

# THE IDEA OF LITERATURE



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## Introduction

Most of the selections that follow originated on my literary blog, *The Reading Experience*. The blog has been around for quite a while (15 years), so I had a wide range of possibilities available in choosing the pieces I wanted to represent the dominant themes I have pursued there. These are not necessarily the issues I intended to take up when I began *The Reading Experience*—it was such a new medium I really had no idea where it might lead—but they were the issues I found myself returning to as it became clear it was a medium that offered yet untried possibilities for serious critical discourse somewhere between full-on academic criticism and book coverage as then practiced in most newspapers and magazines. This is the space I tried to fill with *The Reading Experience* in its early days, and if finally the “litblog” per se did not quite live up to this potential (although it did lead to other, less “bloggy” forms of online literary criticism), my own attempt to seek it out did, I think, leave a varied accumulation of critical writing that nevertheless poses, implicitly and explicitly, a fundamental question: What do we talk about when we talk about literature?

My overriding interest in this question probably arose from my life circumstances when starting the blog—in many ways it was a substitute for the academic criticism I wasn’t going to write, since a convergence of factors, some personal, some professional, all unbidden, brought me to a point where I had to give up all hope of a conventional academic career. To some extent this was liberating: the prevailing fashions in academic criticism were not going to bless the kind of aesthetic criticism I wanted to write (not always close readings looking for “beauty,” but critical analysis that assumed a work of literature was first of all an aesthetic creation), so contemplating the nature of literature and the role of criticism in a new medium that promised to bridge a gap between scholarly criticism—at least of the kind I was trained to value—and “literary journalism” in what bloggers liked to call “mainstream media” offered an opportunity to write seriously about literature without deferring to the protocols of either of these modes. Yet, while I also addressed more transitory matters related to publishing or the present literary “scene,” I still seemed to return to the issues I no doubt would also have taken up if I’d remained an academic critic, the issues featured in this book.

Certainly there are other topics related to literature and literary criticism that engage my interest, not to mention doing close readings of writers and works in the search for beauty (“aesthetic gratification,” let’s say). But most of those would no doubt eventually circle back to the preoccupations informing the subjects here: the experience of reading works of literature *as* literature, the centrality of style (and form), the way in which notions of “craft” can impede imagination and experimentation, among concerns that would have us looking “inside” the literary text; among considerations that take us “outside” the text, I would surely have concentrated on writers whose work asks the reader to attend to the dynamics *of* the text rather than point them to some articulable meaning or representational object beyond it, and would have insisted that literary works themselves are the proper focus of literary study, not the protocols of the academy as enacted in the succession of ever-newer scholarly theories and

methods, just as the creation of novels, stories, essays, and poems by current writers is the ultimate goal of a literary culture, not the formation of a social order of writers whose job is to artificially promote that culture.

No doubt many—although not all—of these essays lack the sort of rigor associated with academic criticism (some of them are rather acerbic in tone, especially in the blog's early days), although by the time I had irreversibly exited the tenure track I had already concluded that much of academic writing required too much adherence to formula, too many mechanical gestures and enforced constraints, to be a mode of writing I could comfortably continue to practice (at least exclusively). Nevertheless, I think they still originate in the imperatives to read more alertly and to understand the literary history without which a particular work is not fully explicable that I learned to value when preparing to become an academic critic and have continued to follow since. My hope in starting the blog was to seek out a critical space in which the formulas of both academic criticism and general-interest book-reviewing would be unnecessary and a more direct but still exacting kind of critical commentary might be possible. Certainly posts attempting this sort of considered analysis were interspersed with more rapidly composed posts addressing more immediate and fleeting literary news (of the kind found on many other literary blogs), but the pieces gathered here offer whatever illustration can be cited as evidence that my hope was realized.

## INSIDE THE TEXT

### *The Experience of Reading*

#### **The Reading Class**

In "Twilight of the Books," Caleb Crain warns us that

There's no reason to think that reading and writing are about to become extinct, but some sociologists speculate that reading books for pleasure will one day be the province of a special "reading class," much as it was before the arrival of mass literacy, in the second half of the nineteenth century. They warn that it probably won't regain the prestige of exclusivity; it may just become 'an increasingly arcane hobby.'

I don't really find myself dismayed by the idea that reading will one day perhaps be confined to a "reading class," primarily because, as far as literature is concerned, it more or less already is. It may be true that "In 1982, 56.9 per cent of Americans had read a work of creative literature in the previous twelve months." and that "The proportion fell to fifty-four per cent in 1992, and to 46.7 per cent in 2002." That something around 50% of Americans still read poetry or fiction at all doesn't finally seem that bad to me, but this measure is not very rigorous: These are the numbers of people who self-reported reading at least one "work of creative literature," and we can probably safely guess that for many—probably most—only one or two such works per year is probably the more accurate report. Thus, those of us who read works of literature on a regular basis, who don't even necessarily read "for pleasure" but out of a deeply felt need that makes it seem impossible to us that reading might someday disappear, are no doubt even now practicing what seems to non-readers an "arcane hobby."

The use of the word "hobby," of course, is meant to disturb us, to shock us out of our complacency about the written word's loss of "the prestige of exclusivity." What kind of world will it be if literacy were to become only a "hobby," as if the ability to read were merely something a few people chose to do in their spare time? (In this future, rather than spend his Saturdays in the basement doing woodwork, Dad might be squirreled away in a damp corner, reading with a flashlight so the kids won't see his shame?) But that reading might one day be the exclusive privilege of those who *actually like to do it*, that books might be written for those who want to read them rather than for those who don't, doesn't finally seem to me a cause for lament. I feel confident enough that the appeal of "great books" is sufficiently constant that there will always be a fairly sizable group of intrepid people who will want to be able to discover for themselves what they have to offer.

But really Crain isn't so much interested in whether literature will survive. Although he begins his essay by citing the NEA report (which alerted us to the decline in interest in "creative literature") and further points out that schoolchildren are especially losing interest in "reading for literary experience," most of his discussion of literacy vs. "orality" focuses on the superiority of

the former in processing information, not on the loss of literature. Indeed, Crain sums up the research of linguist Walter Ong in this way:

Whereas literates can rotate concepts in their minds abstractly, orals embed their thoughts in stories. According to Ong, the best way to preserve ideas in the absence of writing is to “think memorable thoughts,” whose zing insures their transmission. In an oral culture, cliché and stereotype are valued, as accumulations of wisdom, and analysis is frowned upon, for putting those accumulations at risk.

If anything, the "oral mind-set" is more likely to express itself through a "literary experience," through an account of the world as related through story. Abstract concepts and analysis are the tools of philosophy, not literature, and while I ultimately do not think literature can be reduced to the telling of stories (the "literary" lies elsewhere than in the entanglements of story, although it is just as irreducible to "ideas"), it also does not depend on the reader's ability to "rotate" abstractions and is not strictly commensurate with the "calm and abstract investigations" literacy in Crain's definition makes possible.

Crain's reliance on a definition that privileges expository discourse as the object of reading is made only more explicit when he cites "a series of British studies in which people who read transcripts of television newscasts, political programs, advertisements, and science shows recalled more information than those who had watched the shows themselves" or when he concludes that "in a culture of secondary orality, we may be less likely to spend time with ideas we disagree with." I'm certainly not going to dispute that a literate society is preferable to an illiterate one, but few if any of these dangers the new illiteracy poses, at least according to Crain's analysis, threaten to undermine or endanger the literary tradition. The vast majority of technically literate people have always been at best indifferent to this tradition, and it won't be any more irrelevant to the mass of non-readers when they're officially illiterate.

In her response to Crain's essay, Anna Clark suggests that "The urgency [Crain's essay] inspires is of duty, not of excitement—exactly the wrong way to promote reading. The N.E.A. and *New Yorker* article make people feel bad because they \*should\* be reading more, because reading is good for you, like Vitamin C" ("Read or Die"). But I think Crain's cautionary report is directed less at the individual reader who is shirking her duty than at society as a whole, the literate elite that doesn't seem to realize what is happening. It's more concerned about the consequences for "culture" than for any particular set of readers. Myself, I don't believe that continual handwringing about "secondary orality" is going to make our culture less inimical to serious writing and reading than it obviously is, nor will threatening non-readers with the label "illiterate" frighten many of them into taking their Vitamin C. Perhaps it would be better simply to reinforce the enthusiasm of actually existing readers for their "arcane hobby" and let Culture take care of itself.

## **Reading Against Itself**

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

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

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

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

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

Jopling continues:

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

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

The very need to "distance ourselves" in the emotionally immediate way described by Joplin really only testifies to a flawed, unreflective way of reading fiction. It posits an intensity of involvement with "character" and "event"—the creation of which isn't ultimately very hard for most minimally skilled writers—such that all other considerations, point of view, style, narrative method, simply disappear into irrelevance. A reading attentive to these elements already incorporates an appropriate "distance." A reading of fiction that ignores them is to that extent an impoverished reading.

### **The Exigencies of Reading**

In "Questions of Intent," from his book *Where the Southern Cross the Yellow Dog*, Louis Rubin asserts:

It is all very well, when disputes about an author's intentions arise, to insist that it is the written-down story that should command our attention as readers, and that questions about what the author may have intended to do, what his literary models may have been, or what may have been going on in his personal life or that of his community at the time ought not make the least difference to us.

Why, however, go to hear novelists give readings and talk about their work? Why do they wish to know what kind of person it is who wrote the fiction? What can account for their interest in the creative process that produced it? Why are literary biographies written and published, and why do readers buy and read them? Is no more than idle curiosity involved?

I think not. Certainly the story itself is where everything begins (and, ultimately, ends) for the reader. What happens, however, is that readers of fiction, caught up in the telling of a tale, are drawn into the imaginative orbit of the teller. They become interested in how and why the author wrote what they have been reading. Assuredly the reader of a good novel is no purist. The literary theorist, like the passionate trout fisherman discoursing upon the presentation of artificial flies, may hold forth on what is and is not the proper way to go about reading a novel, yet the very nature of the fictional imagination itself invites complicated response. For just that reason, authorial intentions become of interest to us.

I have never really understood why it is that "disputes about an author's intentions arise" in the first place. In some instances such disputes can indeed be easily resolved (ask the author, or read what he/she had to say on the subject), but no doubt Rubin has in mind those that can't be—the author is long dead and made no comments about intent in particular cases. Yet, in neither situation does it seem to me important to know the author's intentions, beyond knowing that he/she considered this composition to be a poem, that one a work of fiction, etc. Once the work has gone out into the world as a poem, a novel, a play, how it is to be understood or interpreted is out of the author's hands, and that is a good thing, both for readers and, ultimately, for the work itself. It may be of interest to know that a writer hoped to accomplish a certain goal in composing this work, to treat an especially urgent theme or explore a specific idea, but if subsequent readers' interpretations are to be constrained by these intentions, held to account by their fidelity to them, the work in question no longer really invites close reading: Just tell me what the writer meant to say and save me the time and effort required to read it.

Rubin's phrasing is in addition rather peculiar: "It is all very well. . .to insist that it is the written-down story that should command our attention as readers". Written-down story? This seems to me a rather awkward attempt at minimizing the differences between literary texts and orally-related stories and thus to secure for the former some of the authority that does indeed belong to the oral storyteller. Because the latter remains present, and is able to exploit the resources of tone and gesture, he/she does have a firmer claim on "intention," while the writer has to settle for his disembodied words becoming fixed to the page. But precisely because they are disembodied, the writer's words are inevitably subject to the interpretive efforts of readers who do not regard themselves as the passive vessels of the author's intent, especially since that intent is usually only obscurely apparent in the first place. Writing down stories is what brings readers into existence, so why negate the significance of this act by dwelling on authorial intent?

In enumerating the possible areas of inquiry one might pursue "outside the text," Rubin unfortunately confuses some perfectly good ones with others that are of extremely doubtful value. What a writer's "literary models may have been" is a potentially very useful thing to know, since this may have a very direct bearing on the text at hand, influencing both its form and its statement of theme, while "wondering what may have been going on in his personal life" takes us away from the text and focuses our attention instead on gossip, just as an "interest in the creative process" might enrich our appreciation of particular strategies or techniques as they

manifest themselves in the work, while wishing "to know what kind of person it is who wrote the fiction" diverts us into hearsay and frivolous speculation.

Rubin is half right when he claims that "readers of fiction, caught up in the telling of a tale, are drawn into the imaginative orbit of the teller." Surely we are caught up in what could be called an "imaginative orbit," a fictional world evoked by the writer, but if by "teller" Rubin means the biographical author him/herself, then I think he is encouraging an inattentive and oversimplified view of what reading fiction is like. The "teller" (in a third-person narrative—first-person narration makes Rubin's account seem only more inadequate) in a work of fiction is just as much a character—just as much a fiction—as any of the more obviously identified kind. It is a construct the author has created to get the story told, although more precisely it is a character evoked by the habits of language the author has given it. It is not the author. How could it be, since, again, a work of fiction is a text, an artificial arrangement of words on a page, not a recitation by an actual person fully present to his/her listeners? And, speaking for myself at least, I may ultimately become interested in "how and why the author wrote what [I] have been reading" (if by "how" is meant how the work itself is structured or how its story is related), but not while I am reading a work for the first time or if "why" means digging around into the author's purely personal circumstances.

It may indeed be true that most readers are not "purists," and it is certainly true that "the very nature of the fictional imagination itself invites complicated responses." But I would argue that many readers might find their enjoyment of fiction actually enhanced if they allowed the complexities of "the fictional imagination itself" to play themselves out as part of a reading experience more attuned to the "pure" possibilities of fiction as an aesthetic medium rather than closing off those possibilities in favor of biographical or sociological speculation. The latter does not so much "complicate" our response as readers as divert our attention away from the exigencies of reading. Since Rubin himself goes on in this essay to warn against taking the author's projected image too seriously (in particular using Hemingway as an example), it is difficult to understand why he would lend respectability to a reading practice that continues to direct our attention to that image in the first place.

### **“Difficulty”**

In John Langan's "William Gaddis, the Last Protestant" (*The Quarterly Conversation*), he observes of Gaddis's work:

Just as his novels *JR* and *A Frolic of His Own* announce their subjects ("Money . . . ?" and "Justice?" respectively) in their opening sentences, William Gaddis's career could have started with the question, "Work?" No single word better encapsulates the concerns and organizing metaphor for Gaddis's artistic project, in which he chronicles the myriad ways that postwar industrial American culture devalues and drowns out individual expression in an endless barrage of information. His concerns were weighty—nothing less than the erosion of western culture and society—but Gaddis's novels are ultimately saved from grim systemic coldness by his emphasis on work, which he defined strictly

and defended with religious zeal. To Gaddis, work equaled an individual effort (best exemplified by the sympathetic and underappreciated artists of his first novels, *The Recognitions* and *JR*) to sort through the swarming cultural ephemera and create, with monastic persistence, something that no machine or business could adequately reproduce. Since Gaddis believed the two to be tantamount, his emphasis on the value of work was nothing less than a defense of the artistic impulse itself.

I mostly agree with this analysis, although I don't think that Gaddis avoids "grim systemic coldness" simply through his depiction of work (a point on which I elaborate below), but that the "work" of art holds special value for him is clearly enough illustrated in his novels.

Still, I can't really accept the implications of Lingan's conclusion about the "difficulty" of Gaddis's fiction:

*The Recognitions* and *JR* are not books that function as the literary equivalent of a player piano. They are not "hot media," to borrow one buzz term that Gaddis quoted in his National Book Award acceptance speech for *A Frolic of His Own*. Rather, they require effort, metaphorical reading between the lines, and ideally a little research, as evidenced by the encyclopedic website *The Gaddis Annotations*, devoted to annotations of the novels. They require, in other words, the readerly equivalent of a Protestant work ethic.

Gaddis is indeed one of those modern/postmodern authors whose writing is considered "difficult," requiring more effort than the casual reader is likely to expend. While it is true that books like *The Recognitions*, *JR*, and *A Frolic of His Own* call for a special kind of attention on the reader's part, an attention capable of reading not just between but around the lines of dialogue that comprise so much of these novels, I don't believe that referring to the act of reading Gaddis as encompassing "the readerly equivalent of a Protestant work ethic" is ultimately very useful or very accurate in commending his novels to potential readers. It suggests that, as the "last Protestant," his "work" privileges moral critique over art, is more ponderous matter than engaging aesthetic manner, and I don't think either is true.

Lingan quotes Gaddis himself protesting this austere view of his fiction:

. . . I think the reader gets satisfaction out of participating in, collaborating, if you will, with the writer, so that it ends up being between the reader and the page. . . Why did we invent the printing press? Why do we, why are we literate? Because of the pleasure of being all alone, with a book, is one of the greatest pleasures.

The perception of Gaddis as a moralist depends largely on construing his fiction as essentially a kind of satire of what Lingan calls "postwar industrial American culture." There is undeniably an element of satire in Gaddis's novels, but in my view to settle for that in responding to these novels is to settle for the least possible interest one might find in them. Satire is ultimately a one-channel mode of discourse: the satirist mocks, and the reader is duly edified. There is no "participation," no "collaboration" on the reader's part—except to agree that the subject at hand is worth mocking. When Gaddis says that what his fiction offers "ends up being between the reader and the page," he is asserting that it provides a much more complex reading experience, one that

is itself the source of "pleasure" and that transcends the lesser value to be found in satirical correction.

However much fiction like Gaddis's challenges some complacent reading habits, it does so in the service of expanding our capacity to read abundantly, and thus our capacity to take "pleasure" in what we read. An assumption that seems to be held by those who decry "difficulty" in fiction is that the ideal reading experience is one in which little is asked of the reader, who judges the value of the experience by how quickly we can get from one sentence to another, one paragraph to the next. A reading experience is worthwhile if reading is in effect concealed, the reader made to forget that words are interceding between him/her and the "story," that a work of fiction is ultimately a verbal composition the patterns and internal logic of which are more immediately the object of the reader's engagement than any "content."

But I think many readers implicitly reject this notion of reading, and many others could be led to do so if confronted by a text whose initial difficulty—which is to say unfamiliarity—is eventually ameliorated by the work itself, which teaches us how to read it as we go, and which proves to be as aesthetically pleasing as any more transparently "enjoyable" conventional narrative—indeed, perhaps even more so, since this pleasure has been earned more rigorously. Gaddis's novels are of this type, it seems to me, and fans of these novels are not just responding to their invocation of a "work ethic" but are finding the work exerted amply rewarded by the subtleties of effect that become available and by the very heightened attention that makes these effects more visible. Both the volubility evoked by Gaddis's emphasis on talk and the silences such talk obscures, the reader asked to make those silences speak, make Gaddis's fiction very active, and thus very entertaining in its own way. This is what makes his fiction appealing to most of his readers, not the prospect of gaining glory through hard work.

## Deep Reading

Sven Birkerts has been developing a critique of "electronic media" for quite a long time, publishing *The Gutenberg Elegies* in 1994, well before the rise of blogs, stand-alone news sites, and critical webzines, so his cyber skepticism is not to be dismissed as simply more defensive posturing by an endangered gatekeeper. His concern for "unhurried" reading is usually expressed in an equally unhurried analysis of the act of reading (specifically reading fiction), not as the high dudgeon of a book critic protesting his imminent loss of status.

This is especially true of a recent essay by Birkerts in *The American Scholar*, "Reading in a Digital Age." The essay is framed as yet another inquiry into the way the digital information "environment" is making serious reading harder to accomplish, but ultimately it is really a candid inquiry into his own reading habits and an attempt to generalize from his conclusions to a theory of sorts both about reading and about the nature of fiction. Much of this theory seems to me perceptive, and generally correct, but parts of it as well seem an overly roundabout way of describing our experience of fiction that would benefit from a consideration of John Dewey's own "experiential-phenomenological" analysis in *Art as Experience*. There is overlap between

the accounts offered by Dewey and Birkerts, but finally Dewey's comes closer to doing full justice to the role of "imagination" in reading, both writer's and reader's.

Birkerts associates imagination with the mental state of "contemplation," which he in turn contrasts with "analytic thought." Contemplation is "intransitive and experiential in its nature, is for itself"; analytic thought "is transitive, is goal directed. . . a means, its increments mainly building blocks toward some synthesis or explanation." Contemplation is, or should be, the preferred mode of reading fiction, by which "enhancement" and "deepening," end-states in themselves, are achieved. But Birkerts finds this "deepening" moving in just one direction: the purpose of fiction "is less to communicate themes or major recognitions and more to engage the mind, the sensibility, in a process that in its full realization bears upon our living as an ignition to inwardness, which has no larger end, which is the end itself."

Birkerts's insistence that the reading of fiction leads to experience and not "explanation" is wholly persuasive and does seem to coincide with Dewey's contention that art is an "enhancement" of experience. However, while Dewey might accept "sensibility" as the name for the human receptivity to art, he would not characterize our response to art and literature as primarily an opportunity "to engage the mind," especially if this means a retreat into an "inwardness" that is itself the ultimately desired state, cut off from the projected space occupied by the work instigating the experience in the first place. A Deweyan representation of the reading experience (the experience of art in general) would balance the inwardness Birkerts evokes with an outwardness that also seeks satisfaction in the perception of form and style. If "contemplation" involves the heightened awareness both of the palpable qualities of the created work and of our own awareness of those qualities, then the term might accurately capture the nature of aesthetic experience, but I think Birkerts privileges the activity of "mind."

When Birkerts writes that fiction provides "an arena of liberation. . . where mind and imagination can freely combine," he is not describing an interaction between the reader's "sensibility" and the work as an act of imagination but is positing "mind" and "imagination" as faculties exercised by the reader. When a little later he allows that "I tend to view the author as on a continuum with his characters, their extension," it seems to me he is explicitly discounting the artistic shaping that is finally the role of "author." In merging the author and his characters, Birkerts is putting most value on fiction's ability to induce "empathy," which in his case means the opportunity to connect with another "mind": "It is the proximity to and belief in the other consciousness that matters, more than its source and location." It is presumably this proximity to the "other" as evoked in fiction that constitutes "imagination" for Birkerts, not the unencumbered immersion in aesthetic experience as a whole.

On the other hand, I do identify with Birkerts's account of the "residue" his reading experiences leave:

. . . the details of plot fall away first, and so rapidly that in a few months' time I will only have the most general précis left. I will find myself getting nervous in party conversations if the book is mentioned, my sensible worry being that if I can't remember what happened in a novel, how it ended, can I say in good conscience that I have read it?

Indeed, if I invoke plot memory as my stricture, then I have to confess that I've read almost nothing at all, never mind these decades of turning pages.

What does remain is "A distinct tonal memory, a conviction of having been inside an author's own language world, and along with that some hard-to-pinpoint understanding of his or her psyche." "Tonal memory" seems to me a good way of characterizing the lingering impression a strong work of fiction leaves, although it is a memory the work has indeed impressed upon the memory rather than the sort of mechanical effort of "recall" the recounting of plot entails. For myself, not only do I usually have trouble retrieving specific episodes from novels I have read more than a few months in the past, I often enough lose all but a general sense of the voice or behavior of the characters, in the case of minor characters sometimes forgetting their existence altogether. Yet I continue to feel a tangible connection to the "language world" I have encountered, which to me is the surest sign my experience of the text was worthwhile.

The storage model of reading thus threatens to reduce the reading experience to the acquisition of "information," which Birkerts rightly resists. But I would take Birkerts's invocation of the "language world" as the ultimate source of value in fiction even farther. Reading a work of literature should always imply the possibility, even the desirability, of re-reading. Suspension in the language-world rather than the collection of facts about the work is much more likely to encourage later re-reading, both because one wants to abide there again and because the work in its particulars hasn't already been thoroughly assimilated and duly packed away. I can read it again and still have a worthwhile literary experience. (Presumably Birkerts might think that re-reading would give him further insight into the author's "psyche" as well; I cannot accept this particular element of his theory of reading, as I cannot see how the created language-world that is the text could possibly reveal anything about the actual author's mental states, except through free-floating speculation irrelevant to the text itself, nor why I should care even if it could.)

Birkerts concludes by encapsulating his claim about "deep reading":

Serious literary work has levels. The engaged reader takes in not only the narrative premise and the craft of its realization, but also the resonance—that which the author creates, deliberately, through her use of language. It is the secondary power of good writing, often the ulterior motive of the writing. The two levels operate on a lag, with the resonance accumulating behind the sense, building a linguistic density that is the verbal equivalent of an aftertaste, or the "finish." The reader who reads without directed concentration, who skims, or even just steps hurriedly across the surface, is missing much of the real point of the work; he is gobbling his foie gras.

While there are still assumptions here that seem to me unwarranted—why must the core element of fiction be its "narrative premise," which would only re-introduce "plot" as a barrier between the reader and the "language world"—ultimately this is a credible description of what is involved in serious reading. Unfortunately, Birkerts seems motivated to offer this description mostly in order to bolster his conviction that this kind of reading is endangered by the transition to screen-reading. I am unconvinced, to say the least. If Birkerts were suggesting that deep reading is

succumbing to the general human inclination to give in to distraction, to settle for what's easiest, he would perhaps be on firmer ground, although this weakness has always plagued us and can hardly have been induced by the presence of computers. But he clearly enough wants to insist there is something inherent in cyberspace and e-books that make them inimical to "serious literary work" and the reading it requires.

A generation or two from now, serious readers—and they will still be around—will look back at Birkerts's claims about reading on screens and find them deeply puzzling. They will find the notion that literary texts published on pieces of glued-together paper are somehow metaphysically superior to those published electronically difficult to comprehend. I find it hard to comprehend the idea now. I can understand continuing to find the printed book more convenient, or more comforting, but to maintain that serious, sustained reading can take place only when enabled by print-on-paper just isn't plausible. Birkerts is a trustworthy literary critic and a reliable authority on the pleasures of reading, but as a seer into the future of literature he will surely prove inadequate.

### *Literary Style*

#### **Style as Moral Failure**

Near the end of her life, Angela Carter said, "I've got nothing against realism. . . [b]ut there is realism and realism. I mean, the questions that I ask myself, I think they are very much to do with reality. I would like, I would really like to have had the guts and the energy and so on to be able to write about, you know, people having battles with the DHSS, but I, I haven't. I've done other things. I mean, I'm an arty person, ok, I write overblown, purple, self-indulgent prose - so fucking what?"

The defensiveness with which Carter speaks here is well-justified. Not only was she accused of being un-British in her choice of subjects and her prose style, but writers like Carter, who willingly employ an "overblown, purple, self-indulgent prose" are frequently treated not like they are in some way bad writers but are actually bad people. I am frequently amazed at the vehemence with which some reviewers and readers react against stories or novels that are unconventional or stylistically "excessive." The authors of such works are regarded as deviant, hostile to "ordinary" readers, just plain contemptuous of good order in matters of storytelling and style. (Even a writer as conventional as John Updike is sometimes attacked for these sins.) And woe indeed to the writer who, like Carter, combines an extra-realistic approach and a "purple" prose.

Philip Roth once mordantly remarked:

. . . I set myself the goal of becoming the writer some Jewish critics had been telling me I was all along: irresponsible, conscienceless, unserious. . . A quotation from Melville began to intrigue me, from a letter he had sent to Hawthorne upon completing *Moby*

*Dick*. . . "I have written a wicked book and feel spotless as a lamb." Now I knew that no matter how hard I tried I could never really hope to be wicked; but perhaps if I worked long and hard and diligently, I could be frivolous.

And indeed from *Portnoy's Complaint* on, Roth produced numerous books that were "frivolous" in comparison to his earlier work, that went beyond the bounds of decorum in structure and good taste in style, that were "excessive" in many, many ways, but . . . so fucking what? They are also books that will continue to stand as among the best American novels written in the latter part of the twentieth century. They are all clearly the consequence of "hard and long and diligent" work, and in their very excesses and frivolity are as serious as anything written by more obviously earnest writers of the time, including Roth's colleague Saul Bellow.

Yet there are still readers who can only see the frivolity--that is the comedy, as savage as it can sometimes become--and the excesses—Roth's frequently freewheeling style—and who regard books like *Sabbath's Theater* and *Operation Shylock* as fundamentally not serious, as irresponsible treatments of subjects that ought to be treated in a grim and sober way. They welcomed, on the other hand, *American Pastoral*, because it seemed closer to this more earnest approach. I think Roth would probably agree with Carter in every particular of her statement, and both of these writers could serve as models of the sort of writer willing to endure the charges that their writing exemplifies moral failure, as long as they were ultimately seen, rightly, as aesthetic triumphs.

