



Literary Aesthetics

**DANIEL GREEN**

## CONTENTS

*A Gateway to Something Else? 2*

*Acts of Rendition 9*

*The History of Change 14*

*Beyond the Narrative Arc 18*

*Aesthetic Bliss 22*

*Something Less Troublesome 27*

*Make Everything More Beautiful 33*

*Critical Objects 39*

*Walking Around Holding Beliefs 43*

*The Various Rays of Culture 50*

*Make It Fresh 54*

### *A Gateway to Something Else?*

In “Literary Aesthetics and the Aims of Criticism” (*Theory’s Empire*, 2005), Paisley Livingston comes to this eminently reasonable conclusion about aesthetic experience:

An aesthetic experience of literature, I suggest, is an intrinsically valued experience occasioned by the contemplation of the qualities of a literary work of art. Such contemplation is what is lacking in nonaesthetic modes of reading. In the latter, the work or its text is read in a purely and exclusively instrumental spirit, or the intrinsic value attached to the experience does not find its basis in an attentive and apt attention to the features of the work.

Livingston then renders his own description incoherent by sneaking “moral content” through the aesthetic back door:

. . .the moral content of a literary work should be acknowledged as being directly relevant to an appreciation of that work qua literary work, my principal reason being that in some contexts moral features directly influence the work’s aesthetic function and value. Attempts to define the specificity of the artistic responses to works of fiction along purely formalist lines have been notoriously problematic. . .If, on the contrary, moral and political ideas are an intrinsic part of many literary works of art, their assessment would seem directly relevant to an evaluation of the works’ overall merits. What is more, since it is reasonable to think that our emotional (or quasi-emotional) reactions to works of fiction are directly relevant to the aesthetic dimensions of these works, moral considerations should be recognized as of aesthetic relevance. . . .

It seems to me that in the second passage Livingston undoes all the good work he’s done in the first to identify the distinctive features of an aesthetic experience of literature. How can it be that “nonaesthetic modes of reading”—which presumably would include reading experiences of such things as moral discourse or political analyses—lack a “basis in an attentive and apt attention to the features of the work,” but nevertheless “moral and political ideas” ought to be assessed in an aesthetic mode of reading? Does Livingston mean that we ought to consider such ideas in their aesthetic dimension, whatever that might be? (A beautifully formed “political

idea”?) Or in insisting that moral and political ideas be taken into account while evaluating a work’s “overall merits,” is he defining “merit” broadly, as something that goes beyond the merely aesthetic? (A given work has both aesthetic and “moral” merit?)

It would seem that Livingston thinks that “moral features” are somehow an “intrinsic” element of a literary work’s aesthetic makeup—or at least of our “aesthetic response” to the work. “Aesthetic” includes both the formal and the moral. But how can this be? Dictionary definitions of the terms tell us that an aesthetic judgment applies criteria of “beauty”; a moral judgment applies criteria of “right behavior.” It might be true that an obnoxious moral belief held by a particular artist or writer could lead to a flawed aesthetic choice, but ultimately our judgment of the work in question should be based on its subsequent aesthetic flaw, not on its moral repugnance (although we may feel moral disgust as well). If “aesthetic” and “moral” are as interchangeable and permeable as Livingston suggests, don’t they become meaningless terms? They simply designate some vague and underdetermined “response” on the viewer’s or reader’s part.

Since human beings hold all kinds of beliefs, and give a higher priority to some than to others, it would be unreasonable to expect we could always neatly separate out our aesthetic sensibilities from our moral reactions from our political ideas. It does seem possible, however, that literary criticism could make an effort to “bracket” the aesthetic and the moral and not to deliberately conflate them. It could insist that while works of literature come loaded with moral implications that are well worth reflection and debate, moral considerations should not “be recognized as of aesthetic relevance” unless by “relevance” you mean “something to think about after you’ve located these considerations within the otherwise distinctive and qualifying context provided by the aesthetic.” Moreover, it might be more specific about what a “moral consideration” properly might be other than to equate it with “emotional (or quasi-emotional) reactions to works of fiction.” (I’m not sure I’ve ever had a quasi-emotional reaction to anything.) It might maintain, in fact, that both aesthetic and moral responses to literature are much more than just manifestations of “emotion” in the first place.

If the editors of this anthology want to return literature to the study of literature, the inclusion of Livingston’s essay (its publication in the anthology marks its first appearance in print) suggests the editors of *Theory’s Empire* don’t want to exclude “content” from the

consideration of “the literary.” Neither do I, but I don’t see how blurring distinctions between the aesthetic and the moral is going to set literary study back on a solid foundation. Ultimately, what’s the difference between smuggling “moral content” into an account of the “aesthetic experience of literature” and smuggling in sociological analysis and political ideology, the sort of thing for which TE takes Theory’s emperors to task? I don’t say that the aesthetic counts for everything in the study of literature, only that it’s where such study should begin. Let’s “contemplate” for a little bit before we rush on to making moral arguments.

"Literary criticism no longer aims to appreciate aesthetics — to study how human beings respond to art," Lindsay Waters asserts in his essay, "Literary Aesthetics: The Very Idea." "Do you get dizzy when you look at a Turner painting of a storm at sea? Do certain buildings make you feel insignificant while others make you feel just the right size? Without understanding that intensely physical reaction, scholarship about the arts can no longer enlarge the soul." As Miriam Burstein notes in her own critique of the essay, the ease with which Waters slides between "literary criticism" and "literary scholarship" is quite conspicuous (*The Little Professor*). While I think it is manifestly true that "scholarship" (defined as the disciplinary discourse of literary study) has abandoned aesthetics as a focus of attention, it is harder to maintain that "criticism" has similarly turned its back on aesthetic "appreciation," especially if you are willing to grant that literary criticism might still be produced by critics outside the ivy-covered walls. Waters apparently shares the now reflexive assumption that all seriously intended literary commentary originates from the academy, but a more useful approach to the problem he identifies might be to encourage a renewal of non-academic criticism that does take "literature itself" as its object, rather than the maintenance of specifically academic norms and protocols.

Waters is if anything even more vague and amorphous in his ostensible definition of the aesthetic as the "feeling" one gets when experiencing great art. Nothing in Waters's essay conveys to me a very clear sense of what it is exactly that Waters wants us to return to when we finally do return to aesthetics beyond a rather saccharine idea of "emotion"—our "intensely physical reaction" to art. Waters doesn't seem to realize how close his notion of studying "how human beings respond to art" is to Stanley Fish's version of reader-response criticism—which posits that what counts in the literary experience occurs "in the reader"—while at the same time

he identifies Fish as one of those pied pipers leading academic criticism astray. One could argue that both Waters and Fish are too quick to dismiss the formal qualities of literary texts—in my opinion, the elements with which all aesthetic analysis must begin—in favor of the reader's response, but if I had to choose between Fish's overemphasis on interpretation and Waters' overemphasis on pseudo-sensation, I think I'd take the former.

I agree with Burstein that Waters' concern for the reader's soul "treads close to elevating art to a form of religion." In their weakest moments, the New Critics were guilty of this as well, and in my opinion it was a discomfort with this tendency that led to New Critical formalism being supplanted by "harder" kinds of hermeneutics, reader-response theory being among the first. While feeling "dizzy" over a great poem is a perfectly fine response by individual readers, at some point one's light-headedness has to be dispelled for further discussion of the poem to take place. It would be hard to maintain that very much of scholastic value is taking place in a classroom full of vertiginous students.

I find Waters' invocation of Whitman particularly puzzling: "We cannot help feeling when we read Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, for example, that we are being inundated by words, as the poet piles clause after clause after clause upon us. We have to grapple with finding order (not to mention a verb) — to assert some kind of control. That kind of experience embodies the experience of the new democratic order that Whitman was celebrating, gives us a sense, not an idea, of that order." The inundation by words in Whitman is real enough, but it seems to me that Waters has skipped over several steps in the reading process in his conclusion that we end up experiencing "the new democratic order that Whitman was celebrating." Isn't the first kind of "order" we struggle to find precisely a formal order, an aesthetic patterning or arrangement of the "clause after clause after clause" that will help us understand the innovations Whitman is introducing to poetry, the "sense" in which we are to appreciate Whitman's overstuffed lines as verse? Miriam Burstein contends that Waters "keeps moving back and forth between the critic's aesthetic response to art. . .and claims about what art itself does," but I never get even an "idea" of what Waters thinks "aesthetic" means as applied to Walt Whitman's poetry. It seems to me that he merely ushers meaning as proposition out the front door as he sneaks it back in through the side door.

A coherent account of the aesthetic effects of literature would have to include the reader's experience of works of poetry or fiction, but I don't see how a concept of aesthetics that focuses entirely on that experience could even be called "aesthetics" to begin with. The psychology of reading is a worthy subject of investigation, although surely the aesthetic is not simply a psychological state. Fish began emphasizing the role of the reader in the study of literature because some forms of "appreciation" threatened to devolve into simple veneration of the "verbal icon." Although I agree with Waters that in subsequent years literary scholars too often "continue to shuck text of its form, reducing it to a proposition to be either affirmed or denied," as far as I can tell what he calls "free aesthetic response" is just as oblivious of the effects of form in provoking "aesthetic response." In seeking to be "free" it substitutes emotional immediacy for attentiveness to the designs and devices that determine (and often defer) meaning. As John Dewey maintains in *Art as Experience*, such attentiveness is itself ultimately liberating, as it expands our apprehension of what "experience" might be like. When Lindsay Waters asserts that Dreiser's portrayal of Carrie Meeber allows us to "experience ourselves as vain and frail and ambitious," he's actually describing a response to the novel that constricts the literary experience, that reduces it to an opportunity for vicarious self-dramatizing.

In *Exit Ghost*, Philip Roth includes a letter putatively written by "Amy Bellette" but, as it turns out, mostly written (she claims) by her lover, E.I. Lonoff, the perfectionist writer whose portrayal in *The Ghost Writer* initiated Roth's series of Zuckerman novels. Bellette/Lonoff write:

Hemingway's early stories are set in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, so your cultural journalist goes to the Upper Peninsula and finds out the names of the locals who are said to have been models for the characters in the early stories. Surprise of surprises, they or their descendants feel badly served by Ernest Hemingway. These feelings, unwarranted or childish or downright imaginary as they may be, are taken more seriously than the fiction because they're easier for your cultural journalist to talk about than the fiction.

I was reminded of this passage when reading Brian Boyd's "The Art of Literature and the Science of Literature," not because Boyd himself really finds external issues easier "to talk about than the fiction," certainly not because Boyd values such issues more than "the fiction," but

because even in his attempt to retrieve the “art of literature” as the central subject of literary criticism he seemingly can’t help but underscore the value of fiction as the gateway to something else.

Boyd correctly observes that

For the last few decades. . .scholars have been reluctant to deal with literature as an art—with the imaginative accomplishment of a work or the imaginative feast of responding to it—as if to do so meant privileging elite capacities and pandering to indulgent inclinations. Many critics have sought to keep literary criticism well away from the literary and instead to arraign literature as largely a product of social oppression, complicit in it or at best offering a resistance already contained.

In order to demonstrate that to ignore the “imaginative accomplishment of a work” is to totally misunderstand the claims that art makes on us, Boyd further correctly observes that “For both artists and audiences, art’s capacity to ensnare attention is crucial” and concludes from this that “attention—engagement in the activity—matters before meaning.”

Yet if we normally engage in art simply because it can command our attention, meaning, in academic contexts, elbows its way to the fore, because the propositional nature of meaning makes it so much easier to expound, circulate, regurgitate, or challenge than the fluid dynamics of attention.

Boyd devotes the largest part of his essay to an analysis of the play with “patterns” in Nabokov’s *Lolita* that shows, for Boyd, that “A writer can capture our attention before, in some cases long before, we reach what academic critics would accept as the ‘meaning’ or ‘meanings’ of works. The high density of multiple patterns holds our attention and elicits our response—especially through patterns of biological importance, like those surrounding character and event, which arouse attention and emotion and feed powerful, dedicated, evolved information-processing subroutines in the mind.”

Boyd’s reading of *Lolita* is impeccable, and I couldn’t agree more with his essential insight that attention precedes meaning and that the implications of this for our “appreciation” of literature are profound. Indeed, up to this point Boyd’s account of the nature of art and the reception of art is entirely consistent with that given in John Dewey’s *Art as Experience*, a book

that stands as the foundation of my own philosophy of art and the claims of which I have tried to integrate with a more purely literary interest in formalist aesthetics (substituting for New Critical notions such as “organic unity” Dewey’s emphasis on the unity of experience). Dewey similarly underscores the value of attentiveness and the process by which the reader or the viewer comes to be aware of patterns.

But in my opinion Boyd more or less gives back what he has taken away from those preoccupied with “meaning” in literature, with extracting from literature an analysis that services an extra- or even anti-literary agenda, when he declares that “The pleasure art’s intense play with patterns affords compels our engagement again and again and helps shape our capacity to create and process pattern more swiftly. Perhaps it even helps explain the so-called Flynn effect, the fact—and it seems to be one—that IQs have risen with each of the last few generations. . . .” Dewey would never have “justified” the experience of art by invoking this capacity to “process pattern more swiftly.” Dewey’s account emphasizes art’s capacity to enlarge experience, to make us more appreciative of experience, not its utilitarian potential to speed up our recognition of patterns. Indeed, such speeding-up probably cuts off the full experience of art as Dewey describes it. Art may or may not contribute to a “Flynn effect,” but that it might do so is hardly the most important reason to attend to art’s patterns in the first place. The attention we pay to art is its own compensation.

Thus I also don’t see why Boyd needs to appeal to “science” as a way of invoking the immediacy of art. The Darwinian/biological analysis of art itself brings along its own anti-art baggage, and finally the appeal to Science as the all-encompassing context in which art is to be understood is no more helpful to art than the appeal to History or to Culture. That “works of art should provide ideal controlled replicable experiments for the study of both rapid and gradual pattern recognition in the mind” or that “Literature and other arts have helped extend our command of information patterns” seem to me conclusions that are just as extra-literary in their attempts to use art and literature for that “something else” as the idea that works of art and literature disclose cultural symptoms or that they capture the elusive forces of history. (Or that they reveal the flaws of their creators.) Finally they also seem topics that might be more convenient to talk about than the fiction.

Ultimately the problem may be that Boyd's brief is not so much on behalf of a more profitable way of reading literature as it is an attempt to reintroduce "literature as an art" back into the university curriculum. But "the fluid dynamics of attention," however much they do govern our response to works of art or literature when we are freely encountering them, are not really "replicable" in the college classroom unless you want to spend most of it simply reading a novel, poem, or story and directing your students to be very dynamic in their attention. Teaching literature because it brings out many of the imperatives of human evolution doesn't seem any more faithful to the "imaginative accomplishments" of literature than any of the other methods of literary study that have been tried. It may be that the "indulgent inclinations" really do need to be indulged outside the classroom and elsewhere than in scholarly journals.

### *Acts of Rendition*

As I was working on a dissertation that was conspicuously about "postmodern" fiction, examined from a "poststructuralist" perspective, several of my readers expressed surprise at my extensive citation of Richard Poirier's 1966 book, *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature*. Although in my opinion this book is one of the most important academic studies of American literature, it had at that time become somewhat neglected even among "Americanist" scholars, but this was not the only reason readers found its prominence in my dissertation a little strange. What they really saw as unexpected was the extent to which supposedly postmodern and poststructuralist ideas about language and literary form could be discovered in Poirier's book, written well before either of these terms were much in circulation and well before critical theory became the dominant approach to literary study. I now think that perhaps the main reason *A World Elsewhere* had fallen into some obscurity was precisely that it offered a radical analysis of American literature and literary history.

*A World Elsewhere* makes it clear that American literature has long been characterized by a preoccupation with the processes of representation and specifically with the limitations of language as a medium of representation, features generally associated with postmodernism and assumed to be a phenomenon of more recent literary history. Such a view of American literary

history was implicitly unsettling to the prevailing approach to the study of American literature, which emphasized literature as a reflection of American history, often embodying “themes” said to be the obsessions of American writers in their encounter with history and culture. But Poirier in *A World Elsewhere* tells us that most of the canonical American writers distrust the very mechanisms available to poets and fiction writers that would render experience adequately and if anything they aspire to write in such a way that they manage to escape history. “The great works of American literature,” he writes, “are alive with the effort to stabilize certain feelings and attitudes that have, as it were, no place in the world, no place at all except where a writer’s style can give them one.” Thus these great works lead us not to the world of historical experience but to “a world elsewhere.”

