

Like Life: Some Versions of Realism

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Contextualized Naturalism: The Artfulness of Russell Banks's *Affliction*

Perhaps because American fiction has always been especially animated by the opposing tendencies toward realism on the one hand and fabulation on the other, toward the "novel" as developed in Europe and toward what Hawthorne insisted was "romance," writers' allegiances to either of these modes often seem as much the real subject of their work as the characters and situations that are ostensibly its focus. Whether a writer is attempting earnestly to capture "life as it's lived" or instead to highlight the difference between fiction and life seems to have a manifest salience more pronounced than in European fiction. Among contemporary American fiction writers, the centrality of the relationship to one or the other of these approaches is often especially noteworthy as a kind of intervention into an existing tradition to which the writer in effect declares him/herself an adherent. Most noteworthy, perhaps, is the case of a writer who appears to shift allegiances, whose work comes to exemplify the very tendency it has previously resisted.

Such a writer is Russell Banks, who commenced his career producing experimental fables and metafiction such as *Family Life* (1974) and *Hamilton Stark* (1978) but who with *Continental Drift* (1985) began writing the increasingly realist and naturalist novels by which he is now most widely known. One might interpret Banks's "conversion" as either a repudiation of the experimental—or "postmodern"—practices of the 1960s and 1970s in American fiction or as affirmation of the realist/naturalist/ mode as exemplified by Norris, Dreiser, or Steinbeck, but while I believe that Banks does present his later work as a reinscription of sorts of the naturalist tradition, it is not so obvious that this entails an outright repudiation of the nonrealist strategies he himself used in his fiction of the preceding period. The stories told and the devices used in such books as *Continental Drift*, *The Sweet Hereafter* (1991), and *Rule of the Bone* (1995) are undoubtedly more transparent than those in most of the books from *Searching for Survivors*, Banks's first book, to *The Relation of My Imprisonment* (1983), but it seems altogether implausible that such a break from past assumptions about the function of prose narrative would be a complete one, and, indeed, Banks's neo-naturalist novels frequently enough employ techniques that complicate the relationship between reality and its representation in fiction, that in effect bracket the strategies of naturalism as aesthetic strategies without ever being quite so intrusive as to deflect attention away from the characters or the emotional "content" of the stories being told about them.

Affliction (1987) may be the post-postmodern Banks novel that most fully and most effectively illustrates this hybrid form of naturalism. It offers a portrayal of character, setting, and incident that is arguably closest to "classic" naturalist narrative and that evokes a

genuinely affecting “world” recognizable as our own in its pain and suffering. One can read the novel entirely for the traditional rewards of character and plot, remaining mostly unaware of the devices the author employs to contextualize the characters and the story within an existing tradition. But attention to the role of these devices in mediating our response can introduce a degree of contingency to that response, an awareness of context that makes it—the relationship between this narrative and the ancestor narratives that give it an extra resonance—part of the novel’s conceptual canvas. An enhanced appreciation of *Affliction* both as the story of the downfall of its rural, working-class protagonist, despite his best intentions, and as the story of this story as one of the sort favored in the tradition of American naturalism becomes possible, even if some or even most readers undoubtedly settle for the first.

In his Twayne U.S. Authors series book on Banks, Robert Niemi also notes the crossing of a literary-modal divide in Banks’s career, but he identifies the two competing practices as “socially conscious fiction” and “avant-garde fiction.” It would be accurate enough to describe the bifurcation in Banks’s fiction in these terms as well, although Niemi conceives of the difference it makes in Banks’s work entirely in terms of “content,” specifically as it arises from “the peculiar and enduring mentality of [the writer’s] social class origins.” According to Niemi, Banks is distinctive as a writer “willing and able to write across social boundaries, one who knows how to dolly back for a revealing long shot of the American class structure in its looming totality.” In my view, this is much too narrow a conception of the stakes involved in Russell Banks’s transition to “social” fiction, which are as much aesthetic as they are thematic. While it is true that some writers adopted literary naturalism as a way of writing “socially conscious fiction”—Steinbeck and Farrell, for example—to maintain that the first generation of naturalists—Norris, Dreiser, Crane—wrote a kind of fiction that can be adequately characterized as primarily a form of social commentary seems to me to unnecessarily restrict both realism and naturalism to their most obvious documentary functions.

Furthermore, to claim that the acuity of its “social observations” adequately accounts for *Affliction*’s narrative power, that it achieves this power most importantly through Banks’s ability to “dolly back for a revealing long shot of the American class structure,” would be equally simplistic. Banks takes the novels of Dreiser and Norris as his touchstones, not those of Steinbeck and Farrell, and like *Sister Carrie* and *McTeague*, *Affliction* is concerned with more than the “class structure” that circumscribes its protagonist’s life possibilities, however much those possibilities are circumscribed by forces beyond his control, or even his comprehension. As such scholars as Donald Pizer and Michael Davitt Bell have illustrated, “naturalism” was for the first American writers to adopt it an intensification of realism that allowed them to get even closer to “reality” by revealing its constituent forces observable only in the way they work themselves out through narrative. The nature of these forces is

portrayed in the major naturalist novels as broadly philosophical, strongly biological, partly psychological, unavoidably sociological, but certainly not centered on the “American class structure in its looming totality,” in the politicized terms advanced by Niemi.

All of these factors underlie as well the portrayal of Wade Whitehouse and his misaligned fate in *Affliction*, although no one of them fully accounts for Wade’s troubled life. On the philosophical level, Wade seems to be caught up in a cycle of decline, an irresistible descent into deeper irrelevance and the diminution of his sense of himself as a man it entails. If this is not necessarily his pre-ordained fate, once the assorted misfortunes—Wade’s divorce and his subsequent estrangement from his daughter, his exclusion from the investigation into an “accidental” hunting accident (Wade is the town’s part time police officer), which leads to further sleights to his authority, the death of his mother and the rekindling of father-son conflict it provokes—begin to press fully on Wade with their interlocking weight, the unrelenting pressure to which he ultimately succumbs begins to seem deliberately directed toward him as part of some preestablished plan rather than simple bad luck. Wade Whitehouse’s claim to his place in the universe is being cancelled.

To some extent (and Banks is actually rather courageous in framing Wade’s dilemma so squarely in these terms at a time when “masculinity” is at best an embattled concept), Wade is portrayed explicitly as a man whose sense of his own masculinity is under assault and whose response to the diminishment of his role as father and ostensible authority figure is largely an instinctual one, the result of biological and psychological imperatives over which Wade has no effective control. That Wade wants to be a good father to his daughter seems readily apparent, but he also seems to have no plausible conception of how to do this, and his fumbling efforts to maintain a connection with her only exacerbates the problem and fuels Wade’s increasing desperation. Similarly, Wade’s already dubious status as the town’s lone policeman is further eroded through his interactions with Gordon La Riviere, town bigwig and Wade’s boss, and with Mel Gordon, who defies Wade’s attempt to cite him for a traffic offense and who, along with La Riviere, Wade believes is involved in arranging the hunting accident that killed union boss Evan Twombly, Gordon’s father-in-law. His frustration with these challenges to his masculine self-image, although never exactly expressed by the narrator directly, again leads him to self-destructive actions he seemingly can no longer avoid.

Before Wade Whitehouse descends irretrievably into his final rage, however, he experiences another unwelcome reminder of his precarious place in the world of masculine power relations. His mother’s death is a traumatic enough event, but ultimately its most damaging effect on Wade is that it draws him more closely into his now widowed father’s orbit, which revives old animosities and elemental conflicts from Wade’s violence-laden childhood. Not only was Wade’s father prone to alcohol-stoked outbursts of violence against Wade and his older brothers, but the atmosphere of dread and intimidation he created clearly hasn’t dissipated, either in Wade’s continuing encounters with him or in the shadow it has cast over Wade’s life in general. Wade makes the mistake of assuming more responsibility for his

father following on his mother's death—for which in his negligence Glenn Whitehouse is mostly to blame—and this renewed proximity only brings the long-simmering hatreds and resentments between them to the ultimate conflagration of the novel's conclusion. Wade's own incipient capacity to inflict great violence, whether inbred or conditioned by the destructive environment in which he had to live, can no longer be contained as he kills his father and sets the body alight, then shoots the man he suspects of carrying out the hit on Evan Twombly, Wade's own ostensible best friend, Jack Hewitt.

It is certainly possible to see in the disaster of Wade Whitehouse's life sociological ramifications of various kinds, to take Wade's life as a case study in working-class frustration or rural decline, but to focus first of all and most directly on the sociological in *Affliction* is to fail to understand Banks's ambitions as a novelist, which, to judge only by his previous work, incorporates the social but doesn't begin or end there. Bank's work has consistently been characterized by a more than cursory attention to form and style, a reluctance to settle for a single formal strategy or stylistic signature. Works as diverse as *Hamilton Stark*, *Continental Drift*, *The Relation of My Imprisonment*, and, following *Affliction*, *The Sweet Hereafter* and *Rule of the Bone*, are united in their apparent determination to try out different narrative strategies and points of view, as well as the various stylistic performances appropriate to such strategies and perspectives. It is apparent enough that Banks has a "subject"—life as lived by working-class people in the American northeast—to which he regularly returns, but over the long run this subject really functions more as the means to a series of aesthetic variations than as an obsessive effort to produce "social fiction."

The naturalist narrative can thus be seen as one such variation. Banks attempts to adapt the form to the circumstances obtaining in the rural northeast rather than Chicago, San Francisco, or the Bowery of New York, and to the changes in literary sensibility that have ensued between the end of the 19th century and the end of the 20th. Even critics who aren't otherwise happy with those changes, who hold up a writer like Banks as one who sustains the possibility of social realism, tend to acknowledge that *Affliction* isn't simply a re-animation of 19th century realism. Niemi refers to Banks as a "postmodern naturalist." Fred Pfeil, who describes Banks's early work as "pointlessly obsessed with narrational experiment" and "formalistically hollow," nevertheless finds that in *Affliction* "Banks avoids the twin dangers of a mere 'sociological' accuracy on the one hand, and a voyeuristic sensationalism on the other, through a wise combination of elevating and distancing techniques" Pfeil associates with Brecht (*Another Tale to Tale: Politics and Narrative in Postmodern Culture*). Pfeil believes these techniques are used to strengthen the novel's political resonance through avoiding sentimentality, but at the same time, the very devices Banks employs to create the novel's "distancing effects" make Pfeil object to its narrative strategy as too intrusive.

One of the ways in which Banks alters the inherited narrative method of naturalism is to assign the narration of Wade Whitehouse's story to another character involved in that story, Wade's younger brother, Rolfe. Although Rolfe is thus technically a first-person narrator, for the most part he relates the story from a removed and detached perspective, presenting his

narrative as the result of his own research into his brother's disappearance and the circumstances preceding it. The narrative thus assumes the tone of a carefully arranged chronicle—Rolfe is himself a history teacher—that also allows Rolfe to occasionally pause and interject a kind of free-floating, philosophical reflection reminiscent of the authorial commentary in, say, *Sister Carrie*, but, since it originates in the character's discourse, more suitably integrated into the narrative proper:

. . .in the fifteen years since I last spent a Halloween [in Lawford], which is to say, since I was in high school, the place has not changed much. In fifty years it has not changed much. But visualizing the place, going there in memory or imagination, is not something I care to do. I studiously avoid it. I have to be almost tricked into it or conjured. Lawford is one of those towns that people leave, not one that people come back to. And to make matters worse, to make it even more difficult to return to, even if you wanted to go back—which of course no one who has left the town in this half century wants to do—those who remain behind cling stubbornly as barnacles to the bits and shards of social rites that once invested their lives with meaning: they love bridal showers, weddings, birthdays, funerals, seasonal and national holidays, even election days. Halloween, as well. A ridiculous holiday, and for whom, for what? It has absolutely no connection to modern life.

Pfeil asserts that passages such as this mar the novel's otherwise "splendid narration": "Suddenly, the beautifully pitched detachment of the rest of the novel turns into portentous, unpersuasive flailing." But it is hard to accept that the novel could exhibit a "splendid narration" at the same time it's narrator is "flailing" and is someone the reader cannot "believe in or care about. . .as an individual character whenever he is roped into the plot." Pfeil believes that "for the most part. . .we can forget he's supposed to be the source of what we read," but this can hardly be the case. How can we forget that the voice narrating the story of Wade Whitehouse is Wade's brother, who has shared some of Wade's formative experiences but who has lived apart from Wade for long enough that Wade has himself become mostly just a voice on the telephone? How can we forget that this vexed relationship substantially determines both the portrayal of Wade and his environment and the manner in which Rolfe relates these particulars?

