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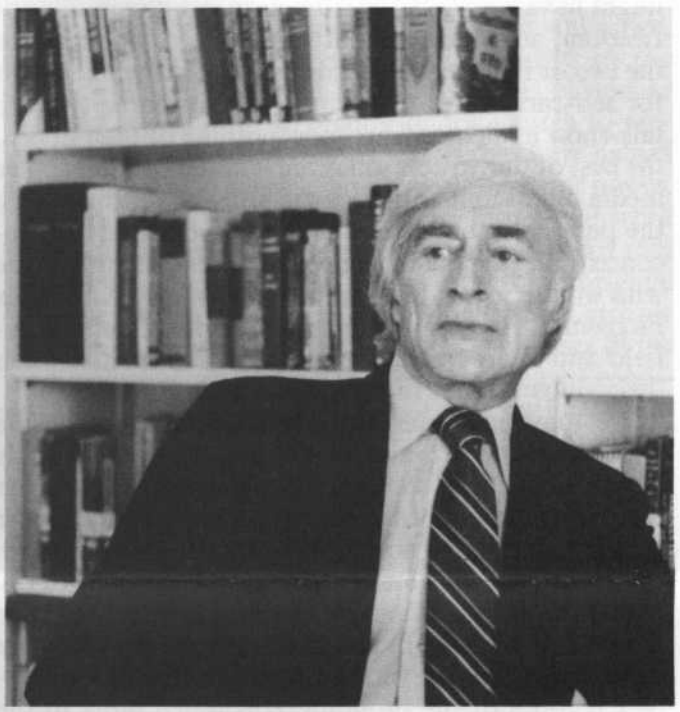
The Novel and the Imperial Self: Jogging to Oblivion

by John W. Aldridge

Editor's Preview: The novel, writes author and literary critic, John Aldridge, cannot be viewed as separable from the nature and quality of the human experience. The assumption is, therefore, that by examining the state of our literature, we can determine our own health. But, no one seems to care about the state of the novel these days. Why? Dr. Aldridge suggests two reasons. One is that the pursuit of novelty, always a normal urge among writers, has become an obsession. Another reason is that the dialectical balance between idealizing and debunking our myths has radically shifted. "In fact," Aldridge states, "it is a characteristic feature of some of our best and most serious fiction that in both the ideal and the reality of individual self-discovery and transcendence . . . have been replaced by a dark fantasy . . . it is no longer a heretical corrective of the lieties behind our illusions."



Preoccupation with the state of the novel was until bout ten years ago one of the major bores of American riticism. From the early Fifties well into the Sixties, was scarcely possible to get through a month without eading — as a rule in the Sunday book review supplements or the editorial pages of *Life* — that the novel this country was dying, was dead, was coming back om the dead, was being reincarnated in the mutant rms of a new journalism or a fictional nonfiction. hen quite suddenly the autopsical discussions stopped. And even though at the present time in the criticism f the other arts such problems as the desperate plight f the theatre, the scarcity of talented new playwrights, e vacuity or vulgarity of current films, the faddishness f modern painting continue to be dissected with unminished vigor, we very seldom hear anything more out the state of the novel, sick or well — presumably ecause we no longer care very much whether it lives dies.

For those of us who have worked closely with contemporary fiction, an explanation for this rather curious development comes easily to mind, although a convincing explanation of the explanation may be enormously difficult to discover. Clearly, if public and critical interest in the novel has declined, it has done so in large part because the novel over the past decade has dramatically lost authority both as an art form and as an instrument for reflecting and educating public consciousness. We have long taken it for granted that the great innovative authority of the classic modern novel is now an entombed, even ossified authority represented by a body of sacred writings worshiped for their ancient wisdom and their ability to evoke the spirit of a dead historical past. But what still seems surprising, no matter how long we have lived with the fact, is that novelists we continue to think of as very much alive and functioning contemporaries have been similarly institutionalized, as if they were already considered as passé as their great predecessors, and have come to be admired

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more for their artistry than for their power to excite our imaginations or deepen our understanding of the meaning of present-day experience. However gifted Bellow, Barth, Pynchon, Mailer, Roth, Heller, Updike, Hawkes, Gaddis, and our other important novelists may be, we somehow do not look to them for intellectual and imaginative leadership, as at one time we looked to the major novelists of the Twenties and Thirties.