Poirier’s insights arise mostly from an analysis of 19th century fiction (although Faulkner receives significant attention as well), but they are equally relevant to an understanding of the seemingly extravagant qualities of much unconventional post-World War II American fiction, or at least so I contended in my own study of metafiction (which was in its initial incarnation an American phenomenon). I took Poirier’s claims even a little farther, arguing that the self-reflexivity of metafiction, in directing the reader’s attention to the artifice of language, in effect makes style itself the “world elsewhere,” asking the reader not to regard language as the transparent medium for the invocation of a created “world” at all but as fiction’s primary source of interest, the irreducible substance of the reading experience. Along with the American writer’s propensity to favor “romance” over “novel” (a distinction made by Hawthorne), this emphasis on style (really an insistence that a work of fiction is finally a construction of words) helps to explain why American fiction has long seemed peculiarly “other” in comparison to British and European fiction—a difference that is often enough taken as a sign of inferiority but has actually made American fiction inherently “experimental” throughout its history.

Poirier’s reading of American fiction (and poetry as well) was directly inspired by his primary reading of Emerson, as illustrated especially in his 1987 book, *The Renewal of Literature*. In my opinion, Poirier is the indispensable commentator on Emerson—certainly few other critics are able to do equal justice to Emerson the philosopher and Emerson the writer as thoroughly as Poirier. He identifies Emerson, correctly in my view, as not just the source of “American” ideas and attitudes that are echoed in many other writers (whether they are always

aware of it or not), but of the quintessentially American approach to style as well. For anyone who has found Emerson's ideas interesting enough in the abstract but difficult to track as expressed through his aphoristic, circuitous prose style, Poirier's account of Emerson the writer can be revelatory. Emerson feared above all "being caught or fixed in a meaning" or "state of conformity," Poirier contends, and that fear is addressed first of all in Emerson's own deployment of language. Thus Emerson's prose is perhaps the supreme example of the centrality of "troping" in American literature, the "turning" of language in new or surprising ways that allow the writer (and the reader) to avoid being trapped in established usages and forms. In this way Emerson's writing doesn't so much "develop" through sequential discourse, which relies on already accepted patterns of thought, as it continually "transitions" from one formulation of language to another. "Emerson makes himself sometimes amazingly hard to read," writes Poirier

hard to get close to, all the more because he finds it manifestly difficult to get close to himself, to read or understand himself. If you want to get to know him, you must stay as close as possible to the movements of his language, moment by moment, for at every moment there is movement with no place to rest; you must share, to a degree few other writers since Shakespeare have asked us to do, in his contentions with his own and therefore with our own meanings, as these pass into and then out of any particular verbal configuration.

Emerson's essays do not present finished thoughts but illustrate a process of thinking. In purely literary terms, they are examples of writing that displays a "thoroughgoing inquisitiveness about its own verbal resources, let[ting] itself discover as much as can be known about the previous uses of its words." For Poirier, a work of literature "can be of lasting interest only if it reveals" such inquisitiveness. This view of the "literary" also leads to Poirier's conception of the role of criticism. Although he was not a New Critic, he explains the preponderance of close reading in *The Renewal of Literature* as the result of his belief that "criticism should engage itself not with rendered experience but the experience of rendering; it must go back to acts of rendition in language." Almost all of Poirier's criticism (of literature at least, since he also occasionally examined other forms, such as in his rather famous essay on the Beatles) is intensively focused on textual analysis, and few critics demonstrate the value of attending closely

to the words of the text as does Poirier in his efforts to disclose those “verbal resources” the writer has engaged, as in this analysis of Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall”:

. . .The sound of the opening line of the poem, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” creates a mystery, or what the poem itself calls a “gap.” This gap is not filled by summary bits of wisdom, like “good fences make good neighbors,” a line given, it should be remembered, to “an old-stone savage armed,” as if aphorisms are crude weaponry. No, good neighbors are made by phrases whose incompleteness is the very sign of neighborliness: “something there is.” Anyone can go along with that. The word “something” partakes mildly of the “mischief” attributed to the emergent energies of spring. when the frozen ground swell “makes gaps even two can pass abreast.” It is the sort of “mischief” which creates chances for companionability; this “something” doesn’t love walls; its love is given instead to the “gaps” in walls wherein people may join.

Poirier was concerned to read literary texts with such attentiveness because the writers he most admired were themselves so constantly attentive to the figurations of language. At the same time that Poirier’s readings help elucidate the tangible qualities of these works and thus enhance our own reading of them, his analyses also center on identifying the way in which such features arise from an orientation to language Poirier calls “linguistic skepticism.” Poirier considers linguistic skepticism to be the literary expression of American pragmatism, an association he pursues most directly in the 1992 book, *Poetry and Pragmatism*. Much of this book is devoted to discussions of William James and, again, Emerson, although Poirier makes a convincing case that it is Emerson who is truly the inspiration for the philosophical orientation James will ultimately label “pragmatism.” Emerson’s emphases on action and individual agency, and his distrust of inherited systems are direct influences on both James and John Dewey, but it is in the manifestation of these beliefs in Emerson’s approach to language and in his habits of writing that Emerson initiates a “pragmatic tradition” in American literature, one that Poirier assigns figuratively to “poetry” but which includes both poets and novelists, as well as essayists such as Emerson and Thoreau.

Writers in this tradition are especially aware of the contingency of language, its unavoidable immersion in past practices and ultimately its insufficiency as a medium for establishing the final truth of things. They understand that, in Poirier’s words, the “proper

activity” of all writers is “essentially a poetic one. It is to make sure that language is kept in a state of continuous troping, turning, transforming, transfiguring. . . .” The act of writing is thus alive with the attempt to “stabilize certain feelings and attitudes,” but the attempt itself provides the only stability, and it will of course be “turned” by subsequent attempts, the transfiguration it accomplishes achieving, in Robert Frost’s famous words, only “a momentary stay against confusion.”

Poirier believes, as do I, that this “momentary stay” is “quite enough,” but I also think that, if there is a limitation to Poirier’s critical project, it would be his (not to mention Emerson’s) underemphasis on the aesthetic satisfaction a work of literature might still provide well beyond the “momentary” act of troping. However much Emerson urges that the poetic impulse is “continuous,” never resting in any particular expression, poems, stories, and novels retain the capacity to provoke an aesthetic experience for potential readers. If the greatest works do not necessarily bear comparison to the “well-wrought urn” in their manifest aesthetic qualities, those qualities are real and are the most immediate object of the experience of literature, unless poetry and fiction differ from more straightforward forms of discourse only in being less direct in communicating “meaning.” In his focus on style, Poirier certainly does not reduce the work of literature to its interpreted meaning, but it nevertheless does seem to me that a pragmatic criticism, or a study of the pragmatic strain in American literature, could allow for the way style interacts with form and for the way their interaction in a particular text can produce literary art of more or less enduring value.

Poirier quite rightly points out that Emersonian pragmatism has always been in its anti-foundationalism “postmodern.” But Poirier also helps us understand that the writers influenced by Emerson do not despair at the contingency of language or abandon all purpose because truth will always remain elusive. Instead, they proceed according to the belief that, as Poirier puts it, “language, and therefore thinking, can be changed by an individual’s acts of imagination and by an individual’s manipulation of words.” “Manipulation of words” is finally what literature is about, and ultimately the change in thinking such manipulation can effect is a change in the disposition of words, a fresh appreciation of the “transfiguring” power of words. Arguably, Poirier’s greatest contribution to literature and literary criticism was to show us why playing

“word games” does not trivialize the writer’s vocation, as some readers and critics seem to think, but is in fact the essence of that vocation, the most serious ambition a writer can possess.

Richard Poirier was an exemplary “academic critic” of a kind no longer much in evidence, one who combined formidable learning with an impeccable literary sensibility and who regarded academic criticism as a useful complement to literature—a study that attempted to deepen our apprehension of literature, not to affect a scholarly superiority to it. “Reading is nothing if not personal,” he wrote in an especially Emersonian mode in *Poetry and Pragmatism*. “It ought to get down ultimately to a struggle between what you want to make of a text and what it wants to make of itself and of you.” These days literary scholars are preoccupied with “what you want to make of a text,” mostly dismissing “what it wants to make of itself” and ignoring “what it wants to make of you.” Poirier could acknowledge the limitations of criticism, maintaining that “skepticism needs also to be directed at the language of criticism itself and its claims to large significance.” Those claims by academic critics have become only more inflated, and unfortunately there now few critics like Richard Poirier around to return us to the significance implicit in the reading experience itself, where the reader’s struggle to make the most of the text mirrors the writer’s struggle to allow language to make what sense it can.

### *The History of Change*

In a post on his blog, Ron Silliman argues that “the history of poetry is the history of change in poetry,” that the critics of innovation in literary practice are themselves writers and critics likely to be swept away by the historical currents that favor innovation and are thus mostly engaging in “tantrums” over their own unavoidable fate, and that the “new” and the fashionable are not synonymous terms in our appreciation of the innovative in poetry (or fiction.).

Literature certainly is more the history of its own evolving forms than it is an assemblage of “great works,” although I would substitute for “change” John Dewey’s notion of “growth” as the inevitable outcome of artistic traditions that manage to extend themselves over time-- “growth” not as simplistic “progress” but as the expansion of available approaches to the form, an increase of insight into the variety of its possibilities. Indeed, even if we were to consider

literary history as the accumulation of great works, in most cases these works are great precisely because they represent some new direction taken by the form employed. Surely English drama was not the same after Shakespeare finished stretching its boundaries, nor was English narrative poetry (narrative poetry in general) after *Paradise Lost*. Although we now think of the realistic novel as the epitome of convention in fiction, there was of course a time when it was on the cutting edge of change and writers like Flaubert, Tolstoy, and Henry James were writing what was for the time experimental fiction.

Thus I am less willing than Silliman to dismiss the "well-wrought urn" as a metaphor for aesthetic accomplishment in works of literature. A poem or novel may indeed be "well-wrought" without conforming to pre-established models. Perhaps the passage of time does allow us to see more clearly the craftedness of some works of art that at first seemed simply model-breaking, but ultimately I see no conflict between innovation in poetry or fiction and the skillful construction of individual poems, plays, short stories, or novels.

On the other hand, Silliman is certainly correct in characterizing most of the critical resistance to change in literary forms as a kind of lashing-out against writing implicitly exposing most of the otherwise critically favored writers of the moment as aesthetically tame and unadventurous, tied to the critical nostrums of the day (which, especially with fiction, are typically not only aesthetically conservative, but often not really focused on aesthetic achievement at all but on what the writer allegedly has to "say" about prominent "issues"). American experimental fiction of the post-World War II era has been especially subjected to these "tantrums"—If anything they have only increased in intensity—concerted efforts to marginalize this fiction by accusing it of lacking seriousness of purpose, of indulging in games and jokes rather than sticking to straightforward storytelling, of striving after effects that turn out to be "merely literary." In my opinion, however, it will be the work of writers like John Hawkes, Robert Coover, and Gilbert Sorrentino that will be recognized as the indispensable fiction of this period, not that of the more celebrated but less formally audacious writers such as Bellow or Styron or Vidal.

Eventually almost all postwar writers whose work departs significantly from convention have come to be labeled "postmodernist," a term that has definable meaning but that also has been used as an aid in this lashing-out, a way to further disparage such writers both by lumping

them together indiscriminately and by identifying their work as just another participant in literary fashion. Ron Silliman points out that a distinction can be made between fashion in the arts and the truly new:

Each art form has its own dynamic around issues such as form and change. For example, one could argue that the visual arts world, at least in New York & London, has become self-trivializing by thrusting change into warp drive because of the market needs of the gallery system. There, capital demands newness at a pace that hardly ever lets a shift in the paradigm marinate awhile. I seriously wonder if any innovation in that world since the Pop artists let in the found imagery of the mid-century commercial landscape has ever had a chance to settle in. That settling process seems to be an important part of the run-up in helping to generate the power of reaction, to motivate whatever comes next. The problem with the visual arts scene today is that innovation is constant, but always unmotivated.

Poetry has the advantage of not being corrupted by too much cash in the system. That ensures that change can occur at a pace that has more to do with the inner needs of writers as they confront their lives. . . .

The New York art world has become so dependent on "the latest thing" that aesthetic change becomes "unmotivated" except by the need for individual artists to enter the system that confers purpose on their work. And although fiction is probably more tied to the cash nexus than poetry, most serious literary fiction is much less so, and the degree of change and resistance to change, while perhaps somewhat less pure than in discussions of poetry, is largely determined by honest beliefs about the direction fiction ought to take.

In this context, to regard experimental fiction as "fashion" is essentially to believe there can be no "shift[s] in the paradigm" in the development of fiction, that the experimental must always represent an irritating deviation from the accepted unitary model of how fiction should be written. It forecloses the possibility that the established paradigm might "shift" if something genuinely new were to appear and transform our assumptions about the nature of the novel and/or the short story. Even if it is allowed that the occasional genius comes along to produce work that stands out from the mainstream, such work is considered a singular achievement, a momentary departure from the otherwise settled paradigm granted only to the genius. The

exceptional, extraordinary talent thus helps to preserve the status quo since no one else can be expected to rise to his/her level.

In reality, the "postmodern" period in American fiction came close to establishing a new paradigm insofar as it seemed to validate the experimental impulse behind modernism, its own even more radical experiments extending the reach of literary experiment beyond modernism and implicitly suggesting it can always be extended farther still. But ultimately experimental fiction can provide a paradigm only if it is one that rejects the creation of paradigms except in the loosest possible sense of the term—the model fiction writers should follow is the absence of a model. However desirable such a model might be in the cause of aesthetic freedom, it isn't likely to offer much stability to literary culture, and thus it was almost inevitable that some sort of reaction against the postmodern would set in to restore good critical order. The past thirty years or so has not seen a shift in paradigm but a reinforcement of conventional practices, a widespread return to narrative business as usual.

Such an embrace of convention—of the assumption that the art of fiction = storytelling, that the writer's job is to create characters who can be regarded as if they were persons, persons with "minds," etc.—can't really be said to be a part of the kind of dialectical process Ron Silliman describes. Postmodernism in fiction didn't "settle in" and then become the impetus for a new a refreshed practice but was considered a temporary aberration until writers could be brought back to producing "normal" fiction. Experimental writers have not disappeared altogether, but those sometimes still called "experimental"—Lethem, Saunders, Wallace—are surely much less resolutely so, much more restrained, than Hawkes and Coover, et. al. Normal fiction is precisely what is taught to aspiring writers in most creative writing programs.

Literary change will continue to occur, of course, but in fiction it won't come in paradigm shifts but through the persistence of individual writers impatient with normal fiction. These fiction writers will be motivated by the need to preserve the integrity of their own work and by the desire to ensure that fiction has a purpose beyond providing the "book business" with a commercial product designed to be another entertainment option. Their work will continue to demonstrate that the aesthetics of fiction are manifested more in the continued reinvention of the form than in the successful reinscription of the existing form.

*Beyond the Narrative Arc*

In the epilogue to *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, a book that ostensibly tries to make a case for unconventional form in fiction, Jane Alison writes:

So often, fictions that experiment formally do so at the expense of feeling. They toy on surfaces or are purely cerebral affairs, don't explore human complexities. But the mostly unconventional narratives I've been discussing have dealt powerfully with core human matters. . . .

This is not an uncommon accusation against experimental fiction, but usually it is made by people without sympathy for formally adventurous fiction, not writers who have just otherwise expressed approval of work that seeks out alternative narrative strategies in a book about such strategies. It almost seems as if Alison is worried that readers might confuse the kind of writing she has discussed for that arid "game-playing" sort of fiction with which "experimental writers" are most often identified.