Pfeil wants Banks to have written a novel whose point of view represents "an expository near-omniscience," but this is not in fact the novel Banks has written. There are indeed many extended passages in which Rolfe narrates the action in the "studiously detached" way Pfeil thinks is appropriate to the Brechtian social fiction he wishes *Affliction* to be, but it seems at the least rather inconsistent to celebrate this mode of narration when it appears to be what it isn't—a disembodied third-person narration—but to condemn it when it reveals its actual source in a potentially unreliable narrator. Pfeil asserts that he is unable to believe that "Rolfe can know all he's saying or [can] execute this masterful narration," but this fails to account for the possibility that Banks wants us to question whether his narrator "can know all he's saying," or at least to consider that the mode of narration presented to us is itself relevant to

our perception of the narrative. Surely a writer of Russell Banks's skills would not deliberately undermine his "masterful narration" by substituting "unpersuasive flailing" for no apparent reason.

Robert Niemi is more tolerant of Rolfe's role in assembling and relating the text that is *Affliction*, noting that "without his mediation Wade's story would surely lose psychological and moral depth." But Niemi is closer to identifying Rolfe's most essential task when he observes that *Affliction* is "a meticulous narrative reconstruction of a subject that is absent from the outset." One could say that the novel is a "reconstruction" insofar as Rolfe has pieced together as much information as he can gather and presented it to us as a coherent narrative. However, it is precisely that the story concerns "a subject that is absent from the outset" that makes Rolfe's version more than a "reconstruction." In his brother's absence, both from the current scene altogether and in effect from Rolfe's life since he went away to college, Rolfe is as much constructing as reconstructing Wade's story, imagining Wade himself as much as simply documenting his actions. Rolfe's "meticulous" style of narration only and additionally highlights Rolfe's sense of himself as an author patiently putting together what he hopes will be a compelling narrative that stands up to scrutiny as a verbal construction, apart from the opportunity it provides Rolfe to reflect on his brother's decline and fall.

It is entirely consistent with our experience of Rolfe's narration to say that he represents a muted version of the self-reflexive narrator to be found in metafiction. Rolfe interrupts the story from time to time, calls attention to his meticulously constructed narrative, precisely in order to remind us that an objective, omniscient rendering of the final days of Wade Whitehouse is not possible, that not even Wade's brother knows him well enough to give us an unquestionably accurate portrait of him. We do not encounter the "real" Wade Whitehouse in *Affliction* because the real Wade Whitehouse is ultimately a stranger to Rolfe and we must make do with the Wade Rolfe is able to conjure from his "research" and his own memory. The only way in which Rolfe Whitehouse is able to invoke his older brother Wade is to make of him a fictional character that can then be seen to manifest those qualities and influences Rolfe believes might explain Wade's actions.

This does not mean that we respond to Wade Whitehouse as something other than a recognizably "human" character into whose circumstances we can imaginatively project ourselves as readers without having our attention explicitly turned away from Wade's dilemma and toward the means of representing that dilemma. Ignoring the means of representing Wade and his story does seem to me a willful denial of the relative complexity of *Affliction's* narrative scheme, but the novel is certainly not metafictional to the extent that we must suspend our belief in the representational illusion Banks still wants us to maintain. The novel is about Wade Whitehouse, not about its own status as fiction (although its status as fiction can appropriately be considered), and our response to Wade can be as complicated as our response to actual human beings. Indeed, an important measure of the success of *Affliction* would have to be precisely the degree to which we do finish the novel

feeling some combination of compassion and horror toward Wade, regarding him as a human being in all of his multifarious and often contradictory traits and behaviors. Any consideration of form, style, or narrative technique would for most readers be a way of extending our perception of this character, not of reflecting on the artifice of fiction-making.

Banks's variations on the naturalist plot and naturalist narrative method in my view make *Affliction* a more artful novel than most of those written by the proto-naturalists, but must its art be an obstacle to a full engagement with the characters that art helps bring to life? One of the consequences of Rolfe's self-regulating narration is that by the time Rolfe himself steps out as an active character to attend his mother's funeral, he has already impressed himself on us as a character whose struggle to understand the forces shaping his brother's life is also the attempt to understand the forces shaping his own. Among the strongest of these forces is the formative influence exerted by Glenn Whitehouse, a character most readers must experience as unpleasant in the extreme but who is nevertheless portrayed with a bestial immediacy that eliminates all distance between readers and characters, making the artifice of character-creation seem a trivial consideration. Yet it is of course the "meticulous" way in which Banks has employed such artifice that builds these characters into the memorable figures they are, just as his equal skill in the elaboration of plot and evocation of setting works to create the very sense of realism in *Affliction* that critics such as Fred Pfeil value in it most highly.

If *Affliction* calls more attention to its own artful construction than *Sister Carrie* or *McTeague*, it is also finally more convincing as a representation of both character and setting, as well as more credible as a narrative depicting true-to-life events than either of these novels. However compelling they are in their unrelenting adherence to their own narrative logic, neither of them can really be described as telling stories that are altogether plausible as realistic reflections of ordinary life. Both could accurately be called melodramas, even if the melodrama mostly succeeds in supporting some pretty substantial thematic weight, and both have fairly obvious stylistic limitations of a kind that only intensifies the melodramatic effects, finally calling attention to the storytelling process even more persistently than does Rolfe Whitehouse's much less rhetorically embellished style. The invoked worlds of these novels are vividly rendered, but they exist to further the portrayal of characters subject to the influences of "environment" more than they serve as depictions of a setting meant to be aesthetically realized in and for itself in its mundane particulars.

In these precursor narratives, setting is created—in the case of Dreiser, through the accumulation of quite specific detail—in order to provide their characters with a plausible background against which to follow the working-out of their fates. In *Affliction*, setting is in effect built around and for its characters, as a realm they fully inhabit and that comes to have its own distinct character and integrity. Banks seems more intent on evoking his small New Hampshire town with a comprehensive realism that can itself serve as a focus of aesthetic interest. The environmental influence represented by this community is not just asserted but is revealed through the details and actions the narrative systematically accumulates. At the

end of the novel, Rolfe meditates on the changes brought to Lawford in the wake of Wade's disappearance and the economic exploitation Wade suspected all along was behind the events contributing to his downfall, concluding with the observation that, following the arrival of the new ski resort, "The community as such, no longer exists; Lawford is a thriving economic zone between Littleton and Catamount." The downfall of Lawford and, by analogy, small towns like it in the American northeast, is arguably as much the subject of *Affliction* as the individual fate of Wade Whitehouse; certainly the degradations to which Lawford is subjected, economic and social, are echoed in those Wade must endure. In this way, the novel doesn't really succeed unless the portrayal of setting is painstaking and can be regarded as an aesthetic achievement in its own right.

Affliction is a "socially conscious novel," but it is also an aesthetically conscious one, and the latter level of consciousness seems to me a necessary precondition for the former to be attained. *Affliction* succeeds because it is most immediately concerned with its own integrity as an aesthetic construction. Rolfe Whitehouse is "meticulous" in his exposition because his creator is meticulous in his use of the narrator's situation and sensibility to fashion a well-made novel that might attract readers interested at least as much in the art of fiction as in an anatomy of the "American class structure." Such readers are only more likely to consider the "social" implications of fiction that seeks to realize some purely aesthetic ambitions, that first of all withstands scrutiny as literary art. Social "relevance" in fiction arises as a resonant effect of narratives that are compelling in their storytelling, the execution of which is the writer's first obligation. "Relevance" is a quality a work of fiction possesses in addition to its primary achievement as a credible aesthetic creation, at least if the author of the work hopes it will survive its motivating but transient "subject."

Affliction will survive into the next generation of readers because Russell Banks is able to make the novel relevant in this way. In the long run it will be valued, I believe, for its perfectly-paced storytelling and skillful deployment of point of view, for its formal appropriation of the naturalist narrative such that what was a loosely connected set of realist narratives embodying, in various degrees of novelistic skill, a determinist worldview becomes freshly shaped into a preeminently skillful narrative that could be described as distilling the common tendencies of literary naturalism into a kind of quintessential form. It will be valued for the "relevance" of its story about the vulnerabilities of rural communities and abiding effects of male rage, to be sure. However, since these vulnerabilities are not likely to decrease any time soon—if anything, they are more likely to increase as such communities continue to become less self-sustaining—and since the pressures contributing to male impulsive behavior will also probably remain in force, *Affliction* will be most relevant to the interests of readers who read fiction for its engagement with abiding dilemmas and persistent conflicts rather than ephemeral "issues."

These readers may not perceive an untraversable breach between Banks's "formalistic" early work and his later social realism. Banks did not simply cease showing concern for form and technique and start focusing instead on "content," on producing "social fiction." He continued

to be occupied with the effects of form through the twinning of narrative strands in *Continental Drift*, with the influence of voice and point of view in *Rule of the Bone* and *The Sweet Hereafter*. In *Affliction*, he is self-conscious about form to the extent that he has appropriated the naturalist narrative and attempted to give it more aesthetically elegant shape. He has incorporated into this novel some of the self-reflexivity associated with postmodernism but does so by amplifying the self-awareness exhibited by his otherwise in-frame narrator. In neither case, however, does he force the reader to be self-conscious about the artifice employed or about the reader's own role in the game of suspending disbelief. Ultimately, *Affliction* shows Russell Banks not so much rejecting the aestheticism of his early fiction as tempering it, using it to create a work of fiction whose artfulness does not eclipse substance but makes it possible in the first place.

Sincerity and the Surface

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of Nicholson Baker's fiction is the way it seems both to ingratiate and provoke, aspires to be both accessible and difficult. Most of his novels could be described as at the same time formally simple--a man tends to his six-month old baby one afternoon, two people hold a telephone conversation--and quite radical, at least while we are still attempting to adjust ourselves as readers to such reduced narrative assumptions (which conversely expand the scope of the narrative's attention.) Stylistically, the novels are also simultaneously transparent, with few "literary" affectations, and elaborate, the sentences themselves expanding in length and complexity to meet the challenges of the kinds of minute observations and prolonged reflections in which Baker's narrators habitually engage. Even the themes of Baker's books can seem both obvious and not that easy to discern. What finally are we to make of the succession of images and memories that go through the mind of the narrator of *The Mezzanine* as he ascends an escalator, or are we left simply with the fact of their succession? How are we to regard the narrator of *The Fermata*, who tells us of his magical powers to suspend time, which he then exploits to remove the clothing of desirable women? Is he repulsive? Pathetic? An honest portrayal of the creepier inclinations harbored by all men, maybe by everyone?

Baker is probably best known for works such as *The Mezzanine*, *Room Temperature*, and *A Box of Matches*, in which the dilation of time, the obsessive recording of detail, and the constant sidetracking onto secondary and tertiary paths of thought characterizing his work are most pronounced. These novels test the reader's patience with their narrators' propensity to digress, as well as their intense interest in such things as shoelaces and airplane tray tables, but the narrators go about their business with such good cheer, assuming we will of course share such interests and appreciate the painstaking delineation of them, our resistance is weakened, ideally leading us to reconsider our presumptive need for a more recognizable story to develop. As the first, most audacious, and probably most successful of these books, *The Mezzanine* in particular seems likely to endure as a signature work, both standing as an impressively achieved first novel and providing potential insights into Baker's

strategies that I believe can help us approach Baker's other books as well, even those that might seem departures from the expectations set up by *The Mezzanine* and *Room Temperature*, his second novel.

Because at the time *The Mezzanine* was published "minimalism" was the most prominent trend in American fiction, some critics did attempt to associate this novel with minimalist neorealism, and there are on a first impression some reasons to regard Baker both as a minimalist of sorts and as a realist. Although his minimalism is a minimalism of plot rather than style, Baker's first books do seem to share with minimalism an inclination to pare back the ambitions of fiction and to return it, after the purported excesses of postmodernism, to a more willing acceptance of the conventions of realism. However, their reduction of plot to such microlevels of act and observation are so extreme, their fixation on surface details so insistent, they could almost be regarded as parodies of minimalism. Fiction's scale and scope have been constrained so radically in these novels that it may even at first seem they do not ask to be taken seriously. When it eventually becomes clear the author is sincere indeed, the effect is if anything more comic yet, although certainly Baker's narrators do not intend for us to take their accounts with anything other than the dedicated seriousness of purpose with which they are related.