Nor, for that matter, do we regard them as beings who, because of the originality of their work, have fascination as personalities or are leading lives that might in various ways instruct us in the possibilities of freedom, adventure, or individual integrity. Except for the two or three mostly third-rate novelists whose talent for self-caricature and bitchery has endeared them to talk-show audiences who know nothing of their books, the best of our writers today are ignored by the popular media unless and until they are arrested for disturbing the peace or manage to win the Nobel Prize. It is inconceivable that there is a novelist among us at this time who would be met by reporters at Kennedy Airport as Fitzgerald, Hemingway, even writers like Louis Bromfield and Pearl Buck, used regularly to be met when their ships arrived in New York from Europe.

We may pass over the more obvious and cliché reasons why these things are so: how artists of all kinds have lost celebrity status in a time when only regular media appearance can, however temporarily, confer such status; how the novel has declined in influence with the decline in the habit of serious reading and with the rise of the dictatorship now exercised by television over the limited powers of mass public attention. These are factors we may cite without engaging the more complex realities of the program. It is much more to the point to suggest that the authority of the novel never has been and probably never can be viewed as separable from the nature and quality of the human experience which, at any historical moment, may form its central subject matter.

Social transformations have over the past century provided the American novel with a continuously replenishing supply of vital materials, and usually their vitality has depended in very large measure on the factor of novelty, the opportunity afforded novelists by historical accident to express for the first time hitherto unknown or unexplored modes of feeling and being, new experiences that in some ultimate way were working to reshape the character of our national life and in the process were introducing fresh perspectives from which to envision the individual in some significantly altered relation to that life. These experiences will of course have been shared by some perhaps substantial part of the reading public. But they will *not* have been made understandable or imaginatively available to the public until recreated and evaluated in the work of an important novelist.

The history of the 20th-century novel in this country might in fact be described as an evolutionary development in which each successive generation of novelists has discovered and appropriated to its particular creative use one or more of the emerging social situations of its age, then has gradually — or in some cases very quickly — depleted it of its potential as imaginative material, in time, as a rule, with its absorption into the homogenizing system of the established national community. There seems always to be a moment when a nascent subculture, whether racial, ethnic, regional, or sexual, is, because of its newness or its bizarre character, a particularly fertile ground for the novel, just as there comes a moment when its materials will have grown familiar to the point of becoming unusable clichés and will lose authority to a more recently emerged subculture possessing newer and as yet unfamiliar materials.

This is a major reason why it is possible to speak of the stages in the growth of the American novel in terms of geographical locale and minority-group interest — and the process has repeatedly involved the conquest, consolidation, and finally the depletion and abandonment of new territories of social and imaginative experience. Beginning early in the 19th century and continuing through the years following World War II, we have had the New England novel of Hawthorne and Melville; the novel of the developing Western frontier of James Fenimore Cooper; the more deeply Western novel of Mark Twain; the international and New York novel of James and Wharton; the many works appearing after the turn of this century which dramatized the plight of the Midwestern and Southern adolescent struggling to escape the suffocations of the small town; other works which explored the usually destructive consequences of the adolescent's escape — to New York, Long Island, Paris, and the south of France. Later dur-

About the Author

Well known to the public for his role as a special commentator on the McNeil-Lehrer News Hour in the mid-1980s and as a literary critic for *Saturday Review,* John Aldridge is also a professor of English at the University of Michigan and the author of a number of highly acclaimed books. His works include: *After the Lost Generation* (1951), *Critiques and Essays on Modern Fiction* (1952), *In Search of Heresy* (1956), editor, *Selected Stories by P. G. Wodehouse* (1958), *The Party at Cranton* (1960), *Time to Murder and Create* (1966), *In the Country of the Young* (1970), *The Devil In the Fire* (1972), and *American Novel and the Way We Live Now* (1983). Dr. Aldridge is also a decorated veteran, having received the Bronze Star in World War II.