Whenever I hear or read someone urging writers to be "clear," to "communicate," to avoid "trickery," I can only take it as an exhortation to be good. Not to offend official sensibilities or imply that many readers are too timid in their willingness to take risks. In the name of literary decency not to engage in "too much writing." Perhaps in the long run these stylistic gatekeepers can be persuaded that literary form and style have nothing to do with morality, but most of them probably don't really much like literature, anyway, if "literature" is more than just an opportunity to assert your own virtue.

## **Too Much Writing**

The Association of Writing Programs (AWP) puts out a review/journal called *The Writer's Chronicle*, similar in many ways to *Poets and Writers*. As does *Poets and Writers*, *Writer's Chronicle* always steers pretty close to the mainstream, dispensing "advice" and "analysis" that seldom strays from the conventional and currently accepted.

Rarely, however, has WC printed an essay as vapid and uninformed as "Translating Ideas: What Scientists Can Teach Fiction Writers About Metaphor," written by Debra Fitzgerald and featured in the March/April 2004 issue of the journal. The essence of her argument in favor of "scientific" uses of metaphor can perhaps be gleaned from this analysis rather late in the essay. First she quotes a passage from Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn*:

The cat walked in from the main room and stood on my outstretched thighs and began kneading them with its front paws, half-retracted claws engaging the material to

make a pocka-pocka-pocka sound. . .The cat was black and white with a Hitler moustache, and when it finally noticed I had a face it squeezed its eyes at me. . .The big Nazi cat went on raking up thread-loops from my trousers, seemingly intent on single-handedly reinventing Velcro. . .its uneven cackling purr. [Ellipses inserted by Fitzgerald.]

Fitzgerald's critique:

There is a clearly defined object here—the cat—but there are three different images attached to it. The big Nazi cat with the Hitler moustache and cackling purr intent on reinventing Velcro conjures up simultaneous images of an ethnic cleanser, a witch, and, I don't know, an inventor. While these images are fun and evocative, they are a dead-end. They do not heighten our understanding of the idea of this cat. It's a passage full of nonfunctional, decorative metaphors, a good example of writing that is all style, no substance.

This reading of the passage is so ham-handed that I can't entirely be sure I know what it's getting at, but the point seems to be that Lethem (it would be more accurate to say Lionel Essrog, the narrator), is not sufficiently concerned with giving us a clearly "functional" description of the cat, one that gives us an "idea" of the cat. (Why that would be necessary is not explained.) It's apparently not enough that Lethem would use the cat as an opportunity to create a word-portrait, a verbal construction, one that might go beyond the merely "functional" to help us see the "clearly defined object" in a less clearly defined, but perhaps more insightful way. Or, more importantly, that he would use this scene and Essrog's perception of the cat to help us more fully understand Essrog's own peculiar relationship to the world (keeping in mind his Tourette's-induced verbal habits.)

I once taught a course in contemporary American fiction in which during our discussion of John Updike's *Rabbit Run* a student bitterly complained about Updike's generous (my word) prose style. In another class I had recently heard a similar complaint about *Madame Bovary*. (All that description.) I was led to say to the Updike-fatigued student—perhaps more harshly than I should have—that I found it strange to be accusing a writer of engaging in "too much writing." (The rest of the class did find it amusing.)

I have to say that I think this is what Debra Fitzgerald's argument boils down to. Too many writers doing too much damn writing. Too much style, and not enough substance. This is not the occasion for going into a lengthy disquisition about the interaction of style and substance, about the way in which style creates its own substance, etc. Suffice it to say that Fitzgerald wants writers to follow scientists in providing strictly functional metaphors that help to explain and instruct, and that I think this couldn't be a more unfortunate and almost willfully obtuse understanding of what serious fiction—literature—ought to be about. Certainly there are plenty of writers who take the merely "decorative" as the index of good writing, but Lethem isn't really one of them, and neither is Updike.

What finally disturbs me the most about "Translating Ideas" is precisely that it is published by *Writer's Chronicle* and at least implicitly has its imprimatur. I can't be certain about the editors' intentions in publishing the essay, but I have to assume they at least in part found it

compelling and worth passing along to its readers. And since a very large part of its readership consists of students and aspiring writers, that this is the advice they get from an influential "professional" organization to me borders on scandalous. Literature has already been shown the door in departments of literary study; is writing to be expelled from Creative Writing?

### **The Limitations of Clarity**

Some critical labor has been expended lately on behalf of the faded reputation of Somerset Maugham, mostly, in my view, as part of a larger effort to identify certain unthreatening modern writers as possible alternatives to the modernists. One such effort in the *New York Times Book Review* by Brooke Allen considers a new biography of Maugham.

After mostly avoiding an assessment of Maugham's fiction (and a voluminous body of work it is), Allen finally concedes that "What characterizes a great writer, perhaps, is what is left out—what must be read between the lines—and on this level Maugham falls short." I have myself read *Of Human Bondage* and a few of the "South Sea" stories, which I had been advised were his best work. Allen's judgment here seems right to me. There is no "between the lines" at all in these fictions, and very little style.

The most interesting part of Allen's review, however, is this bit of quasi-praise: "But Maugham's strengths, it must be remembered, were very considerable. As William Plomer once felt it necessary to remind highbrow readers, 'To be a man of the world, to be acquainted with all sorts of different people, to be tolerant, to be curious, to have a capacity for enjoyment, to be the master of a clear and unaffected prose style—these are advantages.' "

These are perhaps advantages in the attempt to lead a worthwhile life (and to treat people kindly), but they are advantages of no kind in creating works of literature. They are, in fact, except for the imperative "to be curious," wholly irrelevant to the enterprise of writing fiction.

Surely we can all agree that being a "man of the world" and "to be acquainted with all sorts of different people" are in no way necessary qualifications for the job of fiction writer, and can often enough get in the way of doing the job (as they seem to have in Maugham's case). As we all surely know, there are too many great writers who were not at all "of the world" in this way to think it brings something essential to the act of writing.

Being tolerant is of course a virtue, but in my reading of literary biographies, many great writers are indeed anything but, aside from the tolerance they show in their work for the human frailties we all share.

It is certainly an advantage for the writer to be curious, although one might think that this curiosity would extend as well to the possibilities of literary form, rather than the persistent incuriosity about it to be found in the work of a writer like Maugham. And as to the "capacity for enjoyment," Samuel Beckett, for one, appears to have had very little talent for it, yet he turned out to be perhaps the greatest writer of the twentieth century.

This leaves us with the mastery "of a clear and unaffected prose style." I confess that the demand for this particular quality among certain kinds of readers and critics has always seemed inexplicable to me. For one thing, how many great writers of fiction can actually boast of such a style? Hemingway's style is "clear," but certainly not "unaffected." Dreiser's style is unaffected, but not at all clear. (Personally, I wouldn't want either of them to be otherwise.) I am hard pressed to think of an important British writer of fiction whose style could be described this way. Maybe Austen. But Dickens? Hardy? Lawrence? Conrad? For another, why would a fiction writer want such a style? It is a great advantage if you're sending a telegram, but why would a writer seeking to use the resources of language to explore human motivation and psychology, our frequently mysterious behavior and actions, be interested in such a style? Does Shakespeare have it?

If Allen's list of Maugham's attributes is the best that can be said of him, then he will assuredly continue to fall into obscurity. For that matter, all such attempts to rescue "clear" and "unaffected" writers (such attempts have been made on behalf of writers like James Gould Cozzens and J. P. Marquand, among others) will always fail. In the long run, their "advantages" are just not the sorts of things readers interested in what can be accomplished in fiction are looking for. Perhaps it would have been interesting to meet the likes of Somerset Maugham (if indeed he was the kind of man Allen describes), but his fiction, in almost all ways unremarkable, is another matter entirely.

### **Stephen King: Negatory, Good Buddy**

Stated bluntly: Stephen King is a bad writer, considering "writing" purely as prose style. More precisely, whereas filmmakers such as Brian De Palma, David Cronenberg, and John Carpenter treat the "content" of the King novels they adapt with exemplary style, are nothing if not great cinematic stylists, as a writer of prose fiction Stephen King has no style.

Perhaps I might be accused of artificially separating "style" and "content," which are allegedly codependent, but it's precisely because I cannot so easily separate them that I find King's fiction hard to take seriously. In fact, it seems to me that it is Stephen King himself who is guilty of detaching style from content, of not understanding that the two ought to work in concord and not at cross purposes, which in my opinion they too often do in his books.

At best, King's prose is blandly functional, a "plain" style occasionally gussied up with pseudo-colorful idioms. Here's a passage from *The Dead Zone*, describing the accident that sends Johnny Smith into a coma:

There was the sound of smashing glass. A huge gout of flame stroked its way up into the night. Johnny's head collided with the cab's windshield and knocked it out. Reality began to go down a hole. Pain, faint and far away, in his shoulders and arms as the rest of him followed his head through the jagged windshield. He was flying. Flying into the October night.

Dim flashing thought: *Am I dying? Is this going to kill me?*

Interior voice answering: *Yes, this is probably it.*

Flying. October stars flung across the night. Racketing boom of exploding gasoline. An orange glow. Then darkness.

His trip through the void ended with a hard thump and a splash. Cold wetness as he went into Carson's Bog, twenty-five feet from where the Charger and the cab, welded together, pushed a pyre of flame into the night.

Darkness.

Fading.

Until all that was left seemed to be a giant red-and-black wheel revolving in such emptiness as there may be between the stars, try your luck, first time fluky, second time lucky, hey-hey-hey. The wheel revolved up and down, red and black, the marker ticking past the pins, and he strained to see if it was going to come up double zero, house number, house spin, everybody loses but the house. He strained to see but the wheel was gone. There was only blackness and that universal emptiness, negatory, good buddy, el zilcho. Cold limbo.

Johnny Smith stayed there a long, long time.

Can this really be defended as good writing? When it's not straining after poetic phrasing that just lies limply on the page—"A huge gout of flame stroked its way," "His trip through the void ended with a hard thump," "revolving in such emptiness as there may be between the stars"—it presents us with awkward repetitions—"up into the night," "into the October night," "pushed a pyre of flame into the night"—and just purely embarrassing expressions—"Reality began to go down a hole," "only blackness and that universal emptiness, negatory, good buddy, el zilcho." King is trying to describe an extraordinary event as vividly as he can, but his relentlessly routine language simply isn't up to the task.

Here's another passage depicting Johnny's post-crash psychic abilities:

Johnny stopped suddenly and stiffened like a dog on point: "here," he muttered. "He did it right here."

Images and textures and sensations flooded in. The copper taste of excitement, the possibility of being seen adding to it. The girl was squirming, trying to scream. He had covered her mouth with one gloved hand. Awful excitement. Never catch me, I'm the Invisible Man, is it dirty enough for you now, momma?

Johnny began to moan, shaking his head back and forth.

Johnny's power of "second sight" is this novel's primary "supernatural" device (as are similar powers in other of King's books), but it's really hard to accept it with a straight face, much less experience it viscerally as a gateway to "horror," when the writing is as flat and listless as it is in a passage such as this. King renders the most extraordinary (and inherently incredible) occurrences in the most ordinary kind of language, although it's hard to know whether he

employs such language deliberately—in which case it's a very poor choice for bringing scenes like this to life—or whether this is just King's conception of what the language of fiction should be like, in effect the best he can do given the assumption that "content" is everything, style much less than even an afterthought. Ultimately, Stephen King is a realist despite himself, and despite his genre, as the burden of his prose style seems to be to present his characters and their predicaments in as transparently "lifelike" a way as possible, adhering to conventional methods of plot, setting, and characterization even when the plot features outbreaks of "unreal" events and the characters find themselves in the most outlandish of situations. Paradoxically, however, his pedestrian prose fails to make his creations seem "real" in the manner demanded of works that violate the suppositions of ordinary reality: by making the depicted world a vivid, aesthetically transformed alternative to that reality so beguiling it makes those suppositions irrelevant.

Thus I just can't agree that Stephen King's novels are somehow "transgressive," that simply because he writes horror fiction, with its unreal premises, King novels inherently pose a challenge to literary conventions or to the assumptions of "ordinary life." Instead, they make the strange events they portray seem almost as prosaic in the way they unfold as anything else in the routine of human affairs. Their "content" is so perfunctorily related, so lacking in texture, that they only convince us more thoroughly that life will never be like that.

Nor can I agree that in the long run King will rank with other ostensibly "popular" writers such as Charles Dickens. Dickens's books still reveal to us a writer of prose that is vibrant, surprising, and transformative, that makes the long-vanished world of Victorian England as alive to us now as it would have seemed to those who belonged to it—perhaps more so. King's fictional worlds are already dead (except when they are revived and reinvented by more talented filmmakers), done in by a prose style that withers on the page.

## **Kerouac the Writer**

When I read *On the Road* for the first time, I didn't care for it much. I didn't exactly hate it, but I was disappointed by it. I do recall being puzzled by the reputation this novel had of being a radical statement of postwar restlessness, or disaffected youth, or spiritual exaltation, or whatever other urgent "content" *On the Road* was supposed to offer. I couldn't find any statements at all in it, although the characters certainly seemed restless, occasionally expressed disaffection (but not with the government or what could be conveniently labeled "the culture"), and at times appeared to be in a state of exaltation (frequently drug- or alcohol-induced, but not always). The novel's style, as well, though obviously unconventional, did not at the time fulfill my expectations of what a transgressive style might accomplish.

In short, *On the Road* seemed rather tame to me, its rebellion more ingenuously earnest than hard-edged, and I read no further Kerouac for many years. Not too long ago, I decided to try reading *On the Road* again, expecting that I would quickly enough find it the same tepid experience as the first time around, that I would in fact probably stop reading it fairly early on and consign Kerouac permanently to the category of literary disappointments. However, although I can't say I immediately became entranced by it, I did not stop reading it. I did almost

immediately judge the novel's protagonist, Sal Paradise, to be a more interesting character than I had previously, when he seemed to be mostly a cipher. Now I saw his restlessness as a genuine craving for experience, not affectation or pretense. At the same time, I found Dean Moriarty a less annoying character than I had the first time around, although I still wouldn't identify his appearances in the novel as necessarily among its highlights. I suspect that the reputation as an "outlaw" text to which I responded impatiently in my initial reading of *On the Road*, originates in an over-identification with Moriarty, who some readers took to be the novel's most important character. I think Sal Paradise is obviously the main character, and while Moriarty has his role to play in the intensification of Sal Paradise's immersion in experience, he does still too often come off as affected and pretentious, and future critics and scholars would do the novel a service by focusing more on the way his character reinforces the novel's formal and stylistic ambitions and less on his dubious deeds and spurious words of wisdom.

It was precisely the formal and stylistic qualities of *On the Road* that I eventually found myself appreciating more charitably on this second read. I think I originally experienced *On the Road* as essentially formless, even though I understood it was very loosely structured as a "picaresque" narrative ("very loosely" being the characteristic I noticed most). What now seems clearer to me is the strategy by which Kerouac both enlists the picaresque strategy—which is often thought of as a kind of denial of form, although it is not—and fractures it even further to convey an impression of "spontaneous" action that the novel merely chronicles. *On the Road* invokes the journey motif associated with picaresque, but where most classic picaresque narratives present the journey as a serial, unbroken series of episodes that lead directly to journey's end, *On the Road* fragments the journey, leaves it off only to pick it up again, the episodes united only by the participation of Sal Paradise, who meets up with and then departs from the various characters who contribute to his effort of "going West to see the country," as he puts it in the novel's first paragraph. The novel thus can be taken as an experiment with the picaresque form specifically, but also as an effective application of "form" more generally.

I never really agreed with the criticism that as a stylist Kerouac at best exhibits a "plain" style or that, at worst, in his dependence on the declarative mode his is essentially a style without style. He does frequently employ the declarative mode, but this approach also prompts Kerouac to long, cumulative sentences that invoke a kind of lyricism:

In Newburgh it had stopped raining. I walked down to the river, and I had to ride back to New York in a bus coming back from a weekend in the mountains--chatter-chatter, blah-blah, and me swearing for all the time and the money I'd wasted, and telling myself, I wanted to go west and here I've been all day and into the night going up and down, north and south, like something that can't get started. And I swore I'd be in Chicago tomorrow, and made sure of that, taking a bus to Chicago, spending most of my money, and didn't give a damn, just as long as I'd be in Chicago tomorrow.

It's true that Kerouac's prose does not much incorporate traditional figurative language—more of which may be what I was looking for in my initial reading of *On The Road*—but sentence length and structure are as much a part of "style" as metaphor or simile, and Kerouac's style is not just dedicated to moving the story along. This passage doesn't so much move forward as it does spin

in circles once the essential action—getting on the bus—is established. It might seem that Sal Paradise is impatient to get beyond the usual recording of scene—"chatter-chatter, blah-blah"—but Kerouac uses that impatience to motivate Sal's creation of an alternative way of writing that mostly avoids fancy phrasing and obligatory dialogue (although Kerouac's novels have plenty of dialogue—it's just not of the purely ornamental variety) without sacrificing an attention to language to the exigencies of plot. An examination of a passage such as this one also shows that Kerouac was not oblivious to the effects of pace, rhythm, and variety: the short first sentence of the paragraph sets up the expansive second sentence, which is followed by the still-lengthy but more an afterthought final sentence.

Kerouac famously described his method of composition as "spontaneous prose," designed to mimic the spontaneity of jazz musicians. I take Kerouac to be sincere in his description of the aims and nature of this method, and it seems to capture the real achievement of Kerouac's fiction. It is dangerous to impute "development" in Kerouac's work, since the publication dates and the dates of composition of his books are so much at variance. (*On the Road* was written in the late 40s, while the published follow-up, *The Dharma Bums*, was written in 1957, after many of the subsequently published novels.) However, it does seem to me that in reading Kerouac's novels in the order of their publication it is in *The Subterraneans* (published 1958) that we really see a more radical version of spontaneous prose. We can see it as early as the novel's second paragraph:

. . . I was coming down the street with Larry O'Hara old drinking buddy of mine from all the times in San Francisco in my long and nervous and mad careers I've gotten drunk and in fact cadged drinks off friends with such "genial" regularity nobody really cared to notice or announce that I am developing or was developing, in my youth, such bad freeloading habits though of course they did not notice but liked me and as Sam said "Everybody comes to you for your gasoline boy, that's some filling station you got there" or say words to that effect--old Larry O'Hara always nice to me, a crazy Irish young businessman of San Francisco with Balzacian backroom in his bookstore where they'd smoke tea and talk of the old days of the great Basie band or the days of the great Chu Berry--of whom more anon since she got involved with him too as she had to get involved with everyone because of knowing me who am nervous and many leveled and not in the least one-souled--not a piece of my pain has showed yet--or suffering--Angels, bear with me, I'm not even looking at the page but straight ahead into the sadglint of my wallroom and at a Sarah Vaughan Gerry Mulligan KROW show on the desk in the form of a radio, in other words, they were sitting on the fender of the car in front of the Black Mask bar on Montgomery Street, Julien Alexander the Christlike unshaved thin youthful quiet strange almost as you or as Adam might say apocalyptic angel or saint of the subterraneans certainly star (now), and she, Mardou Fox, whose face when I first saw it in Dante's bar around the corner made me think, "By God, I've got to get involved with that little woman" and maybe too because she was Negro. . . .

The free-flowing disregard for sentence boundaries is very pronounced here, but this of course does not mean the passage lacks all structure or does not bear up under analysis. The

fused clauses and phrases set up their own kind of rhythm, which can be heard if one reads the passage with care. The first three lines encourage us to read without pausing, but the forced pause created by the quotation marks around "genial" allow us to catch our breath before moving on through the next two lines and arriving at the inserted nonrestrictive "in my youth." Since Kerouac otherwise so insistently abandons the comma in such a passage, we must assume that the commas here are quite intentional, a way of creating musical effect, a staccato-like phrase that leads to the different kind of variation provided by the quoted words from "Sam." Similar effects are created in the rest of the passage through the use of dashes, which also introduces digressions that reinforce the analogy with jazz improvisation, and additional inserted commas, parentheses, and quotation.

This stylistic strategy seems to me a genuine contribution to literary stylistics specifically and to American literature more generally. It also makes *The Subterraneans* itself an important text both in postwar American fiction and American literature as a whole. Combined with the novel's relative brevity (in my copy, 111 pages), the "bop prosody" of *The Subterraneans* makes it a work at least as close to poetry as to "fiction" equated in the modern era with "storytelling," in which "style" is often enough just another element of "craft" when it isn't disregarded altogether. *The Subterraneans* is probably just as revelatory of the "underground" culture of the 1950s as anything else written during the era, but it is less likely to be regarded as a work whose documentary value exceeds its literary merit. *On the Road* will no doubt continue to be taken as Kerouac's signature work, but I now think *The Subterraneans* will be more highly regarded by future readers as an innovative work of prose.

The criticism frequently leveled at *The Subterraneans*, that it offers, through the character of Mardou Fox, a severely limited portrayal both of women and African-Americans will probably linger into the future as well, but while it is true enough that the novel's narrator, Leo Percepied, has a view of women and African-Americans constricted by his background and the era in which he lives, his affair with Mardou is inextricably linked to his desire for experience (a trait he shares with all of Kerouac's protagonists), which in this novel means an affinity with the "subterraneans" of the title and an immediate curiosity about Mardou, who most strongly evokes the "Other" for Percepied. The limitations of Percepied's assumptions about gender or race have to be balanced against his acceptance of a way of life not much in accord with the cultural norms his background and the era would have him affirm.

One could argue that Mardou isn't really much developed as a character at all, as neither are any of the other characters in this novel, even, to some extent, Percepied. Our sense of knowing them only incompletely, however, is probably an unavoidable consequence of Kerouac's method in *The Subterraneans*. It is a novel less concerned with the delineation of character than with its narrator's response to his experience and its delineation in language.

## **Personality and Prose**

According to Zadie Smith, in a *Guardian* essay by now showered with much praise for its "honesty:

. . .writers do have a different kind of knowledge than either professors or critics. Occasionally it's worth listening to. The insight of the practitioner is, for better or worse, unique. It's what you find in the criticism of Virginia Woolf, of Iris Murdoch, of Roland Barthes. What unites those very different critics is the confidence with which they made the connection between personality and prose. To be clear: theirs was neither strictly biographical criticism nor prescriptively moral criticism, and nothing they wrote was reducible to the childish formulations "only good men write good books" or "one must know a man's life to understand his work". But neither did they think of a writer's personality as an irrelevance. They understood style precisely as an expression of personality, in its widest sense. A writer's personality is his manner of being in the world: his writing style is the unavoidable trace of that manner. When you understand style in these terms, you don't think of it as merely a matter of fanciful syntax, or as the flamboyant icing atop a plain literary cake, nor as the uncontrollable result of some mysterious velocity coiled within language itself. Rather, you see style as a personal necessity, as the only possible expression of a particular human consciousness. Style is a writer's way of telling the truth. Literary success or failure, by this measure, depends not only on the refinement of words on a page, but in the refinement of a consciousness, what Aristotle called the education of the emotions.

Style is "an expression of personality" It's also a mark of the writer's "manner of being in the world." It's also "a personal necessity. . .the only possible expression of a particular human consciousness." It's also "a writer's way of telling the truth." It's also "the refinement of a consciousness." And it's also the "education of the emotions."

That's an awful lot of weight to heap on words and sentences and paragraphs, especially in fiction, which, except in the hands of narcissists and pseudo-philosophers, is not a medium for the "expression" of anything, but the attempt to convince your readers that words on a page evoke a "world," and to make something aesthetically pleasing out of prose. If you can do this, then all of the rhetoric about "human consciousness" and "telling the truth" and educating emotions is just so much bombast.

It is in fact finally difficult to know exactly what any of the declarations made in the above-quoted passage are even supposed to mean. How am I to know anything about the writer's "personality" from reading his novel? Never mind that I don't care about his personality in the first place—I want to know what he can do with words. There's just no way that fiction can embody the writer's personality. Personality is itself a fiction that we use to make overgeneralizations about ourselves and other people. At best, a work of fiction might create what seems to be a personality "behind" the work, but this doesn't happen with all fiction (and Eliot was right in suggesting that good writers try to avoid it, anyway) and to equate that personality with the "real" personality of the writer is to confuse a trope with reality, since neither of these personalities exist in the first place.

Perhaps style could be "the expression of a particular human consciousness" if the writer's "consciousness" was itself the subject being explored. That is, if the writer was writing some kind of psychological memoir rather than fiction. But I don't see how consciousness in this

pretentious way of speaking about it is even at issue in the writing of fiction, and I certainly don't see how style has anything to do with getting it expressed. A good writer's style does exhibit certain continuities and characteristics over time, but is this an effect of "consciousness"? Isn't it just a function of that writer's particular way of living with language? Similarly, style as a way of "telling the truth" might be plausible if by this we mean that the writer has found the right style—the right words and sentences and paragraphs—to evoke the fictional world he/she is after. If it means "telling the truth" about the characters and events portrayed in the fiction. If it means telling the truth in some more metaphysical sense, telling the truth about *The Way Things Really Are*, then Zadie Smith is again indulging in grandiose posturing.

Even more grandiose is her ultimate contention that style has something to do with "the refinement of a consciousness" rather than refinement of "words on a page." "Style" in art and literature is a material characteristic, an identifiable, distinctive arrangement and rearrangement of the elements of the medium, whether that be language, paint, musical sound, etc. It is not some ineffable, mystical quality, a "personal necessity," something these people have but those do not. Literary style is the means by which accomplished writers manipulate language for aesthetic effect. You can educate your emotions all you'd like, but if you haven't created something aesthetically pleasing with your words, you haven't succeeded as a writer of fiction

The inevitable consequence of associating a writer's sentences with the writer's "manner of being in the world" is to conflate a response to writing as a response to the writer. A failure of art becomes a moral defect. Conversely, an artistic success becomes a vindication of "character," the experience of art reduced to the degree of one's sympathy with the artist, however much a figment of the imagination that figure turns out to be. Compared to these "refinements of consciousness" the writer makes available, all discussion of the skill with which he/she organizes "words on a page" is, of course, "merely literary."

## **The Erasure of Style**

Most of the reviews of Adam Thirlwell's *The Delighted States* (including the British reviews of the book under its original title of *Miss Herbert*) concentrated on its idiosyncratic structure and unceremonious tone (idiosyncratic and unceremonious for a work of literary criticism, at any rate). Reviewers seemed to find both annoying distractions from the occasional critical insight Thirlwell offers, and their reservations about Thirlwell as a critic were generally confined to these admittedly unorthodox features of his book.

While it is true that the central argument Thirlwell wants to make in *The Delighted States* could probably have been made in a much shorter book, perhaps even in a critical essay, I can't say I found either Thirlwell's circuitous method of analysis, which proceeds both back and forth across time and national literatures and sideways from author to author (at times providing unusual and surprising juxtapositions), or his conversational style particularly bothersome. I take the travelogue approach to be Thirlwell's attempt to reinforce the book's overriding point—that fiction in effect speaks an international language that manages to survive its migration through translation from one literary tradition to another—in the form his book assumes, and it is an

effective enough device. It might not be the sort of method one expects from a work of serious literary criticism, but there is no inherent reason criticism can't accommodate such an alternative strategy.

Further, both the looser, more informal structure and the reader-friendly critical language Thirlwell employs seem to me to work to accomplish one of criticism's legitimate tasks, which is to explicate features of literary works that are not necessarily obvious to all readers, that require the critic to call attention to them as evocatively as possible. In *The Delighted States*, Thirlwell is making a case for the efficacy of translation that calls for numerous and at times subtle comparisons and analogies, and his manner of leading the reader along his route of unexpected congruences, pointing out the connections more as an enthusiastic guide than as a source of critical pronouncements, is a perfectly sound way to proceed. If the test of a worthwhile critic is whether his reader is able to regard an author, a text, or literary history with enhanced understanding, then Thirlwell passes this test readily enough.