Ultimately Baker's minimalism is really its own kind of maximalism. The microscopic focus on quotidian objects and processes that ordinarily escape our notice is a way of rescuing them from neglect, of preserving them in their actual profusion as elements of human reality. His characters are so immersed in their environments and their interests that the perspective normally provided in a work of fiction, which avoids proliferation of detail and refrains from following all streams of thought in the selective way that allows a story to emerge, is necessarily replaced with one that sacrifices story but arguably stays closer to reality--at least as these characters engage with it. Moreover, their preoccupations are certainly not registered in a style that could be called minimalist:

. . . For a second the fifteen-percent figure made me unhappy, and then I thought, Fine, yes, I *welcome* all this imperfect mingling--I want this circling refluxion of our old reconditioned pleasures and our new genuine ones to continue for years, decades, until it becomes impossible to trace backward the history of any particular liking, just as it was impossible to unstir the rash dollops of red or yellow tint my mother used to add to the custom-mixed paints she got from Sears: she used old peanut butter jars as receptacles, and sat cross-legged in the side yard pouring imperceptibly different yellow-greens from one jar to another, refining the color that she wanted for the porcelain-knobbed dresser in my sister's room, though the young technician in the paint department at Sears had with apparently scientific precision injected what seemed to me a perfectly acceptable series of squirts of yellow, cyan, and magenta from the paint organ into a white base, according to the recipe in a notebook for the sample chip my mother had matched to the border of the cloth calendar. . . . (*Room Temperature*)

In what may be Baker's most notorious books, *Vox*, *The Fermata*, and now *House of Holes*, we are presented with characters whose preoccupation is with sex, but even here the emphasis is on variety and detail. Baker is not really concerned with the psychology of sex, with sex as an expression of love or intimacy, or even with sex in the conventional form of sexual intercourse. All of these books emphasize the multifarious ways of eliciting sexual arousal and of achieving sexual release. Autoeroticism and mutual masturbation occur as frequently as actual sexual congress between a man and a woman (and Baker's depiction of sexual activity is almost entirely heterosexual). Fantasies of sex are perhaps as common as sex itself. The most noteworthy quality of Baker's treatment of sex may be the way it emphasizes the sheer enjoyment it provides. The depiction of sexual desire and the myriad ways it might be satisfied is relentlessly sex-positive, even in *The Fermata*, whose narrator acts on his fantasies in a way many readers could find distasteful. *Vox* is an unambiguous celebration of sex, in this case allowing both its male and its female protagonist to indulge their uninhibited fantasies.

House of Holes is even more emphatically about sex than *Vox* or *The Fermata*. One could argue that *Vox* is also about the need for caution in sexual relations in the AIDS era, with its protagonists confining themselves to the safety of phone sex, or about "sex" as an artificial construct, a phenomenon of language, while *The Fermata* could be taken as a satire of the male preoccupation with sex. Both of these novels certainly offer representations of explicit sexual activity (at least in fantasies), but neither could really be called pornographic in either legal or artistic terms. Each features well-rendered, believable characters whose existence cannot be reduced to their participation in sexual activity. The creation of these characters involves subtle uses of point of view, so that in *Vox* the more aggressive and at times more explicit conversation of the male caller is balanced off against the more restrained sensuality evidenced in the talk of the female caller, each influencing the other, eventually approaching a kind of harmony that mirrors the movement of a love story. *The Fermata* is related to us in the first person by its potentially unsympathetic narrator, but Baker gives him a voice that is undeniably engaging and helps to mitigate the contempt we might otherwise have for him, an aesthetic triumph that in itself brings redeeming value to the novel that raises it beyond the pornographic.

House of Holes has few of these complexities and might indeed be the most direct and sustained exercise in pornography of the three sex novels. It is about people having sex, explicitly and in almost innumerable varieties. There is no single protagonist or controlling consciousness, simply a third-person narrator relating the various characters' escapades at the "House of Holes," an erotic resort to which its sundry visitors suddenly find themselves transported by entering real holes. This initial fantasy device—characters are sucked through a hole on a golf green, through a straw, etc.—sets up the House of Holes as itself a place where sexual fantasies can be fulfilled, and Baker lets his imagination loose. In addition to depicting a multitude of sexual positions and expressions, the novel features a severed arm and hand adept at pleasuring women, a "crotchal transfer," whereby a man and woman

exchange genitals, and a sculptress who gives birth to her sculptures (made of "ass wood") after engaging in anal intercourse. As in *Vox* and *The Fermata*, sex is portrayed with great energy and humor, and while it is all very colorful and explicit, it would be difficult to call this a "dirty" book, if to be dirty or smutty requires that sex be implicitly regarded as shameful, something that otherwise should remain furtive, hidden from view and excluded from conversation.

In an essay criticizing Baker for writing a book like *House of Holes*, Barret Hathcock asserts that it is indeed a dirty book and cannot "be evaluated as anything but pornography." That *House of Holes* consists of graphic representations of sex is undeniable, but Hathcock's assumption appears to be that if the novel is pornographic it is thus by definition irredeemable as literary art. He goes so far as to charge that Baker is "demeaning" himself by indulging in the pornography of this novel. But there is no reason to conclude that even if a literary work can be called pornographic it can't also be worthwhile as art. The possibility that the pornographic representations in *House of Holes* might make some readers uncomfortable or even offend them is not itself a reason to assert the author ought to feel shameful because he is not also uncomfortable. It is also no reason to regard the work as without value, however difficult one might find it to appreciate that value because of a distaste for the sexual content it offers.

Hathcock believes that *House of Holes* could be aesthetically credible only if it were to "comment" on "our current sex-saturated culture" or if it revealed "an interesting inner life" in its characters, neither of which is attempted by the novel. This assumption that a work of fiction can be regarded as "art" only if it is engaged in "saying something" or in "going deep" into human consciousness (ideally both) is a widely shared one. It betrays the further, rather strange, assumption that aesthetic success has more to do with subject and content than it does with the actual fashioning of art through style and form. Presumably if Baker could be found to be satirizing sexual mores or critiquing the cultural preoccupation with sex as reflected in pornography Hathcock would find something *aesthetically* valuable in *House of Holes*. Similarly, if it were to focus on revealing what goes through the minds of the sexually adventurous characters as they frolic their way through the narrative, we would be witnessing something more appropriately aesthetic. But Baker merely presents their frolics without satire or social commentary (although certainly with humor); this is content of which Hathcock disapproves, so it by that measure alone lacks art.¹ Such standards seem to me misguided as applied to any fiction with specifically artistic ambition, but they are especially misguided when applied to Nicholson Baker's work.

Baker is neither a satirist nor a psychological realist. However much his fiction examines the shared (if often ignored) details of contemporary social reality, it does so not in order to dissect it but to record it, not to mock it or call it into question but simply to apprehend it fully. If anything, Baker's fiction could be accused of being too uncritical of the reality it records, too willing to accept things as they are, especially the "things" that exist as the commodities of modern capitalism. One could say that Baker's novels are "about" their characters' self-

conscious immersion in their reality, but this focus is on the "inner life" only in the way in which the novels' protagonists themselves bring it to the surface. Since most of the novels are first-person narratives, we have access only to the thoughts and perceptions the narrators have chosen to verbalize. Psychologically, these characters are remarkably transparent: one would hardly think to look for their hidden motives or deep psychological conflicts. Finally, that *House of Holes* offers no social criticism and attempts no exploration of its characters' minds should not be at all surprising, since these ambitions have always been absent from Nicholson Baker's fiction. Baker's art is the art of sincerity and the surface.

In some ways, sex seems a quintessential subject for Nicholson Baker's art and *House of Holes* his most adventurous treatment of the subject. It is a common human activity that might be considered fundamentally simple but that invites almost infinite expressions--especially in Nicholson Baker's meticulous rendering. The multiplicity of sexual acts might seem obsessional, but what have Baker's books been from the beginning but chronicles of obsession (including his own obsession with John Updike in *U and I*)? Similarly, one might find the episodic structure of the novel, by which each episode relates a new sexual experience, repetitive, but why would anyone familiar with Baker's work find the strategic use of repetition surprising? That *House of Holes* completes what is now a trilogy of sex novels suggests not so much that Nicholson Baker has a dirty mind but that he himself recognizes that this subject allows him to exploit his distinctive approach to fiction in a particularly felicitous way.

Yet at the same time, *House of Holes* significantly departs from Baker's previous novels both formally and stylistically. Although it shares with those novels a refusal of conventionally plotted narrative, its use of sequential episodes, each of them tidily provided with a proper story structure, aligns it more closely with traditional storytelling, while continuing Baker's resistance to larger-scale narrative development. This episodic structure combined with the novel's large cast of characters necessitates that Baker use a third-person point of view for the first time in his published work. The narrative voice is lively enough, specializing in particular in colorful names for the sexual organs—"She lay on the bed and stuck two fingers up her simmering chickenshank and shook them"—but this voice does lack the more personal charm many of Baker's first-person narrators are able to convey through their sincere efforts to share their experiences, however strangely magnified or entangled they become. The most immediate manifestation of the different sort of voice we encounter in *House of Holes* is literally in its style, which is much more functional, less disposed to the sometimes circuitous syntax of *The Mezzanine* and *Room Temperature*:

Pendle peered closely at the ad, and suddenly he felt a powerful air current pulling his hair and the whole of his head downward. He was vacuumed down into the black circle. He lost consciousness for a moment, and he came to he was in Lila's office. Lila was the director of the House of Holes. She was large and pretty in bifocals, about fifty, with lots of loose light-brown hair. Pendle told her that he was there about the job in *The Rooster*.

It may really be the tamer prose style represented in a passage like this, more than the pornographic content, perhaps, that prompts some readers to regard *House of Holes* as a disappointment, "unworthy" of Nicholson Baker. In those scenes depicting explicit sex, such a style would seem to even further emphasize the sexual content, leaving the impression that Baker's usual facility with language has been sacrificed for the naked (so to speak) pornographic imagery. Even so, we should not overlook that much of this imagery is actually conveyed through dialogue, making *House of Holes* closer in form to *Vox* and, as in that book, framing the subject as talk about sex and the healthy loss of inhibition such talk can bring at least as much as about direct representations of sexual acts. This loss of inhibition seems to have a particularly liberating effect on the female characters, who are portrayed affirming their sexual desires and asserting their right to sexual satisfaction. If what Baker has produced here is "pornography," it is certainly much in contrast to the usual male-centered focus characterizing pornography as a genre.

Since Baker has now written three novels about sex, we must assume that he himself considers this a subject both worthy of his time and consistent with his concerns as a writer. Perhaps it is coherent to believe that he shouldn't think so, but unless we are led to conclude that taking up this subject makes Nicholson Baker some sort of moral reprobate, I don't really know what purpose it serves to insist he should write about something else. It seems unlikely Baker would have written these novels only to provoke indignant responses from readers and critics, although *House of Holes* reinforces the impression his ambitions do not include the attempt to court universal approval.

¹It should also be said that Hathcock otherwise expresses admiration for Baker's work and has intelligent things to say about Baker's fiction, even if he does disapprove of *House of Holes*.

The Backward Part

(This review originally appeared in the *Cleveland Review of Books*.)

Although he is a well-known figure among other writers, widely published in literary magazines both prestigious and more obscure, and popular on what might be called the "reading circuit," Michael Martone has during his now rather lengthy career received few reviews in the mainstream literary press. This cannot be due to the quality of his fiction—which is very high indeed—but that he is primarily a writer of short fiction (as well as two novellas, themselves largely comprised of unified shorter pieces adding up to a whole), could perhaps partly explain his absence from the most-read book pages, where novels are rewarded the majority of review coverage.

Perhaps Martone is considered primarily a humorist, a Twain-like figure (on a smaller scale), whose books emphasize jokes, wordplay, weird situations and wacky conceits: a parodic travel guide with invented facts and attractions, a collection of authorial contributor's notes,

some of which conflict in their details with some of the others. Also like Twain, Martone is strongly focused on evoking place, in this case the state of Indiana—more precisely, the northeast corner of Indiana, where is located Martone’s home state of Fort Wayne. Thus Martone can easily enough be dismissed as a regionalist, although his portrayal of Indiana, and the Midwest more generally, is hardly an exercise in “local color,” even though many of the characters Martone creates, in stories that are often quite brief, could indeed be called colorful. What Martone offers us in his fiction is not so much the “real” Indiana but a version he has transformed into a fanciful heartland, one that seems no less real for its apparent incongruities.

Martone has cited Edith Hamilton (from Indiana) as a formative influence on his depiction of their mutual home state: her renderings of Greek mythological stories suggested that telling stories about Indiana might bestow on these midwestern characters the sort of heightened emblematic significance we find in the figures depicted in Hamilton’s *Mythology*, even if such characters’ interests are mundane and their actions not always exactly heroic. Thus, while it would be patronizing to say that Martone seems to express affection for his characters, they are nevertheless granted an integrity in their circumstances and outlook as Midwesterners that allow them both to assert their individual identities and to seem representative of a midwestern (or Indiana) experience of the world. Even Dan Quayle, whose “pensées” are featured in Martone’s series of stories about the Indiana-born Vice-President, is not presented as an object of ridicule but a man sincerely influenced by his Indiana roots, fully aware of his public image and secondary status as Vice-President, who, in one story, silently indulges his frustration by imagining all of the audience members naked as he presides over the State of the Union speech.