A longer version of this essay appears in *The American Novel and the Way We Live Now* (Oxford University Press, 1983).

ng the Thirties there were the large numbers of novels aving to do with the new Depression-created subculture f the economically dispossessed.

After 1945 the racial and ethnic novel came into uthority as the Anglo-Saxon Midwestern experience eased to be the typifying experience of most American riters. During that same period the Southern enaissance initiated by Faulkner reached maturity in ne work of several writers who were among the last o derive their primary materials from geographical ocale, materials which in their case were ultimately evitalized as a result of the proliferation of novels com-osed of self-parodistic Southernesque formulations.

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At the present time the best of our novelists seem, for easons later to be discussed, to have turned away from he direct presentation of regional and subcultural xperience, leaving the field largely to the newer women riters who, now that the homosexuals have had their ay, are speaking for what may well be the sole remain-ng American subculture still capable of providing elatively fresh materials for the novel.

An obsessive hunger for new experience and a isposition to seek it in the actualities of the social orld rather than produce it imaginatively — these have een highly visible characteristics of our writers for as ong as we have had a distinctively national literature. ut what is perhaps less evident is how often their pur-uit of novelty in materials is joined with a preoccupa-on with the pursuit and exploration of novelty as a terary theme.

The American novel tends to remain in a state of ncompromised adversary motion. Its characters move n or walk out at the end rather than regain admis-on to the social fold. The thrust of our imagination resolutely kinetic, and the driving impulse is to seek lvation in escape from community and in the con-rontation of unknown possibility. It is not surprising hat we have come to endow the search for new xperience with mystical and sacramental meaning. To ave behind the known and, because known, com-onplace reality is to invest in the promise of finding n elsewhere that will provide a second chance for being nd consciousness, a regeneration of sensibility in the iscovery of the authentic sources of the self. Cooper's ntrepid and simple-minded frontiersmen, Melville's ea-going pioneers, Hemingway's seekers after the holy ommunion of precise language and true emotion, Fitzgerald's oddly ascetic sentimentalists of wealth and glamor — all are fantasy projections of an essentially religious view of experience, a belief in the possibility of some form of beatific transcendence to be achieved through submersion in elemental nature, the exploration of instinctual truth, or the discovery of an earthly paradise of infinite richness and perfect beauty. It would seem that the experience of the frontier along with its attendant myths founded on such ideas as the corruptions of civilization can be left behind, that there exist inexhaustible territories of fresh challenge and adventure to be conquered, that the meaningful life is a continuous romantic pilgrimage into the virgin unknown, and that man is most noble as a pilgrim in the wilderness and closest to God when he is closest to nature — these have all obviously done much to program our psychic expectations just as they have helped to form a central thematic preoccupation of our novels.

But there has also been a contrary impulse at work behind the American novelistic imagination, and it may well derive from what remains of one of the original functions of the novel as a form, which was to provide critical and satirical commentary on the excesses of the medieval romance. For even as our novels have expressed, and often seemed to celebrate, our romantic fantasies and aspirations to transcendence, they have also served — as a rule through the indirections of irony, metaphor, and ambiguity — as stern moral monitors of them. If there was a strong mythic and mythologizing dimension to the frontier experience, there was also an even stronger dimension of practical reality, physical hardship, privation, and danger — the inescapable limitations imposed by the environment upon the flights of the pioneer imagination. The conquest of the wilderness may have depended upon the existence of the dream of an earthly paradise, but *survival* in the wilderness depended upon the development of a hardy and altogether disenchanted pragmatism. Americans, we know, have never been at ease with the schizophrenia thus induced in them, and many of our most important novels have recorded with powerful intensity the anguish and frustration it has caused.