Something that may have contributed to reviewers' lack of enthusiasm for *The Delighted States* is Thirlwell's emphasis on innovation in fiction, a preference that consistently informs his survey of literary influence and the role of translation in the evolution of fiction as a form. Along with his related emphasis on form (which he often conflates with "style"), Thirlwell's focus on aesthetic innovation must have grated on the sensibilities of mainstream reviewers, who generally look askance at innovation as manifested in contemporary fiction and mostly ignore form in favor of what a work of fiction has "to say" (when they're not simply judging it for its superficial entertainment value, its success or failure at being a "good read"). For me, that Thirlwell's book illustrates the extent to which the history of fiction is the history of inspired change is its greatest virtue, but for some of its reviewers its own unconventional form as literary criticism may have only reminded them of Thirlwell's implicit defense of the role of the unconventional in literary history.

None of the book's reviewers, however, chose to examine what to me is its most problematic claim--or, as it turns out, series of claims. In his commitment to the idea that all works of fiction are translatable, even down to a particular writer's distinctive "style," Thirlwell makes the following observations:

. . .A style may be as large as the length of a book. Its units may well be more massive, and more vague, than I would often like.

A style, in the end, is a list of the methods by which a novelist achieves various effects. As such, it can seem endless.

In fact, it can become something which is finally not linguistic at all. For the way in which a novelist represents life depends on what a novelist thinks is there in a life to be represented. A style is therefore as much a quirk of emotion, or of theological belief, as it is a quirk of language.

A style does not entirely coincide with prose style, or formal construction, or technique.

In order to maintain his position that fiction can be translated without appreciable diminution in the integrity of the translated text, Thirlwell needs to minimize the obstacles posed by "style" understood as a writer's characteristic exploration of the resources of his/her native language. One way to do that would be simply to dismiss the importance of style in comparison to all of the other elements of fiction that could well come through in a good translation without loss of effect. To his credit, Thirlwell does not do this; instead, he radically expands the meaning of "style" so that it includes. . . well, just about everything: It is "a list of the methods by which a novelist achieves various effects. As such, it can seem endless."

But, of course, if style is everything, so "various" as to be "endless" in its features, it is really nothing. Thirlwell in fact deprives it of its one materially definable quality when he asserts that it might be "something which is not linguistic at all." This notion, that style is not fundamentally a phenomenon of language, recurs throughout Thirlwell's discussions of his international (although primarily British and European) cast of writers, even of those writers, such as Flaubert or Chekhov, known for their attention to "linguistic" style. He picks up on Marcel Proust's comment about style as "quality of vision" and uses this phrase as a kind of summary concept encapsulating his definition of style in its most "massive" incarnation. What persists in a translation, then, is this quality of vision, which in its grand scope dwarfs mere facility with language.

I confess I don't finally understand the need for this erasure of style in its tangible, most coherent form. However much it grasps metaphorically at a less tangible if still apprehensible object of our experience of fiction, to speak of "quality of vision" does not adequately account for the concrete achievements of writers as stylists. However much I value Flaubert's "quality of vision" (which is a lot), it just seems to me manifestly obvious that reading Flaubert in English is not the same experience as reading him in French. Reading Virginia Woolf in French cannot be more than a necessary if barely sufficient substitute for those French speakers without English who want to read her work. While I am reasonably sure that the comic vision of Stanley Elkin would still be preserved for those reading his fiction in a translation, how in the world could this writer's style survive the crossing-over?

Near the end of *The Delighted States*, Thirlwell scales back the grandiosity of his claims about translation:

All through this book, I have been arguing that style is the most important thing, and survives its mutilating translations--that although the history of translation is always a history of disillusion, something survives. . . . (429)

Yes, of course something survives. What serious reader sadly restricted to one language (or even two or three) would claim otherwise? Certainly I wouldn't. But I'm comfortable with accepting that this "something" includes inspired storytelling or formal inventiveness or compelling characters, but not style except in a more or less successful approximation. To stretch "style" into "vision" or "theological belief" is way too misty and metaphysical for me. I'm willing to settle for style as irretrievably "linguistic," a writer's artful way with words.

## Avoiding Style

Graham Harman's attempt to elevate H.P. Lovecraft to the pantheon of supreme literary artists in his book, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Zero Books, 2012), begins with a defense of Lovecraft's work against what is probably the most famous dismissal of it, made by the critic Edmund Wilson in the 1930s. "The principal feature of Lovecraft's work," wrote Wilson, "is an elaborate concocted myth" about "a race of outlandish gods and grotesque prehistoric peoples who are always playing tricks with time and space and breaking through into the contemporary world, usually somewhere in Massachusetts." One of Lovecraft's stories, "At the Mountains of Madness," focuses on "semi-invisible polypous monsters that uttered a shrill whistling sound and blasted their enemies with terrific winds."

According to Harman, in his critique Wilson has unfairly "reduced to literal absurdity" Lovecraft's plots through an especially brutal "paraphrase," a term that Harman uses to describe any attempt to translate any "statement, artwork, or anything else" into terms other than its own. For Harman, Lovecraft is a writer whose work is especially noteworthy for its "deliberate and skillful obstruction of all attempts to paraphrase," and the burden of most of *Weird Realism* is to show how and why this is so. But is Wilson's paraphrase--if that's what it is--really unfair, a diminution of Lovecraft's actual achievement?

It certainly seems accurate to say that Lovecraft's work centers on the "elaborate concocted myth" of Cthulhu and other related beings (the "Old Ones"), creatures who predate the appearance of human beings on Earth, who make occasional appearances in the present (providing the horror), and who originate from somewhere else in the cosmos. Perhaps the word "concocted" has pejorative connotations, but would the sense of the phrase markedly differ if Wilson had chosen a near-synonym such as, say, "fabricated"? Is it not simply true to say that in his stories H.P. Lovecraft fabricated an "elaborate myth," meaning one of Lovecraft's own creation? Isn't it also true to say that the creatures featured in this mythos are pretty "outlandish" (so outlandish that Lovecraft's narrators have a hard time describing them) and at times "grotesque"? In the first chapter of his book Harman refers to them as "monstrous creatures," and it's hard to see why this would be considered some kind of neutral description rather than itself a "paraphrase" that could be seen as just as condescending as Wilson's if we choose to forget that it is the very nature of horror that its creations be both outlandish and monstrous.

Similarly, it seems to me literally true and in no way a paraphrase of a Lovecraft tale to note that it is likely to be "playing tricks with time and space," that the "monstrous creatures" are likely to be featured "breaking through into the contemporary world," and that this is likely to take place in Massachusetts.(Arkham, to be more precise--although Wilson is correct that it might range outside of Arkham into the countryside as well). If anything, Wilson's characterization of "At the Mountains of Madness" seems even more accurate as a literal report on the creatures in that story. In short, I can find no compelling reason to regard Wilson's account of Lovecraft's work as reducing that work to "absurdity." I would not suggest that Wilson himself was attempting a neutral description, nor that he did not mean to communicate a negative judgment of Lovecraft's fiction. Clearly that fiction was at best not the

sort of thing Wilson wanted to read; at worst it was too "outlandish" for him to take seriously absent some other compensatory quality he could not find.

Harman believes that any attempt to describe a literary work is going to be insufficient in capturing the spirit of the work (and sometimes such attempts can be just flat-out incorrect), and of course he is right. However, if Edmund Wilson can be faulted in his brief discussion of H.P. Lovecraft it is not because he has reduced the stories to absurdity (Wilson was perfectly aware that the novels of a writer like Dickens were full of the "outlandish," but he still thought Dickens a great writer) but because he has limited their possible appeal to their plots. His criticism is incomplete. It seems likely that had Wilson attempted a lengthier, more developed critique of Lovecraft's fiction he would have found little to recommend it in its atmospheric effects, its style, or its philosophical implications, but he would have more fully justified his position and more adequately stated his "paraphrase." Doubtless Graham Harman would have found it equally unpersuasive. But at this point dismissing Wilson because he is paraphrasing seems close to dismissing him because he doesn't like H.P. Lovecraft, and further dismissing any negative criticism because it can't escape the confines of Harman's conception of "paraphrase" (although presumably a positive evaluation can't, either.)

I myself think somewhat more highly of Lovecraft than did Edmund Wilson. But I don't think it's much of a defense to decry otherwise accurate, if only partial, summaries because they don't make the writer seem very serious. There are indeed elements of Lovecraft's fiction that can't be taken very seriously, and Wilson wasn't wrong to point this out. Only if you think Lovecraft's stories can't survive a focus on the goofier qualities of their plots would it even seem necessary to respond to Edmund Wilson. Graham Harman doesn't think that (although he probably wouldn't accept such a characterization of them), since most of his book is dedicated to showing that Lovecraft is also a stylist and a philosopher, but it does allow him to introduce the problem of paraphrase, which he will continue to pursue throughout the book as the primary form of criticism directed at Lovecraft's work, apparently presuming critics who finally can't consider a "pulp" writer like Lovecraft worth the effort to make more focused and nuanced criticism.

Most of the book is devoted to a systematic analysis of 100 passages from Lovecraft's fiction, each more or less concluding that the passage in question illustrates a typically Lovecraftian move, producing an effect that could not be created using some other move, cumulatively showing Lovecraft to be not just a good writer, but "one of the greatest of the twentieth century." Harman presents this as a form of close reading that avoids the flaws in the conception of close reading offered by New Criticism, which from Harman's perspective is guilty of a "holism" that puts too much emphasis on the "interrelations" among individual words, images and ideas within the work so that meaning becomes too dependent on internal (as opposed to external) context. This critique of New Criticism (specifically using Cleanth Brooks as example) is predicated on the philosophical assumptions of Object-Oriented Ontology/Speculative Realism, the currently prominent movement in philosophy of which Harman has been one of the most prolific proponents. I do not wish to focus on the validity of these assumptions per se, but only on the way Harman applies them to both literature as

represented by H.P. Lovecraft and to literary criticism as represented by Cleanth Brooks--or at least by the account of Brooks Graham Harman provides.

My problem with Harman's characterization of New Criticism as exemplified by Cleanth Brooks begins with his initial description of what would seem to be a kind of first principle for New Critics: "A poem was to be treated as an autonomous entity, working like a machine to create certain effects." Although certainly "autonomy" is an important term in the New Critics' approach to "understanding poetry," there is little reason to believe that any New Critic, Cleanth Brooks especially, would consent to the idea that they regard a poem as an "entity" in the sense Harman has in mind. Since this sort of entity is more like a "machine," such a notion seems even more inappropriate as a characterization of the New Critics' contention that a poem should be read not as the means to a "statement" that could just as easily be paraphrased but as a self-enclosed work of art that indeed needs to be considered as a whole. Brooks does invoke the "organic" quality of a poem, but if this plausibly suggests a metaphorical "entity," it hardly seems consistent with the poem as "machine."

In my opinion, Brooks did not mean his account of poems as "organic," or his analogy between Keats's poem and the urn it apostrophizes, to literally objectify the poem as Harman does. In fact, Brooks in *The Well-Wrought Urn* is as likely to speak of the poem as an activity or a performance as to represent it as an object. Indeed, his analysis of "Ode On a Grecian Urn" specifically uses the terminology of drama to account for the poem's effects, his discussion of the poem's famous closing lines concluding that "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' has precisely the same status, and the same justification as Shakespeare's 'Ripeness is all.' It is a speech 'in character' and supported by a dramatic context." Brooks does not claim merely that poems "create certain effects." The effects are of the sort that require a very active reader, one who does not wait for the poem to announce its "meaning" but in a sense "follows" the poem in the same way an audience member needs to follow a play.

In considering the label of "formalism" often employed to discredit Brooks and the New Critics, Harman defends Brooks but maintains that, nevertheless, Brooks "fails to acknowledge the size of the problem that results from downplaying the content of literature so severely in favor of structural irony and paradox." Here it seems to me that again Harman is not characterizing accurately the position Brooks takes on the vexed question of the relationship between "form" and "content." Brooks does not "downplay" content in favor of form because he believes that in a poem--at least in a good poem--the two cannot be separated. Brooks writes, "The structure [form] obviously is everywhere conditioned by the nature of the material [content] which goes into the poem. The nature of the material sets the problem to be solved, and the solution is the ordering of the material." In Brooks's conception of a poem, it is meaningless to abstract the content from the form because the former has been transformed by the latter in a seamless merger to become *the poem itself*. If we want to talk of the "content," we can find it only in the "ordering" that form has made of it, that makes the poem what it is.

This ordering is what Brooks means by "context," but more importantly it is the reader's perception of context that is the most crucial element in our appreciation of poetry, not the irony or paradox the poem itself insists on or that the poet has "intended." "Meaning" is what the

reader helps to create, not what the poem communicates directly. Thus when Harman asserts that Brooks cannot be right when he claims that the meaning we take away from the final line of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" comes from "its relation to the total context of the poem" because he gives inadequate respect to "individual elements within the poem," he is effectively emptying New Criticism of its own specific content, since at its core is the principle that "the total context of the poem" is the poem. To instead attend closely to "individual elements within the poem" in their own "autonomy" is to treat the poem as something other than a poem.

While Cleanth Brooks certainly wants to correct what he thinks are misconceptions about what makes a poem a poem, ultimately *The Well-Wrought Urn* is more about what a poem requires of the reader than what it requires of the poet, less about getting the meaning right by attending to "total context" than about allowing a poem to afford the reader the most expansive reading experience possible, although no one such experience will be expansive enough to exhaust the poem's potential effects or implications. "Irony and paradox" are only elements that contribute to this expansiveness, not those that somehow prescribe what features poetry must exhibit to be poetry. Thus when Harman asserts that Brooks overlooks the fact that "philosophy and science display as much irony and paradox as literature," he is arguably correct, but only in the sense that the *subjects* of philosophy and science can be paradoxical, not because they aspire to incorporate irony and paradox as discursive modes that help to deflect "meaning" and thus discourage coming to conclusions.

Harman's critique of the unjustified holism of New Criticism is finally his own justification for the approach to Lovecraft's work he takes in his extended analyses of passages (sometimes single sentences) from Lovecraft's best-known stories. Here he both grants the autonomy to the "individual elements" within a literary work he believes Cleanth Brooks denied and uses these passages to discuss Lovecraft's fiction more broadly. This exercise seems designed most urgently to defend Lovecraft against the charge that as a prose stylist he leaves something to be desired, a task Harman performs through a tactic he calls "ruination," which is the effort to determine whether in "discovering how a given passage might be made worse," we might also "find an indirect method of appreciating its virtues." Not so surprisingly, we discover that very few of Lovecraft's sentences can be ruined in this way, as most attempts to do so fall woefully short of approximating in a suitably reductive form anything like the stylistically impeccable, philosophically charged effects Lovecraft's prose achieves. Although Harman does also cogently explicate some of the recurring features of Lovecraft's body of work along the way, it is difficult to take the relentless demonstrations of the difficulty of ruining Lovecraft's signature strategies as anything less than a prolonged rebuke of Edmund Wilson for his condescending "paraphrase" of Lovecraft, condescension that has continued to shadow Lovecraft's work ever since.

Certainly Harman's defense is vigorous: "Far from being a bad stylist, Lovecraft often makes innovations that feel like technical breakthroughs of the sort Vasari finds in various Italian artists." He does not hesitate to use words like "brilliant" and "masterful," to the point that ultimately even sympathetic readers might wonder whether Harman is protesting just a little too much. It is entirely possible to find Lovecraft's stories (some of them) to be imaginatively

conceived and full of effectively creepy creatures and also to find them full of wooden prose and stilted dialogue. It might even be the case that these stories do indeed have interesting philosophical implications, even that they illustrate the particular insights of Speculative Realism/OOO, but why in order to concede these possibilities we must accept that H.P. Lovecraft is also a supreme craftsman and stylist is not at all apparent. The impression left by Harman's readings of Lovecraft is partly of a philosophically-informed literary critic making perceptive comments about the writer and work at hand, and partly of an ardent fan of H.P. Lovecraft so convinced of his genius that no kind of praise could possibly seem excessive: "The idea that Lovecraft is outclassed as a stylist by the likes of Proust or Joyce. . . is not an idea to which I can assent. The opposite claims seems closer to the truth."

To his credit, Harman does pick out passages that are certainly vulnerable to criticism by readers who share Wilson's judgment. Thus he quotes this sentence from "The Call of Cthulhu":

He talked of his dreams in a strangely poetic fashion; making me see with terrible vividness the damp Cyclopean city of slimy green stone --whose *geometry*, he oddly said, *was all wrong*. . .

The emptiness of phrasing--"strangely poetic," "terrible vividness," "oddly said"--is particularly concentrated here, but this sort of writing is quite common in Lovecraft's stories. Harman plausibly appeals to the importance of considering that the source of such writing is in a first-person narrative by noting that in this case the phrase "strangely poetic" registers the narrator's "hesitation at endorsing" this account, but the persistence with which Lovecraft's narrators resort to formulations like this could also as easily be taken as a sign Lovecraft thinks they are appropriately evocative. Even if we grant the narrator's right to his flat phrasing, however, "terrible vividness" seems especially bland, and while Harman asserts this "empty signifier" actually "functions more effectively than any concrete list of terribly vivid things could ever do," he thus neglects to consider that to achieve the verbally "concrete" does not necessarily entail a "list." Likewise Harman claims that "oddly said" signifies that "the net result remains problematic for the narrator" without noticing that it does so in a particularly colorless way.

Harman's most substantive claim on behalf of Lovecraft as a stylist is that Lovecraft's fiction achieves what Harman calls "literary cubism." He cites this passage among others:

If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing—but it was the general outline of the whole which made it most shockingly frightful.

Rather than presenting a concrete, unified image of this creature, according to Harman Lovecraft instead "splits the usual relation between an accessible sensual thing and its accessible sensual qualities," presenting "such a multitude of surfaces that it can no longer be identified with any mere summation of them," in the manner of Picasso or Braque. Perhaps it is true that Lovecraft's favored way of conveying the sheer otherness of his benighted world is to splice together such separate images, simultaneously affirming and asserting their essential incompatibility, but this begs the question of whether any particular such stacking of images actually works very well. In

this instance, I must say I cannot myself find the blurring of octopus, dragon and "human caricature" (whatever that might be) to be particularly effective. Not only does there seem to be no discernible reason why these things (rather than three other things) should be yoked together, but the breathless way in which they are invoked strikes me as rather silly. The narrator obviously regards this composite thing as terrifying; I just can't. (It doesn't help that the creature is not merely "shocking" or "frightful" but "shockingly frightful," a yoking together of equally vague words such that their "summation" merely blends them in a haze of cliché.)

Although the premises of Lovecraft's stories are frequently intriguing (within the confines Lovecraft's more general vision of the lurking, ancient horrors lying behind our ordinary reality allows), and the best of the stories create a legitimately ominous atmosphere and are well-paced enough to make their revelations effective, they are also consistently marred by this kind of writing. Too often we come upon descriptions such as this:

The Great Race's members were immense rugose cones ten foot high, and with head and other organs attached to foot-thick, distensible limbs spreading from the apexes. They spoke by the clicking or scraping of huge paws or claws attached to the end of two of their four limbs, and walked by the expansion and contraction of a viscous layer attached to their vast ten-foot bases.

I have no idea what a "rugose" cone would look like, and unfortunately the rest of the description doesn't make it any more vivid. "Other organs" seems just lazy, nor do "distensible limbs" emerging from the "apexes" (of the creatures?) make me see the creature any better. This is not the result of Lovecraft trying to merely "suggest" otherwise incomprehensible entities, but of bad writing. And again I am simply not able to take seriously the image of this "great race" clicking and scraping its paws in order to communicate. By the time we see them in locomotion through "the expansion and contraction of a viscous layer attached to their vast ten-foot bases," I can no longer suppress my laughter. (And why is ten feet so "vast"?) A writer who not infrequently produces prose that is unintentionally funny cannot, in my view, be a supreme prose stylist surpassing Proust and Joyce.

It seems to me that in putatively attending to Lovecraft's "style," Harman is not actually concerned with Lovecraft's style at all. While not all of Lovecraft's descriptions are as clunky as this one (his descriptions of actually existing terrestrial nature can sometimes be quite nice), they occur often enough that according to any definition of "style" consistent with its proper application to works of fiction—as a measure of the writer's care and facility with language considered as an artistic medium—Lovecraft's style is perfunctory at best, at worst indifferent to "art." What Harman is really responding to in Lovecraft's work is its fanciful ideas: the notion that the geometry is "all wrong," that an entity might be three-things-in-one. That Lovecraft's fiction is full of these ideas is undeniable, and if they lead Graham Harman to think these ideas are remarkably congruent with his own, that the fiction of H.P. Lovecraft provides an apposite literary illustration of the philosophical tenets of Object-Oriented Ontology, I offer no objection. However, in most cases, when Harman claims to be examining Lovecraft's style, he is at best instead highlighting the articulation of these ideas—"simultaneous pictures of a an

octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature." There is very little in this sort of articulation that could meaningfully be identified as "style" in the first place.

A city "whose geometry was all wrong" is a productively vague notion, and of course Harman argues that its vagueness is precisely the point. Lovecraft is depicting an alternate reality so utterly unlike our own that our usual terms and concepts can't possibly make sense of it except to declare that from the human perspective it is "all wrong." And indeed in the climactic episode of "The Call of Cthulhu," in which we finally get a view of the "Cyclopean city," it is presented as geometrically weird, "all wrong" according to ordinary human experience. Yet even here, the description remains vague and colorless, as when the city appears "loathsomely redolent of spheres and dimensions apart from ours," full of "crazily elusive angles." Lovecraft does at least provide some more concrete illustration of these crazy angles and other loathsome features: "In this phantasy of prismatic distortion [the door] moved anomalously in a diagonal way, so the all the rules of matter and perspective seemed upset." In fairness, there are other moments in this account when Lovecraft offers some real writing: "The aperture was black with a darkness almost material. That tenebrousness was indeed a *positive quality*, for it obscured such parts of the inner walls as ought to be revealed, and actually burst forth like smoke from its aeon-long imprisonment, visibly darkening the sun as it slunk away into the shrunken and gibbous sky on flapping membraneous wings."

However, this passage still reveals Lovecraft's fundamental limitations as a prose stylist. The recourse to abstract, pompous vocabulary ("tenebrousness," "gibbous," "membraneous") and the melodramatic effect created through reflexive italicizing and emphatic phrasing ("aeon-long imprisonment"), added to the work Lovecraft wants those adverbially modified adjectives ("loathsomely redolent") to do, substituting for more generous description, gives me, at least, the impression of a writer trying to avoid style more than cultivate it. You can say that this prosaic, deliberately stiff and doggedly bland kind of writing is Lovecraft's chosen style—but that doesn't mean it's very good.

## *“Craft”*

### **The Eminently Sayable**

If we take *The Writer's Notebook: Craft Essays from Tin House* to be a representative gathering of critical wisdom from current American writers, what does it ultimately tell us about these writers' understanding of the purpose of fiction, their widely-shared assumptions?

Unfortunately, in my view it tells us that their understanding of fiction's purposes is very limited indeed, their assumptions about its possibilities, its potential to surprise and to creatively challenge established conventions, very narrow and constricted. Almost none of the essays included in the volume even suggest that fiction ought to be challenging in this way, and some even explicitly express impatience with adventurous, unconventional fiction. Most of the essays—all of them originally delivered at *Tin House's* Summer Writers Workshop—discuss works of fiction as if they were products to be assembled from blueprints exploiting familiar

devices, the writing of fiction as adherence to certain fundamental truths universally acknowledged.

Perhaps this is to be expected in a book presenting "craft essays." A "writers workshop" is centrally focused on "craft" as an element of fiction writing that can be taught (or at least talked about), and as working writers those participating in the workshop presumably do have advice to dispense at the level of craft. Perhaps it is too much to expect that writers themselves would feel comfortable emphasizing "art" over craft, since arguably the best most of them can do is hope that careful attention to craft will ultimately give rise to art. Distinguishing what is successfully artistic, which is a function of the experience of reading fiction, from the mere application of craft is the critic's job, not the writer's.

But in publishing a book like *The Writer's Notebook*, *Tin House* is putting its imprimatur on the "craft" approach, and one might presume that those writers who heed the kind of advice dispensed in the book might ultimately be producing the kind of work that could find its way into print in this journal. That this work would be safe, formally "sound" and stylistically "fine," would only conform to the mission of journals like *Tin House*: to a) reinforce the existing structure of academic writing programs and workshops, providing their graduates with a place to publish, and b) associate themselves as much as possible with "quality" writing, which can't be just anything and everything and thus needs to be narrowed down to its embodiment in "craft," the boundaries of which are laid down in *The Writer's Notebook*.

I wouldn't go so far as to say that *Tin House* or other high-profile literary magazines are actively hostile to adventurous or experimental fiction (sometimes an unconventional story or two can be squeezed into the mix), but the discussions of the nature of fiction and the writing of fiction in *The Writer's Notebook* assume a form that is relatively fixed, comprising such staple elements as "dialogue," "scene," and "character motivation," a practice that is subject to improvement through increased skill with these tools. Such a conception of fiction as a handy collection of pre-approved devices doesn't much encourage departures from standard practice or questioning of the place of these devices in composing works of fiction. (Why, for example, is "dialogue" to be expected in stories or novels? Shouldn't this be something that might be useful in some circumstances, when contributing to an overall aesthetic effect, rather than a convention all fiction must "get to" at some point?) It shouldn't be surprising that most issues of *Tin House* don't feature short stories that seem to question the short story as a stable, identifiable *thing* reproducible through the application of "craft."

Thus Tom Grimes informs us that "our stories are amorphous until we discover how time controls them. Every great story contains a 'clock,' an intrinsic timekeeper." "Determine whether or not your story has a 'clock,'" he concludes. "It can be a day, a week, a month, a season, etcetera, but the story has to have it." If a story "has to have" a clock, then should one discover one's story doesn't really seem to depend much on timekeeping, on the sort of narrative "development" the passage of time provides, then apparently one doesn't really have a story at all. This seems a reductively literal insistence on "story" as the sine qua non of short fiction, when of course much modern/postmodern fiction has explicitly worked to undermine "story" as

the essence of fiction. Not many of Donald Barthelme's stories, for example would be able to pass the "clock" test administered by Grimes. They're much too "amorphous."

Anna Keeseey tells us that a "scene" is "fiction's fundamental unit." "Part of what makes fiction writing so difficult," she claims, is that "the writer must decide what's going to happen, to whom, and why, but is simultaneously loaded up with another set of decisions: who'll be telling the story, in what order, with what level of detail and at what speed of revelation." Here again is a recipe for conventionality in fiction, by which "story," ("what's going to happen") takes precedence and all of the other "decisions"—themselves highly conventional and formulaic—are made as ornamental on the primary illusion of narrative immediacy. "We see the action occur; we feel the time pass," as Keeseey puts it later in the essay. Keeseey acknowledges that writers like Woolf and Proust slow down the unfolding of scene—which Keeseey calls "infolding"—but she can't see this as an implicit repudiation of "scene" except in its most perfunctory role as a framing device. She chooses instead to regard it as just an indication that scene "is superbly elastic." Why not just say that in some fiction "scene" is as irrelevant as "clock time"?

Even when otherwise acknowledging the limitations of one or another conventional approach, as in Keeseey's essay or Aimee Bender's essay on "character motivation," the writers can't seem to give up on the assumptions giving rise to the approach. Bender cautions against making "motivation" explicitly clear. Instead, she writes, it's acceptable "not really to know what's going on with your characters and to let the writing be a process of discovering that." This sort of "complexity" is truer to human psychology, after all. But what if "motivation" never becomes clear, or is not even necessary? What if "psychology" itself is irrelevant to a particular's writer's concerns? One gets the sense that this would not be acceptable, since it jettisons one of the underlying assumptions of mainstream literary fiction—it's all about "understanding" character—that supports all of the accompanying assumptions about "craft."