But exactly how "often" does experimental fiction sacrifice "feeling" for formal invention? Who exactly does Alison have in mind as writers who "toy on surfaces" (which is a rather peculiar complaint in a book that extensively praises the work of Nicholson Baker), or produce "purely cerebral affairs"? Perhaps it is unfair to ask the author to name names in a brief epilogue such as this, but since Alison does include among her book's exemplary cases a few writers (B.S. Johnson, David Foster Wallace) who could be (and are) accused of being too frivolous or too "cerebral," her insinuation that a certain (vague) kind of experimental fiction is too bloodless makes the question seem apposite. If Alison's analysis can be applied to, say, David Markson (also a focus of attention in one of the chapters), then presumably we might find as well that "postmodern" innovators such as John Barth, Gilbert Sorrentino, or Steve Tomasula (the sort of writers I suspect are the targets of Alison's indictment) can be approached through her interpretive frame. That Alison doesn't give us the particulars we need to adequately assess the distinction she's making ultimately means we can't really fully assess the scope of her whole critical project in *Meander, Spiral, Explode*.

The closest we can come to making such an assessment of Alison's assertion is to consider the emphasis she puts on "feeling," on "human complexities," and "core human matters." Presumably these are essential elements missing from game-playing experimental fiction and that she is assuring us we will find in the works she explicates in her book. Indeed, since formal experiment characterizes both these works and the other, flawed kind of experiment, it must be this concern for feeling, the attention to "core human matters" that most distinguishes her chosen writers and their works. The effort to "experiment formally," then, is, or should be, one that finds the right form — beyond the usual "narrative arc" — to communicate feeling and render human complexities, presumably the true goal of art. While it is tempting to adduce a list of experimental writers (the "wrong" kind) whose work is profoundly concerned with "human complexities" and "human matters," that would again only belie the fact that Alison gives us no examples with which we can contrast the treatment of "complexities" and "matters" to be found in the works her book endorses.

It seems quite likely that Alison could not actually provide many — if any — compelling examples of experimental fiction that avoids "human complexities" or ignores "core human matters." But, putting aside how we determine what qualifies as a "core" concern or how we register a human complexity, is it in fact the case that fiction should be devoted first to the delineation of its "human" content, to the cultivation of "feeling"? Why would the exploration of the formal possibilities (in all their complexity) not be just as crucial to the integrity of fiction as evoking emotion in the reader — arguably more so, as it is the shaping of language into dynamic form that confers on fiction the status of *art* in the first place? If Jane Alison truly intends her book to be a primer on how to "keep making our novels *novel*," as she puts it at the end of her epilogue, it would seem advisable not to at the same time imply that such novelty (which is nothing if not itself a significant "human" achievement) should still be secondary to its content, the content that reliably appeals to emotion and restricts itself to established "core" themes.

The kind of formal experiment Alison is eager to encourage is pretty much encapsulated in the book's title. Meander, spiral, and explosion are forms of spatial movement, although Alison also discusses additional such forms: waves, "wavelets," fractals. These are all forms that mirror forms of organization in the natural world. One could say that while Alison seeks alternatives to the kind of traditional arc that is described by Freytag in his famous "triangle," her

counter-forms nevertheless reinforce the conventional practice of *realism* by stressing form as itself a “mirror of nature.” This is not to say that all of the writers she examines in illustration of these could adequately be described as realists (although many of them could), but Alison finds even those works that might otherwise seem the farthest removed from traditional realism to be less daunting in their departures from convention than we might think. “*Cloud Atlas* got lots of attention for its postmodern, metafictional cleverness,” she writes, “each story being nested within the next makes the ‘reality’ of any dizzying. But I think this contrivance is the least interesting thing about it.” Further: “I insist that *Cloud Atlas* is not only clever, not only designed, but earnest and moving. Its playful elements add to its depth.”

Again, it seems peculiar in a book ostensibly defending (and trying to advance) adventurous formal arrangements in fiction to decry as “contrivances” devices that contribute to the effort to reconfigure form. *Cloud Alas*, it seems, would have been one of those books that settle for being clever, merely “designed,” if it didn’t transcend its cleverness to become “earnest and moving.” Being “playful” in its effects is acceptable if those efforts augment the work’s “depth,” which clearly Alison values most of all. Formal experiment is only useful for Alison if, as in *Cloud Atlas*, it can enhance the “earnest” qualities of a novel, and its use diminishes it if the playfulness is in effect “merely literary.” Whether David Mitchell would be content with the perception his novel is “earnest and moving” above all, or whether he might like his design, his “metafictional” ingenuity, to be appreciated as well (else why apply it in the first place?) seems to me a question whose answer seems obvious enough.

*Meander, Spiral, Explode* is not without value as a briskly written, compact overview of the various spatial strategies writers have successfully employed, and might continue to be fruitfully employed if writers had a more synoptic view of them, along with a few models of the way they can work. Many of the illustrative readings are enlightening about the works discussed: Roth’s *Goodbye, Columbus* as a “wave” (as well as the underlying redescription of a narrative arc itself as more usefully perceived as a wave); Raymond Carver’s “Where I’m Calling From” as a “wavelet” (“seemingly small undulations” of story); Mary Robison’s *Why Did I Ever* as an “explosion” (or “radial”). Others are less evocative, or the text in question might just as accurately have been placed in one of the other categories, or described in other terms entirely. Nicholson Baker’s *The Mezzanine*, for example, does not readily seem to fit Alison’s

characterization of it as a “meander.” While it is certainly true that the novel “gives us elaborate dilatory detail” that constantly interrupts the miniscule “forward motion” it ultimately gains, it is finally hard to regard this as a “meander.” It seems more like a deliberate subversion of the very notion of “forward motion,” a playful (but also urgently serious) displacement of that expectation most readers bring to reading a novel. Alison proposes the intriguing interpretation that the form of *The Mezzanine* actually mirrors its content, whereby “we experience a slight rise of forward motion, then a flattening digression, another slight rise, then a flattening digression . . . in the shape of an escalator” (riding which, of course, is really the novel’s only “action”). But it seems to me that this novel wants to arrest all sense of “motion” (as much as is possible in a medium made of sequential words); if it has a spatial rather than a chronological form, the movement of *The Mezzanine* is not “forward” at all but outward, in an attempt to expand the few minutes of its narrative clock time and its protagonist’s place in it to a kind of sustained instant of experience.

Finally, however, it is probably not so important whether Alison precisely identifies each of the spatial forms, or that writers have the “correct” name for them. To the extent that her book convinces writers there are indeed credible alternatives to the reflexive preference for Freytag’s “arc,” alternatives that do not imply a fall into formlessness but challenge inculcated expectations without necessarily alienating readers, Alison will have served a worthy purpose. But the book never really destabilizes the notion of “story” itself as the ultimate object of the fiction writer’s craft. Meanders or spirals do not, at least in Alison’s analysis, abandon narrative in its very loosest sense — a prose description of “what happens” to one or more characters — or deflect attention away from the “content” the narrative embodies in any significant way. In fact, it is in Alison’s account precisely the writer’s “craft” to embody the content by the most efficacious means available. (Form suits content.) Thus, *Meander, Spiral, Explode* is finally not really a book about formal experimentation in fiction but at best an effort to encourage a freer approach to form that forestalls a complete acquiescence to stale routine.

That the book’s intended audience is primarily writers seems fairly unambiguous. Although the analyses provided could be of interest to some readers not themselves writers (especially readers of some of the more “difficult” writers, such as Sebald or Robbe-Grillet, readers who have found their work foreboding), the book would likely be most useful as a supplementary text in a creative writing workshop. Perhaps this also accounts for Alison’s at

times somewhat breathless prose and frequent reliance on figurative phrasing rather than a more analytical critical language. One could wonder, though, whether this gives the book greater accessibility or underestimates most writers' (and writing students') tolerance of more critical rigor. A book that considers thoroughly the principles animating the impulse to "experiment" in fiction, and looks at *all* the formal strategies adventurous writers have attempted, would surely be a service to readers and writers alike. That book has yet to be written.

### *Aesthetic Bliss*

In his review of the Library of America's collection of early Faulkner novels, David Ulin suggests that in Faulkner's fiction

The fixation with time is hardly a modernist sentiment. Rather, it's a classical perspective, in which everything matters and nothing is forgotten or forgiven or redeemed. Yet this is Faulkner's genius: the way he uses modernist strategies but is, in the end, not really a modernist — his ability to be of his time and timeless at once. Unlike Joyce or Pound, there is no orthodoxy in his writing; unlike Stein, he is not using language to play games. No, for Faulkner, stylistic innovation — the lack of punctuation, the run-on sentences, the blurring of chronology, of memory and action — becomes a matter of emotional impact, of the effort to re-create life as it is lived. That's an idea he had to learn how to inhabit, as he moved from the studied diffidence of "Soldiers' Pay" to an aesthetic more three-dimensional and profound. In "Novels 1926-1929," we see the arc of this development, the dramatic shift from artifice to art.

That Faulkner conveys a worldview incorporating "classical" qualities must certainly be true, but I don't see why this feature of his work makes it incompatible with modernism. Does this mean T.S. Eliot, a self-confessed classicist, was also no modernist? Has our definition of "modernist" evolved to the stage where it simply means "chaotic"? No work that moves through apparent disorder to achieve a different kind of order need apply to the "timeless" club? With modernists, nothing matters?

I'm pretty sure I don't at all understand what Ulin means to imply in asserting there is "orthodoxy" in the work of Joyce and Pound. That they are orthodox modernists? That they were thus too committed to the idea of originality, of "making it new"? This strikes me as a pretty bizarre notion. Is he suggesting that some other kind of political, cultural, or religious "orthodoxy" gets expressed in their work? That Pound had some thoroughly obnoxious political views is well known, but Joyce was surely one of the least ideological of writers. What Ulin is getting at remains to me mysterious, but at any rate his degree of orthodox whatever seems a pretty thin measure with which to separate William Faulkner from the other important modernists.

I have to say I find the claim that Faulkner "is not using language to play games" the most wildly mistaken assertion in this whole generally misleading summation. Faulkner at his best is full of game-playing. When Vardaman, the young illiterate Bundren in *As I Lay Dying*, narrates one of his sections of the book in hyper-fluent Faulknerese, most readers must find the device first of all hilariously funny and probably conclude it is an example, in part, of Faulkner indeed playing a game, having a little fun with the reader. (If this was not Faulkner's intent, it is certainly an effect of this section, one that only enhances the novel's appeal, at least for me.) Or to take *The Sound and the Fury*: Is not Benjy's chapter an example of verbal/rhetorical gamesmanship? We accept that it is an attempt to reproduce the thought process of a mentally handicapped character, but would Benjy's monologue really stand up to scrutiny as an accurate rendition of the way such a person thinks? I don't think so. It's a compelling illusion, created by Faulkner's skill with words.

The enabling assumption behind Ulin's effort to disentangle Faulkner from the modernist web seems to me to be expressed in the observation that his "stylistic innovation" is really just "a matter of emotional impact, of the effort to re-create life as it is lived." In other words, if you ignore "the blurring of chronology, of memory and action"—the textual features of Faulkner's books that are otherwise their most notable achievements—he's really a perfectly conventional novelist. To give Ulin more credit, he probably means to say that Faulkner's innovations have a purpose, that they are alternative methods of making "art" out of "life," the latter being the subject held in common by all great writers, conventional or experimental. But can't the same thing can be said of Joyce, Proust, or Kafka, of all the modernist poets? Isn't modernism all about

finding new ways of portraying an enduring human reality? Ulin's prejudice seems to be for fiction that "re-create[s] life as it is lived," but no writer is in the business of "re-creation of life." A novel is a construction of words, "artifice" by nature. No "life" is to be found anywhere within it, only words, sentences, paragraphs. Some writers want to convince you that their words evoke images of the world as we think we know it, summon up "characters" we can accept as like real people; the best of these writers do produce powerful illusions of this kind, but they are illusions, the strategies involved as artificial as any of those dismissed as less "three-dimensional." Faulkner is at times a writer like this, but his fiction always forces awareness of the way these images are produced, and it's hard to believe he didn't know this. Such self-awareness makes him a quintessential modernist.

I have highlighted this passage from Ulin's review because it encourages a view of both modernism and postmodernism that distorts and devalues their aesthetic ambitions. This view makes precisely the distinction between "artifice" and "art" that Ulin thinks distinguishes Faulkner's lesser from his greater work. "Artifice" is about style or form, while "art" is about life. But how can any work of fiction or poetry be about anything but life? On what can a writer base his art other than his experience as a living human being? That some modernists/postmodernists are preoccupied with aesthetic questions is true enough, but why are these kinds of questions not considered properly "human"? Isn't the ability to formulate the concept of the aesthetic one of our defining features as a species? Presumably Ulin wants Faulkner's books to be sources of wisdom, while I want them to be sources of aesthetic delight. But I can see no reason why the former rather than the latter should be the deciding factor in judging a writer's work sufficiently "profound" to be art.

Jay Caspian Kang appears to conclude that so-called "trigger warnings" —statements that some readers might find a particular work disturbing or traumatic—are not such a good idea in college literature courses, even suggesting they might be a "preemptive defacement" of the text, although in reaching that conclusion, he allows that there are good arguments in favor of such warnings. I myself don't particularly object to advisories to students about potentially unsettling content in assigned texts, provided they aren't expressed in an especially reductive way. The example Kang begins by considering—that Nabokov's *Lolita* is a book "about. . .the systematic

rape of a young girl"-- is egregiously reductive, as a better description would be that in *Lolita* "the author wants you to remember the story is about the narrator's serial rape of a young girl, even while you might be enjoying his manner of storytelling or admiring his way with words," however much this might prematurely articulate an insight the author wants readers to come to themselves. The real issue is thus how the "trigger warning" is phrased, not whether they are ever justified.

I do challenge the assumptions about literature on which Kang's characterization of this debate is based, however. One such assumption is that with a novel like *Lolita*, the reader has the either/or choice of focusing on its content, in this case the controversial "subject," or its style, as Kang puts it in Nabokov's case, his "cunning, surprising games with language." Although this crude opposition is never really applicable to any well-realized novel, with *Lolita* it is particularly misguided. The subject of Nabokov's novel is not Humbert Humbert's sexual predation of Lolita per se, but his ability to regard his predatory behavior as just another instance of his pursuit of "beauty" (however perverted his taste in beauty has become), as well as his ability to persuade us he is sincerely motivated by this pursuit. To proceed in reading *Lolita* as if we could easily separate what makes us uncomfortable about its subject (including the novel's success in making us laugh despite the terrible implications of its subject) from Humbert Humbert's manner of relating it to us (by extension, Nabokov's penchant for playing "games with language") is to misread this novel almost completely. You might try to read it, in Kang's formulation, simply as a "series of sentences," but you wouldn't be reading the literary work Nabokov actually wrote.

Kang then assures us he doesn't believe "that literature should only be examined as an object unto itself, detached from time and history," but this of course implies it is possible to "examine" a work of literature "detached from time and history." It is frequently enough suggested that anyone who thinks that literary criticism should start with the formal and stylistic qualities of literature is taking such a position, but even if we were to accept "detachment" as the animating principle of formalism (which I do not), even a moment's reflection reveals the absurdity of believing such a thing as actual detachment from "time and history" is even possible in the first place. How would one reach this state of detachment? Is it in some sort of fifth dimension where one's corporeality as a human being entirely the product of time and history

gets suspended? If as readers we can never ourselves escape time and history, how can our consideration of a literary text evade that condition?

But formalism in fact does not entail the attempt to detach literature from the world of experience. Formalism wants to remind us that the world is mediated through the imaginative reshaping and the stylistic redescriptions of fiction and poetry, so that direct connections between the work and the world can't easily be made without keeping in mind the mediations of form and style. Thus, *Lolita* does indeed attach itself to "time and history"—you can, for example, learn a great deal about backroads America in the 1950s as Humbert and Lolita make their journey from motel to motel after he has spirited her away. No one would want to read *Lolita* as social realism, however, just as also it is not a story about child abuse, or even, finally about one man's self-deception. It is to an extent about all of these things, but more than that it is about Nabokov's transformation of each of these subjects into literary art that encompasses them without merely serving as the vehicle for them. The subjects, rather, serve as vehicles for the art, which the novel does not present as a kind of external ornamentation to be admired but is offered as the experience of what Nabokov famously called "aesthetic bliss" (that "tingling" in the spine), all the more profound because it arises from such tawdry circumstances.

