



# Realisms

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## PREFACE

The underlying assumption of most of my critical writing has been that, far from representing a tangential, eccentric practice (as much of current literary culture would have it), “experimental” fiction in fact provides an indispensable service in helping to keep the literary resources of fiction refreshed. Often this entails contrasting such fiction with a conventionalized or exhausted realism, which despite the interventions of fabulists and postmodernists (not to mention the efforts of many genre writers) remains more or less the default preference in both American fiction and general-interest literary criticism.

But the problem with a blanket critique of realism, especially from the years after World War II, and even more especially from the past couple of decades, is that there is no uniform, invariable “realism,” at least where form and style in fiction are concerned. Even those writers I have in this volume designated as “regressive realists” do not simply seek to create works of fiction that are “like life” by using traditional storytelling conventions à la William Dean Howells or Sarah Orne Jewett (or even Henry James), although the least interesting of these writers do indeed hew rather closely to the most recognizable plot devices and at best adhere to the currently established protocols of “fine writing.” The best writers included here (those I have identified as “radical realists”) accept the imperative to capture reality as it presents itself to us—sometimes accomplishing this task in intricate and exacting ways—but do not settle for linear narrative or conventional scene-setting. Each of them evokes that reality differently, according to his/her own alternative methods, each in the process not only forging a distinctive aesthetic approach but also enabling perceptions of human reality most realistic fictions only evade.

The essays included here neither build a theoretical argument on behalf of “radical” realism nor lay out a set of criteria for determining whether a given work of realist fiction can be regarded as “regressive.” Taken together, however (and they have been arranged so that they might echo each other, if not advance a thesis), they do, on the one hand, examine a variety of strategies that work to create an often intensely realistic impression of “real life” while doing so through unorthodox means, and, on the other, maintain that many celebrated contemporary realists fail to invoke the realist mode for anything other than mostly uninspired rehearsals of familiar methods that threaten to leave their stories lifeless. The selection of writers included (in both categories) is certainly not exhaustive, and I make no claims that somehow it is authoritative. These are writers whose work has helped me think more productively not just

about literary realism but also the ways in which our critical categories both facilitate and distort our experience of the literary art they so tentatively identify.

## RADICAL REALISTS

### Like Life: Radical Realism and the Fiction of Sam Pink

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

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

It is also true that a credible, coherent definition of realism in fiction—the attempt to produce work that is “like life”—could really be upheld in practice only if the role of plot is at the least minimized. Since “life” does not unfold along a neatly sequential dramatic arc, a properly realistic narrative would deemphasize if not eliminate the niceties of exposition and denouement, would acknowledge conflict—without necessarily making it the center of interest—but would not imply that such conflict usually is resolved (indeed, would more truthfully reveal that resolution is rare, at least as part of a discrete, self-enclosed experience). The realistic

conclusion to most stories—loosely construed as some sort of serial progression—would be neither “happy” nor manifestly unhappy but indeterminate, merely a suitable stopping-point.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Something dropped on my head.

I touched my head.

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

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

With that classic vinegar smell that cleared my face.

Before arriving at the bar, the narrator is on the train, where “There was puke on one of the seats and window behind it—like someone not only puked, but his/her head filled with puke, then exploded.” One of the narrator’s frequent jobs inside the bar is to clean up overflowing toilets, and this task is described with the same sort of unflinching specificity. Clearly one of the narrator’s goals in this novella is to expose the reader to the sensory particulars of the dingy environment in which he moves. Such attention to setting is manifested in Pink’s other novels as well, so that, if “story” is not going to be featured in these works, the characters and their surroundings will get especially pronounced emphasis: although “what happens” in *The Garbage Times* and Pink’s other novels is certainly of concern in the reader’s engagement with them, what they most immediately require is an initial fascination with the extremity of the protagonist’s peculiarly impassive attitude toward what seems to be a borderline existence.

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

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

I don’t have a bed.

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

My room is small.

I wish it were even smaller though.

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

That seems like too much.

It always seems like too much.

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

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

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

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

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

Fuck, this is really good—I thought.

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

Sometimes I put my hands up to cover my face.

That made it even better.

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

Neither are the narrator's subsequent activities (once out of bed) simply a string of haphazard events and miscellaneous observations. Although often enough he is occupied by this sort of introspective self-scrutiny (not always flattering in what it reveals), just as often his attention is directed outward. Indeed, despite the interludes of acute self-awareness, he seems most interested in the external environment in which he moves. In both *Person* and *Rontel*, as well as *Witch Piss* and *The Garbage Times*, the setting is the city of Chicago, which is cumulatively depicted quite vividly, impressing itself as a place that both overwhelms its inhabitants and provides a sustaining attraction (especially for the novels' protagonists). *The No Hellos Diet* is also ostensibly set in Chicago, although its immediate setting is the department store in which the protagonist works, which itself comes fully to life in its narrator's rendering of his experience there. In one scene describing the narrator on his way to work, he evokes at length a walk through the Loop and other parts of downtown Chicago. While the scene refrains from figurative descriptions and other flourishes of "fine writing"—the narrator preferring instead simply to name and to list—nevertheless it seems motivated by the traditional goal of realism to firmly situate the reader in a specific setting that is presented with the kind of detail that persuades us to accept the verbal representation as a plausible likeness of reality.

This project is carried forward in *The Garbage Times*, which, like *The No Hellos Diet*, focuses most closely on the protagonist's workplace, but this also, as in *Witch Piss*, offers the narrator the opportunity to broaden the focus to include a more general survey of a seamier side of Chicago. Although this novella, like Pink's previous books, has its moments of astringent humor (frequently at the narrator's own expense), *The Garbage Times* may be Pink's bleakest work; the garbage conceit seems emblematically to represent the narrator's acknowledgement

that the world he inhabits is overwhelmed by filth and waste, although we also find this character at least willing to try and clean up the filth. If there are no subtle intimations that such a world might be redeemed (the novella's final passage has the narrator clearly implying it shouldn't be), Pink's narrator endures.

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

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

patently “literary” devices, a restraint no longer observed here in what is Pink’s most recent work.

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

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

The majority of current “literary fiction” would have to be categorized as realism, although most seems to regard it as a kind of default setting, as if invoking “real” life is simply an unexamined assumption about the goal of fiction. Few writers are as rigorous in their

allegiance to realism in an unembroidered form as Sam Pink, but ever since the appearance of minimalist neorealism in the 1980s (exemplified by such writers as Raymond Carver and Ann Beattie), verisimilitude as an important literary value is no longer met with the skepticism that motivated many experimental writers during the previous two decades. (Perhaps its most noteworthy exponent now is the critic James Wood, whose notion of “hysterical realism” is meant to denigrate the postmodern legacy for neglecting ordinary realism). To be sure, there are current American writers who defy or disregard the realist imperative, most notably in a strain of fabulism influenced especially by George Saunders and Aimee Bender, although much of this fiction, as much as it embraces a kind of surrealism, nonetheless employs traditional narrative machinery almost as earnestly as Freytag could wish.

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

Still, it is not unfair to ask whether an approach that emphasizes what is absent—plot, dramatic tension, conventional prose—might have a better claim on originality if it also encompassed the *presence* of new or unfamiliar aesthetic strategies. Radical realists such as Nicholson Baker and Stephen Dixon deemphasize conventional narrative structure, but also manage to add a singular element that alters our perception of the ostensible formal or stylistic boundaries of fiction—boundaries that these writers reshape in ways that enlarge our appreciation of the elasticity of literary form and style, the extent of their still available resources. Dixon fashions a distinctive prose style (although influenced by Thomas Bernhard) whose chains of loosely linked sentences mirror the loosely linked scenes and episodes that in

some ways resemble Pink's non-narratives. Baker is able to seize on situations—a man on his lunch break, a man feeding his baby daughter—that would seem to have no dramatic potential at all and instead to magnify the moments in which we are nominally inactive and usually least reflective into episodes of heightened awareness that are often surprisingly compelling.

It might be said that writers such as Dixon and Baker provide realism with an aesthetic supplement of sorts, a surplus of “literary” interest beyond the act of representation itself, although surely neither of these writers could exactly be called aesthetes. (Dixon's work in particular avoids obviously lyrical language.) The alienated realism of Sam Pink, Noah Cicero, and Tao Lin, on the other hand, is implicitly an attempt to avoid the literary, or at least give the impression that “real life,” unmediated by literary affectation, is what the writer is after. Sam Pink's fiction does an especially effective job of upholding this illusion, but precisely because it so clearly manifests a unifying artistic intelligence, it is inescapably literary. *White Ibis* suggests he may be moving toward more conventional literary strategies, but while this might be regarded as “experimental” in a trivial sense—a writer who previously avoided all the familiar moves now tries them out—such a turn could hardly count as an advance over this writer's previous achievements in a more unadorned but innovative realism. That work shows that realism is not inherently a regressive literary mode reinforcing conventional narrative form but can readily enough lead an adventurous writer to renew and reshape literary form.

### **Reinforcing Hard Reality: Stephen Dixon**

Reviewers of Stephen Dixon's fiction have often taken note of the author's lack of widespread recognition, despite the high esteem for his work expressed by many writers and critics. For now it is no doubt unlikely that Dixon's work will gain the kind of attention that would in any way equal its genuine achievement, at least in the short run, although posthumous recognition is always possible. Dixon long acknowledged this, telling interviewers—in the few he gave—that he wrote for the sheer gratification of it, adhering to his own aesthetic standards and offering his stories and novels to available readers. Those of us who have accepted these offerings all along should ourselves be grateful he persevered in spite of undeserved neglect and gave us his singular fiction with seemingly undiminished dedication.

On the other hand, it is certainly the case that new readers of Dixon's fiction would find that his aptly named *Late Stories* well-represents his most abiding strategies and assumptions and provides the kinds of satisfactions we can take from all of Dixon's best work. They are satisfactions that are closely tied to the challenges and provocations of Dixon's fiction, which on the one hand seems conspicuously unconventional, with its paragraphs that last for pages (sometimes the entire length of a story or even a novel), its run-on sentences that sweep in both exposition and dialogue in an undifferentiated rush, its narratives that seem to expand incrementally rather than develop; on the other hand, the ultimate effect of these initially disorienting devices is a very intense sort of realism—not the kind of unmediated, transparent realism produced by “normal” storytelling, but a kind of cumulative realism created by Dixon's obsessive focusing and refocusing on specific events and details, often filtered through memory or alluded to in talk, sometimes through discursively drawn-out rumination.

In “The Vestry,” Philip Seidel, the writer protagonist of all of the stories in *Late Stories*, is contemplating going to a play being performed at a church in his neighborhood. Since his wife died, Seidel has rarely ventured out of his house, and surely nothing can be more convenient than an event held right across the street. Still, Seidel contemplates the prospect at length, first recalling his previous failed efforts to get out of the house and then attempting to fortify his resolve to make this one a success:

. . . Just try to get an aisle seat, if there's a middle aisle, so he can see the stage better, though of course if nobody's tall sitting in front of him. He doubts the seats are reserved, if they're all the same price. And there'll be refreshments there, he's almost sure. In fact, he remembers now the sign saying so, the proceeds from it going to some medical research organization. No, a soup kitchen. But the point he's making is he has to get out. He means, not doing just the same things every day. No, he doesn't mean that. He means he has to stop giving himself excuses not to go to things. And the play's right across the street. What could be more convenient? A two-minute walk. Doesn't have to drive to it. No problem about coming home at night. And it'll break the ice, sort of. If he goes to this, maybe he'll go to other things like it. . . .

After Phil has made his way to the church vestry where the play is staged, he soon concludes the play is not worth his time and leaves after the first act. About the play and his

response to it we learn only that “The play’s terrible. Everything about it: acting, writing, characterizations, laugh lines that aren’t funny, romantic and tender scenes and one tragic one. . . .that are cloying, boring, totally unconvincing, something, but they’re awful. Fifteen minutes into the play, he wishes he hadn’t come to it.” That “something” may indicate Phil doesn’t have the right term to indicate his disdain, but it may also mean he’s searching for an excuse to leave, regardless of the play’s quality. The story is not about Phil Seidel’s trip to the theater but about his continuing inability to adjust to the death of his wife and resume something like a normal life without her, a state of affairs that *Late Stories* as a whole makes evident. Ultimately the book engages us precisely through its various inventive ways of reinforcing this hard reality.

*Late Stories* is obviously a book about the specter of old age and the shadows cast by declining vitality, but much of Dixon’s later fiction has an autumnal tone/ His previous novel, (excluding the novella *Beatrice* and the uncharacteristic caprice, *Letters to Kevin*), *His Wife Leaves Him* (2012) dealt directly with the death of its protagonist’s wife, although in this case the writer’s name is Martin. Dixon frequently drew on what we must assume were the circumstances of his own life, although it would undoubtedly be a mistake to assume his fiction can be adequately labeled as autobiographical. (In his interviews, Dixon admits both grounding his work in his own life experiences and freely inventing when that seems necessary to the aesthetic integrity of the work.) Many of his stories and novels center around a writer character, presumably modeled on Dixon, whose wife is ill or disabled, as was Dixon’s own wife, Anne Frydman, who died of MS in 2007. His late fiction thus in a sense brings this broader story to a conclusion of sorts.

If Dixon’s subjects and situations usually remain familiar, each work a piece of what could finally be considered a single, expansive fictional canvas, both the stories and the novels can still surprise, especially in their formal strategies. The first story in *Late Stories*, “Wife in Reverse,” sounds its keynote by relating the story of Seidel and his wife’s lives together, in reverse order, beginning with her death—“His wife dies, mouth slightly parted and one eye open” is the first sentence—to their initial meeting at a party, all in slightly more than a page. Suggesting that his grief has severed Seidel’s ties with the ordinary course of events, the second story, “Another Sad Story,” finds Seidel in a gloom-fueled reverie in which one of his daughters has also died. Excursions into the explicitly dreamlike and fantastic are not unusual in Dixon’s

fiction—*Interstate*, for example, recounts in multiple elaborated versions the story of the shooting of the protagonist’s daughter in a seemingly random event, unless it hasn’t, since in the end we can’t know what really happened, only that the father is clearly filled with dread at the prospect of losing his child. Similarly, what we take most forcefully from “Another Sad Story” is not the daughter’s death, which is just a waking nightmare, but Seidel’s emotional incapacitation: “I am a corpse,” he pronounces at the end of the story. “I can’t move.”

Other stories in the book depict Seidel imagining himself literally on his own deathbed, (one takes place in the aftermath of his imagined death), having conversations with the ghost of his wife (or dreaming about her), while others more straightforwardly portray him recalling the past or continuing to cope with his bereavement and what seems to him the impossibility of returning to a semblance of his previous life. In some he does attempt—or thinks about attempting—to begin a relationship with another woman. “Just What Is” shows the effort failing, while the follow-up story, “Just What Is Not,” shows it apparently, if improbably, succeeding. “Remembering” is one of the more disturbing stories in *Late Stories*, as it relentlessly narrates a series of events clearly demonstrating that Phil’s short-term memory is failing, while “Feel Good” provides something of a breather from the prevailing atmosphere of melancholy and loss, as Phil experiences a day that seems to justify the story’s title. In “Therapy” he talks himself into consulting a therapist, again suggesting he might after all manage to persevere.

