 1960s...

R. BANKS.- Exactly, exactly. He is one of the writers whose concerns and priorities are informed and created in that pursuit of the 60s. But we were teenagers, we

were in college then, and you know, this is another important factor, the sociological change in this period too: where writers come from, who they are, where they are educated. The generation of experimental writers like Gass or Barth basically came from the middle and upper-middle class. They went to private universities, they were defined early on, they were *elected* in a sense early on in their lives. This may explain the sense of entitlement they have of belonging to a group, an appropriate group by and large. Whereas if you look at it from the perspective of the notes that are contributed today for the best American short-stories anthologies, in 1994, you see that younger writers have gone to state universities all over the country, they have come from everywhere, they are mixed, they are blacks and whites, male and female, they reflect much more clearly their pluralism, multicultural aspects of this country than writers did in previous generations.

And, of course, this has something to do with the shape of contemporary literature...

F. COLLADO.- Nevertheless, in this new American multicultural panorama there are some voices that claim that, once again, the whites are the ones who now try to appropriate the voices of the cultural minorities. I assume that you know Ishmael Reed's opinion about this issue...

R. BANKS.- Well, I think that Ishmael might sound a little bit paranoid at times. I mean, he's right about so many things that it's hard to criticize him, but I think he does tend to see conspiracies where there aren't necessarily any conscious or unconscious conspiracies. Ishmael will no more go back to the bad old days than I would; he is much happier here than he would have been 25 or 50 years ago. I think that, in some ways, Ishmael feels more excluded by being a Western or a male writer than for racial or other reasons. I mean, he's more worried about the fact that black women are getting more attention on the issue of racism than anybody else. I think it might be more a question of competition with them... He is obsessed with the subject, he writes about it all the time, but I wouldn't take it too seriously.

P: In a sense Ishmael Reed also offers, as a writer of fiction, a curious combination of experimental writing and social commitment, the same as happens, at times, in Pynchon's novels. Despite the evident differences with the way you write, do you think that Ishmael Reed is close to your own position as a social writer?

R. BANKS.- Yes, he is, and Don DeLillo is also. You can have a sense of feeling and *communality* with writers like Ishmael even if, on the surface, you would think that they have nothing in common with me or with Joyce Carol Oates. But in fact there is a great deal in common.

F. COLLADO.- Despite the fact that Oates, DeLillo, or Banks are white and Reed is not?

R. BANKS.- Yes, despite the racial issue. Not only do I feel the same, at times, as Norman Mailer. I also feel the same as Gloria Naylor; she is interested, I think, in trying to distribute moral values across the whole community rather than locating them

on individuals, she is challenging and working against the conventional, against the conventional ideas of the hero too, as I try to do in my own work.

I don't think the main problem is race, particularly. When you look over the spectrum of writers of America today who are between the age of 45 and 55, you are talking about a mixture of writers no one of whom stands out and holds the literary floor in the way Hemingway held the floor, or Faulker held the floor in the 1930s, for instance. What we have in America now is a much wider and more diverse group of writers. We are over 250 million people living in this country and our culture isn't controlled by such a small group of people as happened, I suppose, 20 or 25 years ago. That's changed a lot and we haven't quite processed the nature of those changes yet. The question that you were arising and what I'm also trying to address in my books very much has to do with those changes in the last 25 years, since the 60s.

F. COLLADO.- In the life of a contemporary American writer the social role played by the media is usually very important. What happens when a writer like Russell Banks starts to be *canonized*? Does it affect your literary agenda?

R. BANKS.- Well, it doesn't mean anything particularly difficult or depressing. As I was telling you, a writer here doesn't get canonized any more as happened to earlier writers. Now this means that your books are socially recognized, that they are translated...

F. COLLADO.- Or that you become a university professor at one of the most prestigious institutions of this country, something that only happens in America. How does it affect your work?

R. BANKS.- Yes, that is also true. Well, to write and, at the same time, to teach at the university is something so much widespread among writers of various qualities that it is difficult to take it seriously. I don't know, I don't feel canonized in the sense that in the past you had a handful of writers that, you could say, characterized American literature: Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, etc.; you could name one of them and the notion of American literature would be on your head and that's it. That was canonization. Now, there aren't too many reasons to say that there is a canonization. I mean, as we were saying earlier, the country is huge, we are 250 million people living here.