The only two essays in *The Writer's Notebook* that really do depart from conventional thinking, the only two essays that finally are about the art of fiction, are Lucy Corin's "Material" and D.A. Powell's "(Mis)Adventures in Poetry." Corin specifically abjures the impulse to "find the form to 'suit' your content, your material." Instead, she describes her own practice of regarding words as her "material," from which come other words that finally cohere into form. Her advice to writers: "you should look at the material you produce to find your material." This can include the visual arrangement of the words on the page, and Corin spends much of her essay comparing different kinds of arrangements of "material." The essay undermines much of the other "advice" to be found in *The Writer's Notebook* and is really the only essay in this book that makes it worth having. Powell posits that in poetry "often it's the inexact, the awful, the mistaken linguistic turn that manages to say the right thing because it unmoors us from our perceived relationship to the subject about which we're trying to write." "The subjects of poetry are always the same," he concludes, "so lend your ear to the language instead." "Dare to say the unsayable in a new way." If only as many fiction writers could find a way to heed this advice as, in my opinion, many poets already do.

Unfortunately, readers of *The Writer's Notebook* won't get exposed to much discussion of language as the fundamental "unit" of fiction. They'll mostly discover essays that invite the

writer to say the same old things, the eminently sayable, in the same old ways, but to think of this as "craft."

## Character as Style

It may be true that in some fiction—perhaps in certain kinds of genre fiction in particular—character emerges mostly from "action," but I would propose that in the very best fiction, genre or otherwise, character is actually just an illusion created by the use of language in a particular way—by a writer's style, although the illusion thus created may be more or less a conscious act, may in fact be simply an artifact of the stylistic choices the writer has made to begin with.

It is sometimes said that among the first "realistic" characters in works of fiction are those to be found in the novels of Jane Austen. They seem quite firmly rooted to the soil of real life, restrained in their actions and words in comparison to most of the fiction of the 18th century, where realism tends to be sacrificed in favor of color and dynamism. But isn't this a consequence of Austen's style, which is itself quite understated and restrained? To the extent a character like Elizabeth Bennet seems to us a very levelheaded and quietly witty woman, isn't this because Jane Austen is a very calm and quietly witty writer? What else do we need to know about Jane and Elizabeth Bennet beyond what we learn from this brief exchange early on in *Pride and Prejudice* about Mr. Bingley: "'He is just what a young man ought to be,' said [Jane], 'sensible, good-humored, lively; and I never saw such happy manners!—so much ease, with such perfect good breeding!'" "'He is also handsome, replied Elizabeth, which a young man ought likewise to be, if he possibly can. His character is thereby complete.'" How much of the effect on our perception of character comes from the revelations of "speech" in the ordinary sense, and how much from the fact Jane Austen is a master at composing very sly and exquisitely worded dialogue?

Likewise, Dickens's characters are usually described as outsized and vigorous (and they are), but how often do we pause to consider how outsized and vigorous Dicken's own style actually is? Don't his characters come across to us in the way they do because of that style? Even the minor characters in Dickens are always vivid, partly because of Dickens's strategy of picking out one or two habits or features and exaggerating them, but also simply through his forceful and distinctive way of writing, as in this brief account of "Mr. Fang," from *Oliver Twist*:

Mr. Fang was a lean, long-backed, stiff-necked, middle-sized man, with no great quality of hair, and what he had, growing on the back and sides of his head. His face was stern, and much flushed. If he were really not in the habit of drinking rather more than was exactly good for him, he might have brought an action against his countenance for libel, and have recovered heavy damages.

It could be said that the effect of a passage such as this comes more from what is usually called "voice" than style per se, but what else is voice in writing but the concrete effect created on the printed page by an appropriate arrangement of words and sentences and paragraphs? Dickens's

style, garrulous but pointed, seemingly ingenuous but actually quite caustic at times ("brought an action against his countenance for libel, and have recovered heavy damages" seems a delicate way to put it, but is really very cutting), might be called "theatrical," but so might all of his characters, their theatricality a reflection of the language used to create them.

Likewise, the characters in Henry James's fiction, which most readers find quite convincing even when the fictions themselves are judged to be somewhat short on dramatic action, share the obsessed and ratiocinative qualities of James's style. When James Joyce or Virginia Woolf create character through the use of the stream-of-consciousness technique, the characters that emerge, Leopold Bloom or Mrs. Dalloway, aren't compelling because of the "content" of their thinking or even because we're given a glimpse into the way they think, but because of the manipulations of language and expected novelistic discourse that each author performs. Literally, it's the strange way in which the words—broken up, rearranged, discontinuous—are put down on the page. "Character" in *Ulysses* or *Mrs. Dalloway* can't be separated from these purposeful arrangements of words.

To use an example from genre fiction: How much more do we ever really learn about Chandler's Philip Marlowe than we do from the very first paragraph of *The Big Sleep*, as Marlowe stands before the Sternwood house?:

It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, mid-October, with the sun not shining and a look of hard wet rain in the clearness of the foothills. I was wearing my powder-blue suit, with dark blue shirt, tie and display handkerchief, black brogues, black wool socks with dark blue clocks on them. I was neat, clean, shaved and sober, and I didn't care who knew it. I was everything the well-dressed private detective ought to be. I was calling on four million dollars.

Everything we associate with Marlowe is here, manifested in this brief but punchy paragraph: his powers of observation, his self-deprecating, wiseass attitude, accomplished through a demotic yet also eloquent style. And in this case it is specifically a writing style, as Marlowe is the narrator of his own adventures, which ultimately makes it impossible for us to separate Marlowe the writer from Marlowe the "character." The "action" in which Marlowe always becomes embroiled is fun to read, perhaps even keeps us reading, but for me such action adds little to my perception of him as a character, which is also always being reinforced by the way in which he describes this action to us.

First-person narration makes it most apparent that it is style—voice, if you wish—that evokes character, not action, certainly not the quirks or affectations that some writers try to use to force characters into being "vivid." Not only is the narrator's own character what we discern through his/her style, but all the other characters about whom such a narrator might speak clearly enough are what they are because of the way this narrator speaks about them. But good writers approach third-person narration in the same way they would a first-person narrator. It is itself a character, a voice, with his/her/its own distinctive way of summoning a fictive world through writing. Perhaps at his point you have to say that character and style are indivisible, but this is where "the reality of a character" has to start.

There are some writers for whom style supersedes character, for whom the "authorial" character is the main character, and their fiction doesn't suffer in the least from it. Stanley Elkin is such a writer. His characters are believable enough, vivid certainly, but their vividness comes not from any externally imposed "features," fastened onto the characters like artificial limbs. It comes from Elkin's inimitable and inexhaustibly inventive style. Here is a third-person account of Ben Flesh, protagonist of *The Franchiser*:

*Forbes* would not have heard of him. *Fortune* wouldn't. There would be no color photographs of him, sharp as holograph, in high-backed executive leathers, his hand a fist on wide mahogany plateaus of desk, his collar white as an admiral's against his dark, timeless suits. There would be no tall columns of beautifully justified print apposite full-page ads for spanking new business machines with their queer space-age vintages, their coded analogues to the minting of postage, say, or money--the TermiNet 1200, the Reliant 700, Canon's L-1610, the NCR 399--numbers like license plates on federal limousines or the markings on aircraft.

Though he actually used some of this stuff. G.E. had an answer for his costly data volume traffic; Kodak had found a practical alternative to his paper filing. He had discussed his microform housing needs with Ring King Visibles. He had come into the clean, bright world of Kalvar. A special card turned even a telephone booth into a WATS line. Still, *Fortune* would do no profile. *Signature*, the Diners Club magazine, had never shown an interest; TWA's *Ambassador* hadn't. There was no color portrait of him next to the mail-order double knits and shoes.

(It's worth noting how Elkin here describes Flesh by what he's *not*; all the clutter of detail only produces a stereotype that Ben Flesh mercifully avoids.)

Here's a first-person narrator, from *The Bailbondsman*:

So I'm Alexander Main, the Phoenician Bailbondsman, other men's difficulties my heritage. Alexander Main the Ba'albondsman, doing his duty by the generations and loving it, thriving on the idea of freedom which is my money in the bank, which is my element as the sand was my ancestors'.

So give the Phoenician your murderer, your rapist, your petty thief yearning to breathe free. Give him your stickup guy and embezzler, your juvenile delinquent and car robber. Give him you subversives and menslaughterers. I *like* dealing with the public.

Pretty clearly both Ben Flesh and Alexander Main are really Stanley Elkin. Or "Stanley Elkin," the manufactured authorial presence. In many ways, all of Elkin's characters seem just like all the others, are versions of this most important character, the writer. No one who loves Stanley Elkin's work, as I do, could want it any other way. Who needs characters when you can be carried along by writing like this?

## **Point of View**

## Conditions of Perception

"Point of view" is an element of fiction that, it seems to me, is often invoked but seldom really appreciated. In our haste to get to the "story," or to ascertain what the work in question has "to say," we acknowledge that the narrative is presented in "third-person" or "first-person," but don't appropriately consider how both of these modes of presentation—as well as their many subtle if less recognized variations—affect the terms of our encounter with both the story told and what is said. This goes well beyond the usual distinctions made between "reliable" and "unreliable" narrators (although this distinction remains important), "omniscience" and "central consciousness," or stories told by the main character and those told by a secondary observer. Point of view is not simply a flourish added to the underlying "content" of fiction, nor a way of establishing "voice," not just a way of providing stability while the story unfolds, but fundamentally conditions our perception of all of the other "elements" of fiction we otherwise might think take precedence: plot, character, setting, etc.

The centrality of point of view in determining the nature of the fictional "world" we are entering in a particular work of fiction became only more obvious to me while reading Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*, a novel I had not previously read because I had assumed, mistakenly I must now say, it was written primarily to become a movie, as is the case with so much current "literary fiction." I both admired and enjoyed the novel, and mostly for the same reason. I admired the way in which Eugenides was able to maintain his experiment in first-person plural narration—"we" rather than "I" as the origin of the narrator's voice—and I enjoyed the collective invocation of the Lisbon sisters and the story of their early deaths that the narrative embodies. Much of what I enjoyed in the novel—the detached view of the sisters, the baffled way in which the stand-in narrator attempts to comprehend both the sisters' behavior and the love-trance induced in him and his confederates by their charms, the ultimate mystery of the sisters' decision to do themselves in—have been singled out by some reviewers and commentators as flaws, however, and it does seem to me that this results from an unwillingness to allow the novel's adopted point of view to produce the sort of effects to which it tends..

It is true that we don't ever really get very close to the Lisbon sisters, so that as characters, indeed, as the ostensible protagonists of the story, they don't quite come into focus as much as we might like. They remain wispy, uncertain figures in a novel that inevitably leads us to seek more definition, more certainty. We are just as bewildered by the Lisbon sisters, and just as unclear about what might be going on in that house across the street—the perspective we are forced to assume—as the narrator, but this is not a problem with "characterization." Since there is no satisfactory answer to the question "Why?"—not even the narrator's assiduous efforts to compile "evidence" and interview the Lisbon parents can provide such an answer—or since Eugenides wants to suggest that getting to "know" the Lisbon sisters by taking us inside their heads will leave us no more enlightened, their role as characters in this novel is necessarily limited to the external observations given. To complain about this is to deny the novel its enabling source of expression in the inquiring "we".

It is tempting to say that the narrator(s) become the main characters, but this isn't quite right either. Only occasionally does one of the boys emerge from behind the verbal curtain to

assume an active role vis-a-vis one of the sisters—most notably "Trip Fontane," who attempts to court Lux Lisbon—and the narrator's role ultimately is really to testify to the enduring spell cast by the sisters, to give us access to them through a concerted act of memory from which they have never departed:

Our own knowledge of Cecilia kept growing after her death, too, with the same unnatural persistence. Though she had spoken only rarely and had had no real friends, everybody possessed his own vivid memories of Cecilia. Some of us had held her for five minutes as a baby while Mrs. Lisbon ran back into the house to get her purse. Some of us had played in the sandbox with her, fighting over a shovel, or had exposed ourselves to her behind the mulberry tree that grew like deformed flesh through the chain link fence. We had stood in line with her for smallpox vaccinations, had held polio sugar cubes under our tongues with her, had taught her to jump rope, to light snakes, had stopped her from picking her scabs on numerous occasions, and had cautioned her against touching her mouth to the drinking fountain at Three Mile Park. A few of us had fallen in love with her, but had kept it to ourselves, knowing that she was the weird sister.

*The Virgin Suicides* could thus be called a novel without conventional characters (the closest to a rounded, "sympathetic" character might be Mr. Lisbon, who almost becomes compelling in his cluelessness) and, since the sisters' fate is more or less known from the beginning, not much plot aside from the filling-in of details. If plot and character are what you must have, these no doubt must seem to be irremediable deficiencies, but the narrative method Eugenides employs invites us to cultivate a different relationship with the characters, one that emphasizes wonder over intimacy, and assume a more relaxed attitude toward plot, one that allows for meditation on what happened, not just a serial record of what did happen. The point of view in *The Virgin Suicides* works to shape a particular kind of fictional space, one that accentuates distance and concealment. Narrating it from some other perspective would have produced a wholly different, in my opinion much more ordinary novel.

Many readers and critics approach *The Virgin Suicides* for its thematic implications, its depiction of stifling suburbia, a morally unhinged middle class, the decline of the industrial Midwest, etc., but I think even these concerns gain the prominence they do because of the way the narrative is related to us. The near-mythic quality the story takes on, its rendition of decline-and-fall, the implication of the whole community in the unfolding of its collective trauma provide the tale of the Lisbon suicides a heightened drama that substitutes for the lesser drama of mere plot and gives the tale a kind of allegorical resonance. A less well-calibrated narrative strategy would not have accomplished the same effect.

### **External Monologue**

I share Scott Esposito's enthusiasm for Heather McGowan's *The Duchess of Nothing*, but I don't exactly agree with his analysis of the novel's narrative strategy:

The premise of Heather McGowan's "Duchess of Nothing" seemingly is not the most promising material for a novel, yet McGowan has fashioned an engrossing, entertaining book. She accomplishes this not through plot but instead through a stream-of-consciousness narration that beautifully characterizes her unnamed protagonist in a voice that is by turns tragic, farcical, pathetic, poignant and hilarious. (*San Francisco Chronicle*)

Later in his review Esposito echoes this claim about "stream-of-consciousness narration," suggesting that McGowan presents us with an "unadorned reality filtered through an unstable mind." But *The Duchess of Nothing* is not really a "stream-of-consciousness" novel, at least not as the term has been used in the critical discussion of this technique that has accumulated since its introduction by novelists such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Dorothy Richardson. In the work of these writers, stream-of-consciousness is a variant on, an intensification of, third-person narration. It is more or less the culmination of the movement toward psychological realism in fiction, which might be said to have begun—at least in English language fiction—with Henry James's use of the third-person "central consciousness" approach. James's fiction helped to bring about the transformation of the omniscient narrator—knows all, sees all—into the much more limited narrator essentially restricted to the vantage point of the character whose experience is being related. But the narrator is still of the third-person variety, originating from outside that experience and telling us the story on the characters' behalf.

Stream-of-consciousness takes this a step farther and attempts to provide a window of sorts on a character's experiences as they are being processed through that character's mind. Such narration is frequently fragmentary and discontinuous, in an attempt to mimic the way such processing actually occurs, or at least to mimic it as closely as written language is able to do so—it is, like everything else in fiction, ultimately an illusion created through prose. If reality ultimately exists in the mind of the beholder, then the stream-of-consciousness method is an effort to have fiction reflect what is *really* real.

*The Duchess of Nothing* is a first-person narrative, so, however much we are made to view the world through the constructions of its protagonist, it can't really be said to consist of her stream of consciousness. While I certainly agree that McGowan portrays this character through "a voice that is by turns tragic, farcical, pathetic, poignant and hilarious," it is a voice, a garrulous and idiosyncratic one, in fact, a voice that in many ways works in a manner that precisely reverses the effect created by the stream-of-consciousness strategy:

Across the cafe Toby stands at the coffee machine gazing into a silver jug. His lips move, to some terrifying soliloquy, I imagine. Behind him well-dressed citizens sip their coffees, quietly content being Italian. If you could understand the strength it takes to sit here quietly, I tell the boy, If I had the power to describe how it feels to do exactly the opposite of what I'd like. I wish you could see the storm that rages beneath my surface. I was never meant to sit quietly, I tell the boy. This sitting quietly was never my idea. I flick my skirt idly, exposing my knee. It stares up at me, a hilly rebuke. I want to leave everything behind as soon as it is a minute past new. Every night after supper I'd like to

drop the plate I'm washing, turn, never see any of it again. And yet I remain. I swallow my coffee, I remain.

Although it is Toby who is described as engaged in "some terrifying soliloquy," *The Duchess of Nothing* itself is an extended soliloquy, its narrator's overflowing monologue interrupted only occasionally by a word or two from "the boy" (her sole companion through most of the book). The narrator may feel there is a storm "raging" inside her, but it's really the storm of words she releases that manifests her inability to "sit quietly," her desire to "leave everything behind as soon as it is a minute past new." Whereas stream-of-consciousness tries to direct our attention to the internal drama unfolding in human consciousness, the narrative strategy in this novel externalizes everything, articulates explicitly in the narrator's own language what in s-o-c would remain half-formed and implicit. It's as if the narrator literally can't resist translating into comprehensible speech every thought that comes into her head.

In his review of the novel (*Boston Globe*), Richard Eder accurately notes the protagonist's "grandiloquent self-proclamation," but I cannot agree with Eder that she is an example of an "unreliable narrator." Eder believes that her reticence in fully disclosing the particulars of her past (or even of her present arrangement with "Edmund," brother of "the boy") creates an incompleteness of context that suggests willful manipulation on the narrator's part. While it is true that the novel is somewhat short on expository detail, I would argue that this is simply the consequence of the narrative method McGowan has chosen and to which she remains faithful: no "infodumps" if that would make the narrative voice ring false. I would argue further that it is this method that otherwise invokes the somewhat misshapen world and off-kilter perspective that, to me, are a large part of this novel's appeal. For the narrator to be "unreliable," we would have to believe she is deliberately presenting us with a false account of herself, her actions, and her background (and that we would be able to tell, ultimately, that the account is false), but that she is in effect working out as she goes what she thinks about her situation does not, in my view, make her unreliable. It makes her, as Esposito puts it, "by turns tragic, farcical, pathetic, poignant and hilarious."

Eder is ultimately rather contemptuous of "the woman," as he chooses to call her. She is "pitiable," guilty of "track-covering, the shame that flickers beneath the arrogance." She has a "skewed and inflated vision of herself and her life." She is "cold." And indeed the narrator does seem frustrated with her situation, unable to square her sense of her own worth with the increasingly desperate circumstances in which she finds herself. She is certainly impulsive. More than anything, however, she is instinctively unconventional and incapable of settling for "normality"—confronting the possibility of accepting a normal life at the novel's conclusion, she instead lights out for the territory: "Then I go out once more, slamming the door behind me. I like the sound so much, I open the door and slam it shut several times." I suppose one could feel contempt for a woman who doesn't behave as she ought, who turns her back so decisively on domestic bliss, but I just find her a very interesting character quite unlike most protagonists of most literary fiction. Both she and *The Duchess of Nothing* itself are much more convincingly "transgressive" of established norms—of female behavior and of conventional "psychological realism"—than other novels sometimes accorded that label.

## Comfortably Numb

Dara Horn's *The World to Come* begins with these two paragraphs:

There used to be many families like the Ziskinds, families where each person always knew that his life was more than his alone. Families like that still exist, but because there are so few of them, they have become insular, isolated, their sentiment that the family is the center of the universe broadened to imply that nothing outside the family is worth anything. If you are from one of these families, you believe this, and you always will.

Lately it had begun to seem to Benjamin Ziskind that the entire world was dead, that he was a citizen of a necropolis. While his parents were living, Ben had thought about them only when it made sense to think about them, when he was talking to them, or talking about them, or planning something involving them. But now they were always here, reminding him of their presence at every moment. He saw them in the streets, always from behind, or turning a corner, his father sitting in the bright yellow taxi next to his, shifting in his seat as the cab screeched away in the opposite direction, his mother--dead six months now, though it felt like one long night--hurrying along the sidewalk on a Sunday morning, turning into a store just when Ben had come close enough to see her face. It was a relief that Ben could close his office door.

No doubt this seems thoroughly unexceptional to most readers of fiction (which is actually one of the problems with Horn's novel), an expository passage that begins to acquaint us with the themes the book will explore and introduces us to the character whose present actions and experiences provide the hinge by which the rest of the novel moves. But that we have become accustomed to this kind of discourse, all but take it for granted, suggests it has hardened into a convention we simply accept as the strategy most appropriate for a certain type of third-person narrative, which itself has become more or less a default setting for our sense of what narrative discourse should be like. I would submit that this strategy has outlived its usefulness and often inhibits the discovery of fresh, genre-expanding aesthetic approaches to fiction, even approaches to the representation of consciousness, which in a novel like *The World to Come* is carried out in such a perfunctory way that it becomes harder to appreciate some of the novel's other virtues.

Although the reader's attention is first of all directed by the Tolstoy-like opening to what presumably will be the novel's overarching theme, the encompassing context within which the story (as it turns out, multiple and intertwining stories) will proceed, to me, the real work being done by this paragraph is in the way it settles the reader into the novel's discursively shaped world, begins to evoke a particular kind of relationship between narrator and character. Are these generalizations about "family" being offered by a hovering, all-knowing narrator, or have they been filtered through the consciousness and specific experiences of Benjamin Ziskind? The second paragraph confirms that it is the latter, and we are thereafter comfortably placed as readers inside Benjamin's awareness (and, later, several other characters' awareness) and way of thinking about things.

I say "comfortably" because by now this mode of psychological realism, by which the depicted world in a work of fiction comes to us not through omniscient description but through the perception of that fiction's characters ("Lately it had begun to seem to Benjamin Ziskind that the entire world was dead"), has become so thoroughly familiar that it acts as a kind of narrative machine, spinning out sundry versions of what Henry James called third-person "central consciousness" stories in what has admittedly become a very efficient manner. In order to provide a little variety in what is otherwise a rather uniform approach, one can include multiple or alternating centers of consciousness, as Horn does in *The World to Come*, but even here readers are ultimately encouraged to regard the storytelling as more or less transparent, if anchored in a particular character's version of reality, and the style as unintrusive, if sometimes decorated with a suitable figurative flourish. It is precisely the expectation that the reader will be satisfied with this mechanical, mass-produced variety of storytelling that makes it difficult to read a book like *The World to Come* with much enthusiasm, even while acknowledging that Dara Horn does have some narrative imagination and that the novel weaves together its various strands—which include both invented characters and real historical figures, occurrences in the present interlaced with episodes from the past—with admirable skill.

Sven Birkerts describes the mindset with which he approaches the submissions his literary magazine receives:

Basically—short version—a work of prose (or poetry) can no longer assume continuity, not as it could in former times. It cannot begin, or unfold, in a way that assumes a basic condition of business as usual. The world is no longer everything we thought was the case, and the writing needs to embody this—through sentence rhythm, tone, camera placement, or some other strategic move that signals that no tired assumptions remain in place. This writing must, in effect, create its own world and terms from the threshold, coming at us from a full creative effort of imagination and not by using the old world as a prop. Now, this last is a tricky assertion and it will be very hard to make clear, not to mention binding. I don't mean for a moment that the world as we know it cannot be invoked, or used, or dissected. Of course it can. But it cannot be taken simply on faith, as unproblematic, treated as a natural signifier; nor can it be cashed in as if it were a treasury bond from the literature of a former era. (Agni 63)

I agree entirely with Birkerts, and if I were an editor beginning to read *The World to Come* for potential publication, I would almost immediately conclude that it "assumes a basic condition of business as usual," that numerous "tired assumptions remain in place," that while the novel does attempt to "create its own world," this attempt comes not from the "threshold," but from a place where fiction is regarded as a set of fixed assumptions and techniques from which is chosen the one that will most efficaciously carry the narrative burden to be placed on it. In this case, Horn doesn't so much lean on the "literature of a former era" (she actually takes this as part of her subject, and her examination of Jewish artistic/literary traditions is one of the more compelling aspects of the novel) as on this set of presently-established conventions, themselves a product of "modern" storytelling practices but, as I have been contending, now urgently in need of reexamination. In invoking the "world to come," Horn's novel is, of course, endeavoring to

capture something essential about this world, about our longings and frustrations, but it is impossible to read such passages as the one quoted above without thinking that this is at odds with its very prosaic language and method of character creation, which do depend on customary "props."

As if the author herself recognizes that this method lacks dynamism, especially when confined to a single character over the course of an entire narrative, she presents us with multiple characters and their interconnecting stories and makes of the larger narrative of which these are a part a kind of mystery tale embedded in recent history. These are Dara Horn's efforts to embody a "full creative effort of imagination." The result is entertaining enough, at least when I am able to ignore the listless "sentence rhythms" created by Horn's adherence to the central consciousness-style of narrative exposition. (And all too many other novels require that I similarly put aside any expectation of stylistic vigor, narrative innovation, or formal invention, novels that aren't even going to manifest to me the intelligence and skill with which Dara Horn shuffles around the conventional elements she has chosen to use, or won't manifest anything more than such skill with the conventional.) But, ultimately, I don't want to put these things aside, and I'm increasingly uncertain why so many writers—especially among "emerging writers"—think it's appropriate to ask me to do it. There are far too few original stories and arrestingly portrayed characters around to justify losing interest in new ways of telling them and uncommon means of summoning them up.

### **As Told By: First-Person Narration**

Justin Courter's *Skunk: A Love Story* is a gimmicky novel whose gimmick almost works. To the extent that it makes the novel consistently enjoyable to read, in fact (it is appropriate to call a narrative in which the main character lives with skunks and drinks their musk "enjoyable"), it does work well enough. But ultimately the bizarre behavior that motivates the story recounted by the novel's first-person narrator seems designed to signal toward some broader thematic relevance I, for one, was unable to fully work out.

The narrator himself accounts for his attraction to skunk musk by connecting it to memories of his mother:

My mother drank quite a lot of beer when I was growing up. She always drank McDougal's--an imported brand that comes in a green bottle and has a slightly skunky aroma. This was the first scent to greet my nostrils in the morning and the last whiff I sniffed before falling asleep at night. I awoke each morning to the clanking of beer bottles as my mother opened and shut the door of the refrigerator to get out her first McDougal's before starting my breakfast. Then I heard more clinking of empty bottles, as she cleared the kitchen table, filled a large garbage bag with the previous day's bottles and carried them outside to put in a can by the street.

One day the narrator, Damien, brings home a dead skunk, thinking his mother will be able to brew her own beer using this "raw material out of which beer was made." Suffice it to say that

his mother doesn't appreciate his gift, and it is only a few days after this incident that the mother is put into a mental hospital, where she eventually commits suicide. Out of this noxious mixture of childhood associations and ultimate trauma emerges, presumably, Damien's adult fixation on skunk musk.

The adult Damien is a loner and something of a misanthrope, although his misanthropy does not seem founded in an excessively high estimation of his own worth:

. . . My eyes are as dark as my hair and are extremely weak. For this reason I have worn thick glasses since I can remember. When I worked at Grund & Greene, I still had the same pair of black frames that had served me since high school, though my prescription had changed many times. Despite the fact that I am quite capable of making my way in the modern world, I know what a miserably inadequate creature, despite my efforts, I truly am. My constitution is so delicate and my eyes so weak that I would not have survived if I had dwelt in an earlier era of history, say, in the Stone Age. I would have been one of the casualties of natural selection--either killed by a wild boar during a hunt because I could not see it coming, or maimed by one of the bigger, stronger boys of the tribe before I reached the age where humans begin copulating--and thus would have been unlikely to pass my defective genes on to future generations. Hence, the race would have continued to grow stronger, as indeed it should. . . .

Still, Damien's inability to come to terms with the modern world, and all of its ways of reminding him he is "defective," is reminiscent of John Kennedy Toole's Ignatius J. Reilly, although Damien's later experiences with what can only be called musk-addiction (he eventually learns to "milk" his skunks and drinks the musk), read like a farcical turn on William S. Burroughs, and Courter's depiction of Damien's retreat to a rural area to become a farmer seems to draw strongly from T.C. Boyle. Ultimately, however, Damien's voice is distinctive, and it is to Courter's credit that this voice has a kind of compulsive power that keeps our curiosity alive despite the fact that Damien Youngquist is in many ways a pretty repulsive character.

