

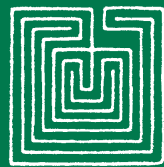
Dædalus

Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

Winter 2021

On the Novel

Michael Wood,
guest editor



with Lorrie Moore · Franco Moretti
Simon Goldhill · Nancy Armstrong
Ruth Bernard Yeazell · Sharon Cameron
Daphne A. Brooks · Rey Chow · Austin Sarfan
Wai Chee Dimock · Robyn Creswell
Garrett Stewart · Eric Hayot
& Jonathan Greenberg

CHAPTER VI.

It was eight o'clock when we landed; ~~we walked for a short time on the shore, enjoying the transitory light, and then retired to the inn,~~ and contemplated the lovely scene of waters, woods, and mountains, obscured in darkness, yet still displaying their black outlines.

The wind, which had fallen in the south, now rose with great violence in the west. The moon had reached her summit in the heavens, and was beginning to descend; the clouds swept across it swifter than the flight of the vulture, and dimmed her rays, while

*the shore we sought the retreat of our
and garden. ~~But~~ Again as I entered
gates of the dimness, an ~~inner~~ inner
feeling bade me hold - yet Elizabeth*

*the ~~our~~ mansion
both our hearts
THE MODER.*

the lake reflected
heavens, rendered
restless waves th
rise. Suddenly
descended.

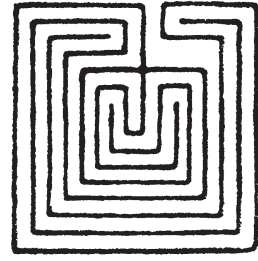
I had been call
so soon as night
of objects, a thou
mind. I was
while my right
which was hidde
sound terrified m
I would sell my
lax the impend
own life, or that
extinguished.

Elizabeth obs
some time in tin
at length she s
agitates you, my
it you fear?"

"Oh! peace

*unwarned, and fe
half ashamed -
any unwholy sight
shadow of the fe
walked on, an*

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Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

“On the Novel”

Volume 150, Number 1; Winter 2021

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Inside front cover: Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s annotated first edition of *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (London: Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor, & Jones, 1818). This copy, held at the Morgan Library & Museum in New York City, includes extensive hand-written additions and emendations, revealing Shelley’s dissatisfaction with parts of her novel.

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The labyrinth designed by Dædalus for King Minos of Crete, on a silver tetradrachma from Cnossos, Crete, c. 350–300 BC (35 mm, Cabinet des Médailles, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris). “Such was the work, so intricate the place, / That scarce the workman all its turns cou’d trace; / And Dædalus was puzzled how to find / The secret ways of what himself design’d.”
–Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 8

Dædalus was founded in 1955 and established as a quarterly in 1958. The journal’s namesake was renowned in ancient Greece as an inventor, scientist, and unriddler of riddles. Its emblem, a maze seen from above, symbolizes the aspiration of its founders to “lift each of us above his cell in the labyrinth of learning in order that he may see the entire structure as if from above, where each separate part loses its comfortable separateness.”

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Introduction: In This World

Michael Wood

The death of the novel, like the not unrelated deaths of God and the author, appears to be an event that is always happening; a sign of life, perhaps. This life is a metaphor, of course, a form of fiction itself, but it is also an instrument, a way of seeing. One of its virtues is that it invites us to consider both the practice and the theory of the novel, allows us to ask what novels do, and how they have been thought about over time.

We know what *a* novel is, but can we say the same about *the* novel? The definite article implies a rather reckless conceptual confidence, even when we drop an adjective into the mix: the novel, the Russian novel, the picaresque novel. We have only to attempt a definition to start thinking of exceptions to our own rule. E. M. Forster, lecturing in Cambridge on the English novel, settled for the broadest remit he could envisage: “any fictitious prose work,” adding only a stipulation of length (“over 50,000 words”).¹ This generous category is still too narrow, since it excludes the novel in verse (from *Don Juan* and *Eugene Onegin* to *The Golden Gate*), and we may not think length is a real issue. I would not, in theory, discount the possibility of the very brief novel. Augusto Monterroso’s one sentence tale – “when he (or she) awoke the dinosaur was still there”² – is most easily described as the shortest of short stories, but in certain readings it might well grow into a novel. Applying the same principle in reverse, Italo Calvino thought Robert Musil’s immense, unfinished *The Man without Qualities* might in some senses be too short.