"The urge for self-transcendence in the struggle to defend some abstract ideal of dignity, moral principle, or social responsibility was revealed as a response to some deep necessity within the human spirit, a hubristic challenge to the power of the gods in which defeat was finally the measure of the significance, even the tragic heroism, of that necessity."

From the first genuinely American fiction of Cooper through the fables of Vonnegut, the pattern has repeatedly been one in which romantic aspiration or a certain idealistic vision of reality is subjected to the test of experience and shown to be empty pretense or illusion, founded on false values or meretricious hopes rather than on premises which take into account the practical necessities and the frailties of the human condition. The Ur-figures are of course Cooper's

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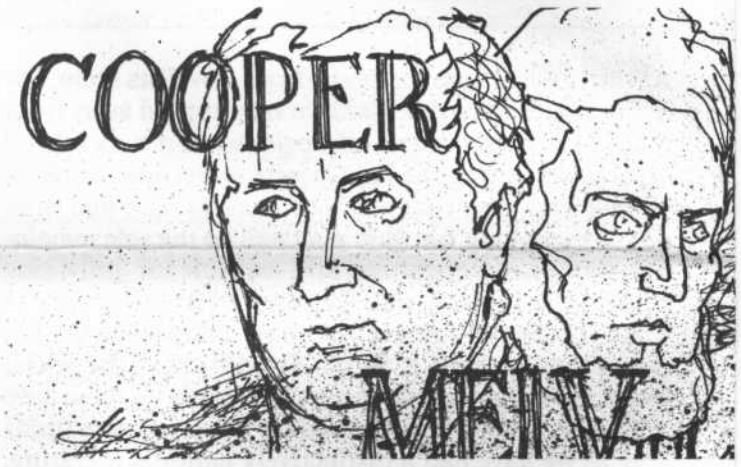
Leatherstocking and Melville's Ahab, both of whom are men obsessed with an idea of godliness and personal purity and who pursue it in the conquest of, or escape into, the sanctity of nature. Leatherstocking is overtaken and finally destroyed by the evils of the civilization he was presumptuous and innocent enough to try to flee, while Ahab presumes beyond the limits of human power and is defeated by a force that is both natural and cosmic. Twain and James were both champions of the natural moral sense, that innate power of knowing right from wrong which Thomas Jefferson believed to be part of the common property of all mankind. But both writers also knew that such a sense is a fragile weapon for survival in the world in which the *universal* possession of this sense is, in actual fact, proven again and again to be itself an illusion. In Twain's case it is the adult world into which one day Huck and Tom, like Holden Caulfield, will have to grow up. For James the continuing metaphor is the society of Europe in which Isabel Archer's and Lambert Strether's trusting American ingenuousness is educated into a sullied comprehension of the nature of evil and the necessity for personal responsibility.

The list could be extended, but significantly enough, appropriate examples become scarcer as we approach closer to the present time. While it is true that the 20th century has been remarkable for the accelerating vengeance with which novelists throughout the world have carried on the process of demythifying experience and eviscerating our illusions, it seems also to be true that at some point the dialectical balance had radically shifted. For we now suffer from a surfeit of negation and an apparent failure of understanding of just what values have been negated, what were the illusions we once mistook for truth, and what, if any, remain to be exposed. In a time when there is much evidence to indicate that fresh areas of social experience for the novel's exploration have sharply diminished in number, we must also confront the fact that the great demythifying function of the novel seems to have come to an end in a cultural situation in which there seems to be little left to demythify and which has actually been engaged for years in a self-destructive process of demythifying itself. In almost every sector of human experience and endeavor — in politics, education, business, sexuality, marriage, the having and rearing of children — contemporary American society is itself performing the job once performed by our novelists, stripping way layers of idealistic assumption, hypocrisy, illusions of purpose, meaning, integrity, principle, and responsibility and exposing the emptiness or the corruption or the insanity beneath.