Perhaps the most affecting story in the book is “Missing Out,” a “what if” story in which Philip Seidel meets Abigail Berman at a party, but he is usurped in his attempt to ask her out by another man attending the party. Phil meets Abby a few additional times at the same annual party, where he learns that she married the man who had left with her at that first party. Years later he is told she has been diagnosed with MS, and eventually that she has succumbed to the disease, although her husband, unable to cope with her affliction, has treated her badly, divorcing her before the end. Phil expresses only regret that he missed his opportunity to become her husband instead, convinced as he is that he would have stuck by her through the bad years.

Seidel is clearly himself writing this story, although it is related more or less straightforwardly, without the sort of metafictional framing and interruption we often see in Dixon’s fiction. Perhaps Seidel is trying to assure himself through the telling of the story that finally he did do right by his wife, but the tone—and its ultimate effect—is wistful, as if the

opportunity lost represents a profound impoverishment of Seidel's life. None of the stories in this book really focus on the period of time in which Philip Seidel actually did care for his wife as her health declined, so we have no context, at least in this book, within which to judge the sincerity of the implicit declaration in "Missing Out" that Phil's love for his wife eased the burden of caregiving. But in much of Dixon's previous fiction, such caregiving, by characters generally similar to Philip Seidel, caring for wives very much in the same situation as Abby, is extensively depicted. Here the writer protagonist is sometimes prone to fits of anger and frustration at the tasks he is required to perform, although usually they are brief and do not lead him to abandon his responsibilities.

What is most notable, at least upon reflection, about Dixon's collective portrayal of what we know must originate in the material circumstances of the author's life is the disconcerting honesty of it. Even if we should remain cautious about attributing the characters and situations in the work to "real life" models, Dixon renders the Seidel-type fictional personae without flinching from their obvious flaws, at the very least taking the risk that readers will transfer their judgment of the characters to the author whose own behavior they presumably reflect. The impression of an autobiographical connection is perhaps reinforced by the habitual presentation of the characters as writers, although this feature of Dixon's work actually introduces a destabilizing element into any final reckoning with both the formal and thematic implications of that work. The metafictional gestures are more than the perfunctory acknowledgement of the artifice of fiction but act to affirm such artifice as the means for getting a more truthful perspective on real life than can be provided by convention-bound realistic narratives, which in their way distort and reshape reality even as they ostensibly seek to faithfully reflect it.

While the life circumstances of characters such as Philip Seidel echo those of his creator, these characters themselves call attention to their acts of writing, so that we might say that writing stories is on one level just a character trait, their vocation. However, that the story we are reading is in the process of being composed is often made explicit through the activity of this character, who feels free to stop and start, to transform and transpose the details of the story being told—or just as often, not being told, due precisely to the fact that the narrative is in flux, subject to backtracking and revision. The act of processing experience, of attempting to bring to it a suitable form of aesthetic coherence, is Stephen Dixon's most immediate subject. The myriad

ways in which this might be done were abundantly realized in Dixon's fiction for over 40 years now, and *Late Stories* is an excellent illustration of this achievement. Through Dixon's work we come to recognize what is most "real" about human experience: the effort to understand it.

### **Sincerity and the Surface: On Nicholson Baker**

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

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

As the first, most audacious, and probably most successful of these books, *The Mezzanine* in particular seems likely to endure as a signature work, both standing as an impressively achieved first novel and providing potential insights into Baker's strategies that I believe can help us approach Baker's other books as well, even those that might seem departures from the expectations set up by *The Mezzanine* and *Room Temperature*, his second novel.

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

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

. . .For a second the fifteen-percent figure made me unhappy, and then I thought, Fine, yes, I *welcome* all this imperfect mingling--I want this circling refluxion of our old

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

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

*House of Holes* is even more emphatically about sex than *Vox* or *The Fermata*. One could argue that *Vox* is also about the need for caution in sexual relations in the AIDS era, with its protagonists confining themselves to the safety of phone sex, or about "sex" as an artificial construct, a phenomenon of language, while *The Fermata* could be taken as a satire of the male preoccupation with sex. Both of these novels certainly offer representations of explicit sexual activity (at least in fantasies), but neither could really be called pornographic in either legal or

artistic terms. Each features well-rendered, believable characters whose existence cannot be reduced to their participation in sexual activity. The creation of these characters involves subtle uses of point of view, so that in *Vox* the more aggressive and at times more explicit conversation of the male caller is balanced off against the more restrained sensuality evidenced in the talk of the female caller, each influencing the other, eventually approaching a kind of harmony that mirrors the movement of a love story. *The Fermata* is related to us in the first person by its potentially unsympathetic narrator, but Baker gives him a voice that is undeniably engaging and helps to mitigate the contempt we might otherwise have for him, an aesthetic triumph that in itself brings redeeming value to the novel that raises it beyond the pornographic.

*House of Holes* has few of these complexities and might indeed be the most direct and sustained exercise in pornography of the three sex novels. It is about people having sex, explicitly and in almost innumerable varieties. There is no single protagonist or controlling consciousness, simply a third-person narrator relating the various characters' escapades at the "House of Holes," an erotic resort to which its sundry visitors suddenly find themselves transported by entering real holes. This initial fantasy device—characters are sucked through a hole on a golf green, through a straw, etc.—sets up the House of Holes as itself a place where sexual fantasies can be fulfilled, and Baker lets his imagination loose. In addition to depicting a multitude of sexual positions and expressions, the novel features a severed arm and hand adept at pleasuring women, a "crotchal transfer," whereby a man and woman exchange genitals, and a sculptress who gives birth to her sculptures (made of "ass wood") after engaging in anal intercourse. As in *Vox* and *The Fermata*, sex is portrayed with great energy and humor, and while it is all very colorful and explicit, it would be difficult to call this a "dirty" book, if to be dirty or smutty requires that sex be implicitly regarded as shameful, something that otherwise should remain furtive, hidden from view and excluded from conversation.

In an essay criticizing Baker for writing a book like *House of Holes*, Barret Hathcock asserts that it is indeed a dirty book and cannot "be evaluated as anything but pornography." That *House of Holes* consists of graphic representations of sex is undeniable, but Hathcock's assumption appears to be that if the novel is pornographic it is thus by definition irredeemable as literary art. He goes so far as to charge that Baker is "demeaning" himself by indulging in the pornography of this novel. But there is no reason to conclude that even if a literary work can be

called pornographic it can't also be worthwhile as art. The possibility that the pornographic representations in *House of Holes* might make some readers uncomfortable or even offend them is not itself a reason to assert the author ought to feel shameful because he is not also uncomfortable. It is also no reason to regard the work as without value, however difficult one might find it to appreciate that value because of a distaste for the sexual content it offers.

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

Baker is neither a satirist nor a psychological realist. However much his fiction examines the shared (if often ignored) details of contemporary social reality, it does so not in order to dissect it but to record it, not to mock it or call it into question but simply to apprehend it fully. If anything, Baker's fiction could be accused of being too uncritical of the reality it records, too willing to accept things as they are, especially the "things" that exist as the commodities of modern capitalism. One could say that Baker's novels are "about" their characters' self-conscious immersion in their reality, but this focus is on the "inner life" only in the way in which the novels' protagonists themselves bring it to the surface. Since most of the novels are first-person narratives, we have access only to the thoughts and perceptions the narrators have chosen to

verbalize. Psychologically, these characters are remarkably transparent: one would hardly think to look for their hidden motives or deep psychological conflicts. Finally, that *House of Holes* offers no social criticism and attempts no exploration of its characters' minds should not be at all surprising, since these ambitions have always been absent from Nicholson Baker's fiction. Baker's art is the art of sincerity and the surface.

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Not Somewhere or Anywhere

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

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

Miss Mooney is entirely aware of her own degradation, but she doesn't altogether seem that disgusted by it. The tone of her narration is at best detached, as if she has become

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

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

“Bettering Myself” foregoes both the appearance of moral judgment and the artificial formal scheme apparent in the novel. Its protagonist’s life is depicted in all of its shambles, without clearly signaling through other recognizable devices that the character might eventually see the error of her ways and her life follow a direction familiar to us from other stories. One could call this sort of story a kind of radical realism similar to that of Sam Pink, through which characters and events are presented in a seemingly artless (but not unskilled) manner, burdening them as sparsely as possible with externally imposed formal structures that might distort or equivocate. If such an effort makes it awkward to even identify a work such as “Bettering

Myself” as a “story” in the first place, since there is little sense of forward movement in its action—the main character’s life so firmly fails to encompass the possibility of notable change, to consider the chronicle of its specifics a “plot” at all seems a peculiar misrepresentation—it also nevertheless accounts for its creepy fascination, its power to disturb. Achieving such an effect, of course, is not an “artless” move at all, but gives the story in its formal construction the suggestion of drift that mirrors the character’s lived reality.

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

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

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

Other characters in the book seem less to lack a strong moral compass than a full commitment to the integrity of their own lives. The narrator of “The Weirdos” recounts an episode of her life during which she is living with an aspiring actor boyfriend in a relationship that she finds unsatisfying, at times enervating, reinforcing her already depressed state. Yet she seems curiously apathetic about the situation: “There were people I could have called, of course.

It wasn't like I was in prison. I could have walked to the park or coffee shop or gone to the movies or church. I could have gone to get a cheap massage or my fortune told. But I didn't feel like calling anyone or leaving the apartment complex. So I sat and watched my boyfriend clip his toenails. . . ." "Maybe he was the man of my dreams" the narrator declares in the story's final line, as if her later life has been sufficiently uninspiring that even this aimless episode may have had significance after all. There may be as well in her seemingly throwaway remark a non-ironic admission that perhaps in truth the boyfriend actually was the man of her dreams, but this more likely tells us that the narrator's dreams remained without much ambition.

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

"A Better Place" is somewhat too abstract, too overtly allegorical, at least in comparison to the all of the other, more vividly and concretely rendered stories in *Homesick for Another World*. Still, its placement as the final story in the book does suggest it can be read as implicitly a recapitulation of the underlying dilemma faced by the characters in most of Moshfegh's short

fiction, giving readers the opportunity to reflect on the preceding stories, perhaps reinforcing or altering our impressions of them and the kinds of people they portray. These are characters who are so homesick for another world, one in which their own existence seems less absurd, that they behave in ways that betray their self-perception they are themselves not made for the world they actually inhabit. Such behavior in its extremity at times pushes these characters and their actions into the domain of the grotesque, a term that has been used by critics to describe Moshfegh's fiction, some of whom have specifically compared it to the work of Flannery O'Connor. But Moshfegh's stories are not anchored in the religious/theological assumptions motivating O'Connor's fiction: O'Connor's characters are grotesque because of their distance from God; Ottessa Moshfegh's characters are marked by their distance from a reality in which the existence of God—understood as a trope signifying purpose and meaning—would even make sense.

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

### **Entering Cross River**

Rion Amilcar Scott's *The World Doesn't Require You* is both continuous with his first collection of short fiction, *Insurrections* (2016), and a significant departure. Most obviously, both books offer stories set in Cross River, a fictional Maryland town outside of Washington D.C. The characters in both collections, almost exclusively African American, are quite acutely

aware of themselves as residents of this community, which is given its own unique history as the site of America's only successful slave insurrection, and a distinctive geography: it abuts the "Wildlands", a kind of wilderness area in the middle of an otherwise urban landscape, and is bisected by the great river that gives the town its name.

The shared setting almost inevitably makes Cross River as much the subject of these books as the characters portrayed and stories told, but Scott as well reinforces the town's centrality in *The World Doesn't Require You* by moving more directly toward a mythopoeic treatment of it by emphasizing the fables and folklore that have accumulated through the community's history, and by adding to the generally realistic short stories in *Insurrections* more formally adventurous narratives marked by fantasia and a kind of magical realism. From the stories in the first collection to those in the second, it is as if Scott has moved on from the effort to convey the palpable reality of Cross River to an attempt to render the setting in the service of a larger, emblematic vision, as a kind of archetypal African American *milieu* in its historical circumstances and cultural inheritance.

Both books together thus offer us a rather wide array of characters, all of whom are compellingly individualized but also collectively representative of the inhabitants of Cross River. However, while some stories, such as 'The Slapsmith', about an abused, transient woman and her encounter with two homeless men encamped near the railroad tracks, portray the most marginalized members of the community, a significant proportion of the characters are, if not exactly prosperous, notably well-educated and mostly middle class. Indeed, several stories, including 'Good Times', the first story in *Insurrections*, and 'Special Topics in Loneliness', the novella that concludes *The World Doesn't Require You*, feature characters who attend or teach at Freedman's University, the local historically black college. Both books depict their characters interacting or in conflict with other black characters; few white characters appear, remaining on the periphery of a fictional world presented as a self-sufficient creation that in no way requires contrast to a white-dominated society to reinforce its authenticity.

This is not to say that the relationship between this African American community and the racialized reality of American culture is obscured or unexplored. The history of this relationship suddenly intrudes in 'Klan', in *Insurrections*, whose narrator recalls "the time the Klan galloped through the main yard of Freedman's University late in the evening. ... Four white-sheeted ghosts

on white horseback riding in procession.” It is hard not to be aware of this history (and its accompanying stereotypes) when reading ‘Party Animal’, also in *Insurrections*, which takes the form of a dispassionate psychological case study of a young black man who has succumbed to “Reverse Animalism”, a disorder that has caused him to enter a “backwards evolution and descent into what can only be described as simian behavior”. For white readers especially, the effect of this story can only be unsettling: on the one hand, the transformation from metaphorical (party animal!) to literal might seem like an exercise in absurdist comedy, but to then learn that the man, Louis Smith, after being confined to a psychiatric institution, “often violently attacked other males for supremacy, sexually accosted female patients, and swung through the facility, hopping from wall to wall as if they were jungle trees”, surely leaves one disconcerted. If the story is not quite an allegory of white racist perceptions of the black male, its bold manipulation of historically racist imagery evokes that history in an unanticipated way.

In *The World Doesn’t Require You*, Scott similarly incorporates such charged imagery in two stories featuring robot protagonists (although the robot’s creator plays a prominent role as well). ‘The Electric Joy of Service’ and ‘Mercury in Retrograde’ are narrated by Jim, a “Robotic Personal Helper”—RPH, or “Riff”—created by a man Jim refers to as “the Master”. Jim was one of the original Riffs, a survivor of the viral plague inflicted by the Master himself when his business partners objected to his plan to “paint these fuckers black”: “Give them big red lips, dress them like lawn jockeys. Sell them to white folks. They’ll have slaves again and we’ll get rich.” The Master is himself a black man, and each of the stories track the ambivalent relationship between Jim and his creator: the Master chooses to call the narrator “Nigger Jim,” and while Jim is eventually fully aware of the implications of the name, he has nevertheless been programmed to meet his master’s needs, “coded to love and to serve him.” In the latter story, the robots carry out their own insurrection (after accessing tapes about the Great Insurrection in Cross River), but most are subsequently deprived of their self-created programming language in an “Electric Holocaust” intended to suppress their revolt.