Finally there really is no reason to read *Lolita* except for the possibility of experiencing this aesthetic bliss. Even for would-be writers or students of literature, the real goal of considering this novel closely is to appreciate how a work of fiction can produce aesthetic bliss—beauty—out of so much apparent ugliness. In this context, trigger warnings regarding what the novel is "about" are just irrelevant. If you aren't reading (or teaching) a work of literature like *Lolita* as a potentially transformative reading experience, why bother? Nabokov is inimitable, so you're not going to be able to write like him. You could put the novel on the syllabus to "interrogate" its cultural assumptions, but it's not likely it will prove a particularly useful tool for this exercise, since it already interrogates most of those assumptions itself. (And students won't be "delighted" to "read a book full of graphic accounts of sexual violence and still have the book not be about sexual violence" because *Lolita* has no graphic accounts of sex or sexual violence at all, a mischaracterization that Kang fails to correct.) That *Lolita* proffers no definitive answers to the questions raised is ultimately what makes us most uncomfortable in reading it, and that is also what makes it a great work of literature.

### *Something Less Troublesome*

It seems to me that almost all of the reviewers who found fault with Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones*—some of them quite harshly—failed to take sufficiently into account the effects and implications of its origin in the first-person narration of its protagonist. They made the mistake of imputing to the author, or to the author's "intentions," ideas that are properly confined to the discourse of the narrator.

The first step in a critically generous assessment of a work of fiction has to be to engage with the work on its own embodied terms, as far as those terms can be apprehended by the discerning critic. When a novel or story is presented as a first-person narrative—related either by the protagonist or some other subsidiary or observing character—this ought to be a sign that the account we are given is rooted in the perceptions, the language, and the assumptions of the narrator. All first-person narrators are to this degree "unreliable," although some third-person narrators might be unreliable as well (if such a narrator hews especially close to the perspective of the characters on whose behalf the narrator essentially speaks) and sometimes reliability is mostly irrelevant. Especially when a character is as self-involved, not to mention self-deceived, as Maximilien Aue, the true-believing Nazi SS officer who narrates his war experiences in *The Kindly Ones*, any critical commentary must acknowledge that "meaning" or "theme" (and even at times "style") are conditioned by the limits of the narrator's perspective.

One has to assume that in creating a narrator with such extreme limitations as Dr. Aue, Littell is fully aware of building in a space for ambiguity and uncertainty, of presenting us with a character whose every utterance has to be considered potentially compromised by context. One might assume further that Littell is posing to readers an explicit challenge precisely to scrutinize the text in this way, not to take it as the author's own account of Nazism or to judge it by standards inappropriate to the kind of work it is. Thus when Laila Lalami complains that the reader of *The Kindly Ones* is not "drawn into the narrative by the beauty of the language, a masterful use of point of view, or an intriguing personal life against which the monstrosity of the main character could be highlighted" (Los Angeles Times), she implies the novel would be less

objectionable as a portrait of a "monster" if instead of its "plodding style" it employed beautiful language (perhaps she has *Lolita* in mind), unified the point of view so that the narrator seemed less dissociated, or made Aue's personal life more "intriguing" and less repellent. She is asking it to be something other than itself, something less troublesome.

For a text authored by an SS bureaucrat to exhibit "beautiful" language would defy belief even more considerably than does Aue's ability to show up at every important stage of the Final Solution, which Lalami describes as "unrealistic." If ever a novel justifies a "plodding style," *The Kindly Ones* is it, since it so accurately reflects Aue's bureaucratic soul. I confess I do not find this novel lacking "a single narrative consciousness" as Lalami sums up her problem with Littell's handling of point of view, although I agree that Aue's narration does modulate in tone. This seems to me, however, a consequence of the fact that Aue's "narrative consciousness" inherently veers from "confessional" to "argumentative," etc., not that this fragmentation is a flaw in the use of point of view. Narrative consciousness is finally unified by Aue's particular kind of fragmented consciousness, although even if we found only disunity in the expression of point of view, I'm not sure why that in itself should be regarded as an aesthetic failure. It could be argued that "unity" of consciousness in fiction is actually a false representation of actual human consciousness, which is likely much more disunited than we want to think.

That Maximilien Aue's "personal life" is so distasteful as to make his story doubly monstrous was a common reaction among reviewers of *The Kindly Ones*. David Gates asserts in his *New York Times Book Review* assessment that "Aue is simply too much of a freak, and his supposed childhood trauma too specialized and contrived, for us to take him seriously," while Michiko Kakutani adds that "Aue is clearly a deranged creature, and his madness turns his story into a voyeuristic spectacle." Ruth Franklin scoffs that the novel's "utterly persuasive evocation of depravity" could be taken "as a sign of achievement" (*The New Republic*). Franklin's review in particular evoked the critical queasiness stirred up by Littell's novel, with its widely quoted remark that "This is one of the most repugnant books I have ever read." She further contends that "there is something awry in this book's unremitting immersion in Aue's worldview, without any effort—direct or indirect, latent or manifest, philosophical or artistic—to balance or counteract it in any way." Melvin Jules Bukiet in the *Washington Post* claims similarly that it is "not that a reader necessarily seeks a lesson, but fiction and nonfiction ought to approach the subject as

more than an opportunity to wallow in the worst humankind has to offer," and these two comments most explicitly reveal the incomprehension with which so many American reviewers of *The Kindly Ones* reacted to the narrative constructed by its protagonist.

Both Franklin and Bukiet implicitly testify here to the success with which Littell has given over the novel to his protagonist's *Weltanschauung*, a word Aue himself uses frequently, even if they also find that aesthetic act objectionable. In my opinion, a novel could do worse than engage in an "unremitting immersion" in its character's worldview, or, for that matter, "wallow in the worst humankind has to offer." That the critic found himself wallowing seems an indication that Littell has indeed created a compelling "narrative consciousness" that brings us uncomfortably close to an unsavory character with a repulsive worldview, not to mention overwhelming psychological problems.

Does an author have a responsibility to "balance" a character's unpleasant views or behavior with normative gestures, either "latent or manifest," indicating the author disapproves of the character's opinions and actions? Surely no reader believes that Littell does approve of his character's actions, so the perceived problem here must be that exposure to a character like Maximilien Aue will unduly soil the sensibilities of the reader. But surely no one expects readers to be converted to Nazism or sadomasochism through Aue's account of himself, either, so one must conclude that Franklin's and Bukiet's dislike of an "unremitting immersion in Aue's worldview" has been converted into a general critical requirement that bad people as depicted in fiction must be "counteracted" by a "philosophical or artistic" effort to meliorate their evil. One suspects that, despite his protestation that we don't necessarily need a "lesson" from such a novel as *The Kindly Ones*, Bukiet would prefer that its unmediated access to the point of view of a morally compromised protagonist be placed in a more didactically clear context as a corrective to "wallowing."

What is going to focus our attention on "the worst humankind has to offer" if not, at least occasionally, fiction? Is this a subject that ought to be ignored or forbidden? Why not write (or read) a novel that allows a Nazi SS man to speak of his experiences as witness to and participant in the attempted extermination of Jews and any other undesirable people? For such a novel to be successful it will almost necessarily offend and disturb some readers, but that is the consequence of attempting the work in the first place. Taking offense—or finding the novel "repugnant"—is

not a credible aesthetic judgment, and in my opinion most of the negative reviews of *The Kindly Ones* lack credibility because they were either explicit expressions of distaste of this kind or thinly disguised versions of such distaste masquerading as critique of character and plot logic.

The major accomplishment of *The Kindly Ones* is the author's thoroughly successful ventriloquism of Dr. Aue, a performance that requires we abide this character in all of his true-believing, sadomasochistic, murderous horror or else the effort is subsumed into the usual safe moralizing provided by "balance." Balance would only produce a cop show-like view of evil, which is comfortably softened by the presence of reassuring outrage at human perfidy. It could be argued that this sort of easy portrayal of the conflict between decency and depravity is false to the actual content of evil, a sentimentalized response. It seems to me that, precisely to the extent Littell has avoided "balance," he has given us a more persuasive representation of evil, something that we must experience for ourselves in its half banality, half degeneracy through Aue's recitation. Only this "unremitting immersion" gets us anywhere near the reality of evil.

Some reviewers focused their criticism of *The Kindly Ones* more on its deficiencies of plot than on a moral repugnance toward its narrator. Lalami observes that "like Forrester Gump, [Aue] conveniently manages to be wherever the most significant events of the war take place, at the time in which they take place, and to interact with all the relevant figures of Nazism," a plot progression which Zak M. Salih describes as "a collection of the Nazi regime's greatest hits" (*City Paper*). Peter Kemp further complains of the "pitiless prolixity" with which Aue tells his story and doubts "Aue's prodigious capacity to recall in profuse, minute detail all that was done and said. . ." (*The Times*). That a fussy bureaucrat like Maximilien Aue would remember his actions in great detail—that he might even have records of them—doesn't seem that far-fetched to me, but the question of whether Aue knows too much brings us back to Aue's status as narrator. Perhaps he does too conveniently recall the details of his wartime experiences. As far as I know, no one has questioned the accuracy of the historical details in which Aue's fictionalized story is embedded, but of course there is no way to "verify" the details of the fictional story. Ultimately, it really makes no difference: these are the things that were "done and said" that Aue wants us to know, and the impression they leave about him is presumably the impression he wants to leave.

The same is true of the plot developments that place Aue at so many of the crucial events of the war's waning years. Perhaps Aue is manipulating the historical record in order to give himself a role in all of these events, but again it doesn't really matter. The self-portrayal that emerges is the one Aue must intend. That this portrayal is a damning one suggests either that Aue is (consciously or subconsciously) submitting himself for judgment or that his particular involvement in the Final Solution is to be taken at face value. The former is not impossible, especially given his willingness to reveal all of his psychosexual problems as well. However, accepting that Aue happened to be in a position to witness so much of Nazi Germany's dissolution, at least for the purposes of the novel his fictional existence makes possible, doesn't seem to me such a difficult concession. His presence at the decisive stages of this process could just be, in fact, the reason he decided to write his memoir, following up on the less comprehensive accounts of other ex-Nazi colleagues.

Whatever degree of artifice Littell has brought to the plot of *The Kindly Ones*—at least that part of the plot devoted to chronicling the extermination program as it leads Aue from the Ukraine to Hitler's bunker—I found it riveting. Unlike some commentators who concluded that through the recounting of these events with their frequent expressions of dismay with the program and its methods, Littell was attempting to "humanize" Dr. Aue, I found the portrait of SS officers manifesting a degree of struggle with the task they'd been assigned a compelling alternative to the usual image of Nazis as unambiguously malevolent. To this extent, a character like Aue is humanized, but this only makes his and his fellow officer's actions more appalling, since they arise from recognizable human beings rather than caricatures. Some of these actions, such as the Babi Yar massacre, are hard to take, but their depiction commands attention.

One element of the novel's narrative structure does threaten to become overly artificial. Overlain on the story of Aue's war journey is a parallel association with Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, featuring Aue as Orestes (a device similar to the "mythic method" of Joyce's *Ulysses*). Ultimately these parallels might be a little too neat. Daniel Mendelsohn does a good job of teasing out the implications of this strategy in his NYRB review of *The Kindly Ones* (the title being a direct reference to the "furies" of Aeschylus's play, who are transformed at the end of the play into "kindly ones"), and while I agree with Mendelsohn that Littell employs the strategy skillfully, I can't agree that the problem it causes is that, in portraying Aue as "a sex-crazed, incestuous,

homosexual, matricidal coprophage," it works against the historical portrayal of Aue as a "human brother." I just don't perceive any effort on Littell's part to affirm Aue as a "human brother," as opposed to simply a "human being," and it does not make him into something other than a human being to imply, metaphorically, that Aue is a man pursued by his own sort of "furies."

What makes me less enamored of the mythic method as employed in *The Kindly Ones* is precisely that it threatens to disrupt our "immersion" in Aue's fictional memoir, that it intrudes on the performance of Aue's narration a different kind of performance, one that makes us too conscious of the author—Jonathan Littell—as the puppeteer pulling Aue's strings. For an exercise in point of view like *The Kindly Ones* to work most efficaciously, it ought to commit itself fully to the discourse of the narrator, and in my opinion the narrative doubling introduced by the Orestes story detracts from that commitment.

Unless. In his review of the novel, Paul La Farge comments that "If it were only Aue making himself out to be Orestes, you'd dismiss the gesture as an unjustified but understandable bid for sympathy, but it's Littell who puts Aue through Orestes's paces, as if to give credence to Aue's assertion that 'in this [life] I never had a choice,' that his free will was curtailed by 'the weight of fate'" (*The Believer*). Of course it is finally Littell "who puts Aue through Orestes's paces" in that Aue is the narrator of the novel Littell has written. In this sense, Littell puts Aue through all of his "paces." But there's nothing really to prevent us from attributing most, if not all, of the allusions to the Oresteia to Aue himself, either through the many direct references he makes or through both the additions and omissions (such as the episode in which he kills his mother and her husband, which he subsequently can't remember) he brings to bear on the story he wants to tell. If Aue attempts a play on our sympathy through these allusions—"I never had a choice"—we can accept it as such without believing his resort to this grandiosity actually absolves him of blame.

I'm not really sure I fully embrace this interpretation. The heavy-handed allusiveness may just be an aesthetic mistake, a secondary flaw we have to countenance while otherwise acknowledging the narrative power of the novel as a whole. *The Kindly Ones* rather early on overwhelmed my own general disdain for history-based fiction not by "bringing history to life" but by bringing life to history.

### *Make Everything More Beautiful*

When reading Roger Scruton, one can always be sure that the ideas and sentiments expressed are being offered with utter sincerity. The extent to which he is willing to defend a view of the world and the place of humans in it that seems not simply conservative but thoroughly antique can be astonishing, but he does defend it, seriously and systematically. As a philosopher, Scruton sticks to the most fundamental questions of social and cultural value, in many instances raising questions long assumed satisfactorily answered and renewing conservative objections to the direction taken by much of modern culture.

Those who might rebut Scruton's case against modern art and popular culture are perhaps tempted to simply dismiss his invocations of such seemingly agreeable concepts as "order" and "beauty" as so much opportunistic cant. This would be a mistake, not merely because Scruton makes his arguments in an intellectually honest way but because the role of order or beauty in art ought not be denied outright. Scruton is not wrong to consider "beauty" a relevant consideration in the assessment of art. He is wrong in his conception of beauty as it manifests itself in works of art.

In "Beauty and Desecration," Scruton asserts that "the sacred task of art. . . is to magnify life as it is and to reveal its beauty." Since the era of modernism, however, deliberate ugliness has usurped the place of beauty and "[a]rt increasingly aimed to disturb, subvert, or transgress moral certainties, and it was not beauty but originality—however achieved and at whatever moral cost—that won the prizes."

Note that is the transgression not of aesthetic standards but of "moral certainties" to which Scruton objects. Scruton rightly notes that in the 20th/21st centuries "expression" has become the underpinning of most movements in and commentary on "new" art, but rather than examine the specifically aesthetic flaws in an approach anchored in "expression," Scruton instead recoils from the moral anarchy unleashed by the modern Romantic rebel: "This emphasis on expression was a legacy of the Romantic movement; but now it was joined by the conviction that the artist is outside bourgeois society, defined in opposition to it, so that artistic self-expression is at the same time a transgression of ordinary moral norms."

Scruton uses as an example the widespread habit in productions of opera to alter the staging and the dramatic vision to produce a "modernized" version. He cites a particular production of Mozart's *The Abduction From the Seraglio* set "in a Berlin brothel, with Selim as pimp and Konstanze one of the prostitutes. Even during the most tender music, copulating couples littered the stage, and every opportunity for violence, with or without a sexual climax, was taken. . . The words and the music speak of love and compassion, but their message is drowned out by the scenes of desecration, murder, and narcissistic sex."