These thoughts are not meant to lead us to a frivolous abandonment of classification but to a cautious awareness of what a classification is. The fact that there may be no definition of the novel that will not fail us at some point does not mean we cannot talk about novels, and indeed some classifications may help us most where they are weakest, closest to running out of persuasive steam. Wittgenstein’s thought about the “indistinct picture” is helpful here. “Is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn’t the indistinct one often exactly what we need?”³ The interesting question, we might say, is not what the novel is but what work the word novel does when we use it, or what reasons we may give for using it or not.

Dictionaries are helpful here as long as we take them as starting points, first stages in a collaborative process. Here is part of what the entries in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and *Merriam-Webster*, respectively, say a novel is:

A long fictional prose narrative . . . typically representing character and action with some degree of realism and complexity.

An invented prose narrative of considerable length and a certain complexity that deals imaginatively with human experience through a connected sequence of events involving a group of persons in a specific setting.

The terms are all fairly bland, of course, but they become a little stricter if we think of what they may be meant to exclude. What do we make of “realism,” “complexity,” “imaginatively”? Does “realism” mean notional fidelity to a non-fictional material world? If so, it covers many nineteenth-century novels admirably, but will not take us very far into times before or after that date. If it means “a disposition of mind,”⁴ as J. P. Stern says, then it can comprehend all kinds of unrealistic fictions, as long as they grapple in some way with the real. Similarly, if novels are supposed to be complex in their form and content, then some very remarkable works of mock simplicity are excluded. Ironic simulations of directness may take us further into complexity than many elaborate acts of would-be direct mimesis. And what sort of writing is “imaginatively” meant to outlaw? It cannot just mean the same as the already used “invented.” Presumably the sense is something like: with the effect of enabling the reader to believe in the truth of what is not true.

Here is an example of a (very funny) novelistic negotiation with the real:

There are a set of religious, or rather moral writers, who teach that virtue is the certain road to happiness, and vice to misery, in this world. A very wholesome and comfortable doctrine, and to which we have but one objection, namely, that it is not true.

This is Henry Fielding’s narrator in the opening chapter of Book XV of *Tom Jones*. He has three more books to go, around one hundred and fifty ample pages, and by the time he ends the novel, he will have amply rewarded his virtuous hero, and consigned all his vicious characters to misery. Why would he celebrate what he sees as untruth in this way? There are many reasons, and one of them will simply be that this is a novel. Novels need readers, and readers have ideas about what they want. Why would he make life unpleasant for them, bother them with the truth? Behind this comic, opportunistic logic is another line of thought, of course. Fielding’s avoidance of the truth asks us to think about our various distances from it. It is not that he does not believe in virtue. He just cannot see any direct connection “in this world” between virtue and reward: he thinks we need a novelist and a fictional plot for that. And when he says finally of his hero and heroine that “as there are not to be found a worthier man and woman, than this fond couple, so neither can any be imagined more happy,”⁵ we believe him, but we also

know he is talking about luck rather than moral causality. And about the work of the imagination.

Jane Austen, in many ways a disciple of Fielding as well as a sort of counter-agent to him, takes up this practice with great subtlety and wit. She pictures her readers as seeing how few pages are left in their copy of *Northanger Abbey*, and looking forward to the happy end, even though the characters themselves do not have any such opportunity. Their “anxiety . . . can hardly extend, I fear, to the bosom of my readers, who will see in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them, that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity.”⁶ “Hastening together” may make us think twice about our optimism. Austen does offer us an unqualified happy end in *Emma*, writing of “the perfect happiness of the union”⁷ between the heroine and Mr. Knightley. But more often she likes to slip in a small remembrance of reality’s habit of darkening the picture. In *Persuasion* she reminds us that Anne Elliot is marrying a naval officer, which means that “the dread of a future war . . . could dim her sunshine,” and she has to “pay the tax of quick alarm.”⁸ And Austen’s phrasing in *Mansfield Park*, apparently unequivocal, leaves a lot of room for readerly defections: “the happiness of the married cousins must appear as secure as earthly happiness can be.”⁹ Must? Whose imperative is this? In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen describes her method with great analytic precision. Speaking of her readers in the third person she says, “I have united for their case what they must divide for mine.”¹⁰ The author’s role in this view is to resolve discrepancies while allowing the readers to see, if they so choose, what the resolution costs.