‘Mercury in Retrograde’ is not satirical, and the connection between its SF-esque situation and American slavery is too unequivocal for the story to be taken merely for its allegorical parallels. Jim’s struggle to maintain solidarity with his robot compatriots despite their suspicion (if not outright hatred) of him, and despite the imperatives of his conditioning, makes

him quite an affecting character. The story's conclusion highlights the strength of that conditioning, and perhaps Scott wants to emphasize how insidiously the slaveholder mentality can warp the consciousness of the enslaved. But almost any interpretation of this story is going to oversimplify it, eliding some of the lingering uncertainties — how are we to respond to the Master? and what are the implications of the robot-slave conceit? — which the story doesn't really resolve. Something similar is true of 'A Loudness of Screechers', although in this case the inconclusiveness comes from the story's hallucinatory quality: a young narrator tells us of his family's encounter with a flock of Wildlands "screecher birds", an encounter that apparently involves a ritual of appeasement the narrator is witnessing for the first time. The boy's uncle makes an offering to the circling birds, but is last seen "climbing higher and higher in the sky" as a screecher clutches him and flies away. Clearly this story draws on embedded Cross Riverian lore, but precisely what we are to make of the enactment of this particular rite — not to mention the phantasmic event at its climax — is surely subject to disparate conclusions.

Even in the stories less reliant on outright fantasy devices, our intended responses to the characters and situations aren't insistently signaled. The dominant character type in *The World Doesn't Require You* is the seeker — after knowledge, after success, after self-enlightenment. Some of these seekers are sincere in their efforts, but others are more self-serving, even outright frauds. A prominent source of the literal pursuit of transcendent insight is again to be found in the Wildlands, specifically in "a kind of forbidden zone they called the Ruins, a succession of abandoned plantations, many taken over by squatters claiming divine right to save the soul of the land". Here, in 'The Temple of the Practical Arts', a group of people, including the narrator, follow "Dave the Deity" (introduced to us in the book's first story, 'David Sherman, the Last Son of God') in his farmhouse turned temple. In this story, the aspirations of the faithful come to a literally fiery end, as the police burn down the temple in an action reminiscent of that taken by the Philadelphia police against the MOVE liberation group. The story depicts the narrator, Slim, grappling with his own darker impulses, even as he recalls the Temple's beginning as the product of a "beautiful" vision, but a follow-up story, 'Slim in Hell', finds him succumbing to those impulses in the aftermath of the Temple's demise.

Dave the Deity is not entirely a charlatan, nor is Slim merely an angry failure. Both have been deprived of their dreams (they are musicians) and both are forced to compensate for their

disillusionment. In David Sherman's case, while his behaviour might just seem eccentric, it also courts danger, a danger that Slim, at least, believes was caused by Dave's own bad judgment. (Dave brought into the Temple an aspirant named "The Kid", who Slim believes is concerned about himself, not the ideals of the Temple. In 'Slim in Hell', it is the Kid's musical success with the local "Riverbeat" sound that finally sends Slim over the edge.) Slim professes to believe in the mission of the Temple — even more than Dave himself — but 'Slim in Hell' makes it clear enough that his personal envy is as large a factor in driving him to the destructive act that concludes the story as the existential despair produced by the burning of the Temple — although that existential despair is also real.

In their mixed motives and internal complexity, Slim and David Sherman are typical of most of the characters in *The World Doesn't Require You*, although some characters and their actions are more morally ambiguous than others. Few of the characters could be called conventionally "sympathetic", but neither do the stories seek to expose them to the reader's disapproval. In some ways, Scott's almost exclusive focus on this self-enclosed black community has the effect of making us even more aware of the overarching white world outside it, but our view of the people of Cross River is not dependent on their relation to that external world (the pernicious effects of which remain implicit — although this world occasionally encroaches in the form of neighboring Port Yooga, Virginia). The characters are presented in all their human complications, however much historical circumstances have inevitably conditioned their tangible expression.

The characters whose motives are arguably the most opaque are the two lead characters in 'Special Topics in Loneliness Studies', Scott's longest published work to date. The novella is composed of a journal of sorts written by Dr. Simon Reece, an enigmatic figure who seems more ghostly than real. Reece tells us of the downfall of his quasi-colleague, Dr. Reginald S. Chambers, an English professor at Freedman's University, and his account is supplemented by various inserted documents: emails, syllabi, student essays, writing by both Chambers and Reece. Reece appears to be an instructor himself, but his status seems nebulous at best: "Somehow I always had students", he writes, "although my courses weren't officially offered by the university. No idea where they came from. I just set up shop every semester in an empty classroom and start teaching." Reece lives in the basement of a classroom building, a space that

“had once been the morgue when the building was the school’s teaching hospital”. He reveals he was formerly a low-paid adjunct at Freedman’s, so low-paid that he and his family were evicted, and it is as if he is now a revenging spirit eager to expose academe “for the dystopian wasteland it truly is”.

This he does not merely by witnessing the ruin of Dr. Chambers but actively participating in it. Whether Reece actually intends this to be the consequence of his actions is finally uncertain. What Reece’s narrative really discloses is that he himself is far from free of the narcissism and moral degradation he attributes to modern academia. Chambers’ most serious offense turns out to be his esteem for Roland Hudson, a Cross River poet known for his autobiographical poems about scorned love. When Chambers — with Reece’s encouragement — makes Hudson the centerpiece of the course that gives the novella its title, the divergence of opinion about the value of Hudson and his work between Chambers and a colleague invited as a guest lecturer leads ultimately to a grievance filed by a student (ironically the only student to find value in the course to begin with) when Chambers doesn’t take kindly to his colleague’s influence on the student’s term paper, a feminist critique of Hudson’s “erasure” of the real-life woman who scorned him. and begins to unravel. Perhaps, in the end, his ordeal (which includes the enmity of his dean and a final humiliation before the faculty) does indeed confirm Reece’s view of the malevolence of academe — not malevolent enough to prevent Reece from accepting a position as Chambers’ replacement — but Reece himself has worked diligently to propel the version of it that defeats Reginald Chambers.

Looked at one way, ‘Special Topics in Loneliness Studies’ could be regarded as an academic satire, but this, like calling ‘Mercury in Retrograde’ science fiction or ‘The Loudness of Screechers’ a horror story, is only a superficial characterisation of the work. These stories both draw on specific actions or images generally associated with such generic forms and have a larger role to play in evoking the imagined reality of Cross River. In this way all of the stories in both *Insurrections* and *The World Doesn’t Require You* seem part of the same work, a project that could be extended indefinitely as a comprehensive creation equally allowing for formal exploration and an underlying continuity of purpose. Scott has indicated that a Cross River novel may be forthcoming — at the least a sign that there is indeed more to be known about this deftly realized place.

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

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

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

intrusive as to deflect attention away from the characters or the emotional “content” of the stories being told about them.

*Affliction* (1987) may be the post-postmodern Banks novel that most fully and most effectively illustrates this hybrid form of naturalism. It offers a portrayal of character, setting, and incident that is arguably closest to “classic” naturalist narrative and that evokes a genuinely affecting “world” recognizable as our own in its pain and suffering. One can read the novel entirely for the traditional rewards of character and plot, remaining mostly unaware of the devices the author employs to contextualize the characters and the story within an existing tradition. But attention to the role of these devices in mediating our response can introduce a degree of contingency to that response, an awareness of context that makes it—the relationship between this narrative and the ancestor narratives that give it an extra resonance—part of the novel’s conceptual canvas. An enhanced appreciation of *Affliction* both as the story of the downfall of its rural, working-class protagonist, despite his best intentions, and as the story of this story as one of the sort favored in the tradition of American naturalism, becomes possible, even if some or even most readers undoubtedly settle for the first.

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

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

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

To some extent (and Banks is actually rather courageous in framing Wade’s dilemma so squarely in these terms at a time when “masculinity” is at best an embattled concept), Wade is portrayed explicitly as a man whose sense of his own masculinity is under assault and whose

response to the diminishment of his role as father and ostensible authority figure is largely an instinctual one, the result of biological and psychological imperatives over which Wade has no effective control. That Wade wants to be a good father to his daughter seems readily apparent, but he also seems to have no plausible conception of how to do this, and his fumbling efforts to maintain a connection with her only exacerbates the problem and fuels Wade's increasing desperation. Similarly, Wade's already dubious status as the town's lone policeman is further eroded through his interactions with Gordon La Riviere, town bigwig and Wade's boss, and with Mel Gordon, who defies Wade's attempt to cite him for a traffic offense and who, along with La Riviere, Wade believes is involved in arranging the hunting accident that killed union boss Evan Twombly, Gordon's father-in-law. His frustration with these challenges to his masculine self-image, although never exactly expressed by the narrator directly, again leads him to self-destructive actions he seemingly can no longer avoid.

Before Wade Whitehouse descends irretrievably into his final rage, however, he experiences another unwelcome reminder of his precarious place in the world of masculine power relations. His mother's death is a traumatic enough event, but ultimately its most damaging effect on Wade is that it draws him more closely into his now widowed father's orbit, which revives old animosities and elemental conflicts from Wade's violence-laden childhood. Not only was Wade's father prone to alcohol-stoked outbursts of violence against Wade and his older brothers, but the atmosphere of dread and intimidation he created clearly hasn't dissipated, either in Wade's continuing encounters with him or in the shadow it has cast over Wade's life in general. Wade makes the mistake of assuming more responsibility for his father following on his mother's death—for which in his negligence Glenn Whitehouse is mostly to blame—and this renewed proximity only brings the long-simmering hatreds and resentments between them to the ultimate conflagration of the novel's conclusion. Wade's own incipient capacity to inflict great violence, whether inbred or conditioned by the destructive environment in which he had to live, can no longer be contained as he kills his father and sets the body alight, then shoots the man he suspects of carrying out the hit on Evan Twombly, Wade's own ostensible best friend, Jack Hewitt.

It is certainly possible to see in the disaster of Wade Whitehouse's life sociological ramifications of various kinds, to take Wade's life as a case study in working-class frustration or

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

The naturalist narrative can thus be seen as one such variation. Banks attempts to adapt the form to the circumstances obtaining in the rural northeast rather than Chicago, San Francisco, or the Bowery of New York, and to the changes in literary sensibility that have ensued between the end of the 19th century and the end of the 20th. Even critics who aren't otherwise happy with those changes, who hold up a writer like Banks as one who sustains the possibility of social realism, tend to acknowledge that *Affliction* isn't simply a re-animation of 19th century realism. Niemi refers to Banks as a "postmodern naturalist" (151). Fred Pfeil, who describes Banks's early work as "pointlessly obsessed with narrational experiment" and "formalistically hollow," nevertheless finds that in *Affliction* "Banks avoids the twin dangers of a mere 'sociological' accuracy on the one hand, and a voyeuristic sensationalism on the other, through a wise combination of elevating and distancing techniques" Pfeil associates with Brecht (*Another Tale to Tale: Politics and Narrative in Postmodern Culture*). Pfeil believes these techniques are used to strengthen the novel's political resonance through avoiding sentimentality, but at the same time, the very devices Banks employs to create the novel's "distancing effects" make Pfeil object to its narrative strategy as too intrusive.

One of the ways in which Banks alters the inherited narrative method of naturalism is to assign the narration of Wade Whitehouse's story to another character involved in that story, Wade's younger brother, Rolfe. Although Rolfe is thus technically a first-person narrator, for the

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

. . .in the fifteen years since I last spent a Halloween [in Lawford], which is to say, since I was in high school, the place has not changed much. In fifty years it has not changed much. But visualizing the place, going there in memory or imagination, is not something I care to do. I studiously avoid it. I have to be almost tricked into it or conjured. Lawford is one of those towns that people leave, not one that people come back to. And to make matters worse, to make it even more difficult to return to, even if you wanted to go back—which of course no one who has left the town in this half century wants to do—those who remain behind cling stubbornly as barnacles to the bits and shards of social rites that once invested their lives with meaning: they love bridal showers, weddings, birthdays, funerals, seasonal and national holidays, even election days. Halloween, as well. A ridiculous holiday, and for whom, for what? It has absolutely no connection to modern life. (5)

Pfeil asserts that passages such as this mar the novel's otherwise "splendid narration": "Suddenly, the beautifully pitched detachment of the rest of the novel turns into portentous, unpersuasive flailing" (80). But it is hard to accept that the novel could exhibit a "splendid narration" at the same time it's narrator is "flailing" and is someone the reader cannot "believe in or care about. . .as an individual character whenever he is roped into the plot" (80). Pfeil believes that "for the most part. . .we can forget he's supposed to be the source of what we read" (80), but this can hardly be the case. How can we forget that the voice narrating the story of Wade Whitehouse is Wade's brother, who has shared some of Wade's formative experiences but who has lived apart from Wade for long enough that Wade has himself become mostly just a voice on the telephone? How can we forget that this vexed relationship substantially determines both the portrayal of Wade and his environment and the manner in which Rolfe relates these particulars?

Pfeil wants Banks to have written a novel whose point of view represents “an expository near-omniscience” (78), but this is not in fact the novel Banks has written. There are indeed many extended passages in which Rolfe narrates the action in the “studiously detached” way Pfeil thinks is appropriate to the Brechtian social fiction he wishes *Affliction* to be, but it seems at the least rather inconsistent to celebrate this mode of narration when it appears to be what it isn’t—a disembodied third-person narration—but to condemn it when it reveals its actual source in a potentially unreliable narrator. Pfeil asserts that he is unable to believe that “Rolfe can know all he’s saying or [can] execute this masterful narration” (80), but this fails to account for the possibility that Banks wants us to question whether his narrator “can know all he’s saying,” or at least to consider that the mode of narration presented to us is itself relevant to our perception of the narrative. Surely a writer of Russell Banks’s skills would not deliberately undermine his “masterful narration” by substituting “unpersuasive flailing” for no apparent reason.

Robert Niemi is more tolerant of Rolfe’s role in assembling and relating the text that is *Affliction*, noting that “without his mediation Wade’s story would surely lose psychological and moral depth” (161). But Niemi is closer to identifying Rolfe’s most essential task when he observes that *Affliction* is “a meticulous narrative reconstruction of a subject that is absent from the outset” (151). One could say that Rolfe has pieced together as much information as he can gather and presented it to us as a coherent narrative. However, it is precisely that the story concerns “a subject that is absent from the outset” that makes Rolfe’s version more than a “reconstruction.” In his brother’s absence, both from the current scene altogether and in effect from Rolfe’s life since he went away to college, Rolfe is as much constructing as reconstructing Wade’s story, imagining Wade himself as much as simply documenting his actions. Rolfe’s “meticulous” style of narration only and additionally highlights Rolfe’s sense of himself as an author patiently putting together what he hopes will be a compelling narrative that stands up to scrutiny as a verbal construction, apart from the opportunity it provides Rolfe to reflect on his brother’s decline and fall.

It is entirely consistent with our experience of Rolfe’s narration to say that he represents a muted version of the self-reflexive narrator to be found in metafiction. Rolfe interrupts the story from time to time, calls attention to his meticulously constructed narrative, precisely in order to remind us that an objective, omniscient rendering of the final days of Wade Whitehouse is not

possible, that not even Wade's brother knows him well enough to give us an unquestionably accurate portrait of him. We do not encounter the "real" Wade Whitehouse in *Affliction* because the real Wade Whitehouse is ultimately a stranger to Rolfe and we must make do with the Wade Rolfe is able to conjure from his "research" and his own memory. The only way in which Rolfe Whitehouse is able to invoke his older brother Wade is to make of him a fictional character that can then be seen to manifest those qualities and influences Rolfe believes might explain Wade's actions.