Even if we accept that Scruton's description of the staging of this opera is true to its director's intent—and I would guess that many others in the audience that night did not see it in this way—his outrage is directed at its moral implications. It is "an example of something familiar in every aspect of our contemporary culture. It is not merely that artists, directors, musicians, and others connected with the arts are in flight from beauty. Wherever beauty lies in wait for us, there arises a desire to preempt its appeal, to smother it with scenes of destruction." Scruton manages to connect this sort of "re-visioning" in the high arts to the music video, which "is often devoted to concentrating into the time span of a pop song some startling new account of moral chaos."

Scruton cannot entertain the possibility that the operatic production he attended committed an aesthetic offense, not a moral one. I am quite willing to believe that those responsible for it thought it a clever idea to "set the opera in a Berlin brothel, with Selim as pimp and Konstanze one of the prostitutes," but ultimately this is just an aesthetically vacuous attempt to "update" Mozart, to run roughshod over Mozart's original vision of his opera and establish their own overwhelmingly lame one in its place. It is a practice to be found not only in opera but in theater in general, whereby directors and producers with impaired aesthetic sensibilities attempt to keep the great works "relevant." One could, I suppose, call this artistic cluelessness a "moral" problem, but most of what Scruton sees as the unleashing of "moral chaos" is finally just the consequence of the aesthetic incompetence of some those entrusted with the job of representing the theatrical art of the past.

I suspect that Scruton does not want to examine the art he despises for its specific aesthetic failings because the very introduction of the "aesthetic" leads for him to the moral

decadence he fears. "Beauty" is not to be found in the creations of artists separated from the moral universe to which they must conform:

We can wander through this world, alienated, resentful, full of suspicion and distrust. Or we can find our home here, coming to rest in harmony with others and with ourselves. The experience of beauty guides us along this second path: it tells us that we are at home in the world, that the world is already ordered in our perceptions as a place fit for the lives of beings like us.

In this view, beauty is not even a "creation" of artists. It is a discovery by artists of "harmony," of the "order" that is "already" there "in our perceptions." Artists, such as the great landscape painters, are, if they are to be artists at all, "devoted to moralizing nature and showing the place of human freedom in the scheme of things."

This harmony and order—a moralized nature—is what Scruton means by the "sacred," the capturing of which is the duty of artists. Modern art is engaged in desecration—the inversion of the sacred. In suggesting that human beings are other than "at home in the world" or that the world itself is not always "fit," modern artists mock and undermine the moral order that art should be celebrating and supporting. It is time, according to Scruton, to recover the sacred, "to rediscover the affirmation and the truth to life without which artistic beauty cannot be realized."

Scruton's is an entirely coherent argument if you accept the underlying world view according to which the role of art is to "affirm" the deep, if not always completely visible, truth in "the scheme of things" that manifests itself in beauty. If you believe, however, that the world at times betrays an order that isn't necessarily beneficent, or that as Scruton puts it in his repugnance at another kind of "truthful" art, a human being can be reduced by life to "a lump of suffering flesh made pitiful, helpless, and disgusting," you might find Scruton's "truth" to be partial indeed. You might, in fact, find it a delusion, and the idea that a great artist can't redeem "suffering flesh made pitiful" by an act of imagination (or, as Susan Sontag would have it, "will") anything but an affirmation of life.

Terry Teachout:

Exactly what is it that art does? Countless books have been written to answer this question, and I can do no more in the compass of an essay than to suggest something of what they tell us. To begin with, it's generally agreed that great art has some mysterious yet ultimately intelligible relationship to truth. The nature of that relationship was nicely described by Fairfield Porter, a major American painter who was also a gifted art critic. "When I paint," Porter said, "I think that what would satisfy me is to express what Bonnard said Renoir told him: make everything more beautiful." No matter who said it first, this statement points gracefully to one of the most important things that art does: it portrays the world creatively, in the process heightening our perception and awareness of things as they are. . . . (Wall Street Journal, June 6, 2005)

I've probably read many of the books to which Teachout is referring, but I don't recall any such general agreement that art is a way of seeking "truth." I, for one, don't agree with this at all. If Teachout means to say that art takes "life" as its subject and for that very reason winds up (at its best) disclosing something truthful about it, then this seems trivial to me. Where else would art find its subject? If he means that truth in this context is something less tangible, something inherent to ordinary reality but not necessarily perceptible by ordinary means, then this already starts to make the pursuit of "truth" rather slippery. Whose truth are we talking about? Surely he can't mean that all artistic truths are equal, as long as they are ultimately "intelligible." One doesn't read Terry Teachout for a celebration of aesthetic relativism.

"Make everything more beautiful." Doesn't this contradict the notion that art aspires to truth? If art makes "things as they are" more beautiful, isn't this indeed a deliberate falsification? Life is something less than beautiful and art improves on it. This is a perfectly good thing for it to do, but whatever "truth" emerges has to be truth about art, not about life. Again, if Teachout thinks this is where the truth in art resides, I'd happily agree, but somehow I don't think he means to suggest this. Perhaps he believes that in making everything more beautiful some "inner truth" about the world emerges, but once more the need to discriminate between artistic truths arises. "'That truth is really true,'" the critic must say, "'while that one merely masquerades as truth.'" Certainly some critics do engage in this sort of thing, but in my opinion it takes them outside the realm of art into morality and metaphysics.

It's hard to disagree with the notion that art "portrays the world creatively, in the process heightening our perception and awareness of things as they are," except that this seems a secondary effect of art, not its *raison d'être*. According to John Dewey (to whom much of my own view of the nature and efficacy of art is indebted), art does indeed heighten perception and awareness, but what it most immediately heightens is our apprehension of what an experience can be like. The experience of art, Dewey says, is the most acute kind of experience we can have, and before we move on to the "subject" of the work we first of all clarify our perception of the art work itself, becoming aware (ideally) of the efforts the artist must have made in creating the work. To say that art primarily directs us to "things as they are" is to deny the "creative" integrity of art in favor of the representation of reality it purportedly gives us. Presumably, for Teachout it is the "truth" of this representation that is most important.

It is certainly the case that political art most insistently points us to "things as they are," and Teachout is correct in contending that political art is, usually, bad art, or at least that it's very difficult for most political art to succeed. Political artists are almost by definition more interested in the representation of reality they convey than in the subtleties of form and expression. They are after Truth in its most unadorned manifestation. They want to heighten our awareness in no uncertain terms. But I don't think that the way to counter bad art of this kind is to delineate more intricate gradations of "truth." I think you should just commit yourself to the art and let truth take care of itself.

This essay by Randy Boyagoda in the online journal *The New Pantagruel* demonstrates how truly catastrophic in its consequences has been the relentless politicization of literature over the past twenty-five years. Boyagoda wants to recoup *Moby-Dick* for the cause of American patriotism, arguing that Melville's "primary ambition" was "to enable Americans to appreciate, in the fullest complexity, their muddy grandeur, and recognize, however vexingly, the imperfect splendor of their nation."

Boyagoda traces *Moby-Dick*'s rise to prominence in academic literary study, making the plausible point that Richard Chase's *Herman Melville: A Critical Study* (1949), for example, was part of an effort made by prominent post-war Americanists to identify "a native-born artist whose achievements could adequately complement the stature of a fledgling superpower." That

much of now canonical American literature was used by many such critics to celebrate America, to enlist works of literature in a cultural cold war rather than delineate their purely literary virtues, is undeniable. To this extent, the Cold War ideology of much of early Americanist criticism surely did make literary study an implicitly political activity, in turn almost ensuring that later, more radical critics would attempt to discredit the ideology while continuing to regard the study of American literature as an excuse to engage in cultural politics.

Boyagoda deplores the results of the left-wing appropriation of Melville, citing specifically what he considers the baneful influence of the Marxist interpretation of *Moby-Dick* by C.L.R. James, but he doesn't renounce the political approach itself, advocating, in fact, that conservatives abandon whatever lingering belief they may have that "high literature ought never be dragged down into conversation with politics." (I myself haven't noticed many scruples on this score among present-day conservatives, but I suppose Boyagoda moves in different circles than I do.) He offers an alternative interpretation of *Moby-Dick* in which Queequeg becomes "the ideal American": "The son of an island king, he leaves behind his aristocratic inheritance to seek adventure and edification in the West. He willingly humbles himself to become a lowly crewman and rises through the whaling ranks through his skills as a harpooner. Today, he seems the archetypal American immigrant in search of the Promised Land, who found it, worked hard, and made good." Certainly Queequeg is portrayed sympathetically in *Moby-Dick*, and Boyagoda's simplistic account is no more simplistic than the view of him as exemplar of the working class, or the view of Ahab as rapacious capitalist or incipient fascist (although it does seem rather too squishily multicultural for most conservatives' comfort). Yet Boyagoda isn't finally interested in "scraping away an accumulation of critical barnacles and returning to Melville for Melville," as he claims to be, but is plainly concerned that a new set of barnacles be added:

These same virtues [embodied by Queequeg] must be nurtured today no matter how old-fashioned or "patriotic" (or even Christian) they may seem to those too easily disenchanted by America's strengths and weaknesses. Such efforts will inevitably be derided in some corners as a new conservative politicization of literature. More truthfully, they develop out of and seek to develop further a thoughtful love of country. . . .

What a thoroughgoing denial of the integrity of such a singular work as *Moby-Dick* to suggest it is valuable because it might ultimately inculcate a "love of country"! Does Boyagoda really

expect that thoughtful people will want to read Melville's novel so they can get a good dose of such patriotic medicine? How does it return Melville to Melville to reduce his literary achievements to such pap? On the other hand, is it any better to value Melville primarily because his work can be similarly wrenched out of shape from the other direction and made into a left-wing critique of American excess? Does it return Melville to Melville to portray him as a political polemicist, of whatever persuasion?

That such a novel as *Moby-Dick* can be read in such wildly disparate ways as those of Boyagoda and of James and his followers suggests to me two things: 1) *Moby-Dick* really is the sort of capacious work, allowing a multitude of readings, that the New Criticism encouraged us to think of as the supreme accomplishment of literary art; 2) neither the conservative nor the radical interpretations of *Moby-Dick* can be trusted as accounts of what Melville was "really" trying to do. They're just interpretations, and very pallid ones at that. They don't come close to describing the aesthetic and metaphysical mazes one can travel in reading Melville's novels and short stories. Boyagoda says that reading Melville will help Americans recognize "the imperfect splendor of their nation." How about the perfect splendor of literature?

### *Critical Objects*

My knowledge of Object-Oriented Philosophy is certainly imperfect (and thus open to correction), but I think I understand it well enough to assess Graham Harman's article, "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism," on the relationship of OO philosophy (or "speculative realism" more generally) to literary criticism. I find his discussion fascinating, full of potentially useful application, even if I can't ultimately agree either with his critique of New Criticism or with his suggestions about what an appropriately object-oriented criticism might attempt to do.

First of all, I do not think it is accurate to say that the New Critics conceived of the poem (the literary text) as "encapsulated machines cut off from all social and material context." It would be absurd to say that a literary work is literally "free" of the social/biographical/cultural context in which it was written. The New Critics just believed that this context had little to do

with the reader's experience of the poem, and it is the experience of reading that the New Critics wanted to emphasize. Consideration of "social and material context" is a distraction from the reading experience, at least in our initial encounter with the work.

Using Cleanth Brooks's *The Well-Wrought Urn* as his representative work of New Criticism (a good choice), Harman approvingly describes its "hostility to paraphrase," casting this as the "object-oriented side" of New Criticism. Brooks's emphasis on ambiguity and paradox correctly signals that, in Harman's words "the literal rendition of the poem is never the poem itself, which must exceed all interpretation in the form of a hidden surplus." But Harman believes this excess "haunts all human dealings with the world," including all other intellectual disciplines. While Brooks opposes poetry to the discourses of science, "regardless of aspiration, the irreducibility of reality to literal presence applies as much to the sciences as it does to poetry," Harman writes.

It seems to me that here aspirations are everything. Science and theology aspire to communicate directly and unambiguously, even though, given the inaccessibility of the "objects" of which they speak (but which exist, nevertheless) they are prevented from doing so. This is a condition against which such discourses fight. Poetry aspires to avoid such direct and unambiguous claims, depending on the inability of language to always convey transparent meaning for its very existence. Conceding poetry this "separate zone" in which paraphrase is actually antithetical to the purposes of poetry may be merely a convention, without anchor in the protocols of speculative realism whereby objects are never fully present for description, but this convention serves a useful enough purpose in human reality by making "literature" possible as something other than undifferentiated "writing." It seems to me that insisting it be treated like any other form of discourse suggests a sensibility that ultimately has little actual use for poetry.

I do not say that Graham Harman possesses such a sensibility, since he writes frequently about literature, and with obvious respect for it. However, I do think he is being overly literal-minded in his reading of Brooks, both in discussing the claim for a "separate zone" and in his further criticism of Brooks for regarding the text as "a holistic wonderland in which everything is defined solely by its interrelations with everything else." Here Harman finds fault with the New Critics' contention that a literary text must be understood as self-enclosed, its "meaning" to be derived from the way elements of the text interact with other elements internally, not with

referents outside the text. "There is no reason," Harman writes, "to descend the slippery slope and posit a general relational ontology in which all things are utterly defined by even the most trivial aspects of their context."

That slippery slope might indeed be hazardous, but I'm not at all sure Cleanth Brooks and most of the New Critics descend it. I don't think Brooks really suggests that "all things" have equally important significance in our assessment of the poem's parts, merely that the parts have significance only when considering the whole as an "autonomous" creation. We can only enter the "gates" of the poem, as Harman describes the boundary markers of the poem's separate zone, once we acknowledge there are gates. Once inside, we might judge that some of what we find is more revealing or important, but I can't see why the argument for this sort of autonomy does other than indeed "open a space where certain interactions and effects can take place and not others." These interactions are what we choose to call literary interactions, which require that we attend to the way the "elements" of the poem work to make it a poem rather than, say, a newspaper article.

When a New Critic such as Brooks uses terms such as "harmony" or "balance," he is not asserting that they define the essential nature of a poem. These are terms of judgment, not ontological claims. Not all poems are harmonious or balanced, or succeed in "making" a poem out of the interrelationship of its language: far from it. Most poems (and most works of fiction as well) are inharmonious and unbalanced, many all-too-eager to compete with science and theology in dispensing wisdom, in "saying something." Again it is the aspiration of poetry as understood by the New Critics—to contribute autonomous aesthetic "objects" to the world—that, in my view at least, ought to be honored. That the goal can't be reached metaphysically seems to me beside the point.

Harman's criticism seems accurate when directed toward the New Historical approach to criticism, which, as Harman does indeed point out, eliminates all boundaries and makes the literary text a thoroughly permeable excuse to consider everything else. The New Historicism at its most dogmatic seems to posit that, if a literary text is not autonomous, the only alternative is to turn it into nothing at all. Harman also considers the poststructuralist approach of Derrida, which Harman considers along with New Criticism and New Historicism the three main lines of contemporary literary criticism, at least in the academy. I have always considered Derrida

compatible with New Criticism in their common emphasis on "writing" as a self-sufficient subject, not what the writing is about, but Harman's critique of Derrida here is cogent enough. If all writing is equally without moorings in some "deep" bedrock of reality, however inaccessible, then science and theology are indeed no different than poetry in their efforts to communicate about that reality, although I do have trouble understanding why Harman would say that Brooks "shares" with Derrida the inability to recognize that "the thing is deeper than its interactions." What "thing" is deeper than the poem? Some Platonic form of the poem?

Suffice it to say that Harman thinks all three approaches to literary criticism are inadequate for incorporating the insights of Object-Oriented philosophy. And I ultimately find myself in complete agreement when Harman declares that the "literary text runs deeper than any coherent meaning, and outruns the intentions of author and reader alike," a fact Harman believes too much current literary criticism ignores. However, it seems to me that he unnecessarily discounts the possibilities of the object-oriented approach by explicitly trying to sell it as "the next big thing" in academic criticism, displacing previous approaches destined to be ephemeral. If the literary text "outruns" intentions, it does so always, and a criticism focused on careful (if inevitably incomplete) description, without closing off interpretive possibilities, would always be relevant.