Many novels, ironically or not, modify reality for the sake of their readers’ happiness, but many also proceed in the opposite direction. For every utopia there is a dystopia waiting somewhere. This second direction often feels more truthful, because the truth is indeed often disappointing, but it is still a modification, a stylization. A fine passage in Nabokov’s *Pnin* offers an intriguing counterpart to Fielding’s concession to the wholesome doctrine. Nabokov’s narrator, having set up his hero for an unfortunate adventure – he is on the wrong train, he will arrive too late for the lecture he is supposed to give – rescues him from it completely, and then complains about the way things have turned out. The result is a brilliant parody of what we often (want to) think realism is:

Some people – and I am one of them – hate happy ends. We feel cheated. Harm is the norm. Doom should not jam. The avalanche stopping in its tracks a few feet above the cowering village behaves not only unnaturally but unethically. Had I been reading about this mild old man, instead of writing about him, I would have preferred him to discover, upon his arrival to Cremona, that his lecture was not this Friday but the next. Actually, however, he not only arrived safely but was in time for dinner.¹¹

Don Quixote is full of games with what is supposed to be reality, and none is more comically, or in a way more desperately haunting than the so-called adventure of the lions. After so many exploits that are cruel jokes or rest on extravagant misperceptions, Cervantes provides Quixote with all the appurtenances of a real adventure, only to take them away again on the strangest of principles: in reality, they would not have to be there.

Quixote and Sancho encounter a man driving a wagon with caged lions on it. The lions have been sent from Oran as presents for the king of Spain. Quixote asks if they are big, and the man says they are the biggest lions ever brought from Africa; and they are hungry because they have not eaten all day. This is music to Quixote's ears, and he asks the man to open the cages so that he can fight the lions. After much discussion the man agrees to do this. Quixote dismounts, and stands facing the cages, armed only with sword and shield. The narrator inserts a rhapsodic declaration of praise for Quixote's valor at this point, attributing it to "the author of this true history."¹² Quixote is a "paragon of all the brave men in the world... the glory and honor of all Spanish knights," a "most valiant Manchegan."¹³ We read this for what it is, a strategic delaying of the comic conclusion of the exploit, but we do note that, however crazy Quixote is in taking on the lions, he is not imagining them, or bending reality in any way, so that his courage, even if it is reckless and pointless, is entirely genuine.

The driver opens the first cage, that of the male lion "of extraordinary size and fearsome and hideous aspect."¹⁴ The lion stretches and yawns, licks his paws and washes his face. He then puts his head out of the cage, and looks around "with eyes like coals, a sight and a vision that could frighten temerity itself."¹⁵ Quixote waits attentively. The narrator decides to allegorize (and moralize) his account of what happens next:

These are the extremes to which Don Quixote's unprecedented madness took him. But the magnanimous lion, more courteous than arrogant, took no notice of either childishness or bravado, and after looking in both directions... he turned his back, and showed his hindquarters to Don Quixote, and with great placidity and calm went back inside the cage.¹⁶

Quixote asks the driver to hit the lion and make him come out, but the man won't do it. It's too dangerous, he says, and Quixote should not "tempt fortune a second time."¹⁷ The nonadventure, the real adventure that refused to be one, is over.

The narrator's anthropomorphizing of the lion – as if the courtly creature of the wild belonged to a fable about comparative civilizations, or as if the narrator himself could not resist a comment on the way supposed acts of chivalry cause unnecessary disruptions of a peaceable world – blinds us for a moment to what is going on. Quixote has faced a hungry lion and... the lion has turned away. This is where the chivalric romance wakes up and finds it was a novel all along. The lion

is a surrogate for unarranged reality. It could just as easily have mauled Quixote as ignored him. Reality in this view is not hostile to human desire, just seriously indifferent to it, random recalcitrance itself. This is how the world, the pictured reality, so often appears in novels. It does not oppose desire, it just gets in the way. It does not end happily, it does not end at all. It fails to provide a proper epic opponent, a Hector for every Achilles; and it mangles the dream logic of the romance, where all promises, including promises of nightmare, are religiously kept.