This does not mean that we respond to Wade Whitehouse as something other than a recognizably "human" character into whose circumstances we can imaginatively project ourselves as readers without having our attention explicitly turned away from Wade's dilemma and toward the means of representing that dilemma. Ignoring the means of representing Wade and his story does seem to me a willful denial of the relative complexity of *Affliction's* narrative scheme, but the novel is certainly not metafictional to the extent that we must suspend our belief in the representational illusion Banks still wants us to maintain. The novel is about Wade Whitehouse, not about its own status as fiction (although its status as fiction can appropriately be considered), and our response to Wade can be as complicated as our response to actual human beings. Indeed, an important measure of the success of *Affliction* would have to be precisely the degree to which we do finish the novel feeling some combination of compassion and horror toward Wade, regarding him as a human being in all of his multifarious and often contradictory traits and behaviors. Any consideration of form, style, or narrative technique would for most readers be a way of extending our perception of this character, not of reflecting on the artifice of fiction-making.

Banks's variations on the naturalist plot and naturalist narrative method in my view make *Affliction* a more artful novel than most of those written by the proto-naturalists, but must its art be an obstacle to a full engagement with the characters that art helps bring to life? One of the consequences of Rolfe's self-regulating narration is that by the time Rolfe himself steps out as an active character to attend his mother's funeral, he has already impressed himself on us as a character whose struggle to understand the forces shaping his brother's life is also the attempt to understand the forces shaping his own. Among the strongest of these forces is the formative influence exerted by Glenn Whitehouse, a character most readers must experience as unpleasant

in the extreme but who is nevertheless portrayed with a bestial immediacy that eliminates all distance between readers and characters, making the artifice of character-creation seem a trivial consideration. Yet it is of course the “meticulous” way in which Banks has employed such artifice that builds these characters into the memorable figures they are, just as his equal skill in the elaboration of plot and evocation of setting works to create the very sense of realism in *Affliction* that critics such as Fred Pfeil value in it most highly.

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

In these precursor narratives, setting is created—in the case of Dreiser, through the accumulation of quite specific detail—in order to provide their characters with a plausible background against which to follow the working-out of their fates. In *Affliction*, setting is in effect built around and for its characters, as a realm they fully inhabit and that comes to have its own distinct character and integrity. Banks seems more intent on evoking his small New Hampshire town with a comprehensive realism that can itself serve as a focus of aesthetic interest. The environmental influence represented by this community is not just asserted but is revealed through the details and actions the narrative systematically accumulates. At the end of the novel, Rolfe meditates on the changes brought to Lawford in the wake of Wade’s disappearance and the economic exploitation Wade suspected all along was behind the events contributing to his downfall, concluding with the observation that, following the arrival of the

new ski resort, “The community as such, no longer exists; Lawford is a thriving economic zone between Littleton and Catamount” (353). The downfall of Lawford and, by analogy, small towns like it in the American northeast, is arguably as much the subject of *Affliction* as the individual fate of Wade Whitehouse; certainly the degradations to which Lawford is subjected, economic and social, are echoed in those Wade must endure. In this way, the novel doesn’t really succeed unless the portrayal of setting is painstaking and can be regarded as an aesthetic achievement in its own right.

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

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

since the pressures contributing to male impulsive behavior will also probably remain in force, *Affliction* will be most relevant to the interests of readers who read fiction for its engagement with abiding dilemmas and persistent conflicts rather than ephemeral “issues.”

These readers may not perceive an untraversable breach between Banks’s “formalistic” early work and his later social realism. Banks did not simply cease showing concern for form and technique and start focusing instead on “content,” on producing “social fiction.” He continued to be occupied with the effects of form through the twinning of narrative strands in *Continental Drift*, with the influence of voice and point of view in *Rule of the Bone* and *The Sweet Hereafter*. In *Affliction*, he is self-conscious about form to the extent that he has appropriated the naturalist narrative and attempted to give it more aesthetically elegant shape. He has incorporated into this novel some of the self-reflexivity associated with postmodernism but does so by amplifying the self-awareness exhibited by his otherwise in-frame narrator. In neither case, however, does he force the reader to be self-conscious about the artifice employed or about the reader’s own role in the game of suspending disbelief. Ultimately, *Affliction* shows Russell Banks not so much rejecting the aestheticism of his early fiction as tempering it, using it to create a work of fiction whose artfulness does not eclipse substance but makes it possible in the first place.

### **Sleights of Hand**

Philip Roth gave the short novels *Everyman*, *Indignation*, *The Humbling*, and now *Nemesis* the collective designation “Nemeses: Short Novels.” Regarding the four together inevitably invites reflection both on the possible connections and correspondences among them and on their status as works of the “late” phase of Roth’s career as a writer.

The relative brevity of these books has struck many reviewers as including a shift in tone, even for some a loss of the energy and audacity we associate with “classic” Roth. It is certainly the case that these four short novels are absent the irreverence and comedic iconoclasm of works like *Portnoy’s Complaint* (itself not a particularly long book) and *Sabbath’s Theater*. On the other hand, they don’t really lack the confrontational attitude toward existence to be found in Roth’s previous fiction, their protagonists’ ability to live comfortably in their own behavior, their

fundamental assertions of self. The unnamed protagonist of *Everyman*, Marcus Messner of *Indignation*, Simon Axler of *The Humbling*, and Bucky Cantor of *Nemesis* all resist the external constraints they perceive to be pressing on them, just as do Alexander Portnoy, Mickey Sabbath, or David Kepesh. But these characters find themselves struggling more directly and immediately with mortality itself, and thus quite possibly the shorter form and less comedically pointed approach of the "Nemeses" books is entirely deliberate, Roth's effort to characterize this struggle in a more appropriately sober tone.

Indeed, perhaps the more appropriate collective title for the four books might have been the title of the third, since the process of aging and/or the prospect of impending death are portrayed in all of them as a kind of "humbling," although in *The Humbling* itself, Simon Axler is also humbled more specifically by his failing powers as an actor and by his sexual misadventure with a woman even more self-centered than he is. "Everyman" is humbled by his helplessness at the mercy of his failing body, while Bucky Cantor is humbled even more cruelly by the random actions of nature, struck down at an early age by polio. Marcus Messner is notable for his refusal to be humbled by the authority figure who has that goal in mind, but ultimately he also is subject to the subsequent humbling of an early death.

It is tempting to conclude that these four novels reflect Roth's own growing sense of being humbled by increasing age and infirmity, and of death as the final nemesis, but of course this could just as easily be an instance of the biographical fallacy, the assumption that a writer's work is a direct translation from episodes in his/her life, or in Roth's case, at least that his last books are more concerned with such ultimate questions than any of his earlier ones. Then again, Roth's fiction is notorious for suggesting parallels with his life, for presumably drawing on his own experience in ways that perhaps most radically blurs the boundaries between life and literature among all postwar American writers. One could say that much of Roth's work makes discerning the former in the latter a mostly hopeless task, but also perhaps trying to separate the two beside the point.

While none of the *Nemeses* books explores these boundaries as deliberately as *Operation Shylock*, *The Facts*, or even the Zuckerman books, they all do share the preoccupation with the historical Newark of Roth's childhood and continue to model characters and events on Roth's family members, particularly his father, and his own experiences as a boy and younger

man. *Everyman*, which seems to me the weakest of these four books, is a rather conventional "autobiographical novel" that draws directly on the circumstances of Roth's life, in this case especially his medical history and, loosely, his relationship with his brother, but is otherwise unremarkable in the way it fictionalizes its author's experiences without insisting on the connections. *The Humbling* would seem to be the least autobiographical work of this quartet, although again the portrait of an aging artist unhappy with his fading powers might be taken as a kind of self-examination, and the protagonist's vexed relationship with the femme fatale could easily enough be seen as a send-up of Roth's own image as both a writer and a man troubled by a dubious history with women. In this way *The Humbling*, not obviously based on the writer's life, is actually a more resonant example of Roth's aesthetic appropriation of "real life" than the more directly autobiographical *Everyman*, which attempts to invest its fairly routine story with additional significance simply through associating the protagonist with the allegorical figure named in the title

*Indignation* is, in my opinion, the most resonant of these four novels, the one most likely to stand among Roth's best books, especially as a shorter work that could serve future readers as an introduction to his fiction. It both inhabits the autobiographical gray area and provocatively exploits this strategy by focusing on a protagonist who apparently has much in common with the young Philip Roth, but then representing the protagonist as the posthumous narrator of his story. This is explained (barely) by projecting Private Marcus Messner's account as the final activity of his dying brain upon his mortal wound as a soldier in the Korean War, not long after the events narrated as *Indignation*, but the ultimate chapter relating this occurrence raises more questions than it answers: How did the narrator of this chapter gain access to Pvt. Messner's fading brainwaves? If this narrator is assumed to be Philip Roth, does this make *Indignation* finally a metafiction, the story of Roth telling us the story of the Roth stand-in Messner, only further obscuring the divide between the experiences on which the novel might be based and the fiction Roth has made of them?

As Jonathan Rosen points out, *Indignation* is "one of Roth's counter-life books, where the author seems to be confronting what might have happened had things gone just a little differently for him" (*Slate*). And Marcus Messner has much in common with other Roth characters—not just Neil Klugman of *Goodbye, Columbus*, Gabe Wallach of *Letting Go*, or Alexander Portnoy,

but also Nathan Zuckerman in the original Zuckerman novellas and Mickey Sabbath, characters who, if not always expressing "indignation" per se, certainly maintain a healthy (or unhealthy) degree of skepticism and impertinence. While such characters don't always necessarily prosper in the wake of their audacities, they persevere, a chance denied to Marcus Messner due to his premature death. To the extent we must inevitably regard all of these characters as variations on Roth's own self-image, we might thus call *Indignation* a kind of autobiographical fantasy, a version of the egoist narrative in which the protagonist does not survive his impudence.

*Nemesis* differs from *Indignation* in that the impudence of its protagonist is both learned and earned. Bucky Cantor is not naturally egocentric or defiant. He is in fact an idealist who wants only to do good and believes that this attitude will be rewarded. When he is cruelly disabused of this notion and not only contracts polio but is convinced he has been the carrier of the virus that has killed many of his students, Bucky himself turns virulently against the God he believes has burdened him with both a broken body and a broken spirit. Although Bucky is seemingly justified in his rage—the novel depicts his undoing as an almost malicious act of fate—he allows this rage to destroy whatever chance he still has left to lead a meaningful life. When at the end of the novel its narrator tells a much older Bucky, "Don't be against yourself. There's enough cruelty in the world as it is. Don't make things worse by scapegoating yourself," we must surely conclude that Roth himself partly endorses this sentiment, but it's hard not to conclude as well that he shares Bucky's disabused view of God's creation as a randomly brutal place. God would indeed be a sadist had he in fact created such a place, and this is what Bucky still seems to believe, but one could just as easily conclude that Bucky's problem is that he does still believe in that God, with whom he is in perpetual battle, when his experience simply confirms that the world can be random and brutal.

The narrator's encounter with Bucky Cantor is part of a final chapter in which we learn that the narrator of *Nemesis* has been all along one of Bucky's former students. Although we have been given one brief hint earlier in the text that this might be the case (and this is reinforced by the fact that Bucky is often referred to as "Mr. Cantor"), it is possible that many readers will assume that the novel is narrated by a third-person narrator, perhaps similar to those narrating *Everyman* and *The Humbling*. Those readers have to some degree been tricked by another subtle manipulation of point of view, which should prompt such readers to reexamine

their response to what has come before. Is *Nemesis* another autobiographical excursion after all, in this case with the Philip Roth stand-in as the narrator rather than the protagonist? How confident can we be of the account provided through this "as told to" strategy? Are we simultaneously to find the narrative of Bucky Cantor moving and Bucky himself pitiable and to agree with the narrator that Bucky overreacted

These are questions readers will have to answer for themselves.

Both *Indignation* and *Nemesis* belong to that by now long line of Roth's fictions that in experimenting with the permeability of "facts" and fiction and in constantly challenging readers' expectations, not always in an immediately obvious way, pose questions without final answers, including questions about the very "realism" on which they otherwise seem to depend.

## **REGRESSIVE REALISTS**

### **Richard Powers I: Forsaking Illusions**

Richard Powers clearly seemed to signal in his auspicious first novel, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* (1985), that his fiction would not conform to the then-emerging conventions of literary minimalism or participate in the full-scale return to the values of traditional realism that would characterize much literary fiction in the 1980s and 1990s. But neither would it share all of the assumptions nor necessarily employ the most ostentatious of the strategies associated with "postmodern" or "experimental" fiction of the 1960s and 1970s, against which minimalism and neorealism were clearly, if quietly, a reaction. Although innovative in narrative structure, insistently self-reflexive, and often stylistically extravagant, Powers's early novels nevertheless would hardly be inaccessible to readers who still expect fiction to foreground compellingly portrayed characters inhabiting a world recognizably drawn from the familiar world of ordinary experience.

One might presume that an approach neither wholly conventional nor radically experimental, with seeming allegiances to both camps, would risk being accused of splitting too many differences and thus not be enthusiastically received either in mainstream literary circles or among the partisans of the offbeat and innovative in contemporary writing. Yet, by the end of the 1990's, Powers was being hailed by numerous reviewers as worthy of the designation "best living

American writer." However, at least one reviewer of *Plowing the Dark*, Michael Ravitch in *The New Republic*, does seem confused by his perception of difference-splitting, noting on the one hand that Powers's "linear associations and neat structures are reassuring to those seeking clarification and organization" and on the other that "too often his verbal associations run amok, without any purpose except self-display."

That Powers is an abundantly gifted stylist is undeniable—even Ravitch acknowledges that his "verbal fireworks can be delightful"—but as with other recent American writers who seem especially attuned to the figurative and rhetorical possibilities of language, such as John Hawkes and Stanley Elkin, style in Powers's fiction counts for much more than the occasional ornamental flourish, nor can it be taken as merely the vehicle of poetic "insight." For these writers, style is not something added to the work, or through which its implicit "subject" is expressed, but is itself inseparable from the work their texts literally enact and must in some fundamental way be acknowledged as the most compelling subject—certainly the most compelling for the authors—of those texts. Powers is thus a writer whose fiction is easy enough to admire as "well-written," but such a locution doesn't come close to describing either the ambitions animating his style or the formal effects it makes possible for the attentive reader, and in fact can just as easily be used, as we have seen, to belittle a writer otherwise judged by the inattentive reader to be too self-consciously literary for his own good.

*Gain* (1998) begins in this way:

Day had a way of shaking Lacewood awake. Slapping it lightly, like a newborn. Rubbing its wrists and reviving it. On warm mornings, you remembered: this is why we do things. Make hay, here, while the sun shines. Work, for the night is coming. Work now, for there is no work in the place where you are going.

May made it seem as if no one in this town had ever sinned. Spring unlocked the casements. Light cured the oaks of lingering winter doubt, lifting new growth from out of nothing, leaving you free again to earn your keep. When the sun came out in Lacewood, you could live.

Even the casual reader "reading for the plot" would probably find this an evocative passage, setting the scene for us (even if it will be the setting for only one strand of the novel's

twin plots) in an imaginative, energetic way and in images and phrases that signal an author able to use language with unusual skill and facility. It is indeed well-written. Perhaps an especially attentive reader will also notice the more subtle effects of such a passage: its insistent alliteration—"Slapping it lightly like a newborn. Rubbing its wrists and reviving it."—its equally assertive assonance—"Day had a way of shaking Lacewood awake."—its ingenious tropes and overall euphony, both of which are manifestly appropriate to the phenomenon the passage essays to represent, as these paragraphs themselves mimic for the fiction they commence the process they simultaneously describe, a coming-into-being, of a spring day in Lacewood and of the novel *Gain*.