This has of course profoundly affected the nature of life in America at the present time, hence, inevitably, the nature of the contemporary novel and our response to it. For if we once found pleasure, instruction, even perhaps a form of Aristotelian purgation of the emotions of pity and fear through seeing, in so many novels



of the past, our idealistic aspirations subjected to the test of actuality and exposed as mistaken or illusory, we did so in part because aspiration in its conflict with actuality was endowed with virtue, even when affirmed in the face of hopeless odds. The urge for self-transcendence in the struggle to defend some abstract ideal of dignity, moral principle, or social responsibility was revealed as a response to some deep necessity within the human spirit, a hubristic challenge to the power of the gods in which defeat was finally the measure of the significance, even the tragic heroism, of that necessity.

Today, in most of the novels, that, for artistic reasons, should be able to make a serious claim upon our attention, we find reflected a complex of conditions and responses of a radically different order. To the extent that they contain any realistic portrait of the actualities of the present time, they tend to dramatize not our hopes but our feelings of generalized frustration and disappointment, not our need for transcendence but our paranoid fears that some obscure force, some metaphysical C.I.A. has robbed us of the means and

the possibility and is bent on manipulating us in directions and for reasons we cannot understand and that have nothing to do with us personally. In fact, it is a characteristic feature of some of our best and most serious fiction that in it both the ideal and the reality of individual self-discovery and transcendence as central thematic preoccupations have been replaced by a dark fantasy in which prophecy and paranoia join to project a horror of universal conspiracy and mass apocalypse. At the center of that fantasy one discovers once again the classic modernist representation of the human condition: the dislocated self no longer sustained by the social structures and idealistic assumptions of the past, trapped in a demythologized and therefore demoralized present, dying a little more each day as the forces of entropy deepen and accelerate throughout the world. This is not a vision capable of giving us very much further instruction. Its meaning has been canceled by the cliche it has become, and it has lost its former adversary function: It is no longer a heretical corrective of the pieties behind our illusions.

as a whole — or put another way, the individual life transvaluated into a projection of, and a vexation laid upon, society as a whole. It is from society seen as a corporate entity that people now try to derive what sense they can of communal relationship and identity, and the effort has most often been made through declarations of allegiance to various political, sexual, racial, or ethnic groups, membership in which is based scarcely at all upon concrete experiences and shared backgrounds (as was the case with minority and subculture membership in the past) but rather upon problems that are conceived of in theoretical and statistical terms as being peculiar to a particular group.

And there inevitably emerges a state of mind inspired by the hollow belief that life in general is not an experience to be lived but a problem to be solved. But the individual has not been freed by the view that life is a problem to be solved by the right application of technological method. Rather, he has been forced to become obsessed with the technology of *all* his personal processes, to see them, as he sees himself and other

We now take it for granted — and the fact creates around us a subliminal envelope of rehabilitating drama — that we inhabit a world in which violence of any and every kind can erupt anywhere and everywhere at any time with or without provocation or meaning. This is a world that some few of us experience every day, but for the rest of us it exists as an abstraction projected and often seemingly created by the reality-manufacturing and reality-fantasizing media of television and film. Our direct experience is usually of another kind of abstraction, an urban or suburban non-community in which we are perhaps most conscious of floating in disconnection between business and home, passing and being passed by strangers in the void.

The physical dislocation of the individual from direct relation to his social and public experience has its correlative in an ideological dislocation that has grown increasingly visible over the last ten or fifteen years. There has been a deepening and even more obsessive preoccupation during this period with the nature and problems not so much of the individual life as of society

people, as objects to be analysed and evaluated for their correctness according to various behavioral measurements and sociological surveys. Since instinct or simply intelligence can no longer be trusted as a guide to feeling and conduct, since the precedent of the past is considered an inhibition from which we are struggling to escape, only technique is left.