It would not really be accurate either to call pieces such as “Pensées of Dan Quayle” satirical, although Martone’s fiction certainly is dominantly comic in tone, albeit less one of outright hilarity than a more restrained, implicit kind of humor that arises from character and situation: in simply being themselves, Martone’s characters take up the kind of ordinary, recognizable activities—setting up the searchlight displays that announce the new fall Chevrolets have arrived, observing a school carnival, with its obligatory fish ponds and cake walks—that might elicit a knowing smile, not a belly laugh, and does not at all raise the suspicion that the characters in carrying out these activities are being subjected to mockery. Really no other current American writer manages to effect quite such a union of an underlying realism of character and place with an inevitably distorting comic outlook as successfully or distinctively as Michael Martone, especially in the short fictions collected in his earliest books (through perhaps *Seeing Eye*, published in 1985).

Beginning with *The Blue Guide to Indiana* (2001), Martone began offering more formally unified works—if not novels, then longer fictions with a readily discernible unifying device. While the earlier works were surely not altogether conventional in form (Martone is not really a storyteller in the strictest sense), these later books are more audacious and adventurous. *The Blue Guide to Indiana* is an ersatz travel guide (named after the actual

“blue guides”), full of history, notable sites, and available attractions that purport to acquaint the reader with the Hoosier state, but really describes an Indiana of twisted folklore and invented history, not the actually existing place. One might call the book a novella, but this requires accepting that such a work might not include any characters (much less plot) in the conventional sense at all. *Michael Martone* (2005) has one character, the author himself (or a slyly fictionalized version of the author), on whose biographical background the book performs numerous variations in the form of Author’s Notes, in the process telling us many often contradictory things about “Michael Martone,” although finally what we learn about Michael Martone, about the influence of his mother, and about Fort Wayne, Indiana add up to a relatively comprehensive account of the collective existence maintained among the three.

Four for a Quarter (2011) is more plainly a collection of shorter pieces, but it too employs an artificial device to effectively integrate the parts into an aesthetically satisfying whole. As the title suggests, the number 4 is used freely as a structural and thematic motif—all of the stories come in four parts, are riffs on familiar phrases employing “four” (“Four Eyes,” “Four Dead in Ohio”) or simply treat subjects that conveniently involve fours (“Four Fifth Beatles,” “Mount Rushmore”). This unifying device might seem arbitrary, but it enables a series of stories that provide dynamic and sometimes surprising juxtapositions and variations, as well as an opportunity for some of Martone’s most supple and evocative writing, from demotic first-person narratives to more lyrical prose, as in this description of the accumulation of cotton lint in an Alabama autumn (Martone now lives in Alabama):

. . . The lint escapes the screened-in trailer trucks of the raw harvest or gets kicked up by the gleaning in the fields and threads itself into the wind, winds up coating anything with a burr enough to stick. It snows, little squalls of it accumulated in the niches, the pockets fall has turned out. It is snow that is not snow, a white remainder, until it dyes itself with all the other detritus, becoming the glue of bark and twigs and leaves, leaving nothing but filth, tilth, a kind of felt.

Martone’s most recent book, *The Moon Over Wapakoneta* (2019), is less intricately structured than *Four for a Quarter*, although its subtitle does indicate the loose connection among the stories: “Fictions and Science Fictions from Indiana and Beyond.” Not all of the stories in the book are strictly science fiction by any means, but even those that are (“Amish in Space”) seem not so much like full-fledged attempts to appropriate this genre than the sort of flights of fancy anchored in the ordinary we might otherwise expect from Michael Martone. Like *Four for a Quarter*, *The Moon Over Wapakoneta* is less exclusively focused on Indiana and the Midwest than Martone’s earliest collections of short fiction, putting less emphasis on setting and more on formal ingenuity and variety. If only a few of the stories might really qualify as science fiction (besides “Amish in Space”—literally about a spaceship carrying a colony of Amish through space on a journey that has already lasted centuries—the title story and “20th Century” are both stories set in an indefinite future), others, such as “The Digitally Enhanced Image of Cary Grant Appears in a Cornfield in Indiana,” an exercise in the

paranormal or “A Bucket of Warm Spit,” a retelling of Jack in the Beanstalk with a drought-stricken midwestern farmer as Jack are more accurately described as engaging in imaginative embellishment through forms of fabulation.

“The Moon Over Wapakoneta,” the first story in the book, projects into a future containing some of the usual sci-fi elements—travel to other planets (in this case the Moon), hyper-developed technology, etc.—but most of the futuristic imagery is merely alluded to, not really developed into a story about the future. Indeed, what is most striking about the story is the extent to which events in the future seem to have made very little difference to the present life of its protagonist. Wapakoneta is a town in Ohio, just across the border from Indiana, where the narrator-protagonist lives, traveling back and forth to Wapakoneta in order to experience a kind of mundane time travel—Indiana being an hour behind Ohio in clock time. The narrator, who announces immediately that he is drunk (“I am always drunk”), thinks of himself as “the last man on earth” and throughout the story contemplates the moon over Wapakoneta, revealing through his reveries a sense of alienation both from the now colonized moon and from his own current circumstances, drifting between rural Indiana and rural Ohio. “What part of the moon is the backwater part?” he wonders at one point, obviously considering his own situation. He further “imagines some Podunk place” on the moon “where the slack-jawed inhabitants can’t begin to imagine being pioneers, being heroes.”

“The Digitally Enhanced Image of Cary Grant,” another Indiana story, is a tale of the uncanny rather than outright science fiction. A family driving through the cornfields of Indiana witnesses the apparition of Cary Grant in his role as Roger Thornhill in Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest*, fleeing from a pursuing crop duster plane, as Thornhill famously does in the film. If “The Moon Over Wapakoneta” conveys a palpable sense of emptiness and isolation, this story is lighter in tone, closer to the kind of tongue-in-cheek depictions of Indiana we get in most of Martone’s stories; in this case, the isolation of Ade, Indiana (known previously as the location for the scene rendered in the apparition) is made rather more poignant, the ghost of Cary Grant providing this place with its only chance of receiving renewed attention. The other Indiana-based story in this book, “Versed,” is arguably one that most clearly illustrates the predominant tone in Martone’s fiction about the state. The situation is faintly comic: the narrator works for a company in Fort Wayne that manufactures a sedative used in colonoscopy exams. Throughout the story he observes a fellow who lives next to the office park mow his lawn, and contemplates the paintings of Modigliani, reproductions of which are hung around the office. (At one point in the story, the narrator pauses to also inform us that on their lunch break, he and his coworkers like to go outside and “dowse,” because “we like the exercise, being led by a stick this way and that.”) The story at times becomes almost elegiac, however, as when the narrator reflects on the office park’s location at what was once the outermost boundary of Fort Wayne, now extended so much farther that the Bypass “now bypasses nothing,” and the narrator recalls how in his youth this was an area where lovers parked and, of course, curious teenagers lay in ambush for them.

If only a few of the stories in *The Moon Over Wapakoneta* directly invoke the Indiana setting, others are clearly motivated by their subjects' connection to the state, including stories about the Indiana writer Gene Stratton-Porter and Philo T. Farnsworth, an inventor of early television technology whose company was located in Fort Wayne. In the brief "The Blues of the Limberlost by Vladimir Nabokov," "Michael Martone" purports to review a posthumous work by Nabokov written in response to the writer's butterfly collecting trip to Indiana's Limberlost Swamp. The remaining stories in the book highlight Martone's formal dexterity, which has always accompanied his treatment of "the Heartland," as it is officially called in the futuristic "20th Century." Martone has called himself a "formalist" rather than an experimental writer (although his publisher is FC2, a press long associated with experimental fiction), and while *Four For a Quarter* shows Martone forging form on a larger scale—a whole assembled from its parts—*The Moon Over Wapakoneta*, in stories like "The Man's Watch" (made from a list), "App ro x im ate" (presented in facing columns), and "A Convention of Reanimated William Faulkners" (with graphic accompaniments), most prominently features unconventional exercises in form. The final story, "MM + MM + MM + MM: Footnotes in Search of a Story" (followed by an Author's Note a la *Michael Martone*) concludes the book with an explicitly metafictional flourish, but much of Martone's later work has incorporated a kind of frankly blatant self-reflexivity, reminiscent perhaps of Martone's mentor, John Barth.

The inherently playful (although not frivolous) tone of *The Moon Over Wapakoneta* makes it fully representative of Michael Martone's fiction in its overall approach, although readers less familiar with Martone's work would certainly want also to sample the early stories as collected in *Double Wide* (2007), as well as *The Blue Guide to Indiana* and *Michael Martone*. These books especially reward the reader interested in the literature of the Midwest, from a writer with an engaging and original vision of the Midwestern sensibility.

Talking About Reality

The two primary modes or tendencies in Richard Ford's fiction are juxtaposed most prominently in *The Sportswriter* and *Rock Springs*, published in 1986 and 1987, respectively. *Rock Springs* is a collection of short stories set in the Western United States, in and around Great Falls, Montana in particular. The stories in the book evoke the relative desolation of this landscape where the prairie meets the mountains, reflecting the desolation in the lives of many of the characters. Although few of the stories rely heavily on plot in any melodramatic way, most of them do emphasize incident and event, related in a generally brisk, translucent prose. Early in his career, Ford was often linked to minimalism (he was friends with Carver and Tobias Wolff), and *Rock Springs*, which gathers together the short stories he wrote before publishing *The Sportswriter*, comes closer than any of other Ford's other books to showing why such a connection might have been made, even though his subsequent books reveal him to be a very different sort of writer.

That different sort of writer makes his presence felt in *The Sportswriter*. Here the subject and the manner ultimately most closely associated with Richard Ford's fiction appears for the first time, to be developed further and at great length in the two subsequent novels in what came to be (for now) a trilogy about the protagonist of *The Sportswriter* (*Independence Day* and *The Lay of the Land*). The setting of these novels is the American suburbs (specifically New Jersey, but each of them could easily take place in some other middle-class suburb), which is also evoked in its own contrasting particulars (whether the suburban environment reflects a desolation of its own sort is perhaps open to interpretation, although certainly narrator/protagonist Frank Bascombe would deny it). The greatest contrast between this writer and the writer who wrote the stories collected in *Rock Springs* is that in the Bascombe trilogy incident and event recede in importance, acting not as these novels' main focus of interest but instead as the occasional links between Frank Bascombe's rhetorical digressions, his choral commentary on events, as well as his frequent flashbacks, requiring our attention more than the plot itself.

Although both of these writers are realists, the first writer, whose work can also be found in the 1990 novel *Wildlife*, as well as, to a lesser extent, in Ford's first two novels, *A Piece of My Heart* and *The Ultimate Good Luck*, did seem to be participating in the revival of realism post-postmodernism that prominently included the minimalists, and if *Rock Springs* does not now seem appropriately categorized as minimalism, it still does share with the minimalism of such writers as Carver, Wolff, Bobbie Ann Mason, or Mary Robison the seemingly deliberate attempt not merely to return to realism after the anti-realism of postmodernism, but to fashion a particular sort of realism that responded to the perceived excesses of postmodern experimentation by evoking a new simplicity of form and style.

The stories in *Rock Springs*, like those of Carver or Robison, offer the reader a narrative, but not much dramatic action. Most of them are a kind of retrospective slice-of-life in which a first-person narrator recalls a signal moment from the past, one that represents a life-changing or -defining episode or in some cases perhaps even approaches being an emblematic moment in American life more generally. Often the story features an adult looking back on his youth (all of the narrators and protagonists are male), recounting a series of events in a more or less dispassionate manner, although the events seldom take on the burden of an imposed "plot." A man remembers going hunting with his mother's boyfriend ("Communist"). Another relates the experience of returning home with his father and encountering his mother's lover still in the house ("Great Falls"). In "Children," the narrator recalls going fishing with his Indian friend and a young prostitute.

Some of the stories certainly depict characters in extreme or unusual situations. In "Sweethearts," a man and his girlfriend drive her ex-husband to prison, where he will be serving time for robbery. In what may be the most conventionally "dramatic" story, "Optimists," again a man returns to his youth and tells us of the day his father killed a man, although this occurs halfway through the story, which concludes with a flash-forward to the present day and the narrator's chance encounter with his mother, whom he has not seen in

fifteen years. This story also illustrates the way in which many of the stories come to a poetically pointed conclusion, giving them a sense of emotional completeness somewhat similar to the way Carver's stories work:

And she bent down and kissed my cheek through the open window and touched my face with both her hands, held me for a moment that seemed like a long time before she turned away, finally, and left me there alone.

The best-known story in the book, the title story, is justly esteemed as a representative example of the sort of neorealism that increasingly began to shift the paradigm away from literary postmodernism during the 1980s. It is a particularly skillful performance, and as the first story in the book it establishes the dominant tone sustained by the rest of the stories and as well introduces us to the prevailing strategies they employ. This story especially might have reminded readers of Carver, as its narrator is the sort of socially marginal male character featured in so many of his stories. The unnamed narrator begins as he and his daughter and his girlfriend are driving through Wyoming: "Edna and I had started down from Kalispell, heading for Tampa-St. Pete where I still had friends from the old days who wouldn't turn me in to the police." The narrator is more a hapless figure than a dangerous fugitive, and the story really only reinforces his haplessness as Edna decides while they are stopping over in Rock Springs that she is going to leave him. The story concludes with the narrator wondering

what would you think a man was doing if you saw him in the middle of the night looking in the window of cars in the parking lot of the Ramada Inn? Would you think he was trying to get his head cleared? Would you think he was trying to get ready for a day when trouble would come down on him? Would you think his girlfriend was leaving him? Would you think he had a daughter? Would you think he was anybody like you?