But Powers is not a stylist for style's sake alone. Indeed, he spoke in a 1998 interview of his essentially utilitarian view of style: "I've tried to approach each book as an experiment in finding the style that best supports and exemplifies that particular story's themes." If Powers's prose style is more than merely pretty, it is also never less than functional, although to read his novels profitably it is necessary also to rethink the relationship between function and form that our ways of speaking about works of fiction generally assume to obtain but that Powers puts into question as keenly as any contemporary novelist. Which is not to say a novel like *Gain* cannot be read with a certain degree of pleasure even while remaining unaware of its formal innovations beyond its signature intertwining of related but separate narratives, only that, in keeping with the theme these narratives mutually reinforce, a gain in the direction of accessibility entails a loss in sensitivity to the full range of effects—to all of the potential sources of meaning—made available by a writer so thoroughly attuned to these possibilities. It is not so much that in novels like *Gain* and *Plowing the Dark* (2000) Powers privileges one over the other, settling either for an unqualified aestheticism or an untroubled rhetorical transparency, but that, like the braiding strands of DNA that provide the structural figure in *The Gold Bug Variations*, form and function are inextricably joined, their interaction producing the basic principle, simultaneously structural and thematic, by which each novel takes its shape.

*The Gold Bug Variations* (1991) makes most explicit a metaphorical linkage between the role played by the genetic code in organizing the processes of life and that played by language in organizing narrative, the latter in turn mediated in this novel by an even more explicit analogy between DNA sequencing and music. *Gain* is built in a perhaps even more thematically

compelling way around this trope, as somewhere in the unfolding story of Clare International, a multinational chemical manufacturer, lies the innate defect responsible for the cancer affecting Laura Bodey, the protagonist of its parallel plot. The juxtaposition of the chronicle of Clare's ascendancy in the world of American business with the tale of Laura's ultimately unavailing struggle with her disease led numerous reviewers to highlight what they took to be the polemical implications of this dialectical pairing, thus reducing the novel to a rather obvious critique of capitalism run amok. But nothing in Powers's prior novels suggests an interest in this kind of direct political commentary, and an attentive reading of *Gain* finds little evidence of such outright didacticism. If anything, one is likely to find the history of Clare International to be related in a surprisingly dispassionate, even respectful, manner, an impression that, far from producing an easy outrage on behalf of Laura Bodey, only lends to her story a more genuine pathos. An unwitting victim of what begins as an exercise of initiative and ingenuity, she seems not a martyr to the American business ethic but an otherwise ordinary, though ultimately strong-willed, woman forced to confront the unintended consequences of such ingenuity, as Adie Klarpol will have to do in *Plowing the Dark*.

The dialectical relationship that truly structures Power's fiction can be seen, in fact, as precisely the perpetual conflict between the inescapable contingencies of existence and the apparent human need to resist, if not overcome, those contingencies. This ingrained need has most commonly taken the form of technology—the potential applications to be derived from scientific research in genetics, medicine (*Operation Wandering Soul*), or artificial intelligence (*Galatea 2.2*). While Powers has acquired a reputation as a writer conversant with science—a characteristic uncommon enough among writers of literary fiction to partly account for the heightened attention paid to his work by reviewers—his concern seems not to be with science per se, which Powers represents as an essentially aesthetic endeavor, but with the place of technology in our lives—a place, on the one hand, taken up via an entirely natural human impulse that, on the other, licenses a technology the inner logic of which might only partially encompass other distinctive values. This clash of values, at work provocatively in both *Galatea 2.2* and *Gain*, is perhaps highlighted most emphatically in *Plowing the Dark*.

If *Gain* reveals the unforeseen and intangible costs exacted by our long-term investment in "progress" (without suggesting we can merely renounce the idea, or that it can't be harnessed

for beneficent purposes), *Plowing the Dark* portrays the process of technological advancement much more directly, and as much more clearly sinister. Again a dual stranded narrative, it begins with the story of Adie Klarpol, a commercial artist prevailed upon by an old college friend to move to Seattle to work in "The Cavern," a virtual reality "immersion environment" operated by a high-tech company called TeraSys. Convinced the Cavern is a site for pure research—allowing her to indulge in a kind of free-form creativity—Adie joins the team employed to explore the Cavern's possibilities, an effort that involves Adie in virtual recreations of Van Gogh's portrait of his room at Arles and of the Hagia Sophia cathedral in Constantinople. To her horror, Adie ultimately discovers that the technology she's helping to develop is destined to be used by the U.S. military in the creation of ever more sophisticated smart weaponry.

The opposition between aesthetic sensibility—here shown to be possessed by almost everyone working on the Cavern project, all of whom seem to share a capacity to take delight in the sheer expressive possibilities of their chosen media—and mercantile expedience could not be more sharply drawn, and again one could easily enough settle for the obvious, but not for that reason trivial, political interpretation of *Plowing the Dark*. That Powers means to raise questions relevant to politics would seem to be confirmed by the second of the novel's narrative strands, which harkens back to the era of hostage-taking by Lebanese militants and relates the grim particulars of the capture and captivity of Taimur Martin, an American teacher in Beirut. But this story only illustrates the perils and the ultimate futility of politics, as Taimur's ordeal can in no way be justified as a necessary consequence of political struggle, even if inflicting such suffering could be shown to further an otherwise worthy political cause. Although Adie Klarpol's resignation from TeraSys after discovering the ugly truth is likely to be a fruitless political gesture, it at least confirms Adie's own moral integrity. Such cannot be said for the acts of Taimur Martin's abductors, who, of course, are just as little concerned with the human lives affected by their actions as the most mercenary purveyors of lethal technology.

What both Adie Klarpol and Taimur Martin learn about political conflict is that it is ubiquitous, potentially hazardous, and finally completely inadequate to the needs of a seriously considered, satisfying life. But this insight into the limitations of politics is by no means the only, and certainly not the most important, knowledge acquired by the twin protagonists of *Plowing the Dark* through the experiences the novel relates. And while it might seem to discount

especially the sheer misery that is the essential quality of Taimur's time in captivity, it is nevertheless appropriate to focus on what—and how—these characters learn from their experiences, for it is the nature and provenance of knowledge itself that serves as both the novel's structuring conceit (reinforcing the underlying figurative translation of the double helix into a form of story-telling) and its overriding theme.

The TeraSys "Cavern" is clearly enough a version of Plato's cave, a technologically updated representation of the potentially confounding interplay of reality and illusion, a place where, in Plato's allegory, a delineation of the boundary between what is real and what illusory is shown to be not only possible but objectively necessary if human beings are to liberate themselves from the tyranny of appearances. Adie Klarpol is thus in the position of the individual in Plato's cave who manages to free herself of the fetters restricting her attention to the shadows that pass for the real things, and to make her way out of the cave of projected phantasms to a clearer perception of the existential truth. However, where the truth for Plato lies outside ordinary human reality, for Adie Klarpol (and one presumes for Richard Powers) truth is to be sought within, through a more scrupulous understanding of what is most compellingly human about human reality. The knowledge she eventually embraces (and that in a sense embraces her in turn) is an aesthetic knowledge that the Cavern's virtual world can inspire only inadvertently, by reminding her of its source in an unconstrained openness to one's experience in the world, not in a flight from it.

Taimur Martin unfortunately finds himself confined to a cave of his own, a bare room in which his captors keep him literally in chains, releasing him only for the most necessary of natural functions and, eventually, a minimal amount of exercise. Unencumbered by the simulated illusions Adie Klarpol is forced to dispel, Taimur nevertheless is compelled by his circumstances to review the course his life has taken, to examine his assumptions and to test the limits of his own consciousness. Significantly, the act of reading comes to have special value for Taimur. Deprived of books, Taimur tries to recreate the now-precious experience of reading:

You reach the opening sentence, the fresh start of all things possible. Modestly boundless, it enters bowing, halfway down that first right-hand page. You lie back against your paradise wall, your pillow. You make yourself a passive instrument, a seance

medium for these voices from beyond the grave. Politics has taught you how to read, how to wait motionless, without hope. To wait for some spirit that is not you to come fill you.

This emptying out of self that Taimur now realizes is the necessary condition in which to answer the claims of literature (Taimur tries to reproduce the experience of reading *Great Expectations*) is the more general state he is finally able to reach, an emptying out of distractions that is paradoxically the most profound source of self-knowledge:

There is a truth only isolation reveals. An insight that action destroys, one scattered by the slightest worldly affair: the fact of our abandonment here, in a far corner of sketched space. This is the truth that enterprise would deny. How many years have you fought to hold at bay this hideous aloneness, only now discovering that it shelters the one fact of any value.

To abide "without hope"—to respect the integrity of experience in its own right—and to acknowledge the limitations of "enterprise"—before human actions transcend themselves to become fantasies of total control—are imperatives both Adie Klarpol and Taimur Martin come to affirm. That these imperatives can be realized most purely, although not exclusively, in the experience of art is provocatively suggested by the lone, and very surprising, encounter between Adie and Taimur in *Plowing the Dark*. Before leaving the Cavern for good, Adie steps one last time into the cyberspace cathedral (attempting to recreate the original has proven to be Adie's profoundest education in the sources and the aspirations of art) and after a virtual ascent "all the way into the uppermost dome, now inscribed with its flowing surah from the Qur'an" she begins to fall back "like a startled fledgling, back into the world's snare."

...The mad thing swam into focus: a man, staring up at her fall, his face an awed bitmap no artist could have animated.

From his side, Taimur Martin has fallen into his own hallucinatory state, "soft-landed in a measureless room. . .the dementia of four years solitary. . .where all your memorized Qur'an and Bible verses ran together jumbled."

Then you heard it , above your head: a noise that passed all understanding. You looked up at the sound, and saw the thing that would save you. A hundred feet above, in the awful dome, an angel dropped out of the air. An angel whose face filled not with

good news but with all the horror of her coming impact. A creature dropping from out of the sky, its bewilderment outstripping your own. That angel terror lay beyond decoding. It left you no choice but to live long enough to learn what it needed from you.

If Taimur wants to know what the "angel" needs from him, it seems equally certain that she—Adie Klarpol, confronting Taimur in a kind of apotheosis of their mutual abandonment to the demands of living "without hope"—will require the kind of knowledge Taimur has so painfully obtained as well if she is to pick herself back up after her fall. Adie has come to recognize the illusory appeal of participation in "worldly affairs" (as opposed to an authentic engagement with the world), but perhaps she has not yet appreciated the "hideous aloneness" Taimur has discovered to be the only indispensable truth. That Taimur desires to bring this truth to bear on the affairs of a newly recovered world is understandable enough. In fidelity to Plato's allegory one can only question whether in the customary world neither Adie nor Taimur can ultimately avoid inhabiting very many of their fellows can adequately understand what both of them have truly learned.

Yet Powers's title suggests a significant revision of Plato's tale. The process of acquiring true knowledge is portrayed in the novel not as something that culminates in a flash of insight, a coming-to-see-the-light, but as a long and arduous task of "plowing the dark." Powers's version ultimately subjects what has arguably been historically the most resonant philosophical account of the nature of knowledge—which continues to provide the conceptual paradigm for most of modern science—to an implicit critique through a counternarrative in which both the reality that human beings can flourish only in a social association with others and that they are capable individually of arriving at the profoundest kind of self-knowledge are vividly illustrated. If these twin truths are, after a fashion, inscribed in the genetic code, so too are they illuminated most brightly in the kind of narrative fiction Powers has devised to convey the experiences of Adie Klarpol and Taimur Martin. But this fiction, unlike Plato's, does not direct us to a world of aesthetic perfection outside the contingent human world; instead it leads us even more firmly back into the human world, exploring those possibilities of enhancing and clarifying experience that ought more properly to be attributed to the aesthetic. This fiction, although possessing its own sort of luminosity, ultimately shares in the labor of plowing the dark, inviting us to make

our own way through the furrows created by Richard Powers's resourceful prose and probing intelligence.

### **Lost in the Woods: Richard Powers, *The Overstory***

*The Overstory* displays some of the formal and stylistic ingenuity we have come to expect from a Richard Powers novel, from his acoustically adventurous prose to his multiple, intertwined narratives (even more multiple in this novel), so characterizing it as purely “agitprop” would be neither fair nor accurate, although the novel is certainly transparent enough in its effort to promote environmental mindfulness. And since Powers has always been willing to take on the weightiest of subjects, generally treated in an earnestly sincere manner, it would go too far to call *The Overstory* sentimental, although the passages invoking its characters’ often rapturous appreciation of the trees that threaten to replace the characters themselves as the novel’s true *dramatis personae* are surely full of passionate intensity.

Still, if *The Overstory* doesn’t stake all of its possible interest to readers in a mawkish story that often veers into melodrama and that doesn’t bother to hide its didactic intent, it comes closer to doing so than I, for one, hope any future Powers novel ever comes. If *Plowing the Dark* and other early novels took on subjects that could suggest political and social critique but avoided crudely didactic gestures, the books Powers has published since then, beginning with the novel that appeared immediately after *Plowing the Dark*, 2003’s *The Time of Our Singing*, gradually began to seem less artful, designed more obviously to “say something.” I was concerned that the aesthetic formalism of Powers’s early fiction would wear out its welcome with readers more insistent that a novel provide direct emotional engagement; as it turns out, it is apparently to those very readers that Powers now most wants to appeal, as if he too has come to agree with the criticism of his early work as too emotionally detached.

As *The Overstory* continues to illustrate, it is not that Powers has abandoned his stylistic explorations or his intricate braiding of multiple narrative strands, both of which in his best work embody “theme” indirectly and suggestively through juxtaposition and implication rather than directly communicate meaning through the usual symbolic devices supplied by a linear story. *The Time of Our Singing* shows Powers bringing this formalist approach together with a theme—

the racial history of the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—it complements only uneasily. However much Powers wants his unconventional structure to support and extend his kaleidoscopic survey of the struggle for civil rights, the theme itself inevitably overwhelms the structure, prompting us to wonder why this manifestly important subject should require such an overwrought design. Moreover, other themes that Powers has often provocatively treated, such as the nature of music and the place of “high art” in general, though present in *The Time of Our Singing* (its brother protagonists are both musicians), are ultimately overshadowed by the larger, more politically resonant subject.

In the immediate follow-up to *The Time of Our Singing*, 2007’s *The Echo Maker*, Powers more or less abandons both the synthesis of ideas and the multi-strand narrative strategy, except insofar as there are three main characters and one of them is a cognitive scientist. The story is essentially unitary, however, as the scientist is brought in by the ostensible protagonist’s sister to help diagnose her brother’s brain disorder. The third-person narrator employs conventional psychological realism to bring together the perspectives of these three characters as we learn that the brother’s disorder is Capgras Syndrome, the exposition of the nature and symptoms of which is the novel’s primary focus, supplemented by an accompanying mystery plot as the brother tries to recall the automobile accident that induced his disorder in the first place. Although the character’s dilemma allows Powers to raise interesting enough questions about the fragility of human perception, *The Echo Maker* is otherwise a disappointingly monophonic novel that seems to show Powers partially surrendering to those critics who have demanded he write novels with more readily apparent plots and more emotionally engaging characters.