It is not remarkable, therefore, that we should now inhabit a culture distinguished by its lack of a sense of present purpose and future direction, by a political doctrine based on a worship of the ordinary and a fear or excellence, and by the magnitude of its obsession with mortality. The currently ubiquitous figure of the jogger is the perfect emblematic image of our age, the supreme embodiment in physical terms of the imperious self-absorption with which, in technological terms, psychiatry has so thoroughly indoctrinated us. The jogger, alone in limbo *not* with his fantasies but with his precious physique, oblivious of his surroundings, attentive only to the workings of his biological machine, sweating and straining to create through the maximum

enhancement of his strength a vitality he cannot discover in the experience of his time — no rough beast its hour come round at last, but an ordinary obsessive soul jogging toward the Bethlehem of his dream of immortality, running to prolong a life into which he might well fear that he will not be born before he dies, that his hour will never come round at last or at all. Surely, in such pathos some revelation for the novelist is at hand.

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Shavano

The Shavano Institute for National Leadership has recently held seminars entitled "Courting Disaster: Our Lawsuit Crisis" in Traverse City, Michigan, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Boston. The following comments highlight the positions taken by their respective authors and indicate the variety of opinion that characterizes Shavano Institute presentations.

"As we have lost our sense of community and sense of personal responsibility, we have turned increasingly to government to live our lives and solve our problems for us. Of course the political and legal system can do just so much and no more. In fact, it can do little indeed unless it governs citizens who retain their sense of community and responsibility. Without a *morally* healthy culture, our politics or economics can never be healthy. The litigation crisis is best understood as a part of this *larger cultural crisis of our times.*"

George Roche
President, Hillsdale College

"But what is America losing? An awful lot, I think. The most dramatic losses may be seen in four particular

areas. The first involves jobs, trade, competitiveness, and the economic health of our system. Firms, for sheer economic reasons, are no longer as inclined to build plants in the United States where they fall under American legal jurisdiction. Chemical companies are the most shy. Why would they want to locate in the United States and make themselves liable to toxic waste suits when they wouldn't face the same sort of problem in another country? And there is bound to be a decline in investment in companies which are prone to increased exposure to liability suits. Chemical companies, aircraft manufacturers, and many other industries face greater and greater exposure. Firms which manufacture machine tools, truck wheel rims, industrial machinery, and so on face high risks as far as liability is concerned because they make a product that stays around a long time. And so as long as the product is still being used, they are liable to be sued if something goes wrong.

This does not hold true for foreign firms just breaking into the field. Insurance costs are simply lower for foreign firms. Researchers recently completed a study of industrial machinery used in textile manufacturing and found out that foreign firms paid 1-5% of the insurance costs of American firms in the same field — 1-5%, that's not much. And they just didn't have the same sort of suits filed by their employees who make use of workman's compensation instead, the way they used to in the United States.

But the most ominous result of the liability crisis is not all these things that we know we are losing, but the things we don't know we're losing: the medicines that will either never be discovered or will never be put on the market, the innovations in industry that will never be found or will be never implemented. The overriding problem with the liability crisis is that it tends to produce a stand-pat, cautious, unimaginative, uninventive society — one which ultimately will decline.''

Fred Barnes
Senior Editor
New Republic

Senator William Proxmire comments on the *Consumer Reports* theory that the insurance crisis has been deliberately manufactured by the insurance companies themselves:

''That is the kind of fantasy about conspiracy that is worthy of Lyndon LaRouche. When he says the Queen of England is the principal operator of a worldwide drug ring, we know that is nonsense. It is the kind of fantastic charge that I think is patently ridiculous, but it is exactly the sort of thing that *Consumer Reports* is indulging in in its treatment of the insurance companies. Anybody who knows anything about insurance companies knows that you can't find a business that's driven more by actuarial tables and by competition. There are lots of insurance companies in this country but no single or even group of companies dominates. I am sure that Michigan has a number of insurance companies which operate nationally and compete vigorously.