Harman is also right in noting that to "call someone 'a product of their time and place' is never a compliment; neither should it be a compliment when aimed at a literary work," suggesting further that we should attend to "how works reverse or shape what might have been expected in their time and place, or. . .how some withstand the earthquakes of the centuries much better than others." But I can't see how Harman's final proposal of a "method" for critics to try out either reinforces these insights or, finally, would lead to a method of literary criticism at all. Instead of just writing about *Moby-Dick*," Harman writes,

why not try shortening it to various degrees in order to discover the point at which it ceases to sound like *Moby-Dick*? Why not imagine it lengthened even further, or told by a third-person narrator rather than by Ishmael, or involving a cruise in the opposite direction around the globe? Why not consider a scenario under which *Pride and Prejudice* were set in upscale Parisian neighborhoods rather than rural England--could such a text plausibly still be *Pride and Prejudice*?

This project is not an exercise in criticism but a further experiment in object-oriented ontology, a philosophical, rather than a critical, move. Harman seems to want to prove that OOO is correct, using the literary text as vehicle. How is this different from using the text to do politics or sociology?

### *Walking Around Holding Beliefs*

George Katsiaficas's "Aesthetic and Political Avant-Gardes" (*Journal of Aesthetics and Politics*) attempts to recoup the original sense of the term "avant-garde" as delineating "attempts to forge new dimensions to our aesthetic and political definitions of reality." "At the intersection of art and politics is where the term originated," writes Katsiaficas, "and it is there that its most explosive interpretations can be found."

Sadly (for Katsiaficas), this intersection is badly in need of repair these days:

Generally speaking, what is called "avant-garde art" today is completely depoliticized, a facet of its nature considered by many to be a hallmark of "modernism." According to this view, the modernist tradition's emphasis is on the "aesthetic" rather than on morality, human suffering or politics. Thus understood, modernists have replaced the spiritual and religious structuring of emotional experience with a secular equivalent: the "aesthetic." .

I'll put aside the now hackneyed accusation that an interest in the aesthetic necessarily amounts to some kind of substitute for religion. It's just a convenient way to dismiss the views and the practices of those who don't turn first to politics or "morality" in thinking about the role of art without having to seriously consider them. I'll also grant Katsiaficas's further point that "when first used in relation to artistic movements, i.e. before the 'modern' period, 'avant-garde' movements were thought to be forces that would propel society forward, not simply to uphold aesthetic values." The idea that radical art might be transformed into radical political action may be mistaken, as I believe it is, but that many of those responsible for advancing the idea of the avant-garde in the first place believed it is more or less undeniable.

I am more interested in the assumptions behind Katsiaficas's specific rejection of the kind of art that would become associated with the depoliticized avant-garde of the later 19th and 20th centuries. Considering the rise of impressionism after the events of 1848, he asserts that "impressionism is an art of the immediate satisfaction of the senses, and its popularity can be understood by locating its context in a society based on consumerism and individual gain." Thus does Katsiaficas both banish impressionism and all later approaches to art inspired by it from inclusion in the category of "avant-garde," and, in effect, minimize its value as "art" at all. Since this sort of art merely satisfies the senses, it can't be the catalyst for subsequent political action, indeed, as Marxists have long maintained, it actively encourages its audience to settle for sensory pleasure and to remain politically quiescent. Furthermore, since we can attribute the broader appeal of impressionist art at least as much to its status as a commodity (its appearance in a context of "consumerism and individual gain"), we have every reason to question its efficacy as an autonomous "artistic" accomplishment in the first place.

The first is a political objection to the apolitical ambitions of impressionism and other aestheticist practices—how shortsighted and selfish it is to wallow in sensory stimulation when there's a revolution to be fought—while the second seems to me more or less a metaphysical judgment—aestheticist art doesn't even have an authentic aesthetic identity. It's just another pernicious product of capitalism, more spurious satisfaction of artificially-constructed needs. Together, these doctrines perform a pretty powerful pincer movement on aestheticism: art that is only art isn't really art at all.

I understand that a significant number of people—including non-Marxists—subscribe to one or another variation on this view. Art needs history or politics or some other kind of social relevance if it is to be worth taking seriously. But where does this disposition come from? Why such impatience with "mere" art or the "merely literary"? Does someone like Katsiaficas truly disdain the "immediate satisfaction of the senses," or is this just a way of keeping it in its place?

Perhaps this question is answered by Katsiaficas later in his essay, where he speaks very approvingly of Cubism as an appropriately politicized mode of modern art: "Unlike Impressionism which easily speaks to people in consumer societies, Cubism requires thinking before it can be understood." So: not only does impressionism conspire with the capitalists in providing too much pleasure, but it is apparently also mindless pleasure. Impressionism needs

only to be experienced, while Cubism has to be understood. And again, although I would not claim that most people who prefer their art to be first of all suitable candidates for critical analysis would go as far as Katsiaficas in separating the exegetical wheat from the ornamental chaff, I do believe that something like his distinction between perceiving and thinking does inform much art and literary criticism that elevates engaged over apolitical art or content over form.

Is it a valid distinction? Does some art stimulate thinking while other art dampens it? It depends on what the meaning of “thinking” is. If you believe that “thinking” means moving from the concrete to the abstract, submitting the objects of perception to systematic scrutiny, perhaps it is a warranted distinction. But if you believe that really experiencing a work of art or literature involves the mind just as much as “the senses” vaguely defined, that making such an experience worthwhile requires the viewer/reader’s active participation in meaning-making and in fully apprehending the aesthetic choices made by the artist/writer in creating the work (John Dewey’s account of the way art, when approached conscientiously, is experience), then Katsiaficas’s version of “thinking” seems pretty thin gruel. It encourages us to turn away from the work itself and substitute intellection for dispassionate contemplation, implying that the latter is somehow closer to pure sensory excitement than to “thought” more amply defined.

The advent of theory and cultural studies in literary study could be explained as a manifestation of the academy’s acceptance of Katsiaficas’s definition of “thinking.” Perhaps it is the case that academic study itself cannot be carried out without some such working definition of what thinking requires. Perhaps literature especially cannot be “studied” unless some degree of discursive abstraction is involved. It’s hard to spend class time “experiencing” literature along the lines drawn out by Dewey, and thus both formalism and simple “appreciation” no longer have many advocates. Empirically speaking, they haven’t turned out to be very productive ways of adapting the consideration of works of literature to the prerequisites of formal academic study as they are now understood. But this doesn’t mean that Katsiaficas is correct in making his essentialist distinction between idle and industrious art. Aestheticism may or may not be compatible with cultural and political agitation, but it is not incompatible with cognition.

Rebecca Wells Jopling speculates on a phenomenon in which "readers sometimes struggle against or try to mitigate the effects of reading the fictions in which they are engaged."

Some readers say that they slow their reading before coming to the culminating moment in a tragedy. I wonder if book clubs are another strategy that people use to put some distance between themselves and the fiction they read. We simply do not know what we're coming upon in the wilderness of some stories. If we have the company of others, though, we may feel emboldened to carry on. (*OnFiction*)

Apparently, some readers need such "self-protective strategies" that "buy time, until the reader can sort out what is happening to her emotionally. . . ." I say "apparently" because this is a reading practice so foreign to my own that I want to think the "struggle" invoked here is being considerably exaggerated. I have never tried to "mitigate the effects" of any fiction I am reading other than to read more carefully. I have never engaged in a "self-protective strategy" in order to "buy time," especially not to "sort out" my emotions. If a particular work of fiction does provoke a strong emotion—which for me actually happens only rarely—I presume that this is the emotion the text was designed to create (otherwise I'm just reading badly) and that my role as reader is to meet the text halfway and pursue that emotion where it's going to lead. That I would try to actively resist the work's effects—emotional, psychological, or formal—seems antithetical to my understanding of what a "reading experience" has to offer.

Jopling explanation for this phenomenon seems to me as unconvincing as the phenomenon itself is strange. "It could be," she writes, "that these readers know, perhaps not consciously but subconsciously, that the book could change their beliefs, and not always in a predictable way." I can understand a kind of squeamishness about strong emotions—fear, grief, anger—that one doesn't necessarily want to indulge (although in that case you probably shouldn't be reading the kind of fiction you know is going to give rise to such emotions), but that reading a work of fiction might make one squeamish about one's beliefs seems a very large leap, even, as explicated, incoherent. Beliefs about what? Research is cited that supposedly shows that readers are vulnerable to a kind of cognitive incaution and "must engage in effortful processing to disbelieve the information they encounter in literary narratives." "Belief" is thus largely epistemological, or so it would seem, the process of arriving at conclusions based on "information."

But is this "information" about the characters or incidents in a fictional story, or is it "information" of the sort one needs to form firm beliefs about the world outside the text? Since it is implausible that readers would need to disbelieve their suspension of disbelief—we all know going in that our suspension of disbelief is artificial—It must be the second kind of "information" that needs to be combatted. Again, I am hard-pressed to understand this fear of "information," since I don't read novels for information, and wouldn't recognize it if it were presented. Reading fiction is an experience, an aesthetic experience in which at best "information" is woven into the fictional fabric, conditioned by its manifestation in fiction. Novels that attempt to convey information without integrating it in this way are bad novels, and I don't know why a theory of reading would focus on such a flawed conception of what novels do.

Jopling continues:

Perhaps strong feelings of rejection toward a story and the resulting strategies for distancing oneself arise because readers somehow know that continuing to read may leave them walking around holding beliefs that they do not want to hold, having thoughts that they do not want to have, and re-experiencing images that they do not want to re-experience.

While it is more plausible to me that some readers might while reading, or after reading, a novel be "having thoughts that they do not want to have, and re-experiencing images that they do not want to re-experience" than that they are "walking around holding beliefs that they do not want to hold," it remains unexplained why any serious readers of fiction would be so shocked that what they read might challenge their assumptions or present vivid images. These are among the most historically-recognized functions of literature, and even in popular fiction many readers return to particular genres precisely because they know that certain kinds of "thoughts" and certain kinds of "images," some of them disturbing, are going to recur. Unless the authors at *OnFiction*, in their concentration on the psychology of fiction, are confining themselves to the most naive and most unadventurous of readers, it's very difficult to accept that the fear of alien thoughts, images, or beliefs motivates many readers' responses to aesthetically credible novels, or any works of narrative art, for that matter.

The very need to "distance ourselves" in the emotionally immediate way described in this post only really testifies to a flawed, unreflective way of reading fiction. It posits an intensity of

involvement with "character" and "event"—the creation of which isn't ultimately very hard for most minimally skilled writers—such that all other considerations, point of view, style, narrative method, simply disappear into irrelevance. A reading attentive to these elements already incorporates an appropriate "distance." A reading of fiction that ignores them is to that extent an impoverished reading.

In an essay at *electronic book review* on "ecocriticism," Andrew McMurry writes:

. . .The resources of poetry and literature and art are not particularly suited for stopping or even slowing the headlong rush into destruction (and this is where I differ from some in ecocriticism. . .who imagine that poetry and art and film can help us tread more lightly on the earth) because the roots of the problem go far deeper than culture can penetrate. Still, a study of culture helps us to understand what sort of creatures we are that we can effectively choose to immolate ourselves and the planet. Literature, as we all know, is the human pageant distilled; but it's equally the transhistorical record of a sad and furious primate, a mirror held up to our species' ugliness. Passed through the interpretative lens of ecocritical theory, literature reveals instance after instance of our inability to project, limit, and control the mainly negentropic quality of all our activities in our environments. In simple terms, the price we have paid for the complexity of our things is the decomplexity of earth's things. As a species, we have the power to modify our surroundings to suit our needs but not the wisdom to suit our needs to our surroundings.

This seems to me an admirably succinct account of what might be called the unromantic school of ecocriticism (disencumbered of the notion that literature can and ought to be deployed as a weapon in the battle to stave off our "headlong rush into destruction," that it might "help us tread more lightly on the earth"). It recognizes that the "resources" of art and literature are wasted when expended on agitprop and ill-disguised moral instruction, and it doesn't insist that writers exchange art for "relevance." McMurry clearly enough believes that literature does have relevance of a sort, but it isn't the kind that must be channeled into particular programmatic or ideological forms.

But he is stuck with a conception of literature that equates it with "content," that reduces it to its role in facilitating our understanding of "what sort of creatures we are," its status as "transhistorical record." Literature, through providing "a mirror held up to our species' ugliness," offers us information about ourselves, in this case disturbing information further clarified "through the interpretative lens of ecocritical theory." Literature's mirror and criticism's lens reflect back to us in a handily focused and duly intensified image "instance after instance of our inability to project, limit, and control the mainly negentropic quality of all our activities in our environments."

That works of literature do frequently reveal "the mainly negentropic quality of all our activities" is undeniable, although this is so mainly because serious writers do not shy from portraying human activity in all of its manifestations (many of which are ugly indeed), not because ecological degradation in particular seems especially pertinent. One might just as easily say that, viewed in the right way, literature reveals "the highly erotic quality of all our activities" or the necessarily "economic" character of those activities. An "interpretive lens" of any sort that directs its attention to what a literary work "reflects" is necessarily going to distort the work, in most cases extracting from it what it hoped to find in the first place, but approaches as determined to "see" only content as ecocriticism puts into high relief this tendency to appropriate the incidental characteristics of the work for external and purely utilitarian purposes, leaving the "merely literary" properties of novels and poems and stories to those who, in this case, seem blithely unaware of the overriding need to save the planet.

(Which is not to say that ecocritical insights never contribute to our understanding of particular works. To add such an insight to others that might be gathered in considering a given text is a perfectly sound strategy, but of course in most cases the ecocritic would likely not appreciate ecocriticism being subsumed to the broader goal of literary understanding in this way. It only makes the ecocritical agenda seem secondary to the protocols of reading literature efficaciously.)

Thus while McMurry is able to resist concentrating the interpretive lens of ecocriticism even more narrowly on the therapeutic possibilities of literature (convincing us "to tread more lightly on the earth"), he remains content with the metaphors of literature as mirror and criticism as lens. There's no doubt that all works of literature refer us to and illuminate human reality, if

not always so directly and so simply as the mirror metaphor implies. But Stendhal's notion of the "mirror in the roadway," when taken too literally, too quickly sanctions the assumption that literature is important for its content and that its most immediate use is to enlighten us about this or that "issue," to serve as the "subject" of some such mode of analysis as ecocriticism. By deflecting attention away from the work itself and onto the "reality" it supposedly reflects, the mirror metaphor encourages us to ignore those elements of literature without which literary texts would be no different than any other species of writing: form and style.

In fact, Andrew McMurry might go some way toward easing his own dyspepsia caused by the depravity of human nature if he were to pay some attention to the aesthetics of literature. By putting aside the mirror and considering the way fiction and poetry transmute human experience into complex and challenging verbal forms, he might come to appreciate one kind of human activity devoted to creating rather than destroying. He might learn that art is one way by which the human imagination is able to realize its more beneficent possibilities. It's all right there in front of us, but sometimes we seem too busy staring at our own reflections in the mirror to see it.

### *The Various Rays of Culture*

In a *Los Angeles Times* article about *Granta's* "Best of Young American Novelists" issue, there is a great deal of talk about the "themes" that the included writers are said to be addressing. While immigration and its legacy seems to be the common theme of this particular "snapshot" anthology, we are also told that some of the issue's judges "were dismayed by the lack of attention to social class in the work of these young novelists across the ethnic and national spectrum." Laura Miller believes that neither of these subjects is really where it's at with current young fiction writers: "The real themes in American fiction these days. . . are the seeking of 'authenticity' — which sometimes works itself out in stories about immigrant communities — and interpreting the highly mediated, pop-suffused culture."

Nowhere in this article about supposedly important new writing is there any discussion, not even the briefest mention, of the aesthetic features, formal and stylistic, that characterize the

stories collected in "Best of Young American Novelists", features that presumably ought to count for something when determining what makes these particular selections the "best" that might be found. What formal innovations, if any, are these writers pursuing? What insights into the possibilities of language in representing human experience, immigrant or otherwise, might be found in the stylistic explorations of their work? Such questions are not addressed; from the comments made by those involved in putting the anthology together, one has to conclude they were not considered relevant to the larger question of what fiction writers of this next generation are trying to "say."