F. COLLADO.- However, only some among you become recognized overseas. Your novels have been translated and you have been invited to visit some European countries, including Spain. Surely it means something for you and your work?

R. BANKS.- I suppose so. But when you talk about such a vast number of writers really you may find it meaningless. You have to realize how much the life of writers has changed in America in the last half century, generally. In one way, the culture support many more writers than it did, but it does so in a much lower level. As I told you, there is no more that kind of golden superstars who were like kings. If you look, for instance in a 1940 issue of *Life* magazine, there is a picture of Ernest Hemingway advertising whisky there, and you have the impression that he is an icon, you immediately recognize that figure, in the same way you would recognize Frank Sinatra or a famous rock singer

Hemingway's face has a kind of iconographic reality. Writers don't obtain that any more. Or perhaps only writers like Stephen King, pulp writers, but not literary writers. And I don't mind this kind of leveling, I think it's all for the good not to have a few superstars but to have, at a lower level, a system that supports a larger number of serious writers. It's partly the university system that does it, which takes much criticism for this, especially from abroad. But without this system, American writers would surely have a much more difficult start.

F. COLLADO.-And don't you think that because you are a participant in this system established by the university, you have been assimilated into it?

R. BANKS. Well, not necessarily. It gives writers freedom to do what we want to do. If I were not working for the university, I would probably be writing journalism, writing myself to death, something like that. I remember having a big fight with Jim Harrison about 15 or 20 years ago. I was going into teaching at that point and he was writing screen plays. He was criticizing me for being *appropriated* by the university, while he was busy writing scripts, supporting himself up there independently. Well, he consumed himself doing that, he spent a lot of time and energy, and I'm sure he couldn't compromised himself, being a screen writer, a little bit more than I did. There is no problem about compromising our ideals, at least here in Princeton and, at the same time, you help your students advance their way through life.

F. COLLADO.- And in your double role as university teacher and creative writer, are you and your fictional work directly influenced by contemporary criticism, by thinkers like Derrida, Foucault, or Lacan? When I read some of your novels, I had the impression that they were deconstructing our conventional interpretation of reality.

R. BANKS.- No, and the danger in this issue is that I have put myself in a reactive mood or that, if you wish, I have a reactive *demon* in some way, out of my anger, frustration, irritation, impatience, when I have tried to read the work of some contemporary critics; so now I'm trying basically to ignore them. Deconstructing a world is basically what novels are doing all the time, what writers like Joyce [Carol Oates] or I are doing but you don't need to read Derrida. I like to read fiction or poetry of a high level, or history. Perhaps in a way I am influenced by these thinkers when I read works written by people who have been educated and informed by deconstruction theorists, especially if you read history or anthropology. But I think it doesn't organize my thoughts in any way about my own writing. I still write with the basic premises and sources which I worked from when I was 20 or 21 years old, when I was first starting. I mean, when I didn't have anything to say, and I still don't [laugh]... Seriously, in my case everything is always in relation to the theme I am writing about. All problems that occur in writing derive from the relationship that you obtain to this theme. I mean, I write this way, I write that way, but all the time I'm reorganizing my relation to the theme that I'm trying to write about, and that's a form of concern.

F. COLLADO.- And what about your readers? Do you also keep a particular set of readers in mind when you write?

R. BANKS.- Well, I'm very much interested in a kind of vernacular audience, rather than in a *high* audience. I'm much happier getting older in this way. And it's perhaps better than being canonized: one of the things I'm deeply satisfied as I get older is that my audience gets younger. But the audience shifts. You find that the original band pulls down with age. Your books are in paperback more and more and you are moving down a class too; you start as a writer in American hard-cover, and your audience is generally the appropriate one for your books, let's say middle-age women, for instance. but then after a while you move down somehow into the academy, your readers are Ph.Ds. or belong to the upper middle. I think that's the sort of movement that has been experienced by writers like Joyce Carol Oates, Toni Morrison or myself.

F. COLLADO.- Let us come back to a very specific part of your audience: your own students. As a teacher of creative writing, what do you exactly teach them?