Georg Lukács seems to be speaking a very different language when he says, “The novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God,” and “Dostoevsky did not write novels,”¹⁸ but the distance may not be as great as it looks. Cervantes and the dictionaries do leave God out of the picture, and suggest that the worlds of the novel (the one it lives in and the one it presents) are zones of contingency, places where Providence has no jurisdiction. This is not true of all novels – nothing is true of all novels – but it is true of huge numbers of them, from *The Tale of Genji* to *The Portrait of a Lady*. Two important assumptions can be found at the heart of these godless works: that the world is what it is, and that reality, whether social, material, political, or psychological, is by its nature resistant to human wishes. Their model would be a form of probability, we might say, tinged with despair. Their maxim is not that “harm is the norm” but that harm can never be securely banished. This would be the “meaning” of the deaths of Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary: sad, appropriate, and plausible, but no solution to any kind of problem. In a different register, this is also the “meaning” of the last sentence of *Middlemarch*:

But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.¹⁹

“Incalculably,” “partly,” and “half” are a little worrying, but we can still, if we wish, believe in “the growing good of the world,” and trust that “things are not so ill with [us] as they might have been.” The novel, meanwhile, is unmistakably confessing its failure to have definitively shown us any such thing.

This swath of “realistic” works makes a large contribution to our sense of what a novel is, but it does not delimit it. We can understand Lukács’s claim about Dostoevsky as a trope rather than an edict, as a hyperbolic suggestion that the modern novel is not what the older novel was. Dostoevsky wrote about “the new world,” Lukács said. We might think he resurrected the old world, or discovered its secret modernity, but the effect would be the same. Most of his characters believe they have abandoned God rather than the other way around. They got rid of Him because He does not exist. Dostoevsky the novelist (as distinct from Dostoevsky

the person) does not say they are wrong, only that they may be missing a whole dimension of life. The secular form of this shifted interest, as we find it in Conrad and Kafka, is the replacement of the implied question the novel is asking. The great nineteenth-century novels sought our assent, they said the world is like this, is it not? The great twentieth-century novels – and we can include the works of Proust, Woolf, Mann, and others in this grouping – ask us to speculate and report on our findings. They say, what if the world were like this? The twentieth century was in this sense much closer to the eighteenth than to the nineteenth.

Another lesson we can take from Lukács is that the epic of a world abandoned by God is still an epic: the subtitle of his book refers to “the forms,” in the plural, “of great epic literature.” The categories can both overlap and exclude each other, depending on our particular critical needs. And this is where we must think a little about our words. The word *novel* comes from the French *nouvelle*, originally a piece of news, and then a shortish fiction. A *novella* ought perhaps linguistically to have been a short novel, but turns out to mean a long short story, such are the travels of usage. The word for novel in French (and in Russian) is *roman*, which also means *romance*. The Italian grouping is the same: *romanzo*. These differences are not a problem, they are opportunities for thought, but they do mean that you have to speak English to make firm distinctions between romances and novels – to separate (as I did earlier in this essay) fantastic late medieval fictions from works that stay close to the mundane, or to focus (as many theories of American literature do) on visions of possibility rather than defeats by the way things are. And conversely, to say in French that an action is like something out of a novel is much closer to calling it a fairy-tale than saying it resembles a moment in *La Princesse de Clèves*. Dictionary relatives for *roman* include dream, utopia, phantasmagoria, and chimera. English-speaking habits encourage distinctions; French ones keep reminding us that fiction is fiction. It is good to remember both that borders exist and that they can fade.

Keeping both possibilities in mind, I want to suggest that if all fictions remain caught up in the facts they elude or seek to mirror, novels do this in a concentrated way. They may correct, invert, or replace the real or go out of their way to reproduce its minute details but the engagement with the missing or magnified referent will always be a part of the reader’s experience. This is as true of the novels of Ursula Le Guin as those of Tolstoy. The engagement can be obvious or all but unnoticed; it is only when it is absent that we may want to start thinking of another descriptive term. And we need to remember precisely what Anglo-American pragmatism so often wants us to forget: that reality includes fears, hopes, desires, and recurring nightmares as well as material objects. I realize I am coming close to Forster’s capacious nondefinition, but perhaps some of my examples will have reduced the vagueness of the profile. Fielding’s “in this world” is also a good reminder of our location. And we may want to find aspects of the novel, to borrow

Forster's term, in epics and romances and fairy-tales, just as many novels will have elements of those other genres in them, too.