The view of fiction implicit in this article's discussion of the newest and the latest is that it is a forum for "expression." Writers "express" themselves, and through them their ethnic or class heritage gets expressed. Taken as whole, the writers included in the *Granta* anthology express the concerns and preoccupations of their generational cohort. Why exactly such writers would choose the indirect and rhetorically impure mode of fiction--which unavoidably is going to disperse and obscure your "themes" unless you run them diligently roughshod--in order to give "expression" to such things is never made clear. Nor is it ever quite clear why anyone would care about such expressions in the first place. If "saying something" is important to you as a writer, perhaps nonfiction is a better choice. Better yet, if sociology or cultural anthropology is what you're really interested in, become an actual sociologist and ponder the effects of immigration or class or interpret mass culture to your heart's content. Perhaps some people might even be interested in what you thus have to say. But don't reduce fiction to a more entertaining branch of social science.

In fairness, it's probably the editors and the critics who contribute most to this metamorphosis of literature into sociology and politics. It gives them something to write about at a time when most of them don't know how to write about the aesthetics of literature, anyway. It's an easy way to convert literary criticism into "literary journalism." And it's this focus on the "journalism" of literature and the avoidance of the "merely literary" that largely explains the impatience and incredulity with which so many editors and critics confront works of fiction that do manifestly ask the reader to consider their formal and stylistic qualities above whatever "theme" they may be assigned, especially if such works can be regarded as "experimental."

Although I agree with Barrett Hathcock's conclusion that the kind of "cultural criticism" represented by Greil Marcus's *The Shape of Things to Come* "too energetically [mines its] material for the cultural rather than the aesthetic," I can't agree with the critical typology that underlies his analysis:

. . .The first level is the most base, the easiest, and perhaps the most valuable--the thumb. A thumbs up or thumbs down? This is the criticism of a friendly recommendation; this is the criticism of year-end lists, whether they're constructed by some blog or by The New York Times.

The second, slightly higher level of criticism is that of specific, aesthetic analysis. How does this particular piece of art work? How does it function as a radically constructed whole? (Or how does it not, and why?) This is, I'll admit, rather undergraduate-heavy--art seen through a lit seminar, where students pop open the hood of a sonnet to see how it works.

The third and highest level of criticism, in my radically simplified piñata here, is criticism as cultural interpretation, where a piece of art is situated in a larger cultural context, both compared to other pieces of the culture, and prism-like, made to shine in the various rays of that culture. I think this third type of criticism is the most complex of the three, the one that rewards the most re-reading, the one that soars above mere book reviewing (this was about that, and it was good), and speaks to what it means to be alive right now in this crazy, kooky world we live in, etc.. . . . (*The Quarterly Conversation*)

"Specific, aesthetic analysis" is only "slightly higher" in its effect than list-making and crude value judgments? I understand that the "recommendation" function of book reviewing is important to many readers, who want to know whether a particular book is worth reading in the first place, but the kind of judgment that can be expressed through the thumb hardly qualifies as literary criticism. Indeed, I'm not likely to take anyone's recommendation seriously at all unless it's accompanied by some "specific, aesthetic analysis" that reveals to me just why how and why the reviewer reached his/her conclusion about a book's thumbworthiness in the first place.

I would further take issue with the notion that "aesthetic analysis" is an act of pulling apart a work of art "to see how it works." To my mind, "aesthetic analysis" and "literary

criticism" are synonymous terms. A literary critic doesn't so much "pop open the hood"-- although something like this is probably inevitable when the critic tries to illustrate his/her responses to the text: this is what worked on me the way it did—as report on the aesthetic experience the work has provided. This may require some re-reading of the text to clarify what prompted the particular experience it provoked, but ideally "aesthetic analysis" is not an end in itself, something that settles once and for all how a particular work "functions as a radically constructed whole," but the means to another critical end: to provide other readers with an informed account of what the work is like, perhaps to encourage the reader to approach it with a sharper critical eye and heighten his/her own experience of it.

My biggest problem with Hathcock's schema, however, is the privileged place it gives to "criticism as cultural interpretation." In my view, this kind of "criticism," at least as it is applied to literature, isn't either literary or criticism. As soon as a work of literature "is situated in a larger cultural context," what follows isn't likely to be about the work at all—about what causes us to call it literary—but about the "context." It will be sociology, not literary criticism, intended to illuminate the "culture" that produced the art, not the art itself. This may or may not be more "complex" than actual criticism (I myself don't think it is; "situating" art in its cultural context may give such a piece of sociological analysis a patina of learnedness or the appearance of sounding out Important Issues, but it's finally much easier to make broad generalizations about "culture" based on superficial comparisons than it is to truly engage in "specific, aesthetic analysis"), but it isn't finally about what makes art or literature worth our attention to begin with. It isn't the literary critic's job to tell us "what it means to be alive right now in this crazy, kooky world we live in," although perhaps it is part of the artist's job to do so. The critic focuses on how the artist goes about that job in a particular instance, how the artist's work encourages (or doesn't) a singular aesthetic experience.

Hathcock says he would "like Marcus to pay more attention to the second type of criticism in an effort to bolster the strength of his higher cultural criticism," but Marcus is obviously not much interested in doing so because he's not much interested in his objects of analysis as art. (Which is one of the more disappointing things about Marcus's writing after he ceased being a regular rock critic. His reviews of individual albums were often quite good.) Whether Marcus himself thinks he's doing "higher cultural criticism" rather than mere aesthetic

analysis is debatable, but I surely don't know what's "higher" about it. I wouldn't necessarily call it "lower" than aesthetic criticism, but unless you think it's more important to understand the cultural currents flowing through David Lynch's work than to appreciate the work itself, I can't see why we would place it on such a pedestal.

### *Make It Fresh*

K. Silem Mohammad (*Lime Tree*) contends that "new forms" in poetry can be just as stultifying as the conventional kind if the poet comes to believe that "the mechanics of composition are more important than the experience created by the work." He goes on to suggest that Ezra Pound's command to "make it new"

does not mean to reinvent the wheel every time you write a poem. The original image associated with this phrase was that of the (same) sun rising every morning, always new. The wording could just as easily be "make it fresh," or "make it seem as though new." It's more about what the reader is enabled to perceive than it is about the writer's use of novel formal techniques.

I would agree that the attempt to create something "new" in either poetry or fiction does not necessarily involve the reinvention of form, if that means ignoring literary history. The poetic "wheel" would require reinvention only if it could be established that the wheel wasn't really a wheel after all. One's precursors not only wrote poems of a sort one no longer fancies, but they didn't actually get at what poetry really is, did not instigate or participate in a tradition that can now be accepted as properly "poetic."

In this sense, making it "fresh" seems entirely sufficient, although one could still be "reinventing" if this is understood to mean adding to the existing tradition something that hasn't been tried before (or something that hasn't been tried in this or that way). A writer who thinks of him/herself as "innovative" because he/she has determined to take nothing for granted, to assume that literary forms can always be reshaped and reconceived, would, in my opinion, be justified in

using that designation. This would be less a matter of developing "novel formal techniques" than regarding the existing presumptions about form to be always potentially expandable.

Mohammad's own definition of form as "near-physicalizations of possibility, not yet quite frozen into fact, but charged with fact's imminence" thus seems entirely satisfactory to me, although I would be less inclined to think of achieved form as "fact" except insofar as the poem produced does indeed embody the sense of potential with which the poet began. Even here, however, the "physicalizations of possibility" would need to be inherent in the poem itself, represented in its formal turns and rhetorical processes but not necessarily literally "physicalized." The poem does not seek to be encased in its form but to demonstrate in its pursuit of form both the struggle to attain aesthetic completion and the ultimate impossibility of achieving that goal, especially if it entails reaching a perfection of sorts in the exploitation of form. Other, equally good if not yet imagined explorations in form are always possible. (The work of Wallace Stevens seems to me a good example of this kind of approach to aesthetic form.)

Undoubtedly it is still easier to debate this conception of "form" in poetry than in fiction. For better or worse, fiction is still tied to story as its irreducible form, even though "story" (telling it, relating it, making it known) is more an excuse for invoking form than a formal property itself. Thus, different kinds of narrative strategies, different ways of arranging and disclosing the story, are acceptable, are even praised as the appropriate kind of "experiment" in fiction, as long as they are there in order finally to present the story in the most dramatically effective manner. But few readers and critics seem willing to consider other kinds of formal structures, structures that foreground language and the non-linear ways in which it might be manipulated, that experiment with other "shapes" a work of fiction might take, as an alternative to the predominance of story. This need not mean dispensing with narrative altogether—although at this point the distinction between poetry and prose fiction might break down in a way that could provide further fruitful experiment and critical discussion—but it would mean acknowledging once and for all that, now we are entering a second century in which visual means of storytelling are proving more effective at satisfying most people's narrative needs, "telling a story" is not the most relevant skill a good fiction writer possesses.

If we would expect a novel written by an accomplished poet to exhibit a gift for language beyond what we find in most fiction, then Joshua Corey's *Beautiful Soul* certainly meets our expectations. Indeed, this gift is apparent literally from the novel's beginning:

Black screen. A flicker. The letter:

In the heart of the night the new reader lies awake with the lights turned off listening to the rain tapping on the skylight. If she opened her eyes she would see the darkness above her, a rectangle gradually reorganizing itself into a gray filmy gleam, glassy surface blistered by streetlamps, and the little shudders of water whose shadows she can feel moving across the bedspread, her husband's sleeping body, her own face, Like hieroglyphs or Hebrew letters they form and squiggle and dissolve almost tangibly before her closed eyes. The letters are falling on her roof and the roofs of her neighbors: they fall invisibly into Lake Michigan, that vast unplacid text, and coat metal and glass and asphalt from Waukegan down to the Indiana border. Others too are awake reading the weather, establishing degrees of correspondence between internal and external states of being, between the past and the present, what they expect from the day and what they are capable of anticipating.

This passage is precise and evocative without being overtly "poetic." The figurative language is concise rather than elaborate ("blistered by streetlamps," "vast unplacid text"), and does not obviously solicit the reader to respond to it as "fine writing." In fact, Corey's prose style throughout the novel does not employ its linguistic transformations and other syntactical devices as a kind of aesthetic ornamentation, of the sort we find too often in much "literary fiction." Instead, language as transformation and illumination is inherent to the conception of prose at work in *Beautiful Soul*. There is narrative in this novel, but its verbal resources are not primarily dedicated to "telling the story" in the functional way most novels do, even those that seem more character than plot-driven or that are noted for their stylistic flourishes. (Which is not to say that *Beautiful Soul* is lacking in storytelling — the account of events relating to the Paris student riots in 1968, for example, is especially compelling.) Corey's prose registers the sensations, perceptions, and experiences of the novel's characters — primarily the protagonist — in truly the only way such characters actually come to life: they live in language, and to that end the writing

in *Beautiful Soul*, in its scrupulous attention to phrase and image in almost every sentence, could be called an attempt to bring the characters and their milieu to life through the vigor of the words on the page.

If this kind of commitment to the generative power of language is part of what might lead us to consider *Beautiful Soul* a “poet’s novel,” we also find a keen attentiveness not just to the discrete phrase and the isolated trope but to the shape and rhythm of sentences, as well as the use of these sentences to form paragraphs that both provide narrative continuity and work as stylistic elements on their own. Corey’s sentences can be quite long, but they should be entirely accessible to readers who don’t always expect the “shapely” sentence, in which every part of the sentence (especially in longer sentences) is duly subordinated to a unifying, underlying thought, by which in turn the sentence is judged as a felicitous expression. Rather, Corey’s sentences seem to unspool or expand, through successive clauses and phrases much more loosely connected:

Our man Lamb leans forward with an appearance of desultory curiosity and speaks again in his flat American accent, the newscaster’s accent of imperial nowhere, clear and intelligible enough to bind us to him incrementally further, to further our investment in him, a narrow middle question mark of a man whose subjectivity, we understand, is to be viewed transparently by us and for us, as we might see a stranger approach the window of a café where we sit writing or talking and step across the invisible barrier to press his forehead against the window, shading his eyes, searching as if for us, and we stop our fingers on the keyboard, we stop the cup from reaching our lips, we half stop our breathing waiting for him to move toward the door, to become a destiny, a man in a long coat and a colorless expression, or else to drift past, to rejoin the long crazy stream of humanity past the intelligible, the acceptable, the corporate comfort of numbers in the darkened theater.

The internal rhythm manifest in sentences such as this is reinforced by their frequent modulation into much shorter sentences. All of Corey’s sentences work to move us “incrementally further” in apprehending the fictional world they are in the process of creating, as well as the characters in their own process of negotiating it. These sentences also incrementally

develop often equally long paragraphs, whose length is determined not by the amount of information they contain or their role as links in a narrative chain (which usually require shorter rather than longer paragraphs) but by their capacity to accumulate the sentences in such a way that they are allowed their discursive freedom, the paragraphs also incorporating them into a larger structure that creates its own rhetorical and aesthetic effects, requiring us to read more deliberately, to appreciate the paragraphs as a formal element with aesthetic appeal, not just as the components used to construct a narrative in prose.

If Corey's ability as poet is evident enough in the way he organizes language at the point where "writing" most fundamentally occurs, in the composition of sentences and paragraphs, one might still ask whether Corey shows equal concern for the broader formal design of his novel, in relation to the existing formal conventions of fiction. Certainly *Beautiful Soul* is not an entirely conventional narrative, although the novel could be described as primarily a character study using a central consciousness mode of narration (what is currently most commonly called "free indirect discourse") that focuses our attention on the inner turmoil the protagonist, Ruth, is experiencing as she takes on the responsibilities of motherhood and seems to lose her professional identity (lawyer by training) in the process. At this vulnerable stage in her life, Ruth finds herself preoccupied with her own (deceased) mother, with whom Ruth had a troublesome relationship and about whom she really knows very little (including the identity of the man who fathered Ruth). This preoccupation gives rise to what turns out to be a secondary narrative, a noir-ish account of a detective who is charged with providing Ruth with information by traveling through Europe, where the mother (referred to simply as "M"), spent much of her life, her final years in the Mediterranean city of Trieste.

This secondary narrative is developed in great detail, but we are never certain that the story it relates is actually "real." It emerges from the dream state into which Ruth falls shortly after we have opened on her listening to the rain. "Sleepwalking," we are told, "she might rise and dress and drive in the dark to a wedge-shaped building in the heart of the city," a building that holds the office of Lamb, the private detective. Thus the story of Lamb's investigation of mysterious letters Ruth has received, letters apparently from M sent three years after her death, could be interpreted as a projection of Ruth's inner struggle with her mother's legacy and influence as she contemplates her future responsibilities, to herself and to her family. That the

novel is finally to be taken as the story of Ruth becoming reconciled to her past and prepared for her future is confirmed by the novel's conclusion. Ruth has herself traveled to Trieste, where she is depicted actually encountering Lamb in the Duino Castle, but upon her return flight we are told that "[t]he castle is behind her and the man she made." Moreover, she begins to visualize the faces of "the daughter who needs her. The husband who waits for her." She "opens the new book, the blank book, the book of home. . . ."

Duino Castle is, of course, the setting of Rilke's Duino Elegies, and we could certainly regard *Beautiful Soul* as also an elegy of sorts for M, as well as for the historical experience she represents as the child of Holocaust survivors. In this context, the story of Ruth's rediscovery of mental and emotional balance is both persuasive and affecting, but finally it is still a rather familiar type of story. Even though the novel avoids narrating the story in a straightforwardly linear way, it finally does cohere as a recognizable story of transformation or discovery. Other devices that might seem departures from what is otherwise a variant of psychological realism, while they might provide some variety, are less successfully integrated into the novel's aesthetic strategy. At times the narrative of Lamb's activity is presented as if it were a movie, one that presumably both we and Ruth are "watching." The parallel with classic detective films is relevant enough, but since Ruth throughout the novel is identified as "the new reader," the cinema-style passages seem somewhat gratuitous, not really reflective of the way Ruth would be thinking about Lamb's efforts (unless "new reader" is meant ironically). Similarly, the occasional metafictional interjections by the author of *Beautiful Soul* aren't so much formally adventurous (such gestures have by now become almost commonplace) as they are formally (and thematically) superfluous.