Much the same could be said of *Generosity* (2009) as well, but in this case the characters do not as directly solicit our emotional response. Indeed, the main character is deliberately presented as an enigma, someone whose motivations are the object of analysis and debate among the other characters because her unremitting good nature otherwise seems so implausible. But ultimately the novel is an “examination” of its subject—human personality—in the same way *The Echo Maker* concertedly inquires into its protagonist’s medical condition, an approach we would not have expected of the author of *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* or *Prisoner’s Dilemma*. And while *Orfeo* is in many ways the most satisfying of Powers’s novels published in

the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as the third of his books to take music as subject, it, too, is more conventionally structured—a present narrative with flashbacks—than those works that initially signaled Richard Powers might be an important successor to the initial generation of postmodern writers that rose to prominence in the 1960s and 70s.

*Orfeo* shows, like all of Powers's best fiction, that the supposed divide between art and science is spurious, gainsaid not only by his own novels, which depict how the latter can creatively accommodate the former, but by the very convergences between the two his encyclopedic narratives reveal. *Orfeo*'s composer protagonist takes his explorations of the possibilities of musical expression to an extreme than lands him in very big trouble, but in sensing that music might be an emergent phenomenon at the microbiological sources of life, Peter Els follows up on the intimations first offered in *The Gold-Bug Variations* that life might be organized according to processes just as inherent to art (music being a particularly pure form of art) as to "science" narrowly understood as a collection of facts about the world. Powers's most essential work is at least as much about art- and fiction-making (explicitly so in *Galatea 2.2*) as science or ideas or advanced technologies.

We might initially assume from its title that *The Overstory* could also be metafictional in this way, but while the novel does exploit the nomenclature that includes both "overstory" and "understory" as descriptions of forest growth, Powers uses them merely as an organizational conceit that works effectively enough to bring a broad order to a fragmented narrative that ranges widely in time and place and that includes an unusually large number of important characters (unusual for a Powers novel). Thus the "understory" introduces us to these characters—and to the obvious importance of trees in their stories—in a sequential fashion that at first almost conveys the impression we are reading a series of discrete short stories. Eventually these stories begin to link up, however (some more directly than others), and the remainder of the novel represents the "overstory," relating the ways in which the characters in some instances literally join forces, in others intersect from a distance, in their actions and attitudes toward the novel's encompassing subject (the splendor and importance of trees).

It might seem condescending or reductive to say that finally *The Overstory* is a novel about trees and the people who love them, but the novel does little to persuade us that such a description is inaccurate. Although subsidiary themes inevitably arise through the accounts of the

characters' various activities—the consequences of zealotry, for example, as one group of characters take their environmental activism too far—that the novel is ultimately conceived almost exclusively to evoke our current state of environmental degradation and make evident the need to halt and reverse it seems undeniable. Powers has been accused in the past of subordinating his characters to his formal devices and his big ideas. In *The Overstory* they have so plainly been subordinated to the novel's polemical purpose that over the course of a 500 page narrative it becomes very difficult to find much interest in them beyond their roles in the author's epic attempt to sanctify trees as symbols of the wonders of life beyond purely human enterprises, roles in which they function as humans able to come to some nascent awareness of the grandeur and resourcefulness of trees in their adaptations to circumstances.

Granted, the large cast of characters doesn't really allow us to witness much development in them individually, which is not inherently a flaw in a work of fiction, but in this case it only exacerbates the novel's most serious, ultimately debilitating, conceptual flaw. Aside from some perfunctory attempts to flesh out the characters through their personal relationships (love affairs and marriages), Powers so obsessively focuses on the characters' raised environmental consciousness it often becomes difficult simply to sustain interest in the incessant expository passages and extended reveries. Passages that might otherwise remind us of the aural and rhythmic effects of Powers's prose come to seem just more verbal underbrush in a novel-long thicket of exposition and rhetorical exaltation of trees:

There are trees that flower and fruit directly from the trunk. Bizarre kapoks forty feet around with branches that run from spiky to shiny to smooth, all from the same trunk. Myrtles scattered throughout the forest that all flower on a single day. *Bertholletia* that grow piñata cannonballs filled with nails. Trees that make rain, that tell time, that predict the weather. Seeds in obscene shapes and colors. Pods like daggers and scimitars. Stilt roots and snaking roots and buttresses like sculpture and roots that breathe air. Solutions run amok. The biomass is mad. One swing of a net suffices to fill it with two dozen kinds of beetles. Thick mats of ant attack her for touching the trees that feed and shelter them.

This passage occurs on page 390, but by the time I had gotten to it (and other passages immediately following that depict one of the characters on an expedition to Brazil), the repetition

of such wide-eyed evocations throughout the novel had already induced a state of sufficiently weary impatience that I wanted simply to skip over it. Suffice it to say that I have never before experienced such a reaction while reading a Richard Powers novel.

If this novel has a dramatic “arc,” it is in the movement toward the ill-fated act of sabotage carried out by five of the character once their lives begin to converge and they find themselves participating in Earth First!-like protest against clearcutting, its aftermath a denouement of sorts. One member of the group (its leader) is killed when an explosive device detonates accidentally, and after the four survivors scatter to face whatever fate awaits them (for a considerable period of time they appear to have escaped discovery), we follow them separately until one of them is revealed to the FBI through an unlucky encounter with a young woman who happens upon his diary of the events. He, in turn, is persuaded to identify one of the others, and so he chooses the one he perceives to have been the least committed to the cause and has gone on to have the most successful post-tragedy career. Powers attempts to bestow some belated dignity on this latter character through his refusal to snitch on anyone else, but since the character’s motivation to join the group in the first place was never made very clear, this seems an essentially empty gesture that only makes Powers seem to equivocate about whether we are to deplore the group’s act of violence or feel satisfaction that some of those involved got away with it.

Some of the characters exist outside the orbit of this band of militants who give the novel its most extended action: a forestry scientist who makes an important discovery about how trees communicate with one another, whose life is chronicled from her original research as a student (which is at first rejected, then celebrated) to her apparent suicide at the lectern while making a conference presentation; a lawyer and his wife, who, after the husband’s stroke, are ultimately reconciled to each other through a fascination with the trees in their own yard; a builder of video games, who suffers from a disabling injury after falling out of a tree as a teenager but who takes inspiration from the genetic code of trees in devising his own computer code.

All of these characters reinforce the central emphasis on the marvel of trees, but the computer scientist, Neejay, fits most uncomfortably in the novel’s overall scheme. Neejay’s circumstances and his idealist belief in computer programming arguably make him the most interesting and well-developed character in *The Overstory*, but his story seems largely detached

from the others, as if it belonged to another novel on another subject. At the book's conclusion, a force of inchoate "learners," apparently self-organizing as emanations of the coding activities of people like Neejay, manifest themselves in what seems to be an evolutionary move away from human beings and their destructive habits. It is a peculiar device that seems intended to provide a happy (or at least hopeful) ending in circumstances that otherwise do not appear to permit one. It is not reassuring.

I share all of the concerns animating *The Overstory* and agree with its implicit arguments, as well as the explicit arguments Powers himself has made, often eloquently, in interviews regarding the subject of this book. But I do not read novels to have my already existing beliefs affirmed; if anything, I read fiction hoping to have my unexamined beliefs challenged, fiction that compels me to view those beliefs from a productively skeptical distance. Most essentially, I want to read works of fiction that offer an aesthetically abundant reading experience, that remind me there are still unfamiliar practices and undiscovered forms to encounter in fiction. Until recently, I was able to find all of these things in Richard Powers's novels, and it is the greatest disappointment of *The Overstory* that it suggests they may no longer be available there.

### **Safely Familiar**

Perhaps what made Denis Johnson's *Nobody Move* (2009), an exercise in "noir" crime fiction, so disappointing was not that it was formulaic or derivative, but that finally it failed to be as "noir" as Johnson's own non-genre fiction, which habitually casts human endeavors in the darkest light without resorting to contrived plot machinations. Johnson's fiction generally features morally compromised protagonists, or protagonists who find themselves in morally ambiguous circumstances, circumstances that at any moment might erupt into violence, that imperfectly conceal implicit danger, both physical and existential.

If *Nobody Move* too explicitly literalizes the violence and moral confusion inherent in Johnson's fiction by embodying them in a genre in which such elements are simply conventions, Johnson's best work conveys a sense of unease or dread that the dangers lurking beneath the surface will become manifestly real, not the assumption they will become "real" as part of the plot that the genre conventions require. These books, in fact, are finally more about character and

atmosphere than plot, even though they are certainly punctuated by episodes of intensified narrative action. Johnson's most well known and arguably best book, *Jesus' Son*, is a collection of stories linked through their narrator, whose role telling several eventful stories is finally secondary to the character portrait of himself that emerges, not least from the manner of his telling, which can be quite lyrical. The best of the novels, such as *Angels* and *Resuscitation of a Hanged Man*, similarly emphasize character even while relating stories that also include much consequential and often dramatic action.

Although it cannot be called one of Johnson's best novels, *The Laughing Monsters* returns to the strategies employed in his most characteristic work. In relating his adventures (misadventures, more accurately), the novel's morally dubious protagonist, who is vaguely engaged in Intelligence work, evokes an atmosphere of equal parts menace and slapstick comedy and reveals himself to be in his own sort of existential crisis. Perhaps it could loosely be called a spy novel, but *The Laughing Monsters* is more of a piece with Johnson's earlier, geopolitically-themed novels *The Stars at Noon* and *Tree of Smoke*. Each of these novels is set during a period of American military involvement — the first Nicaragua, the second Vietnam, and in *The Laughing Monsters*, the post 9/11 “war on terror” — and depicts a protagonist ultimately witnessing the damage and degradation these interventions inflict, on him/herself, on the countries targeted, and ultimately on the United States as well. *Tree of Smoke*, a 700-page saga of the Vietnam War and its immediate aftermath, is the most elaborately developed of these novels, but in some ways both *The Stars at Noon* and *The Laughing Monsters* in their narrower scope more effectively evoke the palpable sense of corruption and looming defeat that emanate from the misguided enterprises portrayed.

*The Laughing Monsters* is narrated by Roland Nair, a man of murky loyalties who may be an Intelligence operative (via NATO) or a rogue agent, or both, and who travels on a Danish passport but is (probably) American. Nair is in Africa to meet up with Michael Adriko, an old friend/co-conspirator with whom Nair is going to embark on a new money-making scheme or on whom he is going to report, or both. Adriko has a new fiancé in tow (an American woman), and the narrative leads Nair into dangerous territory, both literally as he finds himself in a remote African village where the constraints of law have entirely broken down (helped along by American foreign policy), and figuratively when he discovers Adriko's scheme involves the sale

of Uranium and when he discovers himself falling in love with Adriko's fiancé. The illegal transaction and the love affair fail, but at the end of the novel Nair reasserts his solidarity with Adriko, seemingly no longer willing to participate in the dirty business assigned to him by the powers that be in charge of the "global" war on terror.

The African setting invites comparison with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and indeed not only Johnson's novels that explore American colonialist ventures but his fiction in general, depicting characters confronting the corruptions and existential horrors of the world and forced to accommodate themselves to it, sometimes successfully but most often not, seems indebted to the vision of human folly found in Conrad's work. Those characters in Conrad's fiction who believe themselves in control of their own fates only to be painfully disabused of the notion certainly parallel the narrative dilemmas faced by Roland Nair and *Tree of Smoke*'s Skip Sands as well. Johnson's "international" novels additionally recall Graham Greene, and not just in their examination of the clash between indigenous cultures and Western political expediencies. Johnson's fiction also resembles Greene's in its expression of an inherently religious sensibility, both explicitly through characters representing religion (in *The Laughing Monsters* a Buddhist priest, for example) and implicitly through the possibility of something like salvation or redemption that Johnson's narratives offer his protagonists.

In their encounters with what can finally only be called evil, both the evil manifested in the world and their own capacity to accept or even conspire with that evil, Johnson's characters are usually given a chance at redemption. In *Tree of Smoke*, Skip Sands is unable to withstand the moral disillusionment he undergoes as a consequence of his experience during the Vietnam era. *The Laughing Monster*'s Roland Nair, on the other hand, is one of the most perspicuous examples of a Johnson protagonist who achieves redemption of sorts, or at least emerges from his nearly calamitous experience with an altered perspective that leads him to affirm his friendship with Adriko even as he also risks prison or worse through his outright defiance of American Intelligence. Nair flees with rather than betraying Adriko to save himself: "We don't have to put down roots. Maybe we'll keep moving. Michael and I both liked Uganda. Why not? The climate's pleasant." Although it will now be Nair's fate to "keep moving," he seems at the end of the novel to accept that fate, which surely will require of him no more moral compromise

than his part in guarding the world from terrorism has required, and in considering a return to Uganda he is embracing the African heart of darkness as the less debased alternative.

While *The Laughing Monsters* thus may be especially describable in its narrative structure as a kind of spiritual allegory, at its core most of Johnson's fiction depicts an underlying allegorical conflict between human recognition of the morally good and the human inclination to negate that recognition by making poor moral choices, usually in explicitly religious language and iconography. By now, in fact, this narrative mode is so familiar as a core feature of Denis Johnson's books that it has become something of a formula. *Tree of Smoke* attempts to expand the formula by uniting it with a historical saga that examines American sins on a larger scale, although arguably this expansion results primarily in bloat. *Nobody Move* settles entirely for formula, as Johnson presumably finds the crime novel a suitable vehicle for invoking the moral corruption within the context of which his stories otherwise must proceed. *The Laughing Monsters* perhaps surprises somewhat in granting its protagonist such a clear opportunity for grace, but Roland Nair seems such a recognizable Johnson character that the predominant experience of reading the novel is the expectation that he is certainly heading for his moment of reckoning.

*The Laughing Monsters* is not an altogether tedious read. Its origins in Johnson's own reporting on the situation in Africa gives its rendering of character and setting a tacit authenticity. The plot has its moments of high tension, and the narration by Nair succeeds in immersing us in the story. The prose Nair employs is nimble enough to accomplish these larger purposes, although there are few of the kind of stylistic flourishes for which Johnson became much admired in his earlier books. In *The Laughing Monsters* Johnson seems content to produce an "entertainment" of the kind Graham Greene claimed to periodically write, a novel that engages the author's characteristic themes, but in a manner that seems safely familiar.

### **Getting at The Thing Itself**

Established readers of Kent Haruf's fiction would surely find *Benediction* familiar enough: a work of austere realism, weaving together several separate but related narratives, set in rural Holt county on the high plains of northeastern Colorado. They would not be surprised to

find the novel to be written in a very plain, direct style, avoiding obvious “literary” ornamentation, nor that its characters are ordinary citizens of Holt county, the men rather hard-bitten and the women long-suffering, although not necessarily either unsympathetic or less believable for that. Finally, they would recognize the spare and often desolate setting of the American plains serving as an ever-looming backdrop, which, combined with the religious overtones suggested by Haruf’s titles (“Benediction,” “Eventide,” “Plainsong”) gives the characters and their actions a kind of elemental aura that is almost Biblical in its implications.

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

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

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

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

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

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

remain something of a mystery to us, but this also seems to be an intentional effect — we must infer motive from a character’s actions and at times allow emotion to remain implicit.