The essays in this volume of *Dædalus* do not survey or summarize the fate of the novel, but they do offer remarkable insights into the behavior of a versatile literary form, glimpses of where and what it has been and where it may go. We learn from Simon Goldhill that the novel is much older than scholars used to think; from Jonathan Greenberg that a recent attempt not to write a novel (or to write a nonnovel) happily failed in the end. Nancy Armstrong and Wai Chee Dimock trace in different ways the intriguing shift of a dominant pattern in novels: from those that celebrate the resourceful individual to those that attend closely to our traumas and disabilities. Sharon Cameron and Garrett Stewart follow the movements of language in individual novels to startling conclusions: the death of value and the inescapability of word-play, even when no one seems to be dying or playing. Rey Chow and Austin Sarfan show us surprising connections between the novel and the television serial, and Eric Hayot wonders whether video games, like many novels, are condemned to their violent happy ends. Daphne Brooks shows how a novel can become an opera that in turn begets an unfinished cultural narrative full of racial mythologies. Ruth Yeazell reports and reflects on many years of reading the novels of Henry James with undergraduate students, showing how certain imaginations of life prolong themselves in lived reality, and Robyn Creswell, bringing us up to date, or at least to this side of the events in Tahrir Square, shows how the novel in Arabic uses poetry as its foil and secret companion. For Franco Moretti, the theory of the novel diverges in novelistic ways from the theory of tragedy, and Lorrie Moore, a novelist and a short story writer, suggests that the novel, however faithful it tries to be to the etymology of its name, cannot shake off its sense of history, and does not really try. The reappearances of certain writers in these essays, especially Henry James and Richard Powers, are accidents in the sense that they were not part of any original editorial plan, but they are also signs, representative indications of how novelists think inside their novels. It was Henry James who, one hundred and twenty-one years ago, dared to wonder why anyone would want to bother with, or be bothered by, fictitious works of any kind, "mere unsupported and unguaranteed history, the *inexpensive* thing, written in the air, the record of what, in any particular case, has *not* been."²⁰

FURTHER READING

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, 1955), 6.
- ² Augusto Monterroso, *Complete Works and Other Stories*, trans. Edith Grossman (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 42.
- ³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), 34.
- ⁴ J. P. Stern, *On Realism* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 52.

- ⁵ Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones* (Harmondsworth, United Kingdom: Penguin, 1966), 874.
- ⁶ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 250.
- ⁷ Jane Austen, *Emma* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 484.
- ⁸ Austen, *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion*, 273.
- ⁹ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 473.
- ¹⁰ Austen, *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion*, 247.
- ¹¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation of a Spring* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 25–26.
- ¹² Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. Edith Grossman (New York: Ecco, 2003), 563.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, 564.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1971), 88, 152.
- ¹⁹ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956), 613.
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What Is It Like to Write a Novel?

Lorrie Moore

Those American travelers in the 1990s who had to go through Detroit may recall that particular airport before it was redesigned and relocated to an entirely new space. They may remember the cramped hive of the original, with its burnt orange and ochre decor figuring so prominently that it seemed to be already signaling its autumnal condition. Across the way, the new airport being built was not that discernible and so *Pardon Our Dust* signs were not even necessary. A traveler might glance through some plexiglass darkly over at the horizon and see machinery, but beyond that, it was a bit unknowable. Much like the new Bay Bridge in San Francisco, emerging while the old one was still used, the construction went on for some time. And so while the new airport was being built, the old one carried on its decrepit and imperfect life of stalled, disgruntled passengers and fast food. The two airports side by side – or two ideas of an airport – were like a thought experiment. Schrödinger’s cat was still alive but also perhaps on its way to death; although in a parallel reality, it was simultaneously dead and alive, carrying on in one or the other condition. Only witnessing (reading it) determined which. A cat can very well have two lives, insists the experiment, subtracting seven of them.

When the new Detroit airport finally opened (the fantastic one being built across the way) it couldn’t have been more different from its predecessor. It was gleaming white and light and airy and the sun poured in. It had a monorail and glass walls and ceilings. There were bars and nice restaurants and stationed at shiny baby grands were pianists singing selections from the American songbook. The new airport had taken so long to finish that birds had got trapped inside and made their nests in the open white beams, and so they too would sing while swooping around the place.

What happened to the old terminal? I’m not sure. What happened to the old cramped airport, forced eventually into some other expression, one taking place