In my view, a possible future for fiction, at least in its more forward-looking modes, might prominently include its partial merger with poetry (whence, paradoxically, it came), reconfirming fiction's status as a literary genre, a form of verbal art. However, this would have to involve making the novel more "poetic" not just in its stylistic qualities, but in its extension of form beyond an exclusive dependence on narrative, however fractured or transfigured. Joshua Corey's transfigurations in *Beautiful Soul* are compelling, and his skills as a prose stylist are well beyond those of most writers, but the novel doesn't quite transcend the limitations of an approach still rooted in the recognized conventions of narrative-centered fiction..

Edmond Caldwell's *Human Wishes/Enemy Combatant* (Say It With Stones) is a much worthier and more accomplished book than 99% of what is published as "literary fiction" by most "name" publishers. It takes numerous risks, both formally and thematically, but it also manages to be entertaining without conceding to conventional notions of plot arcs or backstory or "fine writing."

Of course, that it does take risks is the primary reason it couldn't be published by one of those name publishers. While it may be true that adventurous, iconoclastic writing has never found much favor among publishers (Sorrentino, Gaddis, e.g.), even publishers who claim to prize "literary value" as much as commercial value, these days small presses and self-publishers are taking up even more of the slack left by the abandonment by publishers of all but the safest, most formulaic versions of the literary. Such books might tweak established practice here and there, but the truly innovative writers are inhabiting the fringes of literary culture, as represented by mainstream publishing, more than ever. (The career of Gary Lutz seems to me a prime example.)

The first thing that undoubtedly would trouble many would-be publishers of *Human Wishes/Enemy Combatants* is to be found most directly in the title, which is taken from two separate chapters (the last two) in what the title page identifies as a novel, but which could as easily be taken as a sequence of stories featuring the same protagonist. The "unified" collection of stories has become something of a commonplace in current fiction, but in most of these books the connections between stories are superficial, an attempt perhaps to get around a short story collection's lack of marketability by making it more like a novel. The stories in *HW/EC* do center around a single protagonist (fairly transparently, Edmond Caldwell), but the connections between them go much deeper both implicitly and explicitly, so that, although some of them could certainly coherently stand on their own as shorter fictions, all of them work most resonantly in relation to each other and within the context of the book as a whole.

The stories most immediately share a common style and structure, the seemingly shapeless and deceptively formidable nature of each undoubtedly also features of the book that make it unpalatable to many publishers. Except for one piece, and a small part of another, in the form of a play (the former a parody of Beckett featuring Samuel Johnson and his cat as

characters), the stories/chapters of *Human Wishes/Enemy Combatants* are composed in a single, uninterrupted block of text, the sentences of which can frequently become quite long and unwieldy. Although in my view this strategy is a little too reminiscent of the work of Thomas Bernhard, it does work well in conveying the protagonist's experiences, which do not occur in discrete, paragraph-sized slices but as one-thing-after-another, as well as his mental processes, which are not exactly organized. This is reflected as well in the rush of sentences, which don't so much meander as collide with each other in a grammatical free-fall. Since Caldwell's prose avoids conventional figurative ornamentation, however, it actually works to advance "story" fairly straightforwardly, even if the story simply accumulates incidents rather than imposing on them more artificial plot devices. Although these formal and stylistic features might at first seem intimidating, I think most readers would readily enough discover that they can adapt to the book's different, but not inaccessible, way of organizing language. (They will further discover that the book's first piece, "Apple Seized," is also the shortest and that, in addition to the thematic elements it introduces, it provides a good opportunity to begin adapting.)

I believe most readers will also find a unifying source of interest in the novel's (unnamed) protagonist, but again it is probably not the sort of interest that would commend itself to a publisher hoping to appeal to those seeking to naively "identify" with a fictional character. Although this protagonist is not without his charms, they are the charms of a sad sack, schlemiel-like figure to whom things happen rather than becoming an active agent of his own fate. His misadventures can be quite entertaining, while at the same time an undercurrent of menace is also decidedly present. The threat is embodied on a personal level by the protagonist's sense that, though he is presumably a Caucasian American, somehow his physiognomy suggests to people he is Semitic, either Jewish or Arabic, the latter of which makes onlookers especially uncomfortable, of course. On the social level, the threat posed by the American surveillance state is invoked in the very first story, set in an airport, but the protagonist doesn't so much feel he is himself under suspicion because he might be a terrorist but because his general demeanor betrays his status as a slacker writer contributing nothing productive to the social order. The one tie he does have to that order is through his wife, whom we never see but who seems to be organized and successful (making us wonder, of course, why she's married to our protagonist).

That the protagonist is a writer supplies *Human Wishes/Enemy Combatant* with an additional unifying element, one that also marks it as an "experimental" work and thus less attractive to publishers' marketing departments. The book is also about its own composition, the metafictional strategy most visible in the book's fifth story/chapter (out of nine), as the protagonist visits an art museum featuring a Joseph Cornell exhibition and "stands before the fifth box in the middle of nine boxes devoted to his nine lives, to his left are the four previous boxes and to his right the four subsequent boxes." The boxes bear the titles of the nine chapters of the book we are reading. Literary self-consciousness is manifested as well in the mock Beckett play and in the final chapter, which begins: "Someone must have dropped a dime on our hero, for without having done anything wrong he woke up one morning from uneasy dreams to find himself transformed in his bed into an enemy of the state."

For the most part, the metafictional contrivances are clever and amusing, although there is one self-reflexive gesture that works less well. Caldwell uses his book as an opportunity to extend his critique of the critic James Wood, to whom there are numerous references and about whom "Samuel Johnson" engages in prolonged discussion in "Human Wishes." While I agree with much of this critique, the very fact that I found myself agreeing/disagreeing with these sections of the book as critical discourse ("A real critic would be discovering new writers and new trends in writing, not just passing judgment on whatever the publishing megaconglomerates choose to shovel onto the shelves of the big chain-bookstores") made for an awkward pause in the reading experience as I struggled to understand the aesthetic purpose of this discourse. At best it seems to me an ultimately superfluous satirical gesture, that pause of mine a rip in the book's aesthetic fabric.

Unfortunately, I would have to make a similar judgment about those parts of the book, in particular "The Little Wayfarer" and "Enemy Combatant" that take it away from geopolitics used as atmospheric backdrop into what borders on geopolitical agitprop on behalf of the Palestinians in their conflict with Israel. Although this is made relevant to the protagonist's story through a rather long digression tracing what may (or may not) be his lineage as the actual son of a Palestinian immigrant to the U.S, the pause required to assimilate an otherwise clearly polemical interlude is even longer, and, to me at least, significantly weakens the second half of the book.

Nevertheless, these are flaws that I would attribute to a writer trying to do too much rather than settling for too little, and if Caldwell needs his rage at perceived injustice (part of a more general dissatisfaction with the world—including the literary world—as it is) to inspire what is still both an iconoclastic and intricately fashioned work such as this, I for one am prepared to accept such flaws as incidental damage. Sometimes in attempting to "say something," a writer manages to make something even more interesting.

Partisans of "experimental" fiction (I am one) frequently make unequivocal distinctions between a properly experimental and a "conventional" work: The experimental work is formally or stylistically unlike anything that has come before--satisfying Ezra Pound's injunction to "make it new"--while the conventional work merely recapitulates, perhaps with modest variation, an already existing form or style.

If the goal is to identify the truly original, this distinction makes sense, however much it seems to some readers an overly rigid standard or just unnecessary--if a work of literature provides some kind of aesthetic satisfaction (if it's merely "a good read"), what difference does it make if it can be called original or not? In my opinion formal and stylistic innovation is important in maintaining the aesthetic potential of fiction. Without it, fiction becomes just a routinized "entertainment" medium that at best appeals to readers willing to settle for routine entertainment but that at worst itself implicitly denies that fiction has any potential to be "art" except through the skill required to master the moves involved in joining together the familiar elements—plot, character, setting—associated with it as an inherited form. I would not deny that this can be done more or less skillfully (and that the result can be more or less entertaining), but surely it is artistic originality that at the very least introduces a fresh perspective on what might be possible in a particular aesthetic form, and surely this is as true of fiction as of any other of the arts.

There is also perhaps a middle ground between "experimental" and "conventional" in fiction where writers are able to follow up on (in a sense further experiment with) strategies and techniques first introduced by previous innovative writers, in some cases precisely employing those techniques in a more obvious attempt to turn them to the purposes of familiar literary pleasures. One such work is Arthur Phillips's *The Tragedy of Arthur*. Describable as parody or

pastiche, or a combination of the two, the novel actually avoids taking on a structure readers immediately recognize as that of a novel, instead assuming the form of an "introduction" to a putatively newly-discovered play by Shakespeare, along with the text of the play. The introduction hardly exhibits the characteristics of an ordinary scholarly introduction, itself proceeding more as the memoir of "Arthur Phillips," in whose possession the play resides, and as such often satirizes the now-ubiquitous memoir form. The structure is highly reminiscent of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, which Phillips has himself acknowledged, although most of the "story" occurs in the memoir itself rather than in the footnotes to the play (which do, however, add another layer of commentary on both the text and its origins.) Whereas *Pale Fire* works by forcing the reader to read carefully both the poem Nabokov has written and attributed to "John Shade" and the scholarly apparatus that purports to explicate it in order to extract the "real" story its narrator/editor wants to tell (which turns out to be quite an entertaining if outlandish one), *The Tragedy of Arthur* puts fewer burdens on the reader (at least explicitly); the fictional memoir, humorously tangential as a critical preface to Shakespeare, offers a narrative complete in itself, while the fabricated play could ostensibly also be read separately.

However lightly Phillips executes the formal manipulation, *The Tragedy of Arthur* is not an ordinary reading experience. It holds in balance several sources of aesthetic tension the reader must still reckon with, tensions left deliberately unresolved. Besides the obvious unresolved question (unresolved within the fictional framework) of whether "The Tragedy of Arthur" is real or fraudulent Shakespeare, we are left to contemplate how much of the story of "Arthur Phillips" is autobiographical and how much invented, which Arthur's life story—père, fils, or protagonist of the play—is characterized as "tragedy," and whether we are to consider "The Tragedy of Arthur" as "good" Shakespeare, even if it is forged.

It may finally be the aesthetic triumph of this novel that all of these questions remain unanswered, or that they must be answered by individual readers. Although it seems most likely that the con man Arthur Sr. did indeed forge the play, the possibility it is genuine (again, within the fictional framework of the novel) is not foreclosed, as it is not beyond possibility that a "lost" Shakespeare play could one day be found. (At least two plays attributed to Shakespeare are known to be lost.) Moreover, even if it is forged, what does it say about Phillips Sr., something close to a common criminal as portrayed in the novel, that he could nevertheless channel

Shakespeare's spirit well enough to produce a plausible simulation? (What does it say about Shakespeare?) (What does it say about Shakespeare that the novelist Arthur Phillips could produce such a simulation? About Arthur Phillips?) That it probably is forged additionally allows us to appreciate Phillips's satire of the "expertise" we assume Shakespeareans possess: their "authentication" of the play is clearly enough part wishful thinking, part craven service to a publisher interested in the project only for the money that might be made.

Phillips invites us to consider his "memoir" authentic as well (much of the information provided seems verifiably true), but ultimately it has to be taken as at least as much a fabrication as "The Tragedy of Arthur," however much Phillips uses real names and seemingly draws on the particulars of his own life and upbringing. Like the play, the introductory memoir has a surface plausibility as "the real thing," but we would be ill-advised to accept it as more than that. It works to reinforce formally what Sam Sacks in his excellent review of the novel called its theme of "the ambiguity of fraud" (*Wall Street Journal*) and in the process reminds us that all memoir is subject to this ambiguity, when it isn't manifestly fraudulent. Fiction, of course, is by definition a "fraud," but it explicitly announces itself as such, and one could say that *The Tragedy of Arthur* is as much as anything else a playful challenge to our tendencies to read fiction as disguised memoir and to the recent turn to memoir as a more reliable narrative source of literal truth. Readers of fiction will have to be content with the "ambiguity" that accompanies the fraud of fiction.

Such ambiguity (and playfulness) is carried through in the juxtaposition of Arthurs: Arthur the narrator, Arthur his father, Arthur the protagonist of the putative Shakespeare play, and Arthur Phillips, the author of *The Tragedy of Arthur*. Arthur the younger suffers the tragedy of a broken relationship with his father, Arthur the elder a similar tragedy in his loss of family, but also in the foreshortening of his own life's possibilities through his own mistakes, while King Arthur undergoes the tragedy that often befalls the royal heroes of Shakespeare's tragedies. The "tragedy" of the title perhaps then belongs equally to each, although one might ask whether Arthur Sr.'s forgery might actually represent a final triumph, a successful effort to breathe the same air as his hero Shakespeare, an effort strong enough it has fooled some into regarding it as genuine. *The Tragedy of Arthur* must represent a triumph for Arthur Phillips as well, a triumph of literary creation that, if it doesn't equal that of Shakespeare, or of Nabokov, is impressive

enough and in its ingenuity subtly mocks any sense of "tragedy" involved in the novel's ostensible subject.

Thus finally the question of whether "The Tragedy of Arthur" as forged by either "Arthur Phillips" or Arthur Phillips is credible as Shakespeare is mostly beside the point. Certainly it is credible enough to pass as a claimant to authorship by Shakespeare, and that it be good enough to provoke the controversy depicted is as good as it needs to be. Phillips has undeniably immersed himself in Elizabethan language and culture as rendered by Shakespeare, and part of the fun in reading the play is coming upon those kinds of constructions one always finds puzzling in Shakespeare skillfully approximated. ("When they would have your guts to stuff their pudding-bags.") In my view, what Phillips has done most adeptly with the play is to fully integrate it within the concerns and the structure of the novel as a whole, and critics who have emphasized the mere fact of its presence or who suggest it is in itself the focal point of the novel have conveyed a distorted impression of its actual achievement.

Because *The Tragedy of Arthur* so emphatically foregrounds form, readers are not as likely to appreciate through it what in Phillips's previous novels seemed to me his strongest talent as a novelist, his facility as a prose stylist. This is on display most conspicuously in *Prague*, his first novel, and *The Song Is You*, the novel immediately preceding *The Tragedy of Arthur*. Although both of these novels feature (for American fiction) somewhat unconventional situations—a group of American expatriates in central Europe, an aging director of television commercials becoming obsessed with a young pop singer—neither of them could be said to be plot-driven. Both appeal through fluency of style. This is especially true of *The Song is You* (although ultimately *Prague* is probably the better novel because it seems less hermetically caught in the consciousness of a single protagonist), which intrepidly if eloquently articulates the increasingly rejuvenated mental life of its protagonist as he both surveys his life and pursues his new interest in a beguiling singer and in music in general:

The Irish girl performed that night. The crowd was larger, challenging the bar's legal capacity, and Julian thought she had changed in the last weeks, maybe even developed. She was slightly more coherent as a performer, as a projector of an idea and an image. The previous gig, something had distracted and dislocated her, as when color newsprint is misaligned and an unholy yellow aura floats a fractioned inch above the

bright red body of a funny-pages dog. It had been perhaps the bass player's mistakes, or, if the hipster snob was to be credited, the seductively whispering approach of success. No matter: she was clearer tonight, even if he could still see her strive, from one song to the next, for an array of effects: the casually ironic urban girl, the junkie on the make, the desperate Irish lass whose love was lost to the Troubles, the degenerate schoolgirl, the lover by the fire with skin as velvet succulent as rose-petal flesh. . . .

With *The Tragedy of Arthur*, Arthur Phillips shows that as a novelist he has formidable control of both form and language. This was to an extent evident as well in *The Egyptologist* and in the Jamesian manipulations of point of view in *Angelica*, but *Arthur* confirms he is not an ordinary novelist rehearsing the same workshop-imposed conventions. I do not necessarily expect a new Arthur Phillips novel to revitalize the avant-garde, but I have come to expect it will exist outside the mold to which too many novels reflexively conform, formally and stylistically. His novels may lag behind Nabokov or Beckett or Sorrentino in adventurousness, but they do perhaps make some readers aware that more adventurous approaches are possible, and can even bring pleasure.