At this stage in Ford's career he seems most interested in characters waiting for trouble to come down, a condition that gains most resonance in these stories set in the American West. Although he will return to this setting in two subsequent novels, the disreputable outsider who may not be so different from us is replaced in *The Sportswriter* by Frank Bascombe, a putative Everyman character who may be representative of the American middle class in his obsession with the circumstances of his situation, but is surely unusual in his ability to dilate on them over the course of three long books. Many would no doubt consider the three books in the Bascombe trilogy to be "voice"-centered books, an impression created not just by Bascombe's role as first-person narrator but also by his remarkable passivity as a character. But what really most distinguishes Frank Bascombe is the sheer verbosity of his discourse, his inclination to explain and qualify, resulting in a prose that is indeed very far from the minimalism of Carver or Wolff.

All three of these books can give the impression they are about nothing in particular, but they are more like a collection of serial narratives interrupted for great periods of time by the narrator's need to enlarge upon context and motive and to offer his wisdom about living in the American suburbs. One can turn to almost any random page in any of the books and find such disquisitions, but early on in *The Sportswriter* this rhetorical tendency starts to assert itself. Bascombe tells us about a group he has joined called "the Divorced Men's Club," and before he can go on to relate the events of a recent meeting, he must provide us with some reflections on his membership in the group:

Though there's another reason I don't leave the club. And that is that none of the five of us is the type to be in a club for divorced men—none of us in act even seems to belong in a place like Haddam—given our particular circumstances. And yet we are there each time, as full of dread and timidity as conscripts to a firing squad, doing what we can to be as chatty and polite as Rotarians—ending nights, wherever we are, talking about life and sports and business, hunched over our solemn knees, some holding red-ended cigarettes as the boat heads into the lighted dock, or before last call at the Press Box Bar on Walnut Street, all doing our best for each other and for non-confessional personal experience. Actually we hardly know each other and sometimes can barely keep the ball moving before a drink arrives. Likewise there have been times when I couldn't wait to get away and promised myself never to come back. . . .

Bascombe is never content simply to narrate his experiences but seems compelled to explain himself. It's never made clear how exactly Bascombe has come to write the accounts we are reading, but he clearly enough takes the opportunity to chronicle his life more to ponder his actions and muse over their implications than to focus directly on these actions as story. That Bascombe is a sportswriter—at least in the first novel—perhaps explains his facility with language (as does his earlier, aborted career as a writer of fiction), but it is also otherwise at odds with the expository, highly discursive kind of narrative that dominates each of these novels. Here, the Richard Ford who created the relatively spare stories of Rock Springs has been replaced by one who at most embeds "story" in his character's extended monologue, which is so leisurely paced as to make the novels seem formless aside from the continuation of that monologue.

What makes Frank Bascombe's endless soliloquy even harder to take is that Frank is himself such a passive, indistinct character that ultimately he doesn't have much of a presence in these novels except through his inescapable narrative voice. He interacts with various other characters over the course of each novel—the members of the Divorced Men's Club, clients to whom he is trying to sell a home (after giving up sportswriting and becoming a real estate agent), his troubled son—but his own role is so severely circumscribed that he almost disappears as a participant in the events he relates. Perhaps this is the continued influence of the vocation of sportswriting, as Frank deliberately restricts himself to describing the actions of his "subjects" and in a sense interviewing them, recording their conversations with him. (At times Frank does indeed deflect questions about himself or his own views in order to

elicit further talk from the subjects, as if he is taking on the role of psychoanalyst as well, prompting his patients to "dig deeper.") In many ways Frank Bascombe seems missing from his own life. One might argue that this is a condition to which the author wants explicitly to call our attention, but three novels' worth of absent protagonist would seem to be a little far to go in making such a point.

The combined effect of Frank Bascombe's blankness as a character and his prolixity as a narrator is that these three novels in which he is featured cumulatively leave the impression we are proceeding through a series of Scenes from Suburban Life, with Frank Bascombe as our guide, but it's never quite clear what is supposed to be holding these scenes together aside from the fact they ostensibly involve Frank Bascombe and he presumably finds them important. Individual episodes sometimes have dramatic interest and emotional resonance (Bascombe's trip with his son to the Baseball Hall of Fame, for example), but they are constantly muted by the return to Bascombe's discursive mode and the lack of any noticeable change in his impassive narrative manner as a consequence of the experiences these episodes represent. Bascombe frequently declares his allegiance to the suburbs, yet his account does little either to defend or critique suburban life, which is presented as a collection of mostly impersonal, undifferentiated activities.

The Bascombe trilogy is, of course, frequently compared to John Updike's Rabbit novels as a portrait of American life over the course of succeeding decades and of its male protagonist's advance into middle age. The comparison is not ultimately in Ford's favor, however, and not only because no one of the Bascombe books can match *Rabbit, Run*, or even *Rabbit is Rich*, in either its narrative power or the quality of its prose. *Rabbit, Run* was not conceived as the first installment of a series that would chronicle postwar American life and the changes in its culture but as the story of its protagonist's existential crisis, a crisis that is occurring, at least retrospectively, at a time when American middle-class values are about to be profoundly challenged and, ultimately, transformed. No doubt it seemed a potentially fruitful idea subsequently for Updike to take Rabbit Angstrom through those changes as they eventually announced themselves, and if not all of the books succeed equally well in balancing the continued focus on Rabbit as an emblematic figure and social observation, as a whole the series does offer both a compelling character and a convincing evocation of the American cultural milieu in the second half of the 20th century.

Taken together, *The Sportswriter*, *Independence Day*, and *The Lay of the Land* really do neither. The portrayal of their main character is static and colorless, the setting perfunctory. Future readers of this trilogy will surely find neither a memorable character in conflict with himself or his surroundings nor an enlightening perspective on suburban culture in the late 20th/early 21st centuries. It's hard to imagine many would want to follow a narrator-protagonist such as Frank Bascombe, who has so little interest in examining his own inner life but also can't muster anything more than the most superficial examination of others and of their social context, through three novels, even if *The Sportswriter* presents some mild interest as a period piece. While one finds Bascombe "saying" a lot (indeed, going on and on

and on in saying it), he can't be accused finally of "saying something" about suburbia as a significant feature of American civilization. Bascombe frequently avers that he is defending suburban life, but his account of it in these three novels neither champions nor attacks it. The suburb is just a place where some things happen in relation to Frank Bascombe.

Immediately after *The Sportswriter*, Ford seemed to return to the Western milieu and to the sort of characters found in *Rock Springs* in his 1990 novel, *Wildlife*. Indeed, this novel seems like an extended version of the stories from *Rock Springs* focusing on a troubled family, such as "Great Falls" or "Optimists." *Wildlife*, set in Great Falls in 1960, tells the story of the breakup of the Brinson family through the first-person account offered by the son and only child, Joe. During the few weeks in which the story takes place, Joe's mother takes up with another man, and his father, a golf pro, loses his job and then volunteers to help fight an out-of-control forest fire. Upon his return, he discovers his wife's liaison and half-heartedly attempts to burn down the other man's house. Despite these events, the narrator concludes his chronicle of them by informing us that his parents shortly afterward began living together again, something about which Joe concedes "there is still much to it that I myself, their only son, cannot fully claim to understand."

Perhaps Joe's failure to "understand" his parent's actions explains why, unlike Frank Bascombe, he spends little time in purely expository rumination and instead focuses on simply relating what happened and reproducing conversations through dialogue. The story is in fact rather crisply told, and the narrator's broader uncertainty about the behavior of his parents, and the motives behind it, gives the novel a kind of elegiac tone, preserving a sense of mystery about that behavior that makes the family dysfunction portrayed in *Wildlife* seem a more perplexing, and thus even more disturbing, affliction. If all of Ford's fiction can broadly be categorized as "realism," only *Rock Springs* and *Wildlife* seem really to trust it as a self-sufficient mode of narrative construction, the realism of character and setting achieved through the unencumbered narration of events presented as of intrinsic interest, needing no rhetorical embellishment of the kind Frank Bascombe insists on providing. The realism of the Bascombe trilogy seems taken for granted, as if the setting and events are a mere convenience enabling Frank's digression-laden recitation of them.

Canada at first seems a return to the narrative-centered realism of *Wildlife* and *Rock Springs*. Set again on the Western plains in the early 1960s, and again narrated retrospectively by a man looking back at the dysfunction that tore apart his family, Part One tells the inherently dramatic story of how narrator Dell Parsons's parents became bank robbers, of their eventual capture after botching the one robbery they attempt (in North Dakota), and of Dell and his sister's meetings with their parents in prison after they have been arrested. This section of the book moves along reasonably well, but even it is interspersed with the narrator's reflections in a way that is uncomfortably reminiscent of Frank Bascombe:

I've always believed that how our mother looked must've played a part in the way she changed and became tranquil while we waited for my father to come home and take life where it would go. How she looked--her size (the same height as Shirley Temple when she was fifteen), her appearance (rarely smiling, bespectacled, her studious Jewish foreignness) her visible disposition (skeptical, sharp-witted, self-defending, frequently distant)--had always seemed to be involved in everything she thought or said, as if her appearance created her whole self. This may be true of anyone. But everything about her distinguished her in any of the places our family ever lived--which wouldn't have been true in Poland or Israel or even New York or Chicago, where plenty of people looked and acted like her. . . .

This tendency becomes even more pronounced in Part Two, in which, at his mother's request, Dell is driven by a friend of the family across the border into Saskatchewan, where he is to live for a while with the friend's brother. The brother turns out to be a rather sinister figure, apparently a murderer, although by the time this is established conclusively readers expecting *Canada* to sustain the dramatic momentum established, however inconsistently, in Part One have surely concluded at the least that the novel's second half will not follow up on the first half's emphasis on narrative. The revelations of Arthur Remlinger's true nature and nefarious deeds occur at such a glacial pace and amid such expository ramblings that it's hard to either be surprised or ultimately care very much when indeed it turns out he is a murderer. If this section is meant to build up suspense or a sense of foreboding on behalf of the already victimized Dell Parsons, it fails miserably. The two sections go together so badly, in fact, it's as if they cancel each other out: Part One makes Part Two seem aesthetically inert if not just redundant, while Part Two makes Part One seem an incomplete if extended fragment, or an already sufficiently realized work that has been yoked to another for reasons that remain unclear.

At best, the sojourn in Saskatchewan seems merely to reinforce the most obvious theme of the story of Dell's parents as bank robbers, as Dell grapples with the unpredictable, destructive behavior of those adults who are supposed to be looking out for him and becomes more aware of human weakness. At worst (at least for the reader), it allows Dell to indulge in such prolonged stretches of tedium as when he reproduces what Charley Quarters, who works for Remlinger, tells him is "the whole story of Arthur Remlinger." It turns out that Remlinger is indeed a bad man, but since we could know that without the benefit of this pace-killing flashback, and since Remlinger is neither "bad" in a particularly interesting way, nor is finally a very interesting character, this added-on piece of extended exposition only further diverts interest from a narrative that has already lost its way on the spacious prairies of Saskatchewan. It also further diverts interest from Dell himself as a character, here without the compensatory interest of the story of bankrobbing parents he tells in the novel's first half.

To be fair, none of the narrators in these Montana-based works really have interest as protagonists aside from their role as observer and passive participant in the story related. In this way they are indeed similar to Frank Bascombe, but in this case the narrator's penchant for the same kind of rhetorical excess as Bascombe makes him that much less dynamic once the family drama has concluded and his personal drama must serve as the focus of concern. It as if Bascombe himself has been transplanted into the persona of Dell Parsons. Although Dell's circumstances are more elemental, his story more metaphysically charged, he bears the same sort of dispassionate relationship to the world he observes, conveyed through the same sort of bloated discourse. His weakness as both character and narrative presence is exacerbated by the disappearance in the novel's second half of his sister, Berner, a fellow sufferer through the family trauma who has already taken off on her own when Dell is removed to Canada. She does return in the novel's final, very brief, section, where we learn that Dell subsequently had little contact with her and that she has suffered the consequences of her parents' acts more acutely than Dell. Somehow it seems likely that the story of how Berner's life was changed by the events chronicled in Canada would be more interesting than what Dell tells us of his encounter with Arthur Remlinger, but that story unfortunately remains out of frame, unnarrated.