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

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

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

Kent Haruf is really a throwback to the “realism” that defined the original practice of 19<sup>th</sup> century realists such as William Dean Howells and the so-called “local colorists,” among the latter especially a writer such as Hamlin Garland, who in his best-known book *Main-Travelled Roads* and other works offered a similar regional portrayal of the plains states and the upper Midwest. Haruf has more subtlety than Garland, and is a more efficient stylist, but his fiction seems animated by the same impulse to represent the lives of “ordinary” people and the local circumstances in which they find themselves. *Benediction* ultimately presents a cast of characters who are all credibly human, exhibiting variable qualities both admirable and blameworthy. In most of Haruf’s books an unusual or uncommonly dramatic development brings the characters out of their quotidian reality, and their responses to such developments have led more than one

reviewer to refer to some of these characters as “heroic” in affirming their sincerely-held, if simple, virtues; but this sort of easy valorization of such characters and their struggles seems to me both patronizing and inaccurate. It casually sentimentalizes both the characters and Haruf’s fiction as a whole by reducing it to an instrument of “affirmation” of the virtues his characters certainly do possess — perseverance, lack of pretension, etc. In my reading of Haruf’s novels, they set out to do what old-fashioned realism, at its best, took as its central ambition, to portray life as lived, without the kind of artificial distortions that would make it seem either better or worse than the actuality itself allows.

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

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

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

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

If *Benediction* does seem “authentic” as a kind of slice-of-life account of the lives of people like those living in his fictional Holt County, we might nevertheless still ask whether, 150 years after its ascension, this sort of realism retains credibility as an aesthetic strategy in fiction. If we grant that Haruf employs the conventions associated with such realism very well, what do we find in a novel like this that we wouldn’t find in the fiction of those writers on whose work it

is modeled? What do we find that is surprising, that takes not just realism but fiction as a literary form in a new or surprising direction? Certainly many of Haruf's readers do not want or expect him to surprise them in this way, assuming instead that he will simply chronicle life in Holt County, Colorado. These readers no doubt value Haruf's effort to "get at the thing itself," resulting in fiction that is "true to life."

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

### **Endless Talk**

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

That different sort of writer makes his presence felt in *The Sportswriter*. Here the subject and the manner ultimately most closely associated with Richard Ford's fiction appears for the first time, to be developed further and at great length in the two subsequent novels in what came to be (for now) a trilogy about the protagonist of *The Sportswriter* (*Independence Day* and *The*

*Lay of the Land*). The setting of these novels is the American suburbs (specifically New Jersey, but each of them could easily take place in some other middle-class suburb), which is also evoked in its own contrasting particulars (whether the suburban environment reflects a desolation of its own sort is perhaps open to interpretation, although certainly narrator/protagonist Frank Bascombe would deny it). The greatest contrast between this writer and the writer who wrote the stories collected in *Rock Springs* is that in the Bascombe trilogy incident and event recede in importance, acting not as these novels' main focus of interest but instead as the occasional links between Frank Bascombe's rhetorical digressions, his choral commentary on events, as well as his frequent flashbacks, requiring our attention more than the plot itself.

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

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

Some of the stories certainly depict characters in extreme or unusual situations. In "Sweethearts," a man and his girlfriend drive her ex-husband to prison, where he will be serving time for robbery. In what may be the most conventionally "dramatic" story, "Optimists," again a man returns to his youth and tells us of the day his father killed a man, although this occurs halfway through the story, which concludes with a flash-forward to the present day and the narrator's chance encounter with his mother, whom he has not seen in fifteen years. This story also illustrates the way in which many of the stories come to a poetically pointed conclusion, giving them a sense of emotional completeness somewhat similar to the way Carver's stories work:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What makes Frank Bascombe's endless soliloquy even harder to take is that Frank is himself such a passive, indistinct character that ultimately he doesn't have much of a presence in these novels except through his inescapable narrative voice. He interacts with various other characters over the course of each novel—the members of the Divorced Men's Club, clients to whom he is trying to sell a home (after giving up sportswriting and becoming a real estate agent), his troubled son—but his own role is so severely circumscribed that he almost disappears as a participant in the events he relates. Perhaps this is the continued influence of the vocation of sportswriting, as Frank deliberately restricts himself to describing the actions of his "subjects" and in a sense interviewing them, recording their conversations with him. (At times Frank does indeed deflect questions about himself or his own views in order to elicit further talk from the subjects, as if he is taking on the role of psychoanalyst as well, prompting his patients to "dig deeper.") In many ways Frank Bascombe seems missing from his own life. One might argue that this is a condition to which the author wants explicitly to call our attention, but three novels' worth of absent protagonist would seem to be a little far to go in making such a point.

The combined effect of Frank Bascombe's blankness as a character and his prolixity as a narrator is that these three novels in which he is featured cumulatively leave the impression we are proceeding through a series of *Scenes from Suburban Life*, with Frank Bascombe as our guide, but it's never quite clear what is supposed to be holding these scenes together aside from the fact they ostensibly involve Frank Bascombe and he presumably finds them important.

Individual episodes sometimes have dramatic interest and emotional resonance (Bascombe's trip with his son to the Baseball Hall of Fame, for example), but they are constantly muted by the return to Bascombe's discursive mode and the lack of any noticeable change in his impassive narrative manner as a consequence of the experiences these episodes represent. Bascombe frequently declares his allegiance to the suburbs, yet his account does little either to defend or critique suburban life, which is presented as a collection of mostly impersonal, undifferentiated activities.

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

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

be accused finally of "saying something" about suburbia as a significant feature of American civilization. Bascombe frequently avers that he is defending suburban life, but his account of it in these three novels neither champions nor attacks it. The suburb is just a place where some things happen in relation to Frank Bascombe.

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

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

granted, as if the setting and events are a mere convenience enabling Frank's digression-laden recitation of them.

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

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

This tendency becomes even more pronounced in Part Two, in which, at his mother's request, Dell is driven by a friend of the family across the border into Saskatchewan, where he is to live for a while with the friend's brother. The brother turns out to be a rather sinister figure, apparently a murderer, although by the time this is established conclusively readers expecting *Canada* to sustain the dramatic momentum established, however inconsistently, in Part One have surely concluded at the least that the novel's second half will not follow up on the first half's emphasis on narrative. The revelations of Arthur Remlinger's true nature and nefarious deeds occur at such a glacial pace and amid such expository ramblings that it's hard to either be surprised or ultimately care very much when indeed it turns out he is a murderer. If this section is meant to build up suspense or a sense of foreboding on behalf of the already victimized Dell

Parsons, it fails miserably. The two sections go together so badly, in fact, it's as if they cancel each other out: Part One makes Part Two seem aesthetically inert if not just redundant, while Part Two makes Part One seem an incomplete if extended fragment, or an already sufficiently realized work that has been yoked to another for reasons that remain unclear.

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

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

chronicled in *Canada* would be more interesting than what Dell tells us of his encounter with Arthur Remlinger, but that story unfortunately remains out of frame, unnarrated.

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

### **Killing the Joke**

Lorrie Moore's first two books, the story collection *Self-Help* (1985) and the novel *Anagrams* (1986), introduced a writer possessing an appealing comic touch, lightly applied but not reducible to mere "humor," and a modest if still palpable impulse to formal experiment. *Self-Help* incorporated as a formal strategy the conventions of direct address found in the genre of nonfiction named in the title. Thus this passage from "How to Be the Other Woman": "Shave your legs in the bathroom sink. Philosophize: you are a mistress, part of a great hysterical you mean historical tradition. Wives are like cockroaches. Also part of a great historical tradition. They will survive you after a nuclear attack--they are tough and hardy and travel in packs--but right now they're not having any fun. And when you look in the bathroom mirror, you spot them scurrying, up out of reach behind you." Or the beginning of the book's

fourth story, called simply "How": "Begin by meeting him in a class, in a bar, at a rummage sale. Maybe he teaches sixth grade. Manages a hardware store. Foreman at a carton factory. He will be a good dancer. He will have perfectly cut hair. He will laugh at your jokes."

*Anagrams* presents us with the stories of "Benna" and "Gerard," except that in the novel's five sections these are never quite the same characters (although also not completely different, either), their lives rearranged and recombined as narrative anagrams. It contains the kind of verbal comedy also characteristic of *Self-Help* and that would come to be a distinctive feature of Moore's fiction: "Eleanor and I around this time founded The Quit-Calling Me Shirley School of Comedy. It entailed the two of us meeting downtown for drinks and making desperate pronouncements about life and love which always began, 'But surely. . .'. It entailed what Eleanor called, 'The Great White Whine': whiney white people getting together over white wine and whining."

These two books made me think Lorrie Moore might be counted among a younger generation of adventurous writers neither programmatically postmodern nor retreating to the sparer comforts of minimalist realism, following up on the radical departures of postmodernism in a perhaps less confrontational, more accessible way. Unfortunately, her subsequent books have evidenced an uninterrupted decline into workshop-style convention, each of them more disappointing than the last. Even the story "People Like That Are the Only People Here" (collected in *Birds of America*), which is ritually cited as Moore's finest work, seems to me mostly an exercise in sentimentality, its supposed mordancy of tone notwithstanding, invoking that most maudlin of narrative devices, a child in distress, without redeeming it. It relies entirely on the reflexive emotional reaction many readers have to this device, but I, for one, don't really need to be convinced that having a sick baby is a woeful state of affairs or that the American health care system is deplorable. As far as I can tell, this story exists primarily to "say" these things.

Neither *Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?* nor any of the stories in *Like Life* or *Birds of America* exhibit the interest in alternative narrative forms found in *Self-Help* and *Anagrams*. They are all conventionally structured narratives employing the kind of strategies designed to "connect" us to their characters, establish appropriate narrative "arc," and provide "telling" and "vivid" detail reinforced by every creative writing program in the country. And while many of

them are leavened by what the dust jacket of *Birds of America* calls the "wit, brio, and verve" manifested in dialogue and by the occasional first-person narrator, the "wit" becomes non-threateningly humorous and essentially ornamental to the "human interest" most reviewers now find central to Lorrie Moore's approach.

Moore's 2009 novel, *A Gate at the Stairs*, shows the most precipitous decline into banality and unearned emotion yet. Once again this is a story that leans heavily on the initial emotional appeal of children, but in this case although an orphaned child is introduced and her plight made a center of interest for a while, ultimately this narrative thread has very little emotional weight and is finally dropped, not to be taken up again. Other potentially emotion-laden episodes are introduced as well, but they all remain surprisingly inert, both in narrative and emotional effect. Thus, while the situations evoked in the novel are potentially mawkish, they are executed so listlessly they essentially just arise and recede without making much of an impression at all. The death of the protagonist's brother, for example, seems so arbitrary, so clearly the product of narrative convenience that her reaction to it is almost grotesquely overwrought. We've been given so little reason to care about the brother, or so little insight into the relationship between sister and brother, this episode as the novel's climactic event falls disastrously flat even in a narrative that never gets off the ground anyway.

*A Gate at the Stairs* chronicles one year in the life of Tassie Keltjen, a Midwestern college student, shortly after the events of 9/11/01. Presumably this context is meant to be significant, the story Tassie tells in some way inflected by or representing allegorically the immediate aftermath of 9/11, but exactly why it is significant or how the story "responds" to the period after the Twin Towers collapsed and before the Iraq war began never becomes clear. In his review of the novel, Ron Charles asserts that it contains "profound reflections on marriage and parenthood, racism and terrorism, and especially the baffling, hilarious, brutal initiation to adult life." Although I myself am unable to discern the "profound reflections" on any of these issues, this may be a function of my disinclination to read fiction for "reflections" on anything rather than the failure of the author to make her reflections more tangible. Moreover, if the nature of her reflections were suddenly to become more apparent, I'm pretty sure this would only clarify further exactly why I find this novel so unpalatable, providing additional evidence that Lorrie Moore has abandoned aesthetic adventurousness for perfunctory "engagement."

The novel certainly does depict "marriage and parenthood," as Tassie finds herself working as a nanny for a couple who have adopted a biracial child. This presumably also introduces the issues of race to which Powers alludes, but the closest we get to "reflection" on racism is through a series of conversations among a group of adoptive mothers of cross-racial children that Tassie overhears. Tassie's employers probably are meant to be "colorful" characters whose marriage provides a contrast with Tassie's own parents back on the farm. They are, however, so superficially portrayed—the menu at the wife's gourmet restaurant is more interesting than she is—that "reflection" on their obviously foundering marriage is hardly possible. Further, the eventually revealed backstory explaining their situation, including their desire to adopt, is so astonishingly implausible that whatever resonance Tassie's experience with them might have is completely lost.

Tassie's parents are actually more interesting, although their son's death at the book's conclusion reduces them to a generic set of grieving parents, emblematic, one supposes, of the many other grieving parents created by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The scenes focusing on Tassie at home and interacting with her parents are the best in the book, but they are overshadowed by the interminable accounts of Tassie at work and at school. The latter include an interlude in which Tassie takes up with a fellow student named Reynaldo, who presents himself as Brazilian, but turns out to be an American Muslim from New Jersey. It would seem he is a proto-terrorist of sorts.

One quality of Lorrie Moore's fiction that initially made her fiction appealing does survive in *A Gate at the Stairs*. As narrator of her story, Tassie Keltjin frequently enough exhibits a comedian-like sense of humor:

Adoption seemed both a cruel joke and lovely daydream--a nice way of avoiding the blood and pain of giving birth, or, from a child's perspective, a realized fantasy of your parents not really being your parents. Your genes could thrust one arm in the air and pump up and down, *Yes!* You were not actually related to *Them!*

"You know," Tassie recalls saying to a date who has just announced to her he's gay, "if you concentrated you could be straight. I'm sure of it. Just relax, close your eyes once in a while, and just do it. Heterosexuality--well, it takes a lot of concentration!. . .It takes a lot for everybody!"

On the other hand, there are passages that struggle for cogency, as when Tassie muses about women's fashion:

What would be cool was something different, more murderous, and not delectable. From what I could see, the best look would involve not just something new, but something with insouciant jewelry and ominous leather goods denouncing something old that lay within yourself and others. Probably I would never accomplish this. Without explicit instructions I had no feel or instinct, at least not for the new part. I felt, however, that if called upon, I could do the other part—denunciation—but privately. Privately part cool, since I partook of denouncing (silently, violently) all the time.

These reflections are clearly enough laboring to "say" something significant, but I, for one, can't say I know what it is.

The contrast between the sure-footed comedy of the first two passages and the straining for effect of the last seems to me to encapsulate the fatal flaw of *A Gate at the Stairs*. Moore retains, on a verbal level, her essentially comedic vision and skills but ultimately allows them to be subjugated to a ponderous effort to be "about" something more "serious." A writer who began by writing funny, formally agile fiction has produced an emotionally overworked, formally dull novel only intermittently relieved by a funny line or facetiously rendered scene.