Early in the novel Damien meets up with a woman named Pearl, a rogue marine biologist who has an obsession with fish similar to Damien's obsession with skunks. Thus able to tolerate each other's fetish, the two begin a sexually acrobatic love affair that is interrupted when Damien's skunk house is raided and the skunks killed, and when he encounters Pearl's self-described fiancé and subsequently embarks on his rural adventure. Later Pearl returns, but she is unable to prevent Damien's apparent ruin: A latter-day hippie neighbor begins using Damien's skunk musk to create a new recreational drug and is busted; to get a lighter sentence for himself, he fingers Damien as the drug ring's mastermind. Damien is carted off to jail and later to a drug-treatment facility.

A strength of this book is its skillful use of first-person narration. I have more or less come to the conclusion that the only way an otherwise conventional narrative (and *Skunk* is, despite its unconventional subject and eccentric characters, essentially a narrative-driven novel, without much in the way of purely formal experimentation) can succeed, post-modernism and post-postmodernism, is through first-person narrative. The third-person central-consciousness mode

of narration (sometimes called the "free indirect style"), which has become the default mode of storytelling, providing us with both story and "psychological realism," is now so worn out and tepid, at least for me, that only first-person narratives can poke through the narrative haze emitted by so many indifferently-related stories. Much can still be done with first-person narrative, starting but not ending with the manipulation of the reader's trust in the story being told.

Thus, *Skunk* presents us with a first-person account by a character we have every reason to believe might not be clear-sighted, both literally—Damien's poor eyesight continues to deteriorate throughout the narrative, but whether this is a side-effect of the skunk musk or just a natural decline, given what we've been told about his poor vision, we really don't know—and figuratively. Might Damien, like his mother, be prone to mental illness? Might the skunk musk have exacerbated this problem? How much do we trust Damien's narrative as the accurate account of what "really" happened? For me, the existence of such potential ambiguity only deepens the novel's interest, creating layers of "meaning" that the third-person method necessarily excludes.

Unfortunately, as the novel nears its conclusion, the events become increasingly contrived and its portrayal of addiction heavy-handed. It seems as though Damien's story of addiction and recovery (as comical as it is) is being offered to us as containing some essential "truth" about addiction. Are we being told that the modern world has become so alienating that we are all led to our own addictions in order to cope with it? That, if so, we should be left alone to indulge them? That we ought to rise above them and find a way to live a productive life? These seem rather pat and familiar themes for a novel otherwise so unfamiliar in its style and its cast of characters.

Nonetheless, Justin Courter has admirably succeeded in taking a character so odd and behavior so potentially repugnant you might think nothing can be done with them and creating from them a surprisingly engaging novel

## OUTSIDE THE TEXT

### *Saying Something*

#### **Merely Literary**

Not long ago I read a weblog post in which the blogger extolled the virtues of a recent critical book by declaring that it examined the fiction of a well-known postwar writer in ways that went beyond the "merely literary"—specifically that it examined the sociopolitical significance of that fiction. Not long after, I came across the same phrase in a slightly different context; this time what was at stake in a particular writing strategy easily transcended the "merely literary."

Versions of this idea—that worthwhile or important writing must of course be characterized by qualities that elevate it above mere literary value—are to be found everywhere in discussions of books and writing in American publications (Leon Wieseltier's infamous non-review of Nicholson Baker's *Checkpoint* in the NYTBR, for example, can be explained as Wieseltier's refusal to waste his time assessing the "merely literary" features of that book), but seldom is it stated as baldly as in these two instances. And it is quite likely that neither writer really thought that in speaking of literary value in this way they were necessarily denigrating literature or the literary—it's just that everyone understands there are more important tasks to fulfill in the act of writing, even in the act of writing fiction or poetry, than just to do it well or with some originality. Don't they?

Most often it is politics that is considered more important than the "merely literary," some kind of engagement with the "real world" that demonstrates the writer's concern for the problems of injustice in its various forms. Even writers as universally acclaimed as, say, Philip Roth are frequently judged by these standards. Roth's best novel in the last decade and a half was easily *Sabbath's Theater*, but much more attention was given to his later trilogy, *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain*, since they were more obviously about consequential subjects like politics and cultural history. *Sabbath's Theater*, a ferociously comic novel about—about what, an oversexed puppeteer?—was "merely literary." (Although not very decorously so.)

But it doesn't have to be attention to politics per se that justifies our taking a writer or book seriously. We just have to feel that the writer is reaching beyond the pages of a book to grapple with "issues," is "saying something" about the world, conveying ideas or stirring up emotions. As Ruth Franklin put it last year in a review in the NYTBR, "literature's most necessary task [is in] communicating the writer's thoughts about the world we live in." Presumably anything else a fiction writer or poet might be concerned with, such things as exploring the stylistic possibilities of language, formal invention, even just telling a story in a skillful way or making us laugh, is "merely literary."

And why would we as readers be interested in a writer's "thoughts about the world we live in" in the first place? Is there something about being a novelist or poet (or memoirist or essayist) that makes one's "thoughts" more significant than anyone else's? I hardly think so. And I don't really think most such writers want to be burdened with the role of "thinking" in this sense, anyway. They probably want to write well enough and in such a way as to attract a certain kind of reader, a reader who doesn't dismiss the "merely literary."

## **Subversive**

When writers or critics speak of fiction as being "political," they most often mean that it engages with a subject or idea that if it is portrayed forcefully enough in its imaginative transformation could lead to fruitful social and cultural change (usually of the "progressive" variety). The website *Literature and Social Change* puts it this way:

Imaginative writing can be both literary and political simultaneously, and inevitably is, to varying degrees. In its own way, fiction can accomplish something similar to what Noam Chomsky and many other progressive workers try to accomplish through non-fiction: the creation of works that clarify and better the world socially, politically, culturally. . . .

Notice how this very definition actually erases itself: How can fiction "be both literary and political simultaneously" if it is attempting to do what "many other progressive workers try to accomplish through non-fiction"? If the goal is so resolutely political, it can't also be literary, or the two terms are simply washed of their meaning. Further, since the goal, to the extent it can be reached, is going to be reached more readily through non-fiction, why not just stick to expository nonfiction? Is it somehow not glamorous enough? Needs the imprimatur of "literature"?

Perhaps when some people speak of the "political" impact of fiction, they really just mean that works of fiction "reflect" the society that produces them, or that some readers might find what they read in a work of fiction to have some sort of broader, social relevance. But this is then made out to be something with much more significance than it really has. How can a work of literature not reflect the social forces that have made themselves felt to the writer, since the writer belongs to his/her society and unavoidably responds to such forces? Readers may indeed find a particular novel or poem to have social implications, but this does not mean that the work was written to have this effect. Certainly such implications can be a salubrious side-benefit to an otherwise attentive reading experience, but surely few writers really want these particular implications to be the only ones their work might have. I don't want to close off the possible meanings a work of literature might have for an individual reader, but to value fiction or poetry primarily for its social commentary is not really to give your full attention to what literature has to offer.

Sometimes, especially among academics, the "political" value of literature is identified more specifically as its capacity to be "subversive" or "transgressive." As M. Keith Booker puts it in his book *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature*, "After all, even the most transgressive works of literature do not in general immediately send their readers into the streets carrying banners and shouting slogans. Transgressive literature works more subtly, by chipping away at certain modes of thinking that contribute to the perpetuation of oppressive political structures." To the extent that literature professors still put any value at all on literature itself, it is usually through this construct of the subversive. Not all works of literature finally measure up, of course—some are simply hopeless in this context, and since for such critics there is no other context, they are better consigned to the trash heap of literary history—but even those that don't seem to hold out much promise of being transgressive in any obvious way can be shown to have their transgressive moments if the critic digs hard enough and misreads strenuously enough. Booker, for example, finds Gilbert Sorrentino hopeless, his "mere rule breaking for the sake of rule breaking" insufficiently "transgressive in a genuine political sense, i.e. challenging existing dominant ideologies in a way that contributes to the process of social change." On the other hand, the fiction of Monique Wittig "[harnesses] the transgressive techniques that are inherent in sexuality not in the service of subjectivized experience but of a socialized and communal political statement." Beware of those "subjectivized experiences."

So-called "conservative" defenders of art or literature are finally no better, even though they frequently claim to be "depoliticizing" the arts. In a recent interview at *Front Page*, for example, Roger Kimball says of academic criticism in general that "One common ingredient is an impatience with the idea of intrinsic merit or intrinsic worth: a poem, a novel, a 'text' of any sort never means what it appears to say but is always an essentially subversive document whose aim is to undermine established values." One might think this is a defense of the aesthetic in art, but it's really just another version of politics. "Intrinsic merit" is itself a political tool; as Kimball also puts it in the same interview: "The great enemy of the totalitarian impulse, in intellectual life as well as in politics, is the idea of intrinsic worth." Putting aside the unexamined metaphysical assumptions informing the notion of "intrinsic worth," what Kimball really wants to recover is not art itself but "the traditional fabric of manners and morals that stands behind the work of art." For someone like Roger Kimball, art is no more to be valued for its real aesthetic qualities (which do often indeed rip at the "traditional fabric" he wants to preserve), but for the way in which it can be enlisted to enforce a "traditional" social order. In the end, people like Roger Kimball and M. Keith Booker are dancing a kind of vicious dance together, each partner despising the other but unable to let go.

Do I then think literature is merely a "subjectivized experience" or, even worse, just "entertainment"? Absolutely not, although it is those things first and foremost. A "subjective experience" of art or literature can indeed be a very profound one, even transforming the way the subject thinks about him/herself as well as the social world into which the reader must inevitably return. I might even say that such an experience can ultimately prove "subversive" in its effects, as long as the word is used in something like the sense conveyed by the poet Stephen Dunn, also in a recent interview:

No, I don't think [artists] have a moral obligation, except maybe to be interesting. Or, if they do, it's to subvert the status quo by resisting official versions of it, then reconstructing it so others can see it anew. Not with an agenda in mind, but through simply trying to find the right language for what is elusive. . . (*Poets & Writers*)

"Official versions" of the status quo are not just political. Such versions can be imposed by family or by our own incuriosity, or by society and culture more broadly. They are all "official" versions of the way things are that we have simply come to accept and haven't questioned much. Works of literature can provoke us into questioning them by showing us that there are always alternative versions, that descriptions of reality are only tentative and that a final understanding of the way things are isn't going to be possible. (Art that suggests there can be a final understanding isn't really art.) Literature does this both through its content—the alternative versions we're presented with—and through form—the way in which the perceived world is "reconstructed," to use Dunn's word. Literature in its aesthetic dimension—literally, the "art" by which it is made—displays to us the imagination at work, reminds us that there are effectively no limits to the human imagination.

To me, this is all indeed powerfully subversive. Through art we become aware that the world can always be remade. Art is the enemy of all certainties and settled doctrines. This is not likely to be acceptable to political critics of either the left or the right, the Bookers or the

Kimballs, which is why I would say that in the final analysis such critics don't really much value art at all. They literally don't have any use for it, unless it can be distorted to suit their own ideological predispositions. As Stephen Dunn says, poets and fiction writers are "trying to find the right language for what is elusive." And afterwards, it remains elusive. In my opinion, the only way that literature can "clarify and better the world socially, politically, culturally" is by revealing to us, perhaps to our dismay, that this is a fact.

## **What Lies Beyond**

I am very surprised to find myself coming to James Wood's defense after reading William Deresiewicz's review Wood's *How Fiction Works*. (I have published my own negative review of this book. (*Open Letters Monthly*)) Although Deresiewicz correctly points out the narrowness of Wood's conception of realism, ultimately he is less concerned with Wood's near-dogmatism on this subject than with what he considers the narrowness of Wood's approach to criticism. According to Deresiewicz, a great critic should exhibit "not great learning, or great thinking, or great expressive ability, or great sensitivity to literary feeling and literary form. . .but a passionate involvement with what lies beyond the literary and creates its context." In other words, literary criticism should not concentrate too strenuously on the "merely literary."

James Wood's greatest strength as a critic is that he does not spend much time and space on "what lies beyond the literary." He certainly could not be accused of lacking "a passionate involvement" with literary texts—even if he can be charged with restricting his involvement too exclusively to a certain kind of text—but to his credit he devotes most of his attention to a close reading of the fiction he considers and leaves what's "beyond" to those less interested in literature than he is.

According to Deresiewicz, the exemplars of modern criticism are the so-called New York critics, specifically Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling, Alfred Kazin, and Irving Howe:

Wilson, who wrote about everything during his teeming career, from politics to popular culture, socialist factions to Native American tribes, warned about "the cost of detaching books from all the other affairs of human life." Trilling's whole method as a critic was to set the object of his consideration within the history of what he called "the moral imagination." Kazin, whose criticism, like [Elizabeth] Hardwick's, focused on the literature of this country in particular, sought to illuminate nothing less than "the nature of our American experiences." The goal of Howe's criticism, he said, was "the recreation of a vital democratic radicalism in America." The New York critics were interested in literature because they were interested in politics, culture, the moral life and the life of society, and all as they bore on one another. They placed literature at the center of their inquiry because they recognized its ability not only to represent life but, as Matthew Arnold said, to criticize it--to ask questions about where we are and how where we are stands in relation to where we should be. They were not aesthetes; they were, in the broadest sense, intellectuals.

With the possible exception of Wilson (who did indeed write about many subjects but whose essays on literary works were attentive to form and style and did mark him as, in part, an "aesthete"), Wood is a much better critic than any of these writers. Trilling is one of the most overrated critics of the 20th century, unwilling as he was to consider works of literature as anything other than what even his acolyte Leon Wiseltier describes protectively as "records of concepts and sentiments and values," apparently unable to describe "the moral imagination" except in platitudes. Kazin is simply hopeless, a truly awful critic whose essays and books on literary topics are simply useless to anyone interested in criticism that might enhance the reading experience. *On Native Grounds* is a bloated assemblage of historical generalizations mostly about writers, not writing. It's full of "remarks" about literature but no actual criticism. Like Trilling, Kazin bypasses the literary in order to arrive at banalities about "the nature of our American experiences." Howe is somewhat better—he does often enough really examine the texts on which he is pronouncing—but why would anyone want to rely for insight into *literature* on a critic who confesses he is most interested in "the recreation of a vital democratic radicalism in America"?

It's really rather astonishing that Deresiewicz seems to believe that the approach to criticism represented by the New York critics has somehow been lost. In reality, criticism that obsesses about "politics, culture, the moral life and the life of society" is the dominant mode of criticism today, especially in academe and even more especially among so-called "intellectuals." These critics condescend to put "literature at the center of their inquiry because they recognize its ability not only to represent life but. . . to ask questions about where we are and how where we are stands in relation to where we should be." James Wood stands out as a critic willing to challenge this tedious preoccupation with "context" and to make an "inquiry" into the literary nature of literature his "center" rather than the intellectual pomposity of "questions about where we are," questions that for Deresiewicz's preferred kind of critic take precedence over aesthetics, finally over literature itself. In my opinion, it is all in Wood's favor that "what has happened in England since the end of World War II—anything that has happened in England since the war, politically, socially or culturally—simply doesn't enter into his thinking," and a testament to the force of his style, sensibility, and, yes, learning that he has managed to become widely known as a critic through publication in magazines that otherwise insist on relevance to politics and "the life of society."

Deresiewicz observes that Wood "ignores the meanings that novelists use [their] methods to propose. . . Wood can tell us about Flaubert's narrator or Bellow's style, but he's not very curious about what those writers have to say about the world." This actually makes me feel better about James Wood's prominence in current literary criticism. At least there is one critic with access to high-profile print publications who knows it isn't the novelist's job to "propose" anything and focuses his attention on writers' art rather than on what they allegedly have "to say."

## **Failure to Communicate**

Joan Houlihan declares that

Like all other forms of writing, poetry is a communication. The evidence is in its release from the poet's brain onto a medium designed to be read. The fact that it was written down, made readable, makes it a communication even if its only reader turns out to be its creator at a later time. Furthermore, whatever one feels about the role of the reader, or author-as-reader, there's no dispute that there is a role—a poem without a reader is not a poem, but just an artifact of the imagination. (*The Boston Comment*)

Neither poetry nor fiction is "a communication" in the way Houlihan clearly intends the term to be understood here. Poets and novelists do not "communicate" information or messages or ideas or propositions or wisdom or anything else by writing poetry or fiction. If these forms of writing are to be considered methods of communication, they are very poor ones indeed, since in most accomplished poems or novels the best that can be said is that their messages or "points" are communicated in a very roundabout way, a strategy that would seem merely self-defeating if the goal of writing them is to satisfy readers looking for the points being made or the message communicated. Most of the great works of literature would surely by now have been judged failures by the communication test: if the value of those works from the past we still read were to be found in their clearly signaled meanings, their unambiguously announced "themes," we probably would not still be reading them. We would have gotten the point long ago.

That poetry is written down, "designed to be read," doesn't in itself demonstrate it's to be taken as communication, although most of us do admittedly have a harder time separating the medium in which the literary arts are created from the artistic effects of which that medium might be capable than we do with painting or sculpture or music. Since we do use language to directly communicate, we assume all language must be used for that purpose—or that all uses of language can't escape its origins in communication or discourse. We are much more willing to grant that music, say, (the scores of which are also "written down") is something other than communication, in most cases, in fact, would resist the idea that behind the music we like is primarily an effort to communicate ideas or messages. But why is it not possible simply to grant that when poets or novelists set to work they are using language for some purposes that can't be reduced to "communication?" A poem or novel is an artificial construction of words. You may not like what has been constructed in a specific instance, but it hardly seems useful to say that it didn't communicate with you.

All of this is just confirmed if we further consider Houlihan's own contention that a poem communicates "even if its only reader turns out to be its creator at a later time." This seems frankly bizarre. If a poet at some future date "reads" a poem she has written, is she really "communicating" with herself? Would this poet even be aware of what's being communicated? Wouldn't she be looking at the poem's formal qualities, the aptness of its word choice, etc.? Did Emily Dickinson consider herself finally a failure because the vast majority of her poems didn't "communicate" with anyone? Might she have been satisfied simply that she had created hundreds of well-made poems?

Even more bizarre, at least to me, is the claim that "a poem without a reader is not a poem, but just an artifact of the imagination." I will agree that ultimately most writers want readers, but what's wrong with those readers considering a given work as "an artifact of the imagination"? Isn't this the very way to define all works of art? Perhaps the problem Houlihan sees here is not that poems are products of the human imagination, but that they might be regarded as "artifacts," something that has been made by "artificial" means. Presumably poetry ought to be "natural," indeed an effort at communication. This distinction is probably at the heart of most complaints against works of art and literature that go too far in their brazen use of artifice or that are pronounced "obscure." But anyone taking up the writing of poetry and fiction is committed to an endeavor that is inescapably artificial. Poetry is an inherently unnatural disruption of our ordinary sense of what language is for (just ask all those freshmen struggling through intro to lit), but if you really resent writers playing this kind of game with words (game-playing, however, being just as integral to human nature as the need to communicate), you probably shouldn't be reading (or writing) poetry in the first place.

I looked for evidence in Houlihan's essay that I was myself misreading her message, misconstruing her point, but was only reinforced in my analysis by her conclusion, in which she writes of "poets who betray what talent they may have for the approbation of peers, who engage in the worst self-delusion: that they have something to say that can only be said in a poem." Once again we are dealing with the assumption that literature is a forum for "saying something," even if it is something "that can only be said in a poem." I've never been clear exactly what things "can only be said in a poem." If you can reformulate the poem into what it "says," then obviously you have said it in another way. If you can't put what it says into words, then just as obviously it's not saying anything. The only other alternative is that a poem just is what it is, in most ways precisely avoiding saying anything in particular. If what we have in such a piece of writing is a failure to communicate, this failure is the poem's greatest success.

### *“Community”*

#### **The Imperative to Break Free**

In the "Interchapter: A Manifesto," included in *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom asserts that "True poetic history is the story of how poets as poets have suffered other poets, just as any true biography is the story of how anyone suffered his own family—or his own displacement of family into lovers and friends." In using the word "poets" Bloom does not confine himself to those writers of lyric poetry whom we now designate with the term but certainly includes writers of fiction and drama as well, all those writers who belong to what we now call collectively "literature," and thus by "poetic history" Bloom implicitly invokes literary history as a whole. This is probably the most direct explanation of what Bloom means by the "anxiety of influence" to be found in the book, and while it might even seem somewhat flippant, unpacking this statement could perhaps help clarify the insight into the nature of literary influence that is likely to remain Bloom's most lasting contribution to literary criticism, while also suggesting a view of literary history that perhaps cuts across the grain of most current

notions of writing as a literary vocation that is itself embedded in what is called a literary "community."

The "other poets" that any individual poet "suffers" are what Bloom calls "precursor poets," those poets who are in fact most important in motivating the current poet to "overcome" the influence of the precursor poet. The attempt to do this does indeed produce "anxiety," not in the poet him/herself but manifest in the poems produced in the attempt. To say the younger poet (an "ephebe," in Bloom's parlance) suffers the precursor is to say both that the ephebe feels an intense rivalry (again, not so much a personal rivalry but one rooted in the latecomer poet's anxiety about the "originality" of his/her own work) but also that there is a kind of suffering involved in the "displacement" of the precursor, who in the poet's development is as important as family is for most people. Ultimately the poet recognizes the significance of the precursor's example (although elsewhere Bloom notes Wallace Stevens's reluctance to acknowledge the influence of Whitman), but also the imperative to break free.

Literary history—at least at the level of the time-tested and canonical—is thus the history of this struggle among "strong poets," the writers whose own achievement can't finally be separated from their simultaneous dependence on and resistance to the achievements of their eminent predecessors. In short, writers who want to be taken seriously can't ignore writing from the past because writing in the present inextricably emerges from the writing of the past, giving substance to the claim that the origin of a poem is always another poem. Writers find themselves within a "tradition" they can't finally evade, although in most cases they don't wish to evade it, but instead to transform it, at least to the extent that the tradition now can accommodate their own work. According to T. S. Eliot, the tradition itself is also thus transformed, but in Bloom's analysis this is not the orderly, "organic" process Eliot described, and "tradition" is certainly not the near-devotional object some of Eliot's followers want it to be. Instead it is fraught with conflict and unacknowledged envy.

It is also, of course, a conflict that arises from intense admiration. One attempts to "overcome" an influence only because the influence is real, because the poet and the work in question has had a profound effect on the would-be poet. But would-be poets are always going to be "anxious" in their admiration because the very qualities they admire pose the greatest threat to their own projects. How can those projects succeed if "other poets" have already made all the best moves and come upon the best subjects?

While Bloom is advancing a Freudian narrative in which quasi-psychological forces are manifested in the relationship between literary works, not a direct Freudian analysis of poets themselves, surely the notion of "rivalry" among writers is neither far-fetched nor confined to the use of images and tropes within writing itself. Certainly Bloom's focus on the anxiety of influence as a material textual feature is the more interesting application of psychoanalytic theory, providing as it does a concrete interpretive tool, but isn't it likely that writers view their own contemporaries not just as colleagues (perhaps not even colleagues) but as antagonists of a sort, potential threats to their artistic visions and literary reputations? How easy is it for a writer to rise above competitive impulses that to some extent seem only natural?

These questions for me are prompted in part by a current literary culture that seems devoted to creating an impression of great collegiality among writers. The most immediate and influential form of literary criticism—book reviewing—is dominated by novelists and poets, some of whom are also perceptive critics but many of whom have been assigned to write reviews under the apparent assumption that fiction writers are best situated to judge other fiction, poets other poetry. This assumption is dubious at best, but the primary effect of this practice is that most reviews dispense abundant praise, often long on superlatives and short on real analysis.

In addition, almost all books now come heavily "blurbed" by other writers, who often seem determined to outdo each other in the rhetorical excess with which they praise their fellow authors. The literary corners of social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook liberally engage in various digital versions of handclapping for writers especially admired and frequently feature explicit appeals to "community" among writers, as if literature was a civic organization, or a team sport in which one pledges one's mutual support for teammates. Perhaps it is in this context that we can understand the controversy over "negative reviews": Some writers, and many critics, fail to fully join the team, venturing to question a team member's accomplishment and disrupting group camaraderie.

In surveying literary history, it is hard to identify another period in which serious writers expected to be, or indicated any desire to be, part of a literary community. Paris after World War I is often discussed as the setting for a gathering of like-minded modernists, but Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* ought to be evidence enough that whatever friendships that might have formed at this time were laced with barely suppressed resentment and condescension, examples of writers suffering other writers. It seems to me that the push for "community" among writers is a direct function of the "program era" in American literature, the relocation of literary life to the academy, where it is administered in creative writing programs, where other writers are indeed colleagues, and where the wheels driving publication and recognition are greased by the spread of literary magazines sponsored by creative writing programs themselves and the substitution of tenure for commercial success. Under these circumstances, it becomes much easier to think of other writers as fellow members of a community (the community of creative writing teachers and students) rather than rivals, although also much easier as well to write safe but duly crafted, convention-approved fiction and poetry rather than challenge the hegemony of craft and convention by following inspiration where it leads.

Certainly at a time when literature occupies an ever-diminishing portion of public attention and offers an ever-diminishing prospect of providing a livelihood, the removal of writers to the security of academe and the rewards of community was and is understandable and perhaps inevitable. But ultimately this model makes no allowance for the more unruly impulses that kindle the imagination and that make the most profound kind of creativity possible. As Bloom says elsewhere in *The Anxiety of Influence*,

It does happen that one poet influences another, or more precisely, that one poet's poems influence the poems of the other, through a generosity of the spirit, even a shared generosity. But our easy idealism is out of place here. Where generosity is involved, the

poets influenced are minor or weaker; the more generosity, and the more mutual it is, the poorer the poets involved.

Today's literary culture of community doesn't much account for "misprision," or creative misinterpretation, because it doesn't really have much room for interpretation and judgment at all. All writing is taken with the same congratulatory enthusiasm, allowed to interpret itself through reviews stuffed with plot summary or overwritten superlatives. Program-era fiction gave rise to the vacuous marketing term "literary fiction," which is mostly applied to the kind of proficiently-written but uninspiring stories and novels issued by the writers within creative writing departments needing tenure or first publication. To judge by the blurbs, the tweets, and the tumblr posts these writers use to promote this work, they are reasonably satisfied with the results, but we could wonder whether some of them, perhaps among the more ambitious, don't finally feel a crippling constraint in all such enforced "generosity of spirit."

### **Literary Citizenship**

"Literary citizenship" is a concept that many writers apparently take quite seriously, as it has evolved from a metaphorical notion that writers should advocate on behalf of literature generally to a quasi-literal requirement that they be good citizens in the "literary community" at large, whose well-being they are expected to consider. According to Lori A. May in her book *The Write Crowd: Literary Citizenship and the Writing Life* (2015),

Literary citizenship takes the power of the individual and puts it to use in fostering, sustaining, and engaging with the literary community for the benefit of others. The concept is to pay kindness and skill forward, to offer something to the community so that others may learn, engage, and grow from combined efforts. And the possibilities for how that is accomplished are wide and varied, both in effort and in outcome. At the heart of literary citizenship, though, is one constant: contributing something to the literary world outside of one's own immediate needs.

The biggest motivating factor in the rise of literary citizenship as an ideal to which writers should aspire is likely to be found in that "constant" May identifies in the final sentence. "One's own immediate needs" in the literary world, are of course, to be published, to find readers, if lucky to make a career of writing. At a time when it has become harder to do all of those things (and when there even more writers trying to do them), "literary citizenship" and the "community" work together as appealing alternatives to the publish-or-perish ethos that dominated not just academic publishing but in effect all of publishing and the old "literary world" associated with it. While "contributing something" to the community free of self-interest is ostensibly the goal of literary citizenship, surely the ultimate benefit of such a contribution redounds to the contributor in some way (tangible or intangible), or it simply wouldn't be worth making. One's "immediate needs" aren't necessarily identical with one's long-term hopes.

Considered most generously, the creation of community through literary citizenship is a way of preserving a space for literature that isn't dependent on (although ultimately by no means

completely separate from) a hyperactive capitalist economy that has so distorted social and commercial values as to otherwise leave little room for such a relatively non-profitable enterprise as literary writing, except at the most crass and mercantile levels of the "book business." From this perspective, cultivating the literary garden as a whole is the only way to ensure that the garden survives to provide a spot for one's own harvest.