In his review of the novel, Sean O'Hagan claimed that it "marks a distinct shift in style. . .from the dense, discursive sentences that characterize the Frank Bascombe trilogy," such that "the writing is leaner, tighter and less concerned with the inner significance of everyday things" (*Guardian*). This is a view that can be maintained only if one forgets *Rock Springs* (in which the writing really is "leaner") or ignores the "shift" in *Canada* itself from the ostensibly similar style of its first half to the more "discursive" second half. Andre Dubus III was certainly correct to note in his *New York Times* review that in *Canada*, as well as the Bascombe books, "what actually happens in the story feels secondary," although when he further declares that plot is "at best equal. . .to the language itself," he is certainly implying that the language represents an aesthetic achievement making plot to a degree superfluous, a satisfactory substitute for plot. This is exactly where Ford goes wrong, in my opinion, both in the Bascombe trilogy and in *Canada*. Contrary to Dubus III, I find the loose, meandering language of these books only calls attention to the lack of plot (as well as character), which proves to be a deadly combination. Realism doesn't need plot to realize its ambition to plausibly represent reality, but it does need something beyond endless talk about reality.

The Thing Itself

(This review originally appeared in *Full Stop*)

Established readers of Kent Haruf's fiction would surely find *Benediction* familiar enough: a work of austere realism, weaving together several separate but related narratives, set in rural Holt county on the high plains of northeastern Colorado. They would not be surprised to find the novel to be written in a very plain, direct style, avoiding obvious "literary" ornamentation, nor that its characters are ordinary citizens of Holt county, the men rather hard-bitten and the

women long-suffering, although not necessarily either unsympathetic or less believable for that. Finally, they would recognize the spare and often desolate setting of the American plains serving as an ever-looming backdrop, which, combined with the religious overtones suggested by Haruf's titles ("Benediction," "Eventide," "Plainsong") gives the characters and their actions a kind of elemental aura that is almost Biblical in its implications.

Benediction meets readers' expectations powerfully enough that it prompts additional reflection on the assumptions about fiction underlying Haruf's work, as well as the strategies he favors in realizing those assumptions in his novels. Haruf has been compared to Faulkner in the way he has focused on a particular place, each novel adding to a cumulative chronicle of that place and its inhabitants, the setting also providing a distinctive regional flavor and cultural milieu. However, these similarities are ultimately superficial, since both character and setting are evoked by these two writers in quite different, even radically incommensurate, ways. Indeed, in style and in the narrative perspective he habitually employs, Haruf seems more like the anti-Faulkner.

While both Faulkner and Haruf could both plausibly be called realists, this really only illustrates that "realism" is a hopelessly elastic term that finally just signifies a broadly conceived goal — to represent something "true" about human experience — but tells us little about how any particular writer will proceed to accomplish that goal. Faulkner seldom directly sets scenes or emphasizes descriptive details in a "realistic" way; rather, the realism of setting is a kind of secondary effect of Faulkner's approach to character and, at times, plot. Furthermore, the realism of character in Faulkner comes not from behavior or appearance as observed externally, but from the focus on subjective states, the portrayal of the world as perceived from the inside. One could label Faulkner's realism "psychological realism," although Faulkner does not settle for the use of "free indirect" discourse in any ordinary way (which as described by someone like James Wood has become a more or less default mode of narration in much "literary fiction") but rather pursues a radical stream-of-consciousness strategy, as in the Benjy sections of *The Sound and the Fury*, or greatly amplifies the character's internal perspective through rhetorically charged language.

Kent Haruf is not a psychological realist. However much we might believe we get to "know" his characters, it is not because Haruf invites us to share their thoughts and subjective perceptions. *Benediction* focuses on the impending death of "Dad" Lewis and its impact on those around him, especially his wife, but we never get any deeper into Dad's own internal processing and subjective experience of the fact he is dying than when, at the end of the first chapter, which otherwise simply narrates a brief initial scene in which Dad learns of his fatal diagnosis (from cancer) and the subsequent drive home by Dad and his wife, Mary, Dad drinks a beer on his front porch:

. . .So the truth was he was dying. That's what they were saying. He would be dead before the end of summer. By the beginning of September the dirt would be piled over what was left of him out at the cemetery three miles east of town. Someone would cut his name into the face of a tombstone and it would be as if he never was.

The most that could be said of such a passage as an attempt at psychological realism is that it is a kind of summation of what's going on in Dad's conscious awareness of his situation, a brief inventory of the thoughts that understandably would be going through his mind at such a time. The exposition of these thoughts involves very little "deep" disclosure, and in fact helps the narrator provide additional expository "information" — Dad will be buried in "the cemetery three miles east of town."

Although Mary perhaps suffers even more acutely through Dad's final days than Dad himself, neither are we provided a direct depiction of her psychological pain. At the beginning of chapter two, Mary collapses due to the stress of confronting her husband's death and attempting to care for him, but this incident comes as much of a surprise to us as it does to Dad, since again we are not given access to the inner turmoil she is clearly experiencing. Some readers might feel that the spareness of the psychological profile these characters are given is an appropriate reflection of their relative lack of self-consciousness about themselves (their spareness of ego possibly also reflective of the intimidating spareness of their physical surroundings), but it hardly seems likely that Haruf wants to suggest his characters are just not capable of sustained reflection or that their ways of thinking just aren't worth exploring. Instead, Haruf's preferred aesthetic strategy is simply to present his characters from the outside, as we follow what they do, what they say, and how they interact with others. To an extent, the inner lives of these characters remain something of a mystery to us, but this also seems to be an intentional effect — we must infer motive from a character's actions and at times allow emotion to remain implicit.

Not only does Haruf hew pretty closely to the narrative surface of his stories, but he does so in a conspicuously "plain" style. As Haruf himself described the prose of *Benediction* in a recent interview, it includes "almost no metaphors or figurative language" because he is "trying to get at the thing itself without comparing it with something else." Thus the narrative is characterized by passages such as this, describing the apartment of Dad's son, Frank:

The street was dark with old tall wooden houses. One of the street lamps was broken out at the corner. They got out and Frank used his key and they climbed the stairs to the third floor, where there was a wide bare hallway with a single shared bathroom. Frank's apartment was just one room looking out onto the dark street, with a narrow bed and a chest of drawers and a curtain hung across the corner for a closet, with an electric hot plate on a stand and a half-size refrigerator, a bare table and two chairs. A poster of the night lights of New York was taped on the wall. Opposite was a poster showing an Indian girl above a caption that said Better Red Than Dead.

What we learn from this scene about Frank's life after leaving his parents (never to return) we learn from the "things" in his immediate environment, which the narrator merely names without rhetorical or figurative embellishment. Haruf's linguistic parsimony, of course, is practically the antithesis of Faulkner's immoderate, figuratively and rhetorically ornate style, making any resemblance between the two writers even more difficult to discern.

Kent Haruf is really a throwback to the "realism" that defined the original practice of 19th century realists such as William Dean Howells and the so-called "local colorists," among the latter especially a writer such as Hamlin Garland, who in his best-known book *Main-Travelled Roads* and other works offered a similar regional portrayal of the plains states and the upper Midwest. Haruf has more subtlety than Garland, and is a more efficient stylist, but his fiction seems animated by the same impulse to represent the lives of "ordinary" people and the local circumstances in which they find themselves. *Benediction* ultimately presents a cast of characters who are all credibly human, exhibiting variable qualities both admirable and blameworthy. In most of Haruf's books an unusual or uncommonly dramatic development brings the characters out of their quotidian reality, and their responses to such developments have led more than one reviewer to refer to some of these characters as "heroic" in affirming their sincerely-held, if simple, virtues; but this sort of easy valorization of such characters and their struggles seems to me both patronizing and inaccurate. It casually sentimentalizes both the characters and Haruf's fiction as a whole by reducing it to an instrument of "affirmation" of the virtues his characters certainly do possess — perseverance, lack of pretension, etc. In my reading of Haruf's novels, they set out to do what old-fashioned realism, at its best, took as its central ambition, to portray life as lived, without the kind of artificial distortions that would make it seem either better or worse than the actuality itself allows.

We might particularly be tempted to describe Dad Lewis's story as the story of Dad's heroic acceptance of his fate, or of Mary's heroic endurance. However, while Dad does indeed accept his oncoming death (mostly) and Mary does indeed endure, it hardly seems necessary that we regard their actions as heroic in order to acknowledge them as facts of the narrative. The narrative itself, in concluding with the final fact of Dad's passing, seems emphatically to avoid sentimentalizing it:

That was on a night in August. Dad Lewis died early that morning and the young girl Alice from next door got lost in the evening and then found her way home in the dark by the streetlights of town and so returned to the people who loved her.

And in the fall the days turned cold and the leaves dropped off the trees and in the winter the wind blew from the mountains and out on the high plains of Holt County there were overnight storms and three-day blizzards.

Perhaps these images of encroaching winter make for a poetically appropriate ending to a novel centering on death (with the young Alice serving as a reminder that life continues), but their almost literal chill also makes the ending a final reinforcement of *Benediction*'s realism: death is a part of life, to be described with fidelity to that reality.

If *Benediction* does seem "authentic" as a kind of slice-of-life account of the lives of people like those living in his fictional Holt County, we might nevertheless still ask whether, 150 years after its ascension, this sort of realism retains credibility as an aesthetic strategy in fiction. If we grant that Haruf employs the conventions associated with such realism very well, what do we find in a novel like this that we wouldn't find in the fiction of those writers on whose work it is modeled? What do we find that is surprising, that takes not just realism but fiction as a literary form in a new or surprising direction? Certainly many of Haruf's readers do not want or expect him to surprise them in this way, assuming instead that he will simply chronicle life in Holt County, Colorado. These readers no doubt value Haruf's effort to "get at the thing itself," resulting in fiction that is "true to life."

But of course even the most earnest realism is created through artifice, although it is an artifice that tries to seem absent. Haruf might conceal his artifice especially well — through a style that pretends not to be one — but is it really any longer possible to accept the attempt at representational transparency with the innocence readers brought to it more than a century ago? Much traveling has been done down the road of literary history since Hamlin Garland ventured on it, after all.

Not Somewhere or Anywhere

(This review originally appeared in *3:AM Magazine*.)

The publication of Ottessa Moshfegh's story collection, *Homesick for Another World*, does not so much allow us to measure the progress of this writer's talent following on her first two published books, the novella *McGlue* and the novel *Eileen*, the latter of which in particular generated considerable enthusiasm among readers and critics and seemed to establish Moshfegh as a writer whose developing career warranted attention. Instead, this new book mostly gathers the short fiction she wrote before the two longer works brought her more widespread acclaim, although these short stories, many published in such premiere venues as the *Paris Review* and the *New Yorker*, certainly also tagged her as a young writer of promise. To read them together now after considering Moshfegh's initial efforts as novelist, in fact, only confirms their authentic achievement, the raw yet purposeful depictions of characters *in extremis* arguably wrought more effectively here than in either of the novels.

The reader previously unacquainted with Moshfegh's short fiction fortunately will be immediately introduced in the book's first story to one of her best, a story whose protagonist bears some superficial resemblance to *Eileen*'s Eileen Dunlop, but, as troubled and "unlikeable" as many reviewers found Eileen to be, the main character in "Bettering Myself,"

a teacher in a Catholic high school serving mostly Ukrainian immigrants, is even more dislocated, both in her life circumstances and her ability to cope with them. Her state of mind and health are quite bluntly suggested in the story's opening sentence: "My classroom was on the first floor, next to the nuns' lounge. I used their bathroom to puke in the morning." The narrator, identified as "Miss Mooney" by her students, is a general-purpose substance abuser, although she specializes in alcohol, usually starting at lunch, she tells us, and continuing until late evening, when "I'd switch to vodka and would pretend to better myself with a book or some kind of music, as though God were checking up on me." She has been married, and near the story's end she has dinner with her ex-husband, who volunteers to pay her if she will just stop calling him when she's drunk. (She ultimately takes him up on the offer when it proves acceptably substantial.) She also has a boyfriend, still a college student, although eventually he has apparently "graduated" and moved on.

Miss Mooney is entirely aware of her own degradation, but she doesn't altogether seem that disgusted by it. The tone of her narration is at best detached, as if she has become sufficiently accustomed to her situation that she cannot conceive any alteration in its static dysfunction, no longer anticipates that "bettering myself" might come to be more than an empty phrase—even if she wanted it to. When she declares that "every year was the same," she is referring specifically to her consistent failure to teach her students the math they need to pass their achievement exams, but of course her resignation to her fate applies as well to the ongoing failure of her life in general. When at the story's conclusion Miss Mooney prepares a resignation letter to her principal, it seems that she might finally be on the verge of changing her self-destructive ways but is instead easily diverted from her task of delivering the letter, the story's final line—"The sun shone on"—ironically conceding to the likelihood she will continue in her lamentable habits.