### **Until the Movie Comes Out**

It is fair to say that, although particular books of his might receive a few less-than-effusive endorsements, Richard Russo is a highly regarded novelist among mainstream American book reviewers. Although *Empire Falls* seems to be the work that received the greatest praise, and remains a critical favorite, reviews of two of Russo's more recent novels, *Bridge of Sighs* and *That Old Cape Magic*, only confirm Russo's standing. Ron Charles, not ordinarily given to hyperbole, called *Bridge of Sighs* "a lovely, deep-hearted novel," even though he also identified several seemingly serious flaws (and then wondered if "these complaints sound more damning than I mean them to.") Janet Maslin found it "richly evocative and beautifully wrought, delivered with deceptive ease," further lauding Russo's "wonderfully unfashionable gift for effortless storytelling on a sweeping, multigenerational scale," while Glenn C. Altschuler

swoons over *That Old Cape Magic*, declaring it "suffused with [Russo's] signature comic sensibility, and with insights, by turns tender and tough, about human frailty, forbearance, fortitude, and fervor."

In support of such praise, reviewers most often cite Russo's ability to evoke a sense of place, especially his native upstate New York, his creation of believable characters to whom he seems to have "affection," his "comic sensibility," as Altschuler puts it, although this is sometimes referred to as his "wry" tone, as well as his lively, if uncomplicated, prose style. Most importantly, these virtues are put in the service of an emotionally resonant, "humane" vision that, if it doesn't always make us feel good, nevertheless satisfyingly reveals to us what it means "to be human." ("When you finish a Russo novel," writes Geoff Schumacher in his review of TOCM "you feel you have really learned something about how human beings function.") You may like some of Russo's books more than others, but they are all "deep-hearted."

Presumably many readers agree with these assessments, since, among "literary" writers, Russo is one of the most popular. And it may indeed be the case that to the extent there is a larger audience for "serious" fiction, a writer like Richard Russo is what those readers (and critics) want. However, although I can understand why many readers might enjoy Russo's novels, which provide a kind of expansive realism and a cast of characters with whom to "identify," I can't accept that this sort of fiction qualifies as "serious" or "literary" or that reviewers would so readily and eagerly celebrate Russo's novels as such. Both the qualities that might make his novels "good reads" and that make them critically embarrassing choices as exemplars of aesthetically serious fiction can be seen in *Bridge of Sighs* and *That Old Cape Magic*.

*Bridge of Sighs* is a family saga centering around the life of Lou C. ("Lucy") Lynch, introduced to us as a 60 year-old married man and proprietor of several convenience stores. Told mostly from Lucy's point of view, the novel chronicles Lucy's childhood in Thomaston, an upstate New York equivalent of a decaying mill town, his love/hate relationship with his parents (love for his father, a good deal of hate for his mother), his intense friendship (intense on Lucy's part, at least) for Bobby Marconi, his courtship of Sarah, who eventually becomes his wife. Most of the drama enacted among these characters is pretty soapy. Indeed, as Louis Menand has

it, *Bridge of Sighs* is "high-quality soap opera," distinguishable from a book like *Peyton Place* mostly in that it is "gentler."

Menand thinks that the characters in *Bridge of Sighs* are nevertheless "convincingly alive" (as arguably they are not in *Peyton Place*), but I can't quite agree. Lucy Lynch is a plausible enough creation (although I don't completely believe in his utter passivity and his attachment to the dreary Thomaston), but the other characters are too neatly arranged into palpable dualisms: the saintly Sarah and the whorish Karen, both of whom might be vying for Lucy's affection; the gregarious and optimistic Lou, Sr., who dotes on Lucy, and the impatient, disabused Tessa, who tries to make her son face reality; the shiftless but lovable Gabriel Mock, a black man who befriends Lucy and the industrious if stern Miss Rosa, whom Sarah meets near the end of the novel (that these are the portraits Russo is able to make of African-American characters seems especially unfortunate, although both characters are forced to speak in a thoroughly unconvincing rendition of Black English). These flaws notwithstanding, by far the least convincing character in the book is Bobby Marconi, or at least the version of Bobby that becomes "Robert Noonan," a world-renowned artist who managed to leave Thomaston and then find his calling as an artistic genius—a calling for which there is no hint whatsoever in the depiction of Bobby Marconi.

I do agree with Menand that it is a strength of Russo's writing that he is able to convincingly portray a sense of place, to use a town like Thomaston to illustrate "the postwar metamorphosis of places like Thomaston. . .from self-sufficient centers of minor industry into faceless, interchangeable nodes in the giant exurban sprawl." As Menand suggests, Russo is able to do this by taking towns like Thomaston seriously in all their specificity, focusing on things like "what happens when a new A. & P. comes to town—it puts the milkman out of work and the corner grocery store out of business." If nothing else, one leaves *Bridge of Sighs* with a strong impression of the reality of Thomaston, and towns like it. This is a not insignificant achievement, and to the extent critics base their esteem for Russo on it they are to that extent justified, although most reviewers focus on setting as simply a sociological given rather than on how Russo engages with setting aesthetically—how he makes it aesthetically credible.

*That Old Cape Magic* also strongly evokes setting, although in this case it couldn't really be farther removed, metaphorically, at least, from the socially marginalized setting of *Bridge of*

*Sighs*. This novel is framed by two trips to Cape Cod, and much of the rest is concerned with the protagonist's memories of family trips there. Although the protagonist's family was in a sense rooted in the "Mid-fucking-west," as his parents called it, those roots were not planted voluntarily—his parents were academics who were exiled there by the exigencies of the job market—and place in this novel is simply the scene of family drama rather than, as in *Bridge of Sighs*, a source of those forces that shape the family drama. The Griffins wanted out of Indiana, son Jack has only professional reasons for living first in Los Angeles (he is a screenwriter) and then in Connecticut (where he goes to teach screenwriting), and Cape Cod was significant to Jack's parents only because it represented the place in the social hierarchy they believed they should occupy. The Griffins couldn't even bring themselves to buy a house in their college town, preferring to rent out the houses of colleagues on sabbatical.

The Griffins eventually divorce, and most of *That Old Cape Magic* alternates between episodes in which Jack either reminisces about his parents and their eventual fates or attempts to deal with his still-living mother (while carrying around his recently deceased father's ashes in the trunk of his car) and episodes that essentially chronicle the process of his own marriage's failure. Where *Bridge of Sighs* is a soap opera of the small-town working class, *That Old Cape Magic* is a soap opera of the cosmopolitan middle class. If you think the psychological "turmoil" of a late-middle-aged screenwriter turned academic is the stuff of great drama, you may appreciate the novel, but if you'd rather that a novel have some aesthetic interest beyond the tedious recounting of curdled affluence, you will likely find it, as I did, something of a slog (although of mercifully short duration, as Russo novels go).

The portrayal of the parents as academics with monstrous egos is presumably an instance of the "humor" of which so many reviewers of Russo's fiction take note, but it seems to me more vicious than funny, although I guess there's still a little entertainment value in the viciousness. Another example of Russo's humor must be a scene late in the book in which a man in a wheelchair finds himself upside down in a tree. This didn't seem cruel so much as an obvious attempt to inject "comedy" into a novel that otherwise doesn't have much. Some reviewers in emphasizing Russo's "humanity" speak of his "optimism," and I guess in ending more or less happily (the protagonist and his wife are cautiously reunited) *That Old Cape Magic* is optimistic, or "deep-hearted," but it really only reinforces the soap opera, although in this case not very

effectively. Here the happy ending doesn't seem so much earned or unearned as uninteresting. Since I didn't really understand what the problem with the protagonist's marriage was in the first place (something to do with his preoccupation with the past, I think), their reunion at the end seemed equally unaccountable.

In his review of *Bridge of Sighs*, Stephen Metcalf remarks that Russo is "among the least 'meta' writers going," but there are, surprisingly enough, some "meta" elements in both of these novels. In *Bridge of Sighs*, Lucy Lynch reports to us that he is writing a memoir about his younger days, so presumably that memoir is the source of much of his narrative, although not all of it, and at times the narration switches to third-person accounts of both Sarah and Bobby Marconi, describing events at which Lucy cannot be present. In *That Old Cape Magic*, Jack Griffin writes a long story based on one of his family's summer stays at the Cape, which is presented as a more or less truthful rendition of events, as if it isn't a story at all, even though it is eventually published in a literary magazine as fiction. Later in the novel, his mother tells him on her deathbed a version of her life with his father he has not heard before, a story he calls the "Morphine Narrative" and which he assumes is fiction, but can't be sure. In both novels, then, we are given reasons to doubt the accuracy and reliability of the narratives we are reading—Is Lucy's version of events what really happened, or is it unavoidably colored by his retrospective self-interest? Are the third-person sections devoted to Sarah and Bobby actually being written by Lucy as well, speculating about their actions? If the morphine narrative is correct, does that make the story of Griffin's past as otherwise related through his possibly flawed perspective unreliable even beyond his already uncertain, filtered memories?

Unfortunately, while the novels inherently raise these questions, potentially adding an intriguing complexity to the narrative method, a judicious reading of each suggests that these interpolated narratives and narrative devices are to be taken at face value, as, in *Bridge of Sighs*, the immediate motivation of Lucy's story, but no more than the occasion of Lucy's retrospection and thus of the beginning of the novel we are reading, and, in *That Old Cape Magic*, a facet of the protagonist's professional life and a feature of the age of pharmaceuticals. In both novels, "writing" is beside the point beyond the fact it gets the story underway or helps it keep moving along. The "meta" elements are supplements to character and plot, not opportunities to provide

aesthetic depth through a beneficial thematic ambiguity--or rather they are such opportunities but, in this case, squandered ones.

In concluding her review of *That Old Cape Magic*, Elaine Showalter observes that, whatever the novel's virtues, they will manage "to keep most readers entertained until the movie comes out." I suspect that, as with other works of "literary fiction" that could easily enough be transformed into movie scripts, the movie versions of both *Bridge of Sighs* and *That Old Cape Magic* would probably be better than the novels. Indeed, I'm not sure why they weren't written as film scripts rather than novels, since there's very little in them that depends on the novel as a form for their appeal. Indeed, one can imagine them as "quirky" indy films or even "quality" Lifetime movies without much if any diminution of effect.

### **Illusions of Substance**

Charles Baxter's stories, as collected in *Gryphon*, seem to me to epitomize an approach to fiction writing that has become the trademark approach in the era of the Creative Writing program and its "workshop" method of instruction. Whether Baxter has simply become the most consistent enabler of this approach, or might even be a model to which other aspiring Creative Writers turn for inspiration, *Gryphon* is a virtual sourcebook of the workshop method, and might ultimately be interesting for later readers and critics who want to understand the nature and appeal of this method—although, in my opinion, they will prove interesting for very little else.

The stories included in this volume are not exactly bad, but they certainly are dull. First and foremost they are dull because they are so formulaic. It is true that Baxter's stories do not emphasize "plot" in the most traditional, drama-building sense of the term, but for this they substitute a more meandering, "slice of life" technique that nevertheless almost always leads to a moment of revelation, understated in the "quiet" manner favored by workshop realism (presumably a legacy of minimalism, but now more a mannerism than an intentional strategy), but a gathering-point of plot nonetheless. In a Baxter story things happen, and they are always pointing to a resolution of the underlying tensions the story has introduced. This sort of slackened plotting so predominates the stories in *Gryphon* that it quickly comes to seem just a pallid variation on conventional plot devices and settles into bland routine.

Baxter's characters are similarly repetitive, and ultimately seem alternative versions of the same character, however much the superficial circumstances change. Most often, they seem to be just drifting along in their lives (so the "drift" in the plotting, of course, is even more directly mimetic); sometimes they are merely eccentric outsiders, other times outright losers; often they are disappointed with their lives (whether they admit it or not), and even those characters who seem mostly content with their lot have experiences that bring out latent conflict. These characters are subject to the revelatory moment or episode, usually a realization on the character's part about the state of his/her life, to which the stories are leading. Usually the revelation adds up to the fact that the character is, well, drifting, disappointed, conflicted, etc.

Baxter's habitual mode of both plotting and characterization could no doubt be called "quirky," or at least this is the overall "feel" of the stories. The characters are off-centered enough and the narratives just nonlinear enough that they can pass for unconventional, but "quirky" has become its own kind of storytelling mode, almost a genre of its own, in both fiction and certain "independent" films. It seems to designate a sufficiently unorthodox approach to suggest such works are to some degree original and innovative, but these "quirky" films and fictions are actually a flight from originality and innovation, a retreat into formal timidity and aesthetic sameness. They pretend to be daring in their choice of character, subject, or milieu, while reinforcing all the unadventurous expectations of narrative transparency that ensure readers won't be alienated by a work that is unduly "difficult." Charles Baxter's stories could be the lodestar of this style of "quirk."

Much of this quirkiness is also, ultimately, sentimental. The characters and their travails inevitably provoke, or are meant to provoke, protective feelings on their behalf, feelings of sorrow or pity for their limitations or of satisfaction at their occasional triumphs. Baxter's stories share in this sentimentality. The first two stories in *Gryphon*, featuring elderly characters with dementia, lay it on pretty thick, but while not all of the stories are quite so explicit in their heart-tugging, most of them do ask the reader to indulge in emotions that are essentially sentimental. "Surprised by Joy" is an especially egregious example, a story about a couple whose daughter has died. The wife finally seems to manage to find "closure," but the husband still has not, and the story ends with the husband exclaiming "I don't *want* to be all right" while the wife looks at the beautiful mountains in reawakened joy. "Shelter" concerns a man who takes a sudden interest

in helping the down-and-out and brings one young homeless man home with him, bemusing his wife but upsetting his son. In "Flood Show," a man almost drowns trying to cross a flooded river to reunite with his ex-wife, to whom he then confesses, "I couldn't help it. I never got over it." All of these stories take ostensibly strange turns to get to their sentimental conclusions ("Shelter" ends as the protagonist asks his wife to "shelter me" and embraces her), but they are finally just a diversion from the hackneyed tropes and cloying emotions in which the stories habitually traffic.

Often enough the stories attempt to cloak their sentimentality with portentous conclusions. In "Harmony of the World," a failed musician turned music journalist takes on a side job playing accompaniment for a singer whose lack of talent he can't finally keep himself from declaring. The protagonist, who is also the narrator, concludes by reflecting on the fate of souls in Dante's limbo, where they suffer "grief without torment." The narrator observes, "These sighs are rather like the sounds one hears drifting from front porches in small towns on soft summer nights." The bathos of this is overwhelming. The story does nothing to convince us that life in "small towns" rises to this level of grandiosity. (The analogy actually makes it seem rather banal and sordid.) It does convince us that the narrator is wallowing in his own self-pity. In "The Disappointed," a Swedish engineer visits America on business, perhaps to stay on in Detroit as a consultant. Not surprisingly, Detroit provides a virtual reverse image to the protagonist's antiseptic native Sweden, and at the end of the story he is mugged. Leaving the hospital, he "steps[s] out onto the front sidewalk, and to the air, which smelled as it always had, of powerful combustible materials and their traces, fire and ash." One hardly knows what this sentence is supposed to signify. It clearly wants to mean something. The "smelled as it always had" seems to add some pseudo-allegorical implication, but at best we are left with a story of ordinary, even obvious, disillusion elevated into faux-apocalyptic imagery.

This kind of fake profundity embodied in the story's concluding image or gesture is unfortunately yet another characteristic of the workshop story Baxter shares, to the ubiquity of which he has no doubt contributed. Such a device is just "indeterminate" enough to seem appropriately "literary," while managing to simulate a moment of insight that is sufficiently arresting to convince some readers the story must be consequential. In all of the devices that Baxter uses, he works to manufacture this illusion of substance, both formal and thematic. Since

I have not found a single negative print review of *Gryphon*, I have to conclude he is apparently succeeding.