But while such an effort to affirm literary value for its own sake is both commendable and necessary, how many would-be literary citizens really are as dedicated to Literature in the abstract as the rhetoric of literary citizenship would have them be? Are there many who would be willing to cultivate the garden even if it wasn't going to be open to their own work, after all? Perhaps I am overly cynical in suspecting that the ranks of good literary citizens would thin out appreciably under those circumstances, that Literature as a sovereign territory worth defending would be a less compelling cause if one's loyalty to it were so purely conceptual. But even if what might be gained through exemplary literary citizenship is not careerist in the narrowly commercial sense, the urge for recognition and status can't help but dilute the purity of motive that supposedly underlies the practice of literary citizenship.

That in itself does not invalidate the call for literary citizenship. Human motives can never be pure, and none of the strategies for manifesting one's citizenship described by May—attending readings, starting a journal, writing reviews, joining literary organizations, etc.—are in themselves at all objectionable (although it is certainly possible to question the reliance on the Reading as the most visible representation of the "literary world"). There is a point, however, beyond which the breadth of responsibilities May suggests the writer might shoulder actually seems to appease the very market forces that literary citizenship is supposed to counteract. Corporate publishers have already contracted out most marketing and advertising to writers themselves, who must relentlessly promote their own work through book touring and maintaining a social media "presence." Should writers aid and abet this process by voluntarily enabling the system in the name of literary citizenship? As Becky Tuch has written on this subject, "Today's writers are expected to do more marketing work than ever before while not expecting much in the way of compensation or benefits. It's what we are being 'trained' to do." (*Salon*)

If literary citizenship "takes the power of the individual and puts it to use" on behalf of all writers, what about the much greater power of publishers and publicists, who are surely in a much better position to be "fostering, sustaining, and engaging with the literary community"? Is the push for literary citizenship another way of acknowledging that the era of the publisher has come to an end? Is the logical extension of literary citizenship a literary world dominated by self-publishing as well as self-promotion, which becomes the only way to do business in books? Although, to again assume the sincerity of those advocating for a writing community built around literary citizenship, presumably "business" would not be the center of activity: payment comes in "kindness and skill," receipt of which cumulatively allows everyone to "learn, engage, and grow."

But would real growth actually occur if all that was "paid forward" was "kindness"? Would the "skill" also offered in payment include a critical skill, an ability to honestly assess

what a writer has produced, even when that assessment might be negative? Is literary citizenship specifically about ensuring a certain kind of "literary life," as May's subtitle suggests, or should it also encourage a serious engagement with literary works that in taking them seriously accepts that some literary efforts are more successful than others? In the literary world that emerges from the congruence of idealism and the obsolescence of the old publishing model, will there be a role for literary critics, who sometimes are accused of something less than kindness, but from whom much can often be learned? It is hard to imagine that a "literary" culture (or "community") with any credibility and integrity could be sustained if frank but impartial criticism was unwelcome.

It is not exactly the case that *readers* seem to be unwelcome in the literary community as described in *The Write Crowd*, but as the title suggests, literary citizenship is practiced primarily by writers, although finding ways of "reaching out" to readers is certainly encouraged. Indeed, in addition to the decline of publisher support, an underlying assumption of both May's book and the appeal to citizenship and community more generally is that there aren't enough readers to go around and thus writers need to support each other, offering themselves as especially dutiful readers who will not just content themselves with the reading experience but will supplement it through recommendations on social media, reviews, and attendance at author events. Writers act as readers on steroids, giving the literary community a semblance of vitality, even when most writers struggle to find readers for whom reading is not so freighted with external obligation.

What about the apostate, the writer who resists the call to literary citizenship, either through obstinacy or through a sincere belief that the writer's job is to write, not to network? Although May frequently insists that the writer's first responsibility is indeed to his/her own writing, those who might deny the value of literary citizenship when it is made into a de facto requirement of living a "writing life" would surely provoke resentment for not carrying his/her weight in propping up the remaining structures that make a literary life still marginally possible. More importantly, what about the true *literary* apostate, who violates community norms, who produces work even the best literary citizens might have trouble celebrating, or even understanding? What if the demand for literary citizenship had been made of Samuel Beckett or William S. Burroughs (or even a more conventional curmudgeonly type such as, say, Philip Larkin)?

The work of Beckett and Burroughs was surely abrasive (to some, incomprehensible) enough to its original audience that, absent some expression of solidarity with their fellow writers by each of them, it was almost foreordained to at first be rejected or ignored (or both) by the literary community of the time, however that would have been defined. Perhaps we feel that now the more self-identified literary community is inclusive enough that iconoclastic writers such as these would be acknowledged. Still, it seems to me that the inevitable tendency of a "literary community" expecting its members to be "good literary citizens" is an at least implicit regulation of what counts as worth supporting, what can be recognized as "literature" in the first place. Bad literary citizens are going to continue to disregard the exhortations to blend harmoniously into the growing crowd of writers, but will also manage to write what turns out to be great works of literature, nevertheless.

## *On "Moral" Fiction*

### **Moral Improvement**

Arthur I. Blaustein obviously believes in the socially redeeming effects of fiction:

. . . Novels offer genuine hope for learning how to handle our daily personal problems—and those political issues of our communities and our country—in a moral and humane way. They can help us to understand the relationship between our inner lives and the outer world, and the balance between thinking, feeling, and acting. They awaken us to the complexities and paradoxes of human life, and to the absurd presumptuousness of moral absolutism. They can give us awareness of place, time, and condition—about ourselves and about others. As our great Nobel Prize winner William Faulkner said, the best literature is far more true than any journalism. (*Mother Jones*)

I know that Blaustein believes he is valorizing fiction by describing its ethical utility in such terms, but in my opinion he is advocating that we read fiction for all the wrong reasons. Far from elevating fiction to some kind of privileged place as an object of our regard, Blaustein's encomium to "moral fiction" really subsumes it to the prerogatives of good citizenship and reduces it to its potential value as instruction and therapy. When Faulkner said that literature is more "true" than journalism, he certainly did not mean that it was instead a way to deliver "metaphoric news," as Blaustein puts it later in his essay; he meant that it grappled with those "problems of the human heart in conflict with itself" that surely transcend our concern with the lying and deceit of the Bush administration.

Indeed, Blaustein trivializes those problems Faulkner identifies by diminishing them to our "daily personal problems" and by implying that fiction aims to teach us how to resolve "those political issues of our communities and our country." The writer, said Faulkner, must leave "no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed." Otherwise, "His griefs grieve on no universal bones, leaving no scars. He writes not of the heart but of the glands."

I really don't know what it means to say that novels "can help us to understand the relationship between our inner lives and the outer world." Are our "inner lives" not part of the "world"? And if in teaching us about "the balance between thinking, feeling, and acting," Blaustein is suggesting that, used properly, novels will encourage us to do more of the last-named, presumably in the name of the "outer world," I can only say that if you need novels to tell you that living in the world is important, that we must balance "thinking, feeling, and acting," you're not likely to take their lessons to heart, either. Not to mention understand why most writers take up fiction in the first place, which is precisely to avoid delivering lessons.

It is certainly the case that fiction "awaken[s] us to the complexities and paradoxes of human life, and to the absurd presumptuousness of moral absolutism." This is the one point on which I wholeheartedly agree with Arthur Blaustein. But it's hard to accept that he really believes this when most of his essay concentrates on the way in which reading fiction can simplify our current conundrums, can uncover for us the essence of our mass-marketed and

politically corrupt social world and perhaps return us to the time when "the imaginations of young people have been fired by characters that function as role models." And it's equally hard to take Blaustein's own lessons to heart when most of his essay is as morally absolutist as this: "How has it come to pass that our founding fathers gave us a land of political and economic opportunity, and we have become a nation of political and economic opportunists? As we have come to worship the idols of power, money, and success, we have neglected the core political principles of justice, equality, community, and democracy." Or this: "This McNews approach has undercut our moral values and civic traditions. We have sought simplistic answers to complex problems without even beginning to comprehend the consequences of our loss."

(I don't necessarily disagree with these statements, but they're not conclusions one reaches from reading novels. They're moral declarations.)

Blaustein would like to see more people forming reading groups in order to share the socially constructive messages of fiction. Here are the questions he thinks such people should ask of the novels they read:

What do you think is the central theme?

What are the underlying themes?

Did the author raise any emotional conflicts you may have had... or resolve any?

Did the author challenge any political, economic, social, or cultural beliefs that you may have held with regard to race, sex, gender, class, or ethnicity?

Conspicuously absent is any question inquiring about those features of a novel that make it a compelling work of art. They're questions about "themes," emotions, and beliefs. Of course, I wouldn't want to prevent anyone from joining a reading group organized around such questions, but finally I can't quite see why in order to discuss them it would be necessary to read novels. Couldn't everyone get together and talk about certain pre-determined themes (perhaps even ones extracted from this or that novel by someone who'd once read it), specified "emotional conflicts," and selected "political, economic, social, or cultural beliefs"? If you're going to target novels because they might be useful as curatives or for raising consciousness, why not just dispense the cure or proceed with enlightening insights and save time?

The time actually spent with a work of fiction is the most valuable part of the reading experience. It is, in fact, everything. The "reading group experience" is something else altogether. Innocuous enough, undoubtedly, and maybe even helpful in the therapeutic sense, but ultimately a poor substitute for sustained engagement with a novel or short story at its deepest formal and linguistic levels or with works of fiction that aren't obviously congenial to "moral" readings..

Caleb Crain takes the socially redeeming possibilities of fiction even farther, wondering in a blog post whether "novels spread human rights and discourage torture." Quoting Lynn Hunt's claim in her book *Inventing Human Rights: A History* that "novels made the point that all people are fundamentally similar because of their inner feelings," Crain glosses Hunt's claim by

adding: "As it became easier to imagine the feelings and interior lives of other people, it became harder to justify treating them with cruelty or systematic inequity."

This is a cogent enough observation (although it remains after-the-fact speculation), as long as a caveat is added: Novels, or at least certain kind of novels, can make it "easier to imagine the feelings and interior lives of other people," but this is a secondary effect of the novel as a form, not its reason for being. It exists to allow writers the opportunity to create aesthetically credible works of literary art in prose, not to champion human solidarity and facilitate good will toward men.

Crain further wonders whether "the recent decline in novel-reading in America hasn't got something to do with the country's new tolerance for torture and lack of concern about human rights." Specifically, he contrasts the attitude toward torture (violence more generally) conveyed by various visual media--advertisements, movies tv--with that encouraged by novels:

. . . Perhaps the brain's limbic system responds to the sight of violence without first checking with the forebrain to find out whether the image is fictional. In other words, a person who see a severed arm, or who sees Kiefer Sutherland shooting a Muslim prisoner, might become frightened, at some level, though perhaps not fully conscious of his fear. His limbic system sees a strong person harming a weak one; his moral faculties, meanwhile, are neutralized by his forebrain's awareness that the sight is fictional; and the limbic system, finding that the forebrain doesn't seem to care one way or the other, decides to side with the strong person. . . .

"Is it really possible," he asks, "to watch the famous torture scene in Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* all the way through and remain identified with the torture victim? Not only is the man mutilated and terrorized, but his torturers have all the good lines." Whereas

I can't think of a vividly imagined torture scene in written fiction where the reader sides with the torturer. Maybe this is because the novel's heyday happened to coincide with a faith in human rights, but maybe it has something to do with the cognitive processes involved. In reading, one's forebrain is fully engaged; when it disengages, reading stops. And to every part of you except perhaps your forebrain, reading seems safe. There's nothing about holding a book and turning its pages to alarm one's limbic system. In fact, nothing can be "seen" without first being imagined. . . .

Crain presumably knows more about the physiology of the limbic system than I do, so I'll take his word that the brain responds to images in the way he describes. That an intervening level of "imagining" is involved in reading seems intuitively correct, although I guess I'd like to see some neuroscientific evidence that reading about violence is as different an experience from being confronted with it—or its aesthetic representation—directly in filmed images as Crain thinks it is. As a literary critic, my engrained bias is that reading is a more complex phenomenon than viewing, that literature is in this sense an aesthetically richer form than film or television (although what about painting?), but still. Is it sufficiently more complicated as to make reading novels inherently part of the struggle to establish human rights?

I guess I can't immediately summon up a torture scene in fiction in which "the reader sides with the torturer," either, although much of the behavior depicted in, say, *A Clockwork Orange* seems just as cruel as outright torture, and I can't say I don't have some empathy for Alex and his droogs as they resist the curtailment of their freedom and, in Alex's case, free will. I may not like feeling such empathy, but most well-fashioned first-person narration produces an almost unavoidable identification with the narrator, an identification that might be repudiated but that still does exist. Bardamu, the protagonist of Celine's *Journey to the End of the Night*, is in many ways a pretty despicable character without much human fellow-feeling, but it's hard to deny that his narrative is powerful, his narrative voice compelling. We certainly find ourselves admiring him as a fictional creation, if not as a "person" we'd otherwise like to meet. Other novels in which we are invited to inhabit the world evoked by unpleasant or morally dubious characters come to mind as well (*Lolita* obviously, *The Stranger*, *Naked Lunch*), although perhaps Crain would contend that forcing us to sample "the feelings and interior lives" of such characters as these is actually itself a step toward clarifying "human rights" (even if it doesn't necessarily show us that "all people are fundamentally similar.")

It's not entirely clear what period Crain takes to be the "novel's heyday." Since Crain has mostly presented himself as a critic/scholar of 19th century American literature and culture, my immediate assumption is that he has the 19th century novel in mind (perhaps extending into the early 20th.) Thus one might infer that his concern for the decline in novel-reading is also an accompanying lament for the passing of the novel in its realist/character-centered phase (at least characters who are relatively unproblematic in their psychological make-up, who give us desired access to their "inner feelings.") We are no longer in that "heyday," and if we were, if the 19th century novel were still the paradigm current writers followed, presumably it would be attracting more readers and helping to spread human rights more efficaciously. Instead we're left with *24* and *Reservoir Dogs*.

Perhaps this is unfair to Crain's more fundamental, underlying argument that if more people were reading and fewer people relied on "edgy" television and film for their entertainment we'd live in a safer and more empathetic world. I'd like to think as well that a planet populated by fans of *Middlemarch* or *Portrait of a Lady* would be one less inclined to "cruelty or systematic inequity," although I do have my doubts. My biggest problem with Crane's analysis is that it strongly implies that a "novel" is properly that sort of thing that was written back in the "heyday" and that those writers of artistically adventurous prose such as Celine or Nabokov have helped to undermine their own enterprise by writing works of fiction that don't so transparently exteriorize "inner feelings" and thus foster human understanding. It may be that some novels, as Richard Rorty has it, "help us become less cruel"; it may even be that a contingent effect of the kind of heyday novel Crain extols was to create a cognitive bond between the reader and the imaginary "people" depicted therein, but reducing cruelty by promoting such a bond takes no more precedence in defining the novel as a literary form than does, say, Nabokov's insistence that great fiction produce a certain aesthetic "tingle" in the reader's spine.

## Avoiding Moral Chaos

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

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

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

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

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

Even if we accept that Scruton's description of the staging of this opera is true to its director's intent—and I would guess that many others in the audience that night did not see it in this way—his outrage is directed at its moral implications. It is "an example of something familiar in every aspect of our contemporary culture. It is not merely that artists, directors, musicians, and others connected with the arts are in flight from beauty. Wherever beauty lies in

wait for us, there arises a desire to preempt its appeal, to smother it with scenes of destruction." Scruton manages to connect this sort of "re-visioning" in the high arts to the music video, which "is often devoted to concentrating into the time span of a pop song some startling new account of moral chaos."

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

I suspect that Scruton does not want to examine the art he despises for its specific aesthetic failings because the very introduction of the "aesthetic" leads for him to the moral decadence he fears. "Beauty" is not to be found in the creations of artists separated from the moral universe to which they must conform:

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

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

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

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

"suffering flesh made pitiful" by an act of imagination (or, as Susan Sontag would have it, "will") itself an affirmation of life.

## *Realism*

### **Literary Realism**

In an article on "literary realism" in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Scott McLemee contends that, given the sociological and political approach exemplified by the realist writers he discusses, it is surprising that academic critics do not give more attention to them. This is probably true, but, on the other hand, it is not so surprising that critics interested in the specifically literary and aesthetic accomplishments of fiction would shy away from such writers as Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair, and James T. Farrell. Their work has little aesthetic appeal in the first place, although, to be fair to them, these writers really did not take up the writing of fiction for its aesthetic potential, anyway.

It's not quite clear why McLemee chose to focus on these particular writers if the object is to bring some attention to "realism" as a literary mode. The realists in American fiction are writers like James, Twain, Crane, and Edith Wharton, or the "colorists" such as Sarah Orne Jewett and Willa Cather. Lewis, Sinclair, Farrell, and Theodore Dreiser are really "naturalists," a further development of realism to be sure, but one that is inherently programmatic, that is to say, it is an approach that deliberately uses fiction to illustrate larger ideas about, in this case, the biological determinants of human nature and the clash of the biological and the social. Aside from Dreiser, these writers no longer hold anything but an historical interest, as examples of the later development of the naturalist mode and of writers who could be called "socially engaged" just before and after World War I.

I think we should preserve a distinction between the kind of social realism discussed in Scott McLemee's article and "literary realism" more concretely understood. If analysis of social conditions is what you want from fiction, then probably social realism is where you should go. Realism as an aesthetic strategy, however, requires that both writers and readers first of all put aside the consideration of social conditions and political debates. Well-conceived and -crafted literary realism might finally lead the reader to reflect on the state of society or on political ideas, but this would be a secondary effect, a consequence of the fact that the writer has taken a particular aesthetic strategy—to create an illusion of "real life" sufficiently compelling that the reader is willing to put aside the knowledge that it's constructed, finally just words on a page—and allowed it to reveal the integrity of its own internal logic, to go where it will.

Dreiser did manage to produce work with aesthetic integrity, even though it's clear enough in reading his books that he had the ambition to be a social philosopher as well. But Dreiser is a good example of a writer whose instincts for fiction to some extent subverted his more schematic intentions. (Flannery O'Connor is another example.) Although Dreiser was surely not subtle, his narratives have a power that comes much less from any insights he may have had into the grinding away of the social machinery than from the impression his novels

create that they have proceeded from their original arresting images—a young girl from the provinces on her way to start a new life in the city, a family of itinerant Christian proselytizers plying their trade on the streets—to dramatize the possibilities inherent in those images with great amplitude and discernment, the narrative unfolding in what finally seems the only way it could have developed. Both *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy* seem "real" in that they are faithful to the particulars their subjects already—naturally—seem to possess, their worlds and their characters built up out of accumulated details that give them credibility as fictions, no matter how readily we are tempted to interpret them as vehicles for the author's social commentary.

Something like this has to be true of any realist fiction that makes a claim on us as fiction rather than an excuse for dubious political or cultural analysis--and the latter would have to be dubious because making up stories is first of all not a very efficient way of engaging in such analysis and because there's nothing inherent in the act of writing fiction that gives the writer any particular wisdom to convey about politics or social arrangements. Again, an artfully composed work of realist fiction might provoke in readers some reflection on these topics, but it would be the result of the work's success in literary terms, its capacity to stand up to subsequent readings because of its aesthetic interest. Otherwise it is inevitable that "realist" works such as *The Jungle* or *Babbitt* or *Studs Lonigan* are ultimately going to be of concern mostly to the kinds of historians who, as McLemee laments, "treat realist fiction strictly for its documentary value" and who, in the words of one scholar McLemee quotes, "[l]ike strip miners,. . .rampage through texts, interested in only the most obvious social references." Unless it can be shown that books like these work first of all as skillfully shaped and convincing examples of literary art (and I admit I don't think this can be shown), they will in the future attract few readers other than these kinds of historians.

In his conclusion, McLemee discusses a current scholar's attempt to show that "a careful reading of the American writers reveals a stronger influence that issued from an incongruous source: the deep current of literary romance, exemplified in American literature by the work of Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne." He claims further that "The genre of romance -- with its strong tendency toward symbolism and its eruptions of the fantastic and the supernatural -- seems like an improbable influence on, say, Frank Norris." But the very first book to propose the Romance as the dominant strand of American fiction, Richard Chase's *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957), included a chapter on "Norris and Naturalism." Writes Chase: ". . .the youthful father of naturalism was in dead earnest in describing his works as romances. . .And in the brief years of his growing maturity. . .he wrote books that departed from realism by becoming in a unified act of the imagination at once romances and naturalistic novels." And of Dreiser Chase writes "[He] performed the considerable service of adapting the colorful poetry of Norris to the more exacting tasks imposed upon the social novelist—very much as James assimilated Hawthorne's imagination of romance into novels."

## **Fantastic Elements**

In an essay registering her curiosity about the current SF scene after several years' absence from it, Susannah Mandel notes a loosening of the idea that science fiction is "a ghettoized genre form, excluded due to its fantastic elements from the realm of respected, 'artistic' literature, which is dominated by the mode of narrative realism" (*Strange Horizons*). She further notes that a number of those previously associated with "artistic literature"—including Margaret Atwood, Cormac McCarthy, and John Updike—have recently at least dabbled in the "tropes, concepts, or premises historically associated with fantastic fiction" and wonders "How many of these writers have, historically, worked only as realists?"

It really isn't so surprising that writers nominally associated with "realism" would occasionally try out the tropes and premises of SF and other categories of genre fiction. Many such realists actually have a lot in common with most genre writers: Both are wedded to story, and both are motivated by an essentially realistic approach to storytelling. Although the stories being told in SF/Fantasy are more expressly "make-believe," they don't thereby get extra credit for being somehow more legitimately make-believe than realism. And even at its most conceptually fantastic in terms of plot and setting, most science fiction (at least in my reading experience) is even more earnestly realistic in presenting its characters and their interactions with their surroundings than most realism. Great efforts are made to present these characters and their actions in minute realistic detail, as if the author is describing a real world that just happens to be strangely transformed from ours.

Richard Larson, in a response to Mandel's essay, puts it this way: "many of the most prominent mainstream writers are. . .stretching the boundaries of realism to fit their needs within particular stories." These writers are "stretching the boundaries," not abandoning the territory. They are working "within particular stories," using genre "tropes" to create compelling narratives, a conception of the writer's job shared by both realist and fantasist.

Lawson suggests further that "People who like Cormac McCarthy and John Updike are not likely to enjoy Dan Simmons or William Gibson, no matter how much people within the genre community say that the books are just so similar" and that this is because these readers will notice in reading *The Road* or *Toward the End of Time* a difference in form that will override any similarities in content. While I doubt that either of these novels departs so thoroughly from the conventions of storytelling as to seem that alien to most readers of SF (I think the differences with these two writers are primarily stylistic differences), I do think Lawson is pointing out a salient distinction to be made between SF and a certain kind of "literary fiction." It's just that the literary fiction I have in mind has little to do with "realism."

Although Matthew Cheney thinks the "form-content distinction" is "more an occasionally useful illusion than an idea that really fosters good analysis" (*The Mumpsimus*), in this case the distinction is not just useful but absolutely necessary in understanding why the conflict between SF as "a ghettoized genre form" and "artistic literature" as "narrative realism" is largely illusory and certainly not a worthy battle to fight if the stakes include the right to claim the genre as an "alternative" to stuffed-shirt "literary" writing.

To put it succinctly: Why does Mandel, or any partisan of genre fiction, believe the relevant opposition is between realism and not-realism, the latter defined crudely as "fantasy"? Why does she assume that the dominant mode of "artistic" fiction in the 20th and now the 21st century has been and continues to be "realism" in the first place?

If we take the modernists as the founders of "artistic fiction," is it entirely accurate to think of them as realists? To be sure, Proust, Joyce, and Woolf pursued their formal and stylistic innovations partly to achieve what we would now call "psychological realism"—the idea that perception, what goes on inside the human head, is just as vital part of "reality" as what goes on "outside"—and thus *Ulysses* or *Mrs. Dalloway* could be called works of realism, if not conventionally so. But what about *Finnegans Wake*? *Orlando*? What about Kafka or Bulgakov? Is Faulkner best understood as a realist? Is this where his "artistry" lies?

Is it really plausible to claim that the important postwar, postmodern "artistic" fiction is realist? John Hawkes? Nabokov? Donald Barthelme? William Gass, Robert Coover, John Barth? Gilbert Sorrentino?

Among the younger generations of "artistic" writers, which are rightfully called realists? David Foster Wallace? Jonathan Lethem? George Saunders? Granted, a great deal of "literary fiction" of the past 25 or so years has turned away from the formal experimentation and stylistic chutzpah of the postmodernists, and even writers such as Ian McEwan and Richard Powers, whose earlier work could not at all be easily located in the realm of realism, have devolved into something resembling realists, but this sort of retrorealism hardly seems a worthy opponent in the war between reality-bending genre fiction and "artistic literature."

The most distinguished American realist currently still at work, Stephen Dixon, perhaps does stand as a worthy opponent in this conflict. Is Dixon's style of "narrative realism"—which leans heavily on the "realism" at the expense of "narrative"—what those who decry it have in mind? Certainly it eschews fantasy for an obsessive chronicle of the particulars of "real life," but his methods hardly seem representative of the "mode" Susannah Mandel thinks is dominant in current literary fiction. Indeed, one wonders whether Dixon's radical suspension of scene-setting and narrative drama isn't just a little too, well, radical for the genre radicals who think realism is too stodgy. Dixon's fiction illustrates just where the narrative realists and the narrative anti-realists are dancing to the same tune. It's experimental where they are stubbornly traditional: it implicitly posits that fiction has many more unexplored approaches to the depiction of human experience that go beyond the tired storytelling formulas shared by many narrative realists and narrative antirealists alike.

## **Radical Realism**

The fiction of Stephen Dixon starkly illustrates the difference between realism as a literary effect and "story" as a structural device, a distinction that is often enough blurred in discussions of conventional storytelling. "Realism" is the attempt to convince readers that the characters and events depicted in a given work are "like life" as most of us experience it, but, as

Dixon's stories and novels demonstrate, story or plot conceived as the orderly—or even not so orderly—arrangement of incidents and events for explicitly dramatic purposes need not be present for such an attempt to succeed. Few readers are likely to finish his novel, *Phone Rings* (2005) thinking it does not provide a comprehensive and intensely realistic account of its characters and their circumstances, and of the family relationships the novel chronicles, but many if not most will have concluded that fidelity to the stages in Freytag's Triangle has very little to do with its realism.

Which is not to say that *Phone Rings* has no story to impart, only that it is one that emerges in the narrative long run, through the accumulation of episodes and interchanges (in this case, as in Dixon's previous novel, *Old Friends*, interchanges over the telephone), although the episodes themselves retain a kind of narrative autonomy separate from their placement as points on a narrative arc. Ultimately, the whole is more than the sum of its parts, but the relationship between the parts is lateral, not linear, the story an aftereffect of Dixon's relentless layering of these episodic elements. (In some Dixon novels, such as, for example, *Interstate* or *Gould*, the repetitions, reversals, and transformations he effects through such layering become the story, or at least what makes the story memorable and gives these novels their aesthetically distinctive shape.) One could say that Dixon's commitment to realism precludes imposing "story" when doing so would only be a way of distorting reality by imputing to it more order and more direction than it in fact has.

Dixon's strategy of allowing his fiction to register the mundane and the contingent can seem obsessive, even perverse. In section 7 of *Phone Rings*, the novel's protagonist, Stu, makes breakfast for his wife. Through a chain of banal actions, Stu accidentally cuts himself with a bread knife. He serves the breakfast and talks with his wife about the fact that he's just cut himself with a bread knife, then, returning to the kitchen and seeing the knife, he wonders what might have happened if the knife had struck his carotid artery. He returns to his wife, who suggests he put a Band-Aid on the cut. The chapter concludes with Stu going back to the kitchen, where he attempts to recreate the situation that led to the accident:

He went back to the kitchen and got the bread knife and opened the refrigerator and wanted to reproduce the way the knife got stuck in the door, but couldn't find a place where it could have got caught. Just somewhere here, in the top shelf of the door, and then before he could do anything about it the knife, buckling under the pressure and something to do with realizing it was stuck and perhaps overcorrecting the situation by pushing the door too far back, sprung out of whatever it was into his neck. Okay, enough; forget about it as you said.