R. BANKS.- That's a very good question. Well, I could begin by telling you that Joyce Carol Oates and myself are not teaching people here to be writers in the sense that it is a professional training program for graduate students, such as the one they have in Iowa, for instance. Joyce is an editor, and basically she works with students who are showing their ability to write. But our students are all undergraduates...The procedure might be similar to the one in Iowa, people come with their manuscripts and they are discussed and revised, but the premises are different and the students are different. Students are younger here, they are undergraduates, they don't have the bachelor degree yet. They are majoring in other areas like English literature, romance languages, engineering... My best writer now is a Chinese-American kid, a chemical engineering student, and he writes the best American slang you've ever seen. He's got a great ear and he just writes this stuff. He's trained to do it and he is also really fascinated by it, but he is a chemical engineering kid. Students are working on stories, on fiction pieces of various types but they are also reading anthologies, texts that we assign them and they are discussing it in a seminar format. So the combination of their being challenged to write fiction and to analyze and read fiction from the point of view of the writer makes them somehow better readers. Some way I feel I'm teaching reading rather than writing, I'm teaching reading in a way that is primarily analytical.

F. COLLADO.- And what about literary theory, does it play an important part in your classes?

R. BANKS.- Well, our teaching steps here tend to be more personal and historical and less critically informed and driven by theory than what they usually get in an English literature department. As you know, in literature departments theory analysis is very important, but this is not what students are getting in creative writing programs. In fact it's being said by the number of people that the last place, or perhaps the only place now where they are teaching literature in the American university is in the creative writing programs. You see, the only place where we are teaching literature that isn't driven by theory, by critical theory.

F. COLLADO.- I suppose you mean the recent impact of Cultural Studies in the American University, especially in the English departments...

R. BANKS.- Yes, that's correct. Nowadays they include everything in the same program. They include people like Madonna and Henry James, you know. They are studied together and treated as if they have the same significance [laugh].

F. COLLADO.- Yes, the key term in this field of studies seems to be *ideology*, I suppose, and, as you imply in your words, one may have the impression at times that some critics are a little too far-fetched in their research. However, in contemporary culture there is another aspect that, as you commented earlier, has also become predominant in current studies: I am referring to the present importance of cultural minorities. How does American cultural pluralism affect your own writing?

R. BANKS.- Well, I've learned actually a lot from novelists who are writing out of these different traditions. I have already mentioned Toni Morrison but there are other writers in her tradition whose works are also seriously informed, Charles Johnson, for instance, and other African-American writers. They are seriously informed by, let's say, their own position as a minority. This is a fascinating form to me. There are writers, I think, that somehow abuse this literary approach, but it is a very interesting pattern for me. The pluralism of American writing is very useful for all of us: American storytelling has been basically revitalized for the last decade or so, and everybody profits by it. If we are now borrowing from Western European traditions, it is also true that at the same time we are borrowing from the traditions that recreated, for instance, the African fiasco... It has been very positive and useful for American writing.

F. COLLADO.- Yes, but do you think that the situation is effectually and socially changing now? I mean, do you think that really social repression against minority groups is now being attenuated in American life?

R. BANKS.- Well, only human beings change, but nowadays you can invite people to have dinner, and tell them to speak at dinner. This is something that has been happening for the last decade with regard to women and with regard to minorities of various types. They are invited to speak up among white males, primarily. Certainly it's changing, but not in any grand dramatic fashion. This is not like the election in South Africa. That's significant, that's dramatic, almost apocalyptic, that's an event you can identify as a real social change. Yes, you can say: Oh, this week in April a huge event will happen in South Africa. Whereas in America we are talking about a gradual shift, very small changes occur over a long period of time. But even so, I would rather be a writer today, a woman writer, an African-American writer, Chinese-American, Spanish-American, or any kind of American, even a white male writer to be honest with you [laugh], better than 25 years ago.

Things are gradually changing. I have four daughters and I remember that one day my mother said to me, «I think it's terrible the way all the good schools now accept women.» My mother, it's clear, has a different mentality. So I said to her, «Mum ! Do you realize that everyone of your granddaughters has gone to college but they couldn't

have gone 25 years ago, and you were so proud that they went to colleges like Brown...» The change in one generation is obvious, but then take my daughters: they don't even know what the issue is about, they just took for granted that things were like they are now. In a way, it's the generation of people in their 50s who can look in both directions. We are the children of the elderly so we still remember the world from our parents' times, and we are parents of the youth, so that we can still try to see the world from the youth's point of view. I am now in a position in which I can understand my mother and my children...because I have to support both of them. It's the nature of American economy [laugh]...

F. COLLADO.- Perhaps that's what explains the irony that your readers may find in your novels. Thank you very much.