There are moments in the protagonist's narration when she conveys a clearly retrospective viewpoint—the narrative is recounted in the past tense—although we get no indication that from some later perspective the narrator feels shame or regret at her past actions. In this regard, "Bettering Myself" provides both a point of comparison and an important contrast to *Eileen*. Eileen Dunlop as well is disaffected from her own life, the circumstances of which she relates to us retrospect, but in her case she is recalling her previous experiences much farther into the future, after she has in fact lived the different kind of life those experiences ultimately prompted. While Eileen forthrightly portrays her younger self's moral shortcomings and confusions, it is evident enough throughout her narrative that the older Eileen deplors the former version's notions, that her life turned out better because if for no other reason she rid herself of them. To this extent, *Eileen* reads as a kind of moral inquiry, albeit one cast in the form of a quasi-noir narrative.

"Bettering Myself" foregoes both the appearance of moral judgment and the artificial formal scheme apparent in the novel. Its protagonist's life is depicted in all of its shambles, without clearly signaling through other recognizable devices that the character might eventually see the error of her ways and her life follow a direction familiar to us from other stories. One

could call this sort of story a kind of radical realism, through which characters and events are presented in a seemingly artless (but not unskilled) manner, burdening them as sparsely as possible with externally imposed formal structures that might distort or equivocate. If such an effort makes it awkward to even identify a work such as “Bettering Myself” as a “story” in the first place, since there is little sense of forward movement in its action—the main character’s life so firmly fails to encompass the possibility of notable change, to consider the chronicle of its specifics a “plot” at all seems a peculiar misrepresentation—it also nevertheless accounts for its creepy fascination, its power to disturb. Achieving such an effect, of course, is not an “artless” move at all, but gives the story in its formal construction the suggestion of drift that mirrors the character’s lived reality.

Invoking the lived reality of her characters is the primary strength of Moshfegh’s short stories, and taken together the stories in *Homesick for Another World* are above all stories of character. They are in fact unusual among works of short fiction in successfully focusing on characters first—they are not so insubstantial in their reliance on setting and plot (at least as defined minimally as “what happens”) that they should be called merely character “sketches,” but what does linger most from the reading experience of these stories are the impressions of characters, even if in most cases the characters are difficult to admire and in some cases quite deliberately made to be unsympathetic. As in “Bettering Myself,” often the main character doesn’t try to hide his/her more unpleasant qualities. The narrator of “Malibu” informs us that

Girls liked me. I rarely liked them back. If they asked me what I did for fun, I told them lies, saying I Jet Skied or went to casinos. The truth was that I didn’t know how to have fun. I wasn’t interested in fun.

In a story nearly as disturbing as “Bettering Myself,” the narrator protagonist of “Slumming” escapes her unhappy existence making “an abysmal living back home teaching high-school English” by spending every summer in a rural, working-class community where she occupies herself most of the time by scoring drugs and generally feeling superior to the locals. At the ostensible climax of the story, she notices the signs that her pregnant cleaning lady is having a miscarriage (she is beginning to bleed through her clothing) but does nothing to warn her, so the woman continues her work and is eventually taken away by ambulance.

Other characters in the book seem less to lack a strong moral compass than a full commitment to the integrity of their own lives. The narrator of “The Weirdos” recounts an episode of her life during which she is living with an aspiring actor boyfriend in a relationship that she finds unsatisfying, at times enervating, reinforcing her already depressed state. Yet she seems curiously apathetic about the situation: “There were people I could have called, of course. It wasn’t like I was in prison. I could have walked to the park or coffee shop or gone to the movies or church. I could have gone to get a cheap massage or my fortune told. But I didn’t feel like calling anyone or leaving the apartment complex. So I sat and watched my boyfriend clip his toenails. . . .” “Maybe he was the man of my dreams” the narrator declares

in the story's final line, as if her later life has been sufficiently uninspiring that even this aimless episode may have had significance after all. There may be as well in her seemingly throwaway remark a non-ironic admission that perhaps in truth the boyfriend actually was the man of her dreams, but this more likely tells us that the narrator's dreams remained without much ambition.

In "A Dark and Winding Road," a man retreats to a mountain cabin after a fight with his pregnant wife "to have one last weekend to myself before the baby was born and my life as I know it was forever ruined." He is visited by a woman looking for his brother, who apparently has also been using the cabin to share drugs with the woman. After concluding the brother isn't going to show up, the narrator and the woman party instead. "I let her do whatever she wanted to do to me. . . It wasn't painful, nor was it terrifying, but it was disgusting—just as I'd always hoped it to be." In some ways, this assertion articulates what could be taken as the source of dissatisfaction—and thus the misbehavior—of many if not most of the characters in *Homesick for Another World*: their lives are sufficiently unrewarding that they settle for the stimulation provided by the dangerous and the disgusting. If this doesn't necessarily make life more worth living, it does help make it seem more consequential—at least temporarily. Some of them are perhaps as self-aware in their alienation as Urszula, the child protagonist of "A Better Place," who finds her reality so disagreeable that she is convinced it is not actually her proper reality at all. Instead she believes she comes "from some other place," a better place. "It is not somewhere or anywhere, but it's not nowhere either. There is no *where* about it. I don't know what it is. But it certainly isn't this place, here on Earth, with all you silly people." Urszula believes she can return to this place that is not somewhere but also not nowhere by killing the "right person," and after determining who that person (a bad person) is for her, she sets out to kill him.

"A Better Place" is somewhat too abstract, too overtly allegorical, at least in comparison to the all of the other, more vividly and concretely rendered stories in *Homesick for Another World*. Still, its placement as the final story in the book does suggest it can be read as implicitly a recapitulation of the underlying dilemma faced by the characters in most of Moshfegh's short fiction, giving readers the opportunity to reflect on the preceding stories, perhaps reinforcing or altering our impressions of them and the kinds of people they portray. These are characters who are so homesick for another world, one in which their own existence seems less absurd, that they behave in ways that betray their self-perception they are themselves not made for the world they actually inhabit. Such behavior in its extremity at times pushes these characters and their actions into the domain of the grotesque, a term that has been used by critics to describe Moshfegh's fiction, some of whom have specifically compared it to the work of Flannery O'Connor. But Moshfegh's stories are not anchored in the religious/theological assumptions motivating O'Connor's fiction: O'Connor's characters are grotesque because of their distance from God; Ottessa Moshfegh's characters are marked by their distance from a reality in which the existence of God—understood as a trope signifying purpose and meaning—would even make sense.

Moshfegh is perhaps comparable to O'Connor, however, in that, judging from what she has produced so far at least, her short stories are more resonant and rewarding than her novels. *McGlue* is a compelling novella chronicling the degradation of a recognizable enough sort of Moshfegh character, and as an historical narrative its details of 19th century nautical life distinguish it from the stories of contemporary life that dominate *Homesick for Another World*, but nevertheless by its conclusion it comes to seem more like a short story that has been extended beyond its most effective length. The protagonist of *Eileen* is also surely a character readers of the short stories would readily recognize, but if *McGlue* at times seems to drift, *Eileen* is ultimately too overdetermined by the requirements of its plot and the expected atmospherics. Eileen Dunlop emerges not so much as a character shorn of all sentimentally conceived notions of "growth" or self-help but as a synthetically fabricated figure fashioned to do the work assigned to this sort of character in this sort of narrative. It is difficult to think of this as a promising advance from the more audacious work presented in *Homesick for Another World*.

Radical Realism

(This essay originally appeared in *3:AM Magazine*.)

For the most part, "realism" in current discussions of fiction has become conflated with conventional narrative practice: "storytelling" employing the orthodox "elements" of fiction as developed in that latter 19th and early 20th centuries. While in American literary history at least, the rise of realism in this period did bring a change in the kinds of subjects addressed (more "ordinary" characters), in setting (less familiar sorts of places, made to seem "real" in the kind of description involved), and in the stories told (fewer stories about haunted mansions or demoniac white whales), as well as in the manner of telling (less grandiloquent, but also less stylistically dynamic), in both the new realism and the old romanticism writers ultimately perceived their task to be relating a story recognizable as such according to accepted dramatic form—elucidated perhaps most memorably by Gustave Freytag in his famous "pyramid."

Almost all of the classic realist novels, however much they feature less fanciful or flamboyant stories, nevertheless take on this traditional narrative form. If many realistic narratives don't seem conspicuously "dramatic" in their narrative effects, the even more radical mode of realism, American naturalism, frequently does manipulate plot structure so intensively that novels such as Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* or Norris's *McTeague* accelerate into outright melodrama. Even the fiction of Henry James, who endeavors to move the external drama of narrative realism into the internal drama of what ultimately came to be regarded as "psychological realism," still tells stories that can be plotted along Freytag's pyramid (including stories such as "The Beast in the Jungle," which on the surface conveys the impression that "nothing happens").

It is also true that a credible, coherent definition of realism in fiction—the attempt to produce work that is “like life”—could really be upheld in practice only if the role of plot is at the least minimized. Since “life” does not unfold along a neatly sequential dramatic arc, a properly realistic narrative would deemphasize if not eliminate the niceties of exposition and denouement, would acknowledge conflict—without necessarily making it the center of interest—but would not imply that such conflict usually is resolved (indeed, would more truthfully reveal that resolution is rare, at least as part of a discrete, self-enclosed experience). The realistic conclusion to most stories—loosely construed as some sort of serial progression—would be neither “happy” nor manifestly unhappy but indeterminate, merely a suitable stopping-point.

Few writers have consistently attempted this sort of radical realism, although the stories of Chekhov and Hemingway might be provisional models of what it looks like. Some might adduce Bukowski or Kerouac as examples of such unvarnished realism, but Bukowski often seems more interested in realism as the vehicle for an apologia of sorts for his protagonists’ romanticized marginality, while Kerouac, although he does abandon formulaic storytelling for picaresque narrative, also romanticizes his restless characters and their quest for enlightenment, which is ultimately more central to his fiction’s purpose than the faithful depiction of mid-twentieth century social and cultural realities. The minimalist realism of writers such as Raymond Carver and Mary Robison was frequently called plotless (a description that especially seems appropriate to Robison’s short stories), but while most of these writers did indeed reduce the role of plot in favor of atmosphere and setting, they did not so much abandon “story” as reconfigure it, so that “conflict” often remains unstated, emerging instead in a moment of revelation or heightened perception (including the reader’s perception) that works to unify the story’s elements without laboring to produce an overt, dramatic tension.

A writer whose work goes farther in removing plot as an obstacle to realism is the American writer Sam Pink. Pink has been described variously as “surreal,” “bizarro,” “experimental,” and “minimalist,” among other attempts to characterize his short novels and stories. That reviewers might respond differently in assessing a writer’s work is of course inevitable, but in Pink’s case such disparate labels is surprising, since all of the fiction he has published so far seems readily identifiable as realism, albeit a particularly plotless, episodic kind. Pink’s fiction, at first glance, at least, seems closely associated with the “slacker” realism of Tao Lin and Noah Cicero, although the realism of Pink’s fiction is more outwardly directed, not simply a chronicle of disaffection.

Pink’s novels—most of them more accurately described as novellas—surely are in part chronicles of disaffection, but the male protagonists of these books are alienated more from any consistent belief in their own self-worth than from the social expectations and arrangements they confront, about which they generally remain impassive if not indifferent. Indeed, to the extent they acknowledge the social conditions in which they subsist, they do so not to decry their oppressive effects but to observe and often admire those others around

them who are enduring the same conditions. In *Witch Piss*, for example, the protagonist's own marginal circumstances recede into the background as he interacts with street people through most of the novel, becoming in effect a witness to their way of adapting to their situation. What in the novels preceding *Witch Piss* could seem like recitations of personal degradation becomes in this novel something more like objective reporting, almost a kind of documentary realism.

The Garbage Times, one of the twinned novellas (along with *White Ibis*) forming Pink's most recent book, could also be described in these terms, although here the underachieving protagonist is more actively an agent in the social milieu he also depicts in his first-person narrative. But what *The Garbage Times* helps to make clear is that Pink's fiction from the beginning was not an exercise in post-adolescent confessional but a more or less objective rendering of the profound stasis into which their characters' lives seem fixed. So thorough seems their profound indifference to the cultural imperatives spurring ambition and aspiration, and so remote from any discernible compensating internal motivation, that we are offered in these works an almost disinterested anatomy of the protagonists' radically passive mental state, as if the characters are dutifully reporting on their own emotional detachment.

But these novels are not just convincing depictions of their characters' psychological makeup but are also palpably "realistic" in other, more customary ways as well. *The Garbage Times* begins with its narrator hauling dumpsters into the alley behind the seedy bar where he works, an episode (and a rather extended one) that establishes "garbage" as a motif that helps to unify a novel that, like most of Pink's novels, doesn't much rely on plot as a structural device. That narrator notes the salient details:

Something dropped on my head.

I touched my head.

Thick, dark-green gel on my head—like pureed spinach. . .

The dumpsters were full of broken glass and liquid collected from chutes coming from upstairs.

With that classic vinegar smell that cleared my face.