In section 10, "Brother of a neighbor dies. Stu reads about it in the *Sun*." Stu wonders whether he should send condolences, starts walking up the hill to the neighbor's house, decides not to after all, and returns home. "I'll just send a condolence card. I'll get it at the drugstore and speak to Peter about his brother sometime after," he says to his wife in the section's closing line.

While these set-pieces are loosely connected to the novel's overarching depiction of Stu's grief over the death of his brother, it certainly cannot be said they advance "plot" in any but the

most incremental sort of way—they present us with additional scenes from Stu's life, but do not reduce that life to the bare sum of those scenes. Each provides an equally significant account, however brief or however extended, of Stu's experience (just as the telephone conversations that make up a large portion of the novel's "action" remain self-contained exchanges that allow Stu to invoke past experiences), but *Phone Rings*, like much of Dixon's fiction, encourages us to consider the portrayal of its characters' experiences as an end-in-itself, not as the prop for a conventional narrative structure artificially imposed on these experiences.

However, if *Phone Rings* is a novel of character rather than plot, Dixon doesn't always seem at pains to delineate his characters with the expected kind of specificity. Here is a phone exchange between Stu and his brother Dan:

. . . "I'm only calling to tell you something that might interest you that happened today. Of course, also to hear how you are. But that, later, for I don't want to lose what I called to say, unless everything with you's not okay," and Dan said, "No, we're fine. What?" "I was going through my top dresser drawer to throw out all the useless papers and single socks and so on, and came across Dad's old business card," and Dan said "Which one? His dental office or the one he used after he lost his license and sold textiles for what was the company called. . . Lakeside?" and he said "Brookhaven. On Seventh Avenue and 38th." "And a third card. In fact, four," and Stu said "This one was for his 40th Street dental office--his last," and Dan said, "That's what I was getting to. First the Delancey Street office, which he had from 1919 till we moved to the West Side in '37, and he set up his practice there. Then Brookhaven, if you're right, and it sounds right--Brookfield or Brookhaven," and he said "Take my word, Haven". . . .

It is nearly impossible to distinguish between Stu and Dan based on their speech patterns and characteristics alone--and in this novel they are known primarily through their speech. Both exhibit the same tendency to free association and other kinds of roundabout locutions (perhaps influenced by American Jewish speech patterns), to digressive asides and fragmentary utterances. Moreover, many of the other characters in the novel talk like this as well, as if the novel's primary objective is to project a kind of collective voice or to create out of workaday language itself a collective character that is the ultimate focus of Dixon's interest.

This does not mean that the characters in *Phone Rings* are inadequately rendered or fail to convince as plausibly "real" people. If anything, Dixon's emphasis on the quotidian and the conditional only lends them authenticity—this is the way people actually do talk and act, after all—and his prose style more broadly so insistently restricts itself to the plain narrative essentials, refusing to indulge in figurative embellishments and descriptive decoration (literally sticking to the prosaic) that it might seem these characters are not the creations of writing at all but are merely being caught in the midst of their ongoing, preexisting lives. Thus, chapters begin like this:

His younger daughter comes into the bedroom and says, "Phone call for you."  
He's working at his work table and says, "Darn, I'm right in the middle of something.  
That's why I turned the ringer off." "Next time tell us to tell callers you're busy and you'll

call back," and he says "Next time I will, thanks," and gets up and picks up the phone receiver and says hello. "Uncle Stu, it's Manny." . . .

This goal of representing life as lived (right down to including details and dialogue most other writers would simply eliminate for efficiency's sake) may also be the motive behind Dixon's often excessively long paragraphs. To adjust his prose to the artificial demands of paragraphing would be a false way of representing the flow of experience, and Dixon's method in effect forces the reader to regard experience in this way—one thing after another. His style—and it is such, a deliberate effort to compose a style that seems without style—does produce a flattening effect, by which actions, thoughts and speech seem to occur on the same discursive plane and receive the same degree of emphasis, but this is more fundamentally the consequence of an approach that seeks to make its treatment of reality as material as possible. We don't get "psychological realism" from Stephen Dixon, at least insofar as that term indicates an effort to plumb the depths of consciousness, to approximate the ineffable. His characters think out loud: "He'd never told Dan this. Thought several times to but then thought better. Made Isaac swear not to tell Dan or Zee about it. 'Oh, on second thought, you can tell her,' after Isaac swore he'd never tell either, 'but not Dan. You do, he won't let me take you anywhere for the next few years. I know him. . . .'" What originates in Stu's ruminations becomes just another form of exposition.

I find Dixon's strategies immensely satisfying (he usually manages to extend them just a little bit farther with each book) and his ability to elicit from them compelling and often emotionally affecting fictions impressive indeed. He's one of the few writers to whose work the descriptions "experimental" and "realistic" seem to apply equally, although his inclination to the former is almost always a way of further securing the latter. His relative lack of popularity among even readers of serious literary fiction is both surprising and understandable: Surprising because he's finally such an engrossing and rewarding writer, understandable because his style of realism, shunning as it does the facile resort to "story," calls into question the idea that fiction functions to elucidate life by, figuratively at least, whipping it into shape.

## **Taking on Problems**

In the first chapter of his 2005 book, *Realist Vision*, Peter Brooks writes:

With the rise of the realist novel in the nineteenth century, we are into the age of Jules Michelet and Thomas Carlyle, of Karl Marx and John Ruskin, of Charles Darwin and Hippolyte Taine: that is, an age where history takes on new importance, and learns to be more scientific, and where theories of history come to explain how we got to be how we are, and in particular how we evolved from earlier forms to the present. It is the time of industrial, social and political revolution, and one of the defining characteristics of realist writing is I think a willingness to confront these issues. England develops a recognizable "industrial novel," one that takes on the problems of social misery and class conflict, and France has its "roman social," including popular socialist varieties.

To the extent that Brooks wants to link the rise of realist fiction to the rise of science and "theories of history," I can't really see how the former is influenced much by the latter, except specifically in the fiction of naturalist writers such as Emile Zola or, in the United States, Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser. These writers did indeed try to depict human behavior as it was defined by science—especially Darwinism—and by the forces of history. But these were writers who were deliberately using realism to illustrate a view of human life as determined by such external forces, not exploring the purely literary possibilities of realism as a still relatively new aesthetic strategy. They may have in a sense been portraying "things as they are," but they were doing it from an abstract philosophical perspective, not as an attempt to first of all render life in all of its particularities.

I equally don't understand why a defining feature of realism would be the willingness to "confront" issues or to "take on" social problems. If works of fiction are truly "realistic," immersed in the details of life as lived, they will naturally, sooner or later and in one way or another, engage with the issues and the problems of the times. There is no need to take that extra step, to insist that "issues" be confronted, unless the writer's (and the critic's) real interest lies in "taking on" social problems, on using fiction as a tool of social amelioration rather than regarding it as a self-sufficient form of literary art. To me, a "defining characteristic" of any fiction that can make a claim to be literary art, that can still be taken seriously in the long run, after the "social problems" of the day have been replaced by the next set, is that it not "confront" any issues or problems other than the literary problems immediately at hand.

Brooks's own insistence here that realism must "take on" larger social and cultural questions is actually contradicted, it seems to me, by what he asserts just a few paragraphs later:

You cannot, the realist claims, represent people without taking account of the things that people use and acquire in order to define themselves--their tools, their furniture, their accessories. These things are indeed part of the very definition of "character," of who one is and what one claims to be. The presence of things in these novels also signals their break from the neoclassical stylistic tradition, which tended to see the concrete, the particular, the utilitarian as vulgar, lower class, and to find beauty in the generalized and noble. The need to include and to represent things will consequently imply a visual inspection of the world of phenomena and a detailed report on it--a report often in the form of what we call description. The descriptive is typical--sometimes maddeningly so, of these novels. And the picture of the whole only emerges--if it does--from the accumulation of things.

This seems to me a pretty good account of what the best realist novels do: Draw the reader into a meticulously described world that the reader can accept as like the "real" world (keeping in mind that realistic description in fiction is just another device the writer can use, no more "authentic" than any other, given that what the reader is finally "confronted" with are just words on a page) and allow the reader to "see" the approximated world as fully as possible. If this sort of realism does bear philosophical implications, they are centered around the idea that the real is what is perceived. (Later, the "psychological" realists such as Woolf and Joyce would reject this; their fiction finds the real in how things are perceived, by focusing on the internal processes of

consciousness.) But finally the art of realism lies in the way "things" are organized, in the manner and the skill with which the writer entices the reader to take note of the illuminating details.

Such an approach seems wholly at odds with the notion that realist fiction makes the reader aware of historical abstractions and social "issues." (The "generalized" rather than the "concrete.") "Things as they are" in the one seem on a wholly different scale than "things as they are" in the other. We can be made aware in fiction, subtly if implicitly, of historical change or social conflict, but only by acknowledging that the "defining characteristic" of realism is its particular approach to aesthetic representation, not its willingness to "take on" non-literary "problems."

Thus, an analysis of realism that emphasizes taking on social problems as a defining characteristic requires a skeptical attitude toward the literary art of two of realism's ostensible founding figures, Charles Dickens and Gustave Flaubert. Brooks writes of Dickens's *Hard Times*, perhaps his own most concentrated portrayal of the social conditions of Victorian England:

By its play on the streets and surfaces of Coketown, the narratorial prose upholds that ideal evoked in the allusion to the *Arabian Nights*: the play of fancy, of metaphor, of magic and the counterfactual. The narratorial language is constantly saying to Coketown, as to Gradgrind and company, I am not prisoner of your system, I can transform it, soar above it, through the imaginative resources of my prose.

This is Brooks's ultimate judgment on Dickens as a writer who evokes the surfaces of realistic description, at times soars above them, but doesn't really grapple with the "issues" behind them: he writes too much. As Brooks puts it a little later, Dickens engages in "the procedure of turning all issues, facts, conditions, into questions of style." Rather than acknowledging that "Everything in the conditions of Coketown. . .cry out for organization of the workers," Dickens just plays his grandiose language games. He makes "the questions posed by industrialism too much into a trope."

For Brooks, *Hard Times* is not so much a "taking on" of the harsh realities of 19th century England but a retreat from them into. . .literature. Dickens doesn't attempt the politically-directed representation of these forces but instead the "nonrepresentation of Coketown in favor of something else, a representation of imaginative processes at work, a representation of transformative style at play on the world." It is difficult at times in reading this chapter to remember that Brooks intends such words as criticism. The "representation of imaginative processes at work" that Brooks describes here has always seemed to me one of the triumphs of Dickens's fiction.

Brooks gestures at granting Dickens his artistic preferences, but it's pretty clear from his discussion of *Hard Times* that he doesn't value these preferences in the same way he values fiction "that takes on the problems of social misery and class conflict," or at least that does so without turning them into tropes. Certainly Brooks doesn't want to admit Dickens's fiction, with

its out-of-control "narratorial prose" and its stubborn insistence on imagination, into the club of respectable realism.

With Flaubert, Brooks is less impatient with his style per se but still essentially accuses Flaubert of writing too much--of being preoccupied with writing, in this case of being fixated on structure and on detail ("le most juste"). According to Brooks:

. . .it may be precisely in this disciplining of his imagination to something he loathes that the arduous perfection of *Madame Bovary* is forged. There is nothing natural about this novel. It is absolutely the most literary of novels, Henry James said--which he did not mean entirely as praise. There is indeed something labored about the novel, its characters, plot, milieu are all constructed with effort. Everything, as Flaubert understands it, depends on the detail.

Flaubert's insistence on detailed description makes Brooks think that *Madame Bovary* "is the one novel, among all novels, that deserves the label 'realist'," but this conclusion does not leave him sanguine. Flaubert's sort of realism is too insular, too much the excuse for building an elaborate aesthetic construction where "everything depends on the detail." Unfortunately, the detail doesn't add up to a "confrontation" with the world, doesn't even add up to a coherent whole at all:

Rhetorically, I suppose you would call all of those riding crops and cravats and shirt buttons in Balzac's world synecdoches: they are parts that stand for an intelligible whole. In Flaubert's world, however, they seem more like *apparent* synecdoches, in that often the whole is never given, never quite achieved. While Emma is frequently described, we never quite see her whole. She and her world never quite cohere.

Further: "It is as if the parts of the world really are what is most significant about it—the rest may simply be metaphysics." Flaubert's very approach to realism, then, precludes a fiction that takes on problems other than the problems of representation themselves, beginning with the representation of Emma Bovary: "Emma is surely one of the most memorable 'characters' of the novels we have read, we want to construct her fully as a person, we live with her aspirations, delusions, disappointments. Yet we repeatedly are given to understand that as a living, breathing, character-construction, Emma is a product of language—of her reading, and reveries on her reading, and of the sociolects that define her world." When Brooks claims there is "something labored" about *Madame Bovary*, he intends it as "le mot juste" in describing Flaubert's relationship with language: "Writing was such a slow and painful process for Flaubert because he had to make something new, strange, and beautiful out of a language in essence commonplace."

"New, strange, and beautiful," it would seem, are finally incommensurate with "realism" as Peter Brooks would have us define it. Despite their importance as writers moving fiction toward a greater realism of representation—the attempt to create the illusion of life as lived by ordinary people—neither Dickens nor Flaubert can finally be embraced as true-blue realists dedicated to confronting the issues of the age. Both of them seem too interested in writing to be reliable social critics, the role Brooks appears to think supersedes all else in the realist's job

description. Brooks almost seems to suggest that "art" and "realism" are mutually exclusive terms.

### **James Wood on Realism**

In his essay "The Blue River of Truth," Wood elaborates on his own ideas about literary realism while also responding to Brooks's *Realist Vision*. Wood begins his essay by quoting two "anti-realist" statements (one by the novelist Rick Moody) and declares them to be "typical of their age." Realism, we are told, is now widely considered "stuffy, correct, unprogressive." It's a little hard to know whether Wood considers this attitude "typical" only of critics and other commentators on contemporary fiction or whether this is a "finely characteristic" belief about realism held by most writers and readers. If he means the latter, he couldn't be more wrong. Judging from the fiction that actually gets published and reviewed, the vast (vast) majority of literary fiction is still safely realistic, even to the extent of focusing on "Mind" in the form of psychological realism, the source for Wood of most of fiction's satisfactions. Any honest assessment of the kind of novels showing up on Barnes and Noble's fiction shelves would have to conclude that psychological realism is still the order of the day. That Wood would disregard this fact is not that surprising, since most of these books are mediocre and, if anything, illustrate quite persuasively that this mode of realism is indeed, as John Barth once put it, "exhausted."

"The major struggle in American fiction today is over the question of realism," writes Wood. "Anywhere fiction is discussed with partisan heat, a fault line emerges, with 'realists' and traditionalists on one side, and postmodernists and experimentalists on the other." I think this is wrong as well. Postmodernism began to be superseded by various neotraditional practices in the mid-to-late 1970s, although some of the true postmodernists—Barth, Coover, Sorrentino—did continue to produce interesting work on into their literary dotage. And compared to the "experimental" work of these writers—*Lost in the Funhouse*, *Mulligan Stew*, etc.—the more adventurous writers who followed them are hardly radical innovators. Richard Powers has been an interesting writer, but he's hardly a programmatic metafictionist. T. Coraghessan Boyle has settled into a more or less conventional kind of satire. In my opinion, David Foster Wallace is closer to being a psychological realist—albeit of a somewhat twisted kind—than he is a postmodernist. There are other, less well-known writers who continue to explore the possibilities of self-referentiality or who have revived a form of surrealism, but we shouldn't pretend that they have a very high profile or constitute some kind of "movement" against realism comparable to the postmodernism of the 1960s and 1970s. If there is a "struggle" in current fiction, it is between those who write a conventional kind of character- or plot-driven fiction more or less auditioning to become movies and those who still seek to discover what the possibilities of fiction might be beyond its role as source of film adaptation, what fiction can do better than other narrative or dramatic arts. Realism itself doesn't necessarily have anything to do with this.

I agree with Wood that too many people think of realism as a "genre," confusing realism per se with "a certain kind of traditional plot, with predictable beginnings and endings." Moody is quoted as deploring realism's "epiphanies, its rising action, its predictable movement. . . ." But

these things are more properly associated with orthodox narrative conventions (embodied in "Freytag's Triangle") than with realism strictly understood. Indeed, one could argue that truly realistic fictions would avoid neat divisions of plot and anything at all "predictable," since "real life" does not unfold like well-made stories. I also agree that the great 19th century realists were actually radicals in their time, overturning as they did the picaresque and romantic modes of storytelling they'd inherited from the first generation of novelists in favor of narratives that focused more on details of setting and on creating plausibly "lifelike" characters. And I certainly agree that "There is no writing without convention," making it most important to "be alive to the moment when a literary convention becomes dead," not to assume that the ultimate goal is to free fiction from convention altogether.

Perhaps my biggest problem with James Wood's approach to fiction is embodied in this statement: "There is, one could argue, not just a 'grammar' of narrative convention, but also a grammar of life—those elements without which human activity no longer looks recognizable, and without which fiction no longer seems human." Much of the fiction Wood reviews unfavorably is, in one way or another, ultimately charged with this offense, that it doesn't "seem human." He so conflates a particular aesthetic strategy with the representation of the "human" that the writers of whom he disapproves are more or less declared "inhuman," their work morally grotesque. (This seems to me the upshot of Wood's recent dismissal of Cormac McCarthy, for example.) But this is a wholly unjustified substitution of "human" for "realistic." Since all writers are human beings writing about their own human experiences or those of other human beings, how can any work of fiction be something other than "human" at its core? It may not provide James Wood with a sampling of the human that meets his high moral standards, but to suggest that the dispute between realists and anti-realists is over who gets to be more "human" seems to me supremely unjust, if not simply absurd.

Furthermore, it turns out that what a work of fiction needs to be "recognizable" as human is to conform to W. J. Harvey's "constitutive category":

The four elements of this category are, he suggests, Time, Identity, Causality, and Freedom. I would add Mind, or Consciousness. Any fiction that lacked all five elements would probably have little power to move us. The defense of this broad idea of mimesis should not harden into a narrow aesthetic, for it ought to be large enough to connect Shakespeare's dramatic mimesis, say, with Dickens's novelistic mimesis, or Dostoevsky's melodramatic mimesis with Muriel Spark's satiric mimesis, or Pushkin's poetic mimesis with Platonov's lyrical mimesis.

As far as I can tell, what this means is that fiction needs to be "realistic" enough that it doesn't collapse into the "entirely random and chaotic." (Although in adding "Mind, or Consciousness," Wood again ups the ante. Now it must not only depict "plausible human activity," it must do so with psychological plausibility.) Does Wood really think there are many works of fiction that don't meet this minimal standard? Is experimental fiction merely a descent into chaos? In order to rescue the innovative fiction he apparently likes, Wood broadens his definition of "plausible" even further: "Kafka's *Metamorphosis*" and Hamsun's *Hunger* and Beckett's *Endgame* are not representations of likely or typical human behavior; but they draw their power, in part, from their

connection to the human." Well, of course they do. How could they do otherwise? The question is whether in so doing they have done it artfully, and whether the art involved had to be "realistic" in the less sweeping sense of the term. (And I confess to having no idea what "melodramatic mimesis" might be.)

The most provocative thing Wood has to say in his essay may be his assertion that "both sides in this argument are perforce Flaubert's children—Flaubert being at once the greatest realist and the great anti-realist, the realist who dreamed of abolishing the real, the luxurious stylist who longed to write 'a book about nothing, a book with no external attachment.'" Unless Wood deplores Flaubert for his "luxury," for his effort to transcend mere documentary description, one now wonders why he finds fault with the anti-realists. If they too are among Flaubert's children, then they are only attempting to live up to his ideal of the autonomy and integrity of literary art. They just don't think that realism as he understood it is the only way to accomplish this. Wood says further of Henry James that he "found Flaubert's realism exemplary but lacking, because he felt that it did not extend to a subtle moral scrutiny of the self." If Wood agrees with James, then we have arrived at his real complaint against the anti-realists: It's not that they fail to recognize the centrality of "realism" (Wood has already defined the term so broadly as to essentially render it meaningless, anyway), it's that they fail to engage in "moral scrutiny." He objects to this group of Flaubert's offspring not on aesthetic but on moral grounds.

In his concluding paragraph, Wood asks us to "imagine a world in which the only possible novel available was, say, Pynchon's *Vineland* and books like it. It would be a hysterical and falsifying monotony. By contrast, a world in which the only available novel was, say, *A House for Mr. Biswas* would be a fearfully honest, comic, tragic, compassionate, and above all deeply human place." Now, I happen to like both of these books (*Vineland* less than either *V* or *Gravity's Rainbow*, however). I'm glad we live in a world where both kinds of books are available. It would seem, however, that Wood could be perfectly content in a zero-sum world occupied only by Naipaul. No variety is necessary because this would be a "deeply human place." (What kind of place would the Pynchon world be? Superficially primatial?) Note as well the way in which this comparison is made in the form of moral judgment. Pynchon is "hysterical" and "falsifying." Naipaul is "honest" and "compassionate." James Wood is perfectly entitled to elevate Naipaulian realism and denigrate Pynchonian anti-realism (if that's what he wants to call them—I don't think either term does either writer much justice). I do wish he wouldn't call those of who like the sort of thing a writer like Pynchon does hysterics and liars.

### *The Study of Literature*

#### **Course Requirements**

In an essay at *The New Yorker*, Louis Menand recounts an episode from early in his career as a professor in which a student asked him, "Why did we have to buy this book?" Continuing in the student's mercantile language, Menand avers that the student was "asking me

to justify the return on investment in a college education. I just had never been called upon to think about this before. It wasn't part of my training. We took the value of the business we were in for granted."

Menand proposes three possible answers to the student's question. The first simply asserts that "you're in college, and these are the kinds of books that people in college read." The second assures the student "You're reading these books because they teach you things about the world and yourself that, if you do not learn them in college, you are unlikely to learn anywhere else." The most baldly utilitarian response has it that "advanced economies demand specialized knowledge and skills, and, since high school is aimed at the general learner, college is where people can be taught what they need in order to enter a vocation."

The third answer is the one now implicitly given by the school as part of the state apparatus, and Menand expresses the usual dismay at the pass to which we have come when this is the primary justification for reading books in college (although he does also acknowledge that the situation isn't likely to change). However, I can't see that the other two answers are any better. The first would be true if this were 1935 and all college students were undergraduates at Yale, but it hardly describes the situation we're in now. The second, which is Menand's own preferred answer, spells out perhaps the underlying justification for answer one, but if college students are no longer interested in learning "things about the world and yourself" in return for their "investment" in college (which in my experience they indeed are not, to the extent they ever were), this answer is no more compelling than the first.

The problem with all three answers, ultimately, is that they tie the value of reading a book (I'm assuming Menand has in mind primarily works of literature, since he's an English professor) to its potential value to the institution of college, to the school (most charitably, to the goals of "education"). In my opinion, a better answer would be something like this: "You should read that book because it's a significant book of its kind, one that anyone studying \_\_\_\_\_ ought to read." In my opinion, a literature professor's first allegiance is to literature, or to the period/genre/national literature the course covers, and as long as the college where the professor is employed requires or encourages its students to take courses in literature, this answer should suffice. All questions concerning the place of literature in a college curriculum need to be answered by administrators or campus committees, not by the individual professor otherwise just doing his/her job.

Perhaps the time has come to reconsider the literature requirement, however. Most of the justifications that need to be made of reading assignments occur in courses in which the majority of students would not be there if taking such a course were not a degree requirement in "general education." Although generally speaking I think it a good idea for as many people as possible to read as many worthwhile books as possible, I'm pretty sure that materializing this broad aspiration into specific college course requirements has not worked out that well. It has especially not worked out well for literature. Courses in "Introduction to Literature" or "American Literature, Beginnings to the Present" are hopelessly incapable of fulfilling the aspiration, at best providing some students with some "information" about the subject they might later be able to recall, at worst making most students resentful of being compelled to take the

course and less likely to follow up on the assigned reading with voluntary reading of their own. Given the career and personal goals of most of the students who take such courses, there really isn't a good answer for them to the question posed by Menand's student. Frankly, I don't see why these students should have to buy the books to take this sort of course, and I don't really want to teach them.

Students who take literature courses voluntarily, or choose to major in English, Comparative Literature, etc., are implicitly agreeing to accept the instructor's judgment about what books are appropriate for them to read. They would have cause for complaint only if it were determined the instructor's judgment is demonstrably faulty or if the instructor is a demonstrably bad teacher of the subject. An instructor (not just in literature) should be asked to know his/her subject well and to present it with integrity. He/she should not be asked to justify the entire project of higher education as it currently stands.

Of course, a great deal of instruction in "literature," particularly in the bigger universities and more prestigious liberal arts colleges (as opposed to, say, community colleges and many "regional" universities) is no longer instruction in literature. Literature is instead used to indeed "teach you things about the world" through cultural studies or to improve "thinking" through critical theory. Perhaps this development over the past twenty-five years or so has managed to keep what are still labeled as literature courses in the curriculum, but soon enough the question "why did we have to buy this book?" will be a question about some theorist's magnum opus, not Melville. At that point, the utilitarian answer may actually be the most truthful one.

## **Normative Conclusion**

In a post on his *Think Again* blog about the misappropriation of deconstruction by American academics, Stanley Fish writes:

. . . No normative conclusion — this is bad, this must be overthrown — can legitimately be drawn from the fact that something is discovered to be socially constructed; for by the logic of deconstructive thought everything is; which doesn't mean that a social construction cannot be criticized, only that it cannot be criticized for being one.

Among literary scholars, there are many who regard works of literature as a kind of social construction. In this view, a given work cannot be granted a special status as "art" separated from history or culture, since it is permeated with both. For literary study in its historicist and cultural studies incarnations, literature gives us access to the historical/cultural forces that worked through the writer to author the work, the exposure of which forces is the most important work of academic criticism. Literary art as an autonomous accomplishment that deserves consideration in its own right is not just shunted aside but is dismissed outright as a delusion.

Behind this rejection of the "literary" as anything other than a window on culture and beyond that mostly an imposition by overweening writers claiming an exalted power they don't ultimately possess is an attitude that might indeed be described as "normative conclusion" as Fish uses the term. Writers are inevitably responding to the social conditions of their time; they

can't escape the historical contingencies that inform their assumptions about the world; their works might help us understand how culturally-bound beliefs get circulated around and through all culturally-inscribed modes of expression, but they certainly can't be considered as distinctive aesthetic objects produced by the play of human imagination. The notion that a work of literature might, in its encounter with particular readers, transcend the conditions, contingencies, and cultural presuppositions of its creation, at least for the moment of the reader's experience, just can't be countenanced. No text can escape the confines of its social construction.

Thus all literary works are "just" social constructions. And this conclusion has become the basis of the most widely-practiced forms of academic criticism, whereby poems and stories and novels (particularly the latter) are scrutinized for their socially-constructed representations, as if they were being punished for being found complicit with all the evils with which "culture" can be charged. But, as Fish points out, a specific work can be criticized for advancing a particular socially constructed vision that might be found objectionable (which in most cases means it has failed at being art in the first place), but it can hardly be criticized for being a social construction to one degree or another. Writers are human beings, not members of some alien species, so they cannot finally escape their circumstances as human beings, their being alive at a certain time, in a certain place, with all the attendant assumptions and perspectives that time and place embody.

Ultimately, then, to say that a work of literature is inescapably a social construction is precisely to say nothing. Of course it is. How could it be otherwise? That it can also be a work of art, "art" being defined not as something insulated from history and culture, outside of time and place, but as we human beings in all our socially constructed attitudes and expectations choose to define it as we go along, seems to me not only possible but indispensable. Sometimes writers manage to raise themselves to an awareness of the social constructedness of aesthetic conventions and conventional discourse and compel their readers to rise to such an awareness as well. Sometimes they even work toward the dissolution of certain especially noxious social constructions. They don't always succeed in these efforts to confront social constructions, because they can't. We remain blind to some of them, especially if they're constructions of which we approve or which otherwise help us get our work done. But this is no reason to hold all of literature responsible for this unavoidable human failing.