Consumer Reports notes that the insurance companies are currently taking a beating because interest rates are down and that they may be trying to recover their investment losses by hiking liability insurance premiums. But life insurance and fire insurance rates aren't up. They are up for product liability and they are up for malpractice because of the growing number of liability suits which are filed each year. There is no question about that. Who is to blame? How about the system that provides the glittering prospect of compensation — hundreds of thousands of dollars — for a few weeks' or months' work for a lawyer, or a system that provides only about one-third of the cost of the liability system for the victims?

Let me conclude by saying that we do need a system which will provide assistance to those who do suffer. Our current system simply isn't working. When only one-third of liability awards are going to those who are the victims, justice isn't being properly served. Representative Dick Armey stressed this so well and so emphatically, but I will just repeat it because it is very important: We have to recognize that one thing we are very proud of in this country is our reputation for self-reliance and individual responsibility. One can overdo it, obviously. Sometimes even very self-reliant and very careful people suffer terrible, damaging, traumatic experiences through no fault of their own. But self-reliance is no longer the norm.

We should also hammer away, over and over again, about safety. If ever there was an area in which an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, this is it. We should do everything we can to tell our children and our grandchildren and the people we work with how important it is to be careful and that it is our responsibility to prevent accidents. Then, I think, we can make some real progress. Rather than pointing fingers at the insurance business, the lawyers, or in trying to settle for making people queen or king for a day, we must reform the system.''

Judge J. Clifford Wallace:

''Six years ago the Chief Justice of the United States requested that I undertake the task of giving preliminary, exploratory thought to the problems that the judicial system will encounter in 10, 15, and 20 years and what types of questions we should ask ourselves in progressing towards reasonable solutions to those future problems. He referred to the ''whole infinite range of problems that are being thrust on the judicial system and which are constantly expanding.'' He did not request that solutions be recommended, but did ask me 'to raise the questions whose answers we ought to be probing for.'

From my study, I concluded that the major questions that require ventilation involve a determination of the types of disputes that should be decided in the courts, and what substantial structural changes within the court system should be required. So the analysis I suggest is two-fold: we must decide first what disputes should be resolved in the courts as distinguished from some other dispute resolving body, and, second, how the court process should be changed. I believe that to accommodate a new era, different types of dispute-resolution models are needed as well as changes in the present mainstream court model. A secondary, but no less important goal is accommodating these changes without interfering with the required independence of the judiciary and without modification of the important basic functions of the judicial system which have benefited our country over the years.

We have enjoyed and been recipients of the best system of justice known in the world. Perhaps we have become too complacent. We do not see a united leadership addressing this vital concern. It is insufficient to put band aids on the problem — such as adding a few more judges. It is necessary for us to look at our entire dispute-resolving procedures and processes and make important value decisions as to where disputes should be resolved and pursuant to what procedures. The court system needs to be preserved for those disputes that it can most effectively and properly handle. We must experiment with alternative dispute resolution procedures to develop means of better handling other disputes. It is long-range planning and taking seriously the challenge which is before us which affords us the best opportunity to solve the litigation crisis."

THE FREE MARKET AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Concentrating his analysis on the concepts of nuisance law and injunction, Hillsdale College Associate Professor Robert Blackstock concludes: "For 20 years the free market has been under indictment as powerless to protect the environment. In actuality it was never given a chance. The environmental cause, long championed by the left, should be of grave concern to us all, for it was the perversion of free market principles that granted industry the license to foul our nest. Only through restoration of private property to its proper place will these wrongs be put right."

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DONOR NEWS

THE NEW TAX LAW:

As you are aware, the new tax law will affect the amount you may deduct on your federal tax return for charitable contributions. By giving now, you will still be able to take advantage of existing regulations, particularly if your gift is in the form of stock or appreciated property.

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Another important way to make your tax-deductible contributions go farther is to enroll in your company's matching gift program. Some businesses offer to double or even triple your pledge by supplementing it with a matching corporate donation; for every dollar you give to Hillsdale College, your company may also give one, even two, dollars! Check with your company's personnel or matching gift officer today. There's no better way to make free enterprise—or independent education—succeed.

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