Before arriving at the bar, the narrator is on the train, where "There was puke on one of the seats and window behind it—like someone not only puked, but his/her head filled with puke, then exploded." One of the narrator's frequent jobs inside the bar is to clean up overflowing toilets, and this task is described with the same sort of unflinching specificity. Clearly one of the narrator's goals in this novella is to expose the reader to the sensory particulars of the dingy environment in which he moves. Such attention to setting is manifested in Pink's other novels as well, so that, if "story" is not going to be featured in these works, the characters and their surroundings will get especially pronounced emphasis: although "what happens"

in *The Garbage Times* and Pink's other novels is certainly of concern in the reader's engagement with them, what they most immediately require is an initial fascination with the extremity of the protagonist's peculiarly impassive attitude toward what seems to be a borderline existence.

Pink's fiction does not convey the impression of crafted simplicity revealed in the chiseled prose and offhand dialogue of Hemingway and Chekhov, but this is arguably the most conspicuous sign of its own craftsmanship, as the apparent contingency and drift experienced by his protagonists is surely not a reflection of the writer's indifference to structure but a purposeful effect that is carried out with remarkable consistency in all of the novels, in each extended only to the point beyond which the strategy might begin to pall, so that the episodes still seem to cohere as a "slice of life," not just a random collection of scenes. If the novels couldn't really be called "picaresque," despite the loose sequentiality of the scenes, it is because the protagonists never seem to be on a journey to anywhere, although perhaps the goal involved is that whereby the *reader* is led to acknowledge that most lives are not journeys at all; muddle and inconclusion are more common, when outright failure does not prevail.

Certainly in all of the books leading up to *The Garbage Times/White Ibis* there are no epiphanic moments, no portentous symbols that would otherwise bestow a false transcendence on their resolutely temporal and material concerns. Readers might be tempted to think of the titular protagonist of Pink's first novel, *Person*, as a kind of emblematic Everyman figure, but in fact "Person" designates this character specifically, his sense of himself as a kind of nonentity. Even his desire to occupy space is attenuated:

I don't have a bed.

I sleep on a sleeping bag, on the floor in my room.

My room is small.

I wish it were even smaller though.

Right now I can take like, two steps one way across, and three steps the other way.

That seems like too much.

It always seems like too much.

It would be awesome to just walk up to someone on the street and grab him or her by both shoulders then scream, "It's always too much!"

It feels embarrassing when I require too much of the world.

Person might be classified as a “loser,” but he is a loser in his own distinctive way: he seemingly has little desire to change his status (even to the extent of following up on a possible job as a grocery bagger), but is also clearly enough dissatisfied with his life, using his chronicle of a winter in Chicago as the occasion for interrogating his apparent inability to reject his loser status.

The sense of spontaneity arising from *Person*’s narrative comes partly from this insistent self-questioning, but it is reinforced by the prevailing style and mode of narration, which continues to characterize the subsequent novels as well. Although the narrator’s account does not entirely proceed in one-sentence paragraphs as in the passage above (it comes close to doing so in *The Garbage Times/White Ibis*, however), it consists of a very fragmented and staccato prose, often conveying the impression the narrator is reeling off a succession of thoughts as they come to him—which he is, although that does not mean these thoughts themselves are disconnected and scattershot. *Rontel* begins:

After my girlfriend left for work this morning, I lay in her bed for an our looking at the wall.

Fuck, this is really good—I thought.

It was good, if you didn’t think about doing it as you were doing it.

Sometimes I put my hands up to cover my face.

That made it even better.

If the action (or inaction) here invokes what seems a static, desultory situation, the narrator’s comments are not merely random remarks. However much the passage establishes the narrator/protagonist’s extreme passivity, it also very succinctly summons a telling image and rather intricately reveals the narrator’s psychological predisposition: Clearly stillness and stasis is a state to which he aspires (even to kind of blissful erasure of consciousness where “thinking” is an obstacle). Yet such bliss also seems perilously close not just to a temporary self-renunciation but self-obliteration as well.

Neither are the narrator’s subsequent activities (once out of bed) simply a string of haphazard events and miscellaneous observations. Although often enough he is occupied by this sort of introspective self-scrutiny (not always flattering in what it reveals), just as often his attention is directed outward. Indeed, despite the interludes of acute self-awareness, he seems most interested in the external environment in which he moves. In both *Person* and *Rontel*, as well as *Witch Piss* and *The Garbage Times*, the setting is the city of Chicago, which is cumulatively depicted quite vividly, impressing itself as a place that both overwhelms its inhabitants and provides a sustaining attraction (especially for the novels’ protagonists). *The No Hellos Diet* is also ostensibly set in Chicago, although its immediate setting is the department store in which the protagonist works, which itself comes fully to life

in its narrator's rendering of his experience there. In one scene describing the narrator on his way to work, he evokes at length a walk through the Loop and other parts of downtown Chicago. While the scene refrains from figurative descriptions and other flourishes of "fine writing"—the narrator preferring instead simply to name and to list—nevertheless it seems motivated by the traditional goal of realism to firmly situate the reader in a specific setting that is presented with the kind of detail that persuades us to accept the verbal representation as a plausible likeness of reality.

This project is carried forward in *The Garbage Times*, which, like *The No Hellos Diet*, focuses most closely on the protagonist's workplace, but this also, as in *Witch Piss*, offers the narrator the opportunity to broaden the focus to include a more general survey of a seamier side of Chicago. Although this novella, like Pink's previous books, has its moments of astringent humor (frequently at the narrator's own expense), *The Garbage Times* may be Pink's bleakest work; the garbage conceit seems emblematically to represent the narrator's acknowledgement that the world he inhabits is overwhelmed by filth and waste, although we also find this character at least willing to try and clean up the filth. If there are no subtle intimations that such a world might be redeemed (the novella's final passage has the narrator clearly implying it shouldn't be), Pink's narrator endures.

White Ibis, however, does seem to signal a change—whether it will be lasting or just a passing variation remains to be seen, of course—in both tone and approach from this writer's predominant practice in the fiction culminating in *The Garbage Times*. Most obviously, this novel is set not in Chicago but in Florida, although the autobiographical features attached to the protagonist (which become even more explicit in this work) make his story clearly enough continuous with the narrator-protagonist of the previous novels. Whether the radical shift in environment from the Chicago novels to this one is deliberately mirrored in the narrator's somewhat more relaxed persona, or his more congenial circumstances—he has moved to Florida with his girlfriend—has simply made him more content, less estranged from his own life, in *White Ibis* the dominant mood seems lighter; the protagonist, if not exactly ambitious, does reveal a sense of purpose (specifically related to art and writing) not really in evidence in the preceding novels.

The novella as well, while not radically departing from the formal and stylistic assumptions familiar from the previous books, is noticeably different in its strategies and devices. For one, it could more plausibly be called a narrative, as the narrator does more or less relate a story, one that might be characterized as the story of his adaptation to his changed circumstances. It also includes episodes more straightforwardly humorous than anything to be found before in Pink's fiction, such as the protagonist's climactic encounter with a Girl Scout troop, and its conclusion could even be called upbeat. Further, the novel's title refers to the recurring appearance of this tropical bird throughout the novel, lingering at the end of the narrator's driveway. Although the novel features much animal imagery in general, the white ibis clearly comes to represent the narrator's burgeoning appreciation of nature in his new environment, as well as an incipient realization that in its stubborn persistence and wary reserve the ibis is

similar to the narrator himself. Pink has not so brazenly indulged in symbolism before, as if the kind of starkly honest realism to be found in the first books requires avoiding all patently “literary” devices, a restraint no longer observed here in what is Pink’s most recent work.

It would not really be accurate, however, to regard even the grittiest of the earlier books as somehow something other than “literary.” However loosely structured they may seem to be—or even without structure at all—this is a deliberate effect the author creates; indeed, it is an effect Pink realizes with remarkable consistency and skill across all of the novels. To adopt a transparent and unaffected prose style is not to refuse style but to cultivate a particular kind of style, in Pink’s case not so much “plain” as deceptively artless, devised to seem as direct and “natural” as possible, unembellished by ostentatious stylistic flourishes or gratuitous complexities. But Pink replaces these more conventional signs of verbal artifice with fragmentation and partial repetitions, ultimately producing a prose style with its own distinctive cadence, in contrast to the accustomed rhythms of most literary prose. And to successfully maintain a reader’s interest in a work of fiction that resolutely—even defiantly—refuses to center that interest in plot requires an otherwise deft and considered handling of form, not simply its disregard. While a reader sampling just one of Pink’s novels might understandably conclude that the author seeks to avoid the conspicuously “literary,” no one reading all his published fiction could plausibly maintain that this work is anything other than thoroughly composed.

Any conception of realism that would have it as the absence of all artificial devices—except for “story,” which is seen as identical with fiction itself—is simply not credible. Story itself is as much a contrivance as any other formal stratagem—it may in fact distort reality even more directly than many other ostensibly unconventional structural devices. Many of the alternatives to traditional narrative offered since the emergence of modernism (stream-of-consciousness, fragmentation and collage, unreliable narration, etc.) were introduced precisely to penetrate surface realism, to get at a perspective on reality not accessible to external description and linear narrative. If literary realism as traditionally understood is the attempt to create an illusion of “real life” in a work of fiction, to do that entirely through the ordering of language inherently requires not an eye for documentary detail but an aptitude for art.

The majority of current “literary fiction” would have to be categorized as realism, although most seems to regard it as a kind of default setting, as if invoking “real” life is simply an unexamined assumption about the goal of fiction. Few writers are as rigorous in their allegiance to realism in an unembroidered form as Sam Pink, but ever since the appearance of minimalist neorealism in the 1980s (exemplified by such writers as Raymond Carver and Ann Beattie), verisimilitude as an important literary value is no longer met with the skepticism that motivated many experimental writers during the previous two decades. (Perhaps its most noteworthy exponent now is the critic James Wood, whose notion of “hysterical realism” is meant to denigrate the postmodern legacy for neglecting ordinary realism). To be sure, there are current American writers who defy or disregard the realist imperative, most notably

in a strain of fabulism influenced especially by George Saunders and Aimee Bender, although much of this fiction, as much as it embraces a kind of surrealism, nonetheless employs traditional narrative machinery almost as earnestly as Freytag could wish.

More so than the “quirky” diversions of these writers, Sam Pink’s realism could plausibly be considered “experimental” in its conceptual asperity and stringency of form. Neither realism nor anti-realism is itself inherently experimental, although in historical context either could certainly seem more or less audacious given established norms, so that Pink’s work can seem refreshingly adventurous even if it is best described within a mode that occupies a perennial—if contested—space in familiar literary history. If a writer’s motives, however conservative or conventional some might reflexively think them to be, prompts innovative strategies, there is no reason to dismiss what seems the “wrong” motivation. When “realism” is defined so vaguely that its alternative is simply some form of overt fantasy (as it too frequently seems to be in popular literary discourse), then the term is actually concealing a multitude of practices that shouldn’t be reduced to its most naïve formulation.

Still, it is not unfair to ask whether an approach that emphasizes what is absent—plot, dramatic tension, conventional prose—might have a better claim on originality if it also encompassed the *presence* of new or unfamiliar aesthetic strategies. Radical realists such as Nicholson Baker and Stephen Dixon deemphasize conventional narrative structure, but also manage to add a singular element that alters our perception of the ostensible formal or stylistic boundaries of fiction—boundaries that these writers reshape in ways that enlarge our appreciation of the elasticity of literary form and style, the extent of their still available resources. Dixon fashions a distinctive prose style (although influenced by Thomas Bernhard) whose chains of loosely linked sentences mirror the loosely linked scenes and episodes that in some ways resemble Pink’s non-narratives. Baker is able to seize on situations—a man on his lunch break, a man feeding his baby daughter—that would to seem to have no dramatic potential at all and instead to magnify the moments in which we are nominally inactive and usually least reflective into episodes of heightened awareness that are often surprisingly compelling.

It might be said that writers such as Dixon and Baker provide realism with an aesthetic supplement of sorts, a surplus of “literary” interest beyond the act of representation itself, although surely neither of these writers could exactly be called aesthetes. (Dixon’s work in particular avoids obviously lyrical language.) The alienated realism of Sam Pink, Noah Cicero, and Tao Lin, on the other hand, is implicitly an attempt to avoid the literary, or at least give the impression that “real life,” unmediated by literary affectation, is what the writer is after. Sam Pink’s fiction does an especially effective job of upholding this illusion, but precisely because it so clearly manifests a unifying artistic intelligence, it is inescapably literary. *White Ibis* suggests he may be moving toward more conventional literary strategies, but while this might be regarded as “experimental” in a trivial sense—a writer who previously avoided all the familiar moves now tries them out—such a turn could hardly count as an advance over this writer’s previous achievements in a more unadorned but innovative

realism. That work shows that realism is not inherently a regressive literary mode reinforcing conventional narrative form but can readily enough lead an adventurous writer to renew and reshape literary form.

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