### **Don't Ask the Professors**

In a *New York Times* profile of novelist Steve Stern, we get this from Harold Bloom:

"I started to read Stern thinking I would just dip into it," Mr. Bloom said in a telephone interview from his home in New Haven. "But he has gusto, exuberance, panache; this is immensely readable and vibrant."

And then Mr. Bloom asked, "Who is he?"

I have great respect for Harold Bloom as a literary critic. If anything, his response to Steve Stern only reinforces my high opinion of his critical acumen. But that Bloom was unfamiliar with

Stern's work not only indicates the degree to which Stern is unjustly neglected by the current literary scene, but also how little we should in general rely on English professors, "literary scholars" more broadly, for insight about contemporary literature. Bloom keeps up with current writers more thoroughly than most academic critics—especially for a critic whose specialty is Romantic poetry—but that a writer as accomplished as Steve Stern remains unknown to him speaks volumes about the essential disconnection between literary academics (excluding creative writers) and the larger literary world populated by writers and readers of contemporary work.

In my opinion, a good case can be made that the operative definition of what constitutes "literature" in the first place should come from the practice of current writers. They—and their readers—have inherited the literary tradition studied by academics and are expanding and modifying that tradition through their ongoing work. Thus critics and scholars interested in understanding the literary impulse, the nature of literature and the possibilities of literary form, ought to be attending to contemporary writers.

But this is not what happens, of course. Through academic study the procession of writers and works that make up literary history are carved into periods and "specialties," and academic scholars, even those most up-to-date on reigning theories or critical approaches, usually spend their time becoming experts on these periods. I know from experience that many such scholars think of "their" writers as the most interesting or rewarding writers one might study, and tend to regard contemporary writers as at best "untested," at worst a sad decline from the standards set in the Renaissance, or the 18th century, or even in the first half of the twentieth century. In this context it would not be surprising at all for most English professors to respond to the names of even more well-known writers than Steve Stern with Bloom's "Who is he/she?"

Over the past 40-50 years an academic specialty called, strangely enough, "Contemporary Literature" arose partly as a reaction to this attitude on the part of literary scholars. It was designed by those who helped establish it as an academic discipline to bring more attention to contemporary writing, to demonstrate that it, too, was worthy of serious academic attention. For a while this happened. Current writers were the subjects of numerous very good scholarly books in the 1970s and 1980s, and courses in contemporary literature came to be taught in most English departments. But even this "specialty" in contemporary literature has, in my opinion, turned out to be mostly unhelpful in creating real interest in current writing and in contributing to anything that could be called a "literary culture" in the United States. It, too, has been carved into various sub-specialties, has become atomized and fragmented. Scholars of postmodernism don't often have much to say to scholars specializing in feminist writers, who don't generally have much to say to those studying minority writers, and none of these academic critics usually speak much to the creative writers.

Thus the last person you should probably approach for an informed opinion of contemporary literature would be an English professor. The best you will probably get is someone like Bloom, who is willing to read current writing and take it seriously; at worst you will get outright disdain or condescension. (Which doesn't mean the professor will refrain from making a pronouncement on the writer or work in question.) Most literature professors don't think that much about what "literature" might be as a vital, continuing practice, only about what

it was at some time in the past. The word has indeed meant different things to different people at different times. "Historicizing" is a perfectly nice thing to do, and sometimes it tells us interesting things about the poetry and fiction we still continue to read. For myself, I generally prefer to concentrate on what serious writing can do for us in the here and now, which requires keeping up a little bit on the new books and writers who can help us achieve this goal.

### **General Symbolic Interpretation**

In "The Critic as Ethnographer," (*New Literary History*) Richard Van Oort) writes:

The discipline of literature is no longer restricted to literature. Literature still forms a large part of what we study in English and Modern Language departments, but our interest in the interpretation of classic works. . .has been extended to embrace all kinds of other texts, including texts that do not appear to be literary at all, for example, oral testimonies, rituals, advertisements, pop music, and clothing.

But in what sense are these nonliterary objects "texts"? They are texts because they invite interpretation. But what is interpretation? Interpretation is the symbolic process whereby we translate the significance of one thing by seeing it in terms of another. For example, to those who worship it, the totem at the center of the rite is not just a piece of wood (that is, an object to be described in terms of its intrinsic physical and chemical structure); it is also a symbol of the deity who inhabits the wood as a living presence. . .

This irreducible anthropological fact explains the current preoccupation in literary studies with culture as an object of general symbolic interpretation. For if humanity is defined as the culture-using animal, and if culture is defined as that object which invites symbolic interpretation, then it follows that literary studies stands at the center of an anthropology founded on these assumptions. For who is better trained than the literary critic in the exercise of searching for symbolic significance, of reading beyond the literary surface to see the deeper, more *sacred meaning* beneath?

Even if you accept the qualifying statement that literature "still forms a large part of what we study in English," the rest of the passage makes it clear to what use literature is being put by the "ethnographic" approach described by this writer: The study of literature is merely an "anthropology" whereby, along with the other "non literary objects" mentioned, it serves as a case study for interrogation into "culture as an object of general symbolic interpretation." Van Oort advocates reducing the study of literature to a branch of the social sciences, bypassing whatever purely "literary" value a work of literature might have in favor of the social and cultural "information" that might be wrung from it. I would argue that this has become the most prevalent approach to literary study among academic critics already, supplemented most recently by the literal information to be gleaned through data mining in "digital" scholarship.

I don't particularly have any objection to studying such things as rituals or pop music or clothing, "texts" about which interesting things might be said using a method of analysis that

could very loosely be called "literary"—one of my own academic subspecialties was film—but the move toward critically examining such things has a) siphoned off interest in literature itself, the subject that ostensibly forms the core of this discipline, and b) led to a general levelling of evaluation, by which literature is seen as no more interesting, meaningful, or valuable than these other objects of scrutiny. I don't even necessarily have a problem with this, but it does seem to me that those engaged in this sort of "general symbolic interpretation" ought to confess that they don't really care much about literature, and ought as well to be willing to relinquish title to "literature" as the nominal subject of their critical efforts. If "culture" needs to be studied in the way Oort would have it, fine, but why not allow literary criticism per se, which has now been held hostage by academic critics for forty years or more, to be returned to those who want to read and write about literature for its own sake?

In my opinion, many academic scholars want to retain "literature" as the name of what they profess because they perceive it to still have a certain intellectual cachet they couldn't claim if they admitted they'd rather study clothing. They do their best to dress up their real interests by talking about "interpretation" and "symbolic processes," but finally studying advertisements and tv sitcoms just doesn't elevate their sense of worth as highly as the title of "literature professor." That Van Oort is driven to speak of the "sacred meaning" to be found in the subjects of "ethnographic" criticism to me only suggests that he and his like-minded colleagues are desperate to find profound significance in their study of what could simply be called trivia and detritus.

And not only is Van Oort's definition of interpretation itself—"searching for symbolic significance"—the sort of thing that has always struck fear in the freshman literature student, but it is precisely the orientation to reading and to the formal study of literature that Susan Sontag had in mind when she wrote "against interpretation" and called for a new "erotics" of art, including literature. The description of the "discipline of literature" provided here by Van Oort is one that indeed enforces "discipline" on works of literature, of a sort more reminiscent of the archaeologist than the anthropologist, digging "beyond the literary surface" to the foundational "meaning" to be discovered there. Sontag had this to say about such an endeavor:

Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all.

The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art—and, by analogy, our own experience—more, rather than less real to us. The function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*.

Of course, I would not claim that something like Sontag's notion of an "erotics" of reading—an unmediated or aesthetically pure experience of a work of literature—could be the basis of academic literary study in any sustained way commensurate with the requirements of disciplinary scholarship, if at all. While I can't finally think of anything more truly useful to students of literature than the attempt to encourage this kind of reading, the difficulties of accomplishing it in a high school or college classroom are probably insurmountable. Finally it

can only be left to individuals to learn for themselves how to value literature simply for the pleasure of reading it. But the heavy-handed approach advocated by the likes of Richard Van Ornt is not an adequate substitute. If "ethnography" is the only way by which literature and literary criticism can be incorporated into a college curriculum or into academic scholarship, best to leave them be.

Perhaps literature and the academy have finally proven to be not such a good "fit." If historians or philosophers or sociologists (or literature professors, for that matter) want to use works of literature to illuminate or illustrate non-literary issues in those disciplines I surely have no objection, but I just can't see how such practices could be called part of "literary study" unless, again, the word "literary" is simply an empty expression having something to do with "writing." I have an especially hard time seeing how adopting such practices in courses nominally devoted to "literature" adds much to the understanding of either literature or any of the other disciplinary subject to which it is subsumed. At what point do we say that, as far as the academy is concerned, both literature and "the literary" have become so thoroughly shorn of any value in particular that it's no longer very useful to claim them as subjects at all?

## **Literary Periods**

There are some writers who are, and likely always will be, inextricably linked to the "period" with which their work is associated, and in many cases helped to define. Surely Wordsworth and Keats will always be "Romantic" poets, while Faulkner and Woolf will remain modernists, as the term "modern" has been fully appropriated to describe the historical era beginning just before World War I and ending with the coming of World War II (the 1920s in particular representing the truest efflorescence of modernism). Anyone who has taken a college literature course knows that the English department (and literary study more broadly) organizes itself using these sorts of historical designations, but this way of understanding literary history has become so pervasive that probably few readers regard it as an especially "academic" assumption.

In *Why Literary Periods Mattered: Historical Context and the Prestige of English Studies*, Ted Underwood proposes that such a view of the literary past—through "periodization"—ultimately does not in fact derive from academic literary study but from a more general perspective on history introduced by a popular source, the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott. Scott "was celebrated specifically for his power to recreate particularized historical moments in intimate social detail," writes Underwood, "and the English professors who introduced period survey courses to universities in the 1840s modeled their new courses implicitly on Scott's accomplishment." Scott's ability to "recreate particularized historical moments" somewhat paradoxically depends on the reader's awareness of an essential discontinuity in history, a recognition that the past is fundamentally different, irretrievable by study or representation except through contrast with the present. "Historical contrast" thus came to seem the logical way to organize a curriculum in English literature, since works of the literary

past (at the time the only works that might conceivably be taught) are presumably marked as well by historical variance.

Underwood's book is valuable not least for the account it gives of the establishment of English literature as a university subject (at University College—then the University of London—and King's College) in the 1840s, prior to the efforts to introduce English as a field of study chronicled by Gerald Graff in *Professing Literature*, otherwise the definitive history of the rise of "English studies," particularly in the United States. Graff frames the debate about whether the study of vernacular literature should have a place in the university as between "philology" and "criticism," with the advocates of the latter arguing that studying literature for its own sake is justified because it helps to cultivate critical reading skills, against the linguistic/historical approach of the former, whereby literature serves as a source for the study of the development of language per se. Underwood's analysis shows that underlying the triumph of criticism was the organizing principle of historical periodization, which survived all of the changes of critical approach that have characterized modern literary study, from the initial dominance of New Criticism to its later supplanting by critical theory and cultural studies.

This certainly suggests that periodization has been useful to the academy, so much so that Underwood believes most academic scholars and critics simply take it for granted, and in fact often resist the idea that some other organizing strategy might better suit literary study. By the end of the book Underwood more or less concludes that it is indeed time for English departments to reconsider periodization as the curricular norm, but the primary burden of *Why Literary Periods Mattered* is to illuminate why literary periods did indeed matter, and why the period course continued to endure even though there were challenges to its dominion and the orientation of literary study toward its subject, literature, has changed rather profoundly.

The most logical alternative to organization by period would be an organization emphasizing continuity through genre, through "types" of literary practice, or through "issues" that arise across generic boundaries or even across nationalities. This sort of alternative was offered by "comparative literature" in its earliest manifestation. The comparatists, according to Underwood, "sought to explain continuous processes of development" and thus "challenged the whole underlying notion that literary study ought to be organized around discrete movements at all." But comparative literature pretty quickly evolved into the discipline as we know it today, in American universities emphasizing literature in translation (at its most anodyne a vague sort of "world literature"). Soon enough comp lit courses were also being offered through periodization: "The literary curriculum was already organized around nations and periods. To gain entry to the curriculum, comparative literature generally had to borrow faculty from departments of national literature and adapt itself to a periodized structure." Eventually, comparative literature became just as preoccupied with critical theory as English studies, managing to make it compatible with a period structure in both scholarship and course offerings. Underwood argues, in fact, that the view of history represented by a theorist such as Foucault actually accommodates itself quite nicely to periodization.

The real blow against comparative literature's incipient challenge to historical periodization in the literature curriculum was struck by Rene Wellek, a supporter of New

Criticism and himself a comparatist. Wellek believed that a literature curriculum needed to combine “critical evaluation” with literary history, and that periodization was the only way to do that. For Wellek, the challenge was to preserve a place for literary study that was distinctively literary, that did not simply loan out literature to approaches more interested in history or the study of culture more broadly. Underwood quotes Wellek’s expression of concern that

The study of everything connected with the history of civilization will crowd out strictly literary studies. All distinctions will fall and extraneous criteria will be introduced into literature, and literature will necessarily be judged valuable only insofar as it yields results for this or that neighboring discipline.

Wellek is essentially arguing that literary study, whose status within the modern research university was already precarious, could maintain itself as an academic discipline only if it remained self-evidently *about* literature. Once the study of literature had been admitted to the university curriculum, its integrity, Wellek believed, depended on avoiding “extraneous” issues that pointed away from “literature itself” to subjects properly belonging to other disciplines.

This is not an idle concern if you do believe that “literature” is a definable subject that includes an identifiable history of practice and a supply of important works, as well as provides a continuity of such practice so that it becomes more than just a collection of old texts but instead a “living tradition” to which students can be exposed (and perhaps some of them will eventually contribute). Whether the triumph of the comparative lit model would have had the effect of hollowing out literary study in the way Wellek describes is certainly open to question. That Wellek’s position prevailed as readily as it did suggests that scholars weren’t so eager to collapse the distinctions he wanted to reinforce, but even so the impression that losing sight of the autonomy of literature as an aesthetic form or special kind of moral reflection might eventually lead to the dissolution of “strictly” literary study into a hodgepodge of disparate approaches, often indeed moving into “neighboring disciplines,” was not ill-founded. Arguably this is exactly what has happened to academic literary study, even while periodization has otherwise continued to structure the curriculum. Wellek thus ultimately was wrong about the necessity of periodization for the preservation of “strictly literary studies”: organization by periods has made for a certain stability in course offerings and academic publishing, but it has by no means ensured that a focus on the kind of critical evaluation Wellek had in mind would continue to predominate.

We might even speculate that the “intrinsic” study of literature Wellek championed in his most famous book, *Theory of Literature* (written with Austin Warren) may have in fact been better served by a curriculum organized by literary forms or genres, with or without distinctions of nationality. To emphasize “historical contrast” is still to consider literature historically, and a field of study in which history weighs so heavily is going to foreground historical forces themselves to a degree that begins to make literary scholarship into a species of historical inquiry as much as, in some cases more than, it is a form of literary criticism. Likewise, the additional separations of nationality lead to analyses focused on social and cultural traits and tendencies that works of literature conveniently make visible. The beginnings of “American Literature” may have involved efforts to celebrate the Americanness of American literature, while later on the

goal was more often to question and critique the cultural assumptions to be found in American writing, but ultimately both approaches are equally willing to reduce literature to its instrumental value in examining national character or disclosing cultural attitudes.

Wellek and the New Critics wanted to value literature for itself, and their preferred method of doing so, what came to be called “close reading,” practiced within the framework of periodization, appeared to give literary study its disciplinary identity. The scholar became the academic critic (although more traditionally “scholarly” activities continued to be carried out, in a kind of *modus vivendi* with New Criticism), with “critical evaluation” taking on a more elevated status in relation to the book reviewer or literary journalist. Yet even close reading could not finally be safely claimed as the defining method of “strictly literary studies,” as the proponents of critical theory, while otherwise rejecting New Critical notions of the literary text as “verbal icon” to be held up for appreciation, nonetheless retained close reading as their own strategy for drawing out political, historical, and cultural implications of literary texts (which were to be “interrogated” more than read). Because periodization still allowed academic criticism in this new mode to operate perfectly well—in some ways even encouraged it, since these implications work themselves out differently in different historical conditions—the period-centered curriculum largely escaped scrutiny.

Underwood believes that the increasing prominence of “digital humanities” signals the end of periodization, and he argues that the quantitative methods of digital data-gathering can provide literary study a new mission in which the goal becomes to “map broad patterns and trace gradients of change.” The most well-known proponent of the quantitative approach is probably Franco Moretti and his notion of “distant reading,” its very name suggesting that academic literary criticism has now fully severed itself from the kind of criticism Rene Wellek once advocated. Underwood acknowledges that the quantitative mode also probably means that the autonomy of literary study Wellek wanted to safeguard is no longer desirable or expedient, predicting that with the adoption of quantitative analysis “it becomes increasingly difficult to draw disciplinary boundaries.” For those of us who continue to believe the study of literature carries its own kind of value that has not been exhausted, perhaps the only possible silver lining in this rather cloudy prospect is that the final erasure of the disciplinary boundary that once gave definition to “literary study” will be complete enough that someone will again have the idea that literature might be an interesting addition to the college curriculum.

## **We Wanted to Be Writers**

A frequent criticism of creative writing programs is that they focus too narrowly on established techniques supposedly constituting “craft,” but if Gordon Mennenga is to be believed in this excerpt from *We Wanted to Be Writers*, very few concrete literary strategies were “taught” at all at the most famous such program, at least in the 1970s:

“The craft thing? I don’t think the topic ever came up, did it? At least not in the workshops I was in. You did your lump and threw it on the table. I was surprised we never picked out an element of ‘craft’ and looked at it, how metaphor was used in a story,

for example. We never did exercises of any kind. I suppose it's that way still... We didn't get into why things are done a certain way, or talk about different styles, what styles are tolerated and what aren't... why and how."

Although Mennenga is more blunt in his assessment of the degree to which writing "instruction" even took place at the Iowa Writer's Workshop in the middle 1970s, the period of time during which the cohort of writers interviewed in *We Wanted to Be Writers* attended the Workshop, many of the participants in this assortment of reflections and reminiscences echo his comment. "Our teachers were writers, not teachers," says Jane Smiley. "They knew a lot about writing, but hadn't given a lot of thought to how to communicate what they knew." Jennie Fields expresses outright disappointment with the teachers at Iowa, who "weren't nearly as involved or instructive as the faculty I had as an undergraduate," while Jayne Anne Phillips concludes that, anyway, "people enter into an MFA program, not to 'learn' to write, but to spend time in a mentor relationship with an accomplished writer...and to be part of a community for a scant two years that supports literature, reading, and the attempt to write." Co-editor Glenn Schaeffer believes "the real Workshop was a certain booth by the kitchen at the Mill, where I could watch the band, and my classmates would come by and we'd drink beer and talk about writing."

*We Wanted to Be Writers* is essentially an extension of this "talk about writing," although it is at least as much talk about being a writer after fulfilling the aspiration of the title as it is talk about writing or learning to write. Indeed, the book's subtitle gives a more accurate description of the ultimate focus of the book: "life, love, and literature." It is presented as something like a collective memoir by this cohort of writers (which also includes T.C. Boyle, Allan Gurganus, and Sandra Cisneros among its best-known members, as well as Marvin Bell and John Irving as teachers during this time), a memoir that is presumably justified because Schaeffer and his fellow editor, Eric Olsen, believe "our cohort to date, as a slice of scribblers, is the most decorated in the history of American letters, as far as having been enrolled at the same graduate institution at one time." There is a tension in the book between this rather self-congratulatory explanation of the book's existence and the effort to illuminate the influence of the Iowa Writer's Workshop on the accomplishments of this "slice of scribblers" that is never satisfactorily resolved. The editors might say the book is intended to both chronicle a collective experience and examine the effects of creative writing programs on American fiction and poetry, but ultimately these goals may be at cross-purposes: The experiences are too superficially explored to be distinctive or surprising, while the focus on "life" at the Iowa Writer's Workshop precludes extensive critique of the instructional methods used there and their utility in developing the talents of this literary greatest generation.

To call this generation "the most decorated" is not, of course, to say it is the most talented or most accomplished. A good case could be made that this cohort did indeed manage especially well to combine seriousness of intent (a dedication to "literature") with a degree of commercial success or popular appeal (one of the graduates is a television writer whose credits include writing for *The Sopranos*), but is the implicit claim being made by this book that the Iowa Writer's Workshop played some formative role in guiding these writers to this sort of success? Surely it can't be that they were more naturally gifted than other groups of aspiring writers

“enrolled at the same graduate institution,” including previous and later groups at the Iowa Workshop itself. Nor on the basis of what is revealed here about the level of instruction at the Workshop could the assertion be made that it imparted some special insights into the nature of literary creation. Is the focus on this particular class and the affirmation of its prestige meant to validate the Workshop’s status as the preeminent “program” of its kind? If so, what did it actually do for these students that could be seen as a contribution to literature?

Again if Glenn Schaeffer is to be believed, its contribution isn’t specifically literary at all, nor was the Iowa Writer’s Workshop finally teaching primarily writing. Instead, it was the center of what Schaeffer calls in his introductory chapter a “creative enterprise,” its principal object to foster a broader “creativity.” Creativity as encouraged by the Writer’s Workshop is in fact entirely compatible with creativity in business:

“Creativity captures and holds the attention (or money) of others, whether signified as audience or customers. In fact, people depend on narratives to get them through life; neuroscience tells us that our brains are hardwired to organize our existential states as ongoing narratives, draft upon draft of them. Therefore, a concept in business, as in a story, must be told forcefully and simply, using consequential logic mixed with dramatic leaps. Writers who can convince us of the real through the artifice of story are similar to entrepreneurs: Both start every day with the barest essentials, hoping to change us or our experience of the world, and struggle toward expression on the blank page, or the blank drawing board (inferentially resistant media in either case). . . .”

Since Schaeffer himself went on from the Workshop to become a successful businessman, one could interpret this strained analogy as a necessary rationalization for his project of revisiting his previous “literary” indulgence. but it also helps to explain the amount of space devoted rather tediously to “process,” talk about how those who did make careers in writing organize their creativity. Although one writer does claim that a helpful “lesson” learned at the Workshop was provided specifically by John Irving through his efforts to “model” his own process in writing a novel, developing a systematic process suitable to a professional writer was otherwise not something the Iowa Writer’s Workshop appears to have much emphasized. Given the typical structure imposed by the workshop model in the vast majority of creative writing programs—a fixed number of submissions per semester, due at fixed intervals—these programs only accidentally teach writing discipline, as student writers scramble to meet the quota while struggling against the time constraints. In this way as well, *We Wanted to Be Writers* seems designed less to identify the beneficial practices of the Iowa Writer’s Workshop than to celebrate the superior skill level of this specific cohort who happened to pass through the Workshop together, as its members have developed the requisite discipline, perhaps in spite of the failure of the Workshop to sufficiently alert them to its importance.

Some of the writers interviewed here complain about other ways in which the Workshop failed to prepare them for the concrete realities of being a “professional” fiction writer or poet. Co-editor Olsen avers that “maybe I just wasn’t paying attention, but when I left and got into writing for a living (as if), I was amazed at what a rube I was. I was an Iowa grad, and I didn’t know crap about the real world of publishing. . . . We absorbed the occasional dose about the art,

but there wasn't much nuts and bolts about the business or the craft." If *We Wanted to Be Writers* works at all to sort through the at times conflicting goals to which creative writing is necessarily devoted—to "art," to "business," to "craft"—it seems to depict the Iowa Writer's Workshop as more comfortably focused on art, even if there was little organized effort to specifically delineate the arts of fiction and poetry, little understanding of how to systematically "teach" those arts. The Workshop, no doubt like most creative writing programs at that time, was apparently a stimulating and convivial place for a collection of aspiring writers to reside for a time, while also providing them an opportunity to concentrate on their writing and receive a critical response, but it was hardly the place to get a sophisticated education in literary aesthetics.

A number of those writers who themselves went on to be teachers of creative writing observe that instruction in most programs has improved significantly, and, to judge by the descriptions some give of their own teaching methods, it is likely that this is the case. But for the most part, such an improvement is a pedagogical improvement, an increase in efficiency or a more productive focus on process, not derived from fresh inspiration about how to develop aesthetic sensibility or determine appropriate artistic standards. Perhaps achieving such things is impossible, or, even if an effort could be made to orient creative writing in such a direction, perhaps undesirable, especially in lower-tier programs without pretensions to producing many ambitious "literary" writers to begin with. But there is little evidence that even "prestige" programs such as Iowa are graduating writers who are transforming American literature with their superior appreciation of the "art" of fiction or poetry. Instead, the very improvements in the teaching of creative writing have themselves arguably helped reduce creative writing to the acquisition of "craft" in the narrowest sense of the term.

It is doubtful that the workshop method of instruction, which most creative writing programs have adopted from the Iowa model, could ever work to privilege "art" as the primary ambition to be pursued by the workshop's participants. The natural tendency of the workshop is surely to migrate toward issues of commercial acceptability or publishing prospects, issues that focus attention on the common lot of expectations facing the aspiring writer, lest discussion devolve into incoherence through the chaos of inevitably various and conflicting assumptions about aesthetic value. Individual instructors might want to dispense "the occasional dose about the art," but students aiming to become professional writers are inevitably going to regard their instructors most of all as sources of information about the publishing world and as valuable conduits to that world. In creative writing programs that have themselves come to serve predominantly as conduits to the publishing world—and to supplementary sinecures as creative writing instructors in other creative writing programs, sinecures that have become crucial adjuncts to the publishing world—"business" and "craft" have inexorably come to be unavoidable concerns, arguably to the point that "art" is something left to take care of itself.

In the mid-1970s, the Iowa Writer's Workshop apparently was still a place where simply being around other writers and aspiring writers, in an environment in which the writer's vocation was taken seriously, was enough to make the experience worthwhile. Although the cohort represented in *We Wanted to Be Writers* of course had their ambitions to become recognized poets and novelists, few of them seem to have regarded the Workshop as a "professional"

program providing direct preparation for a career in writing. Certainly they do not seem to have considered it certification for a job teaching creative writing. While many of them did wind up teaching in creative writing programs, the impression one gets from the comments in this book's final chapter, which chronicles the group's post-Workshop experiences, is that most of them fell into teaching as a job they now found themselves qualified to do. Most presumably attended the Iowa Writer's Workshop because they indeed wanted to be writers and it promised to help them attain that goal. One could conclude from the testimony of this book that at this time "creative writing" had not quite reached the self-perpetuating status it now occupies, through which the advanced creative writing degree provides students the appropriate credential to themselves become teachers of creative writing. That this is the current situation does not mean students enrolled in creative writing no longer want to be writers first of all, but it does mean that what began as institutional support that provided writers some security from an unreliable marketplace, whereby they could also pass along first-hand advice to interested students, has become itself the primary means by which writers declare their intention to become writers in the first place.

Eric Olsen expresses the usual justification for creative writing from the writer's/instructor's perspective:

"Absent other forms of reliable support for writers, absent a marketplace that values writing and rewards writers commensurate with their labor (or at least sufficient to cover basic necessities), a teaching gig is about as good as it gets, until those royalties kick in, anyway."

But by now, for the vast majority of writers with teaching positions in creative writing programs, those royalty checks will never "kick in," at least not to the degree such writers might relinquish those positions to write "full time." On the one hand, we could regard this state of affairs as even stronger justification for the now very extensive system of creative writing programs, which allows writers who otherwise would struggle to survive in an unfriendly commercial environment to keep writing. On the other, we might wonder if this system is artificially both maintaining a storehouse of writers who will never receive much attention and enticing students into pursuing a "career" that will never really emerge.

Perhaps it doesn't finally matter. There are surely worse ways to spend a life than in talking about writing with literary-minded students, and much less rewarding legacies of one's education that insight into "creativity." Although one could still ask whether, whatever service the system of creative writing performs for individuals and for the American university system at large, it performs an equal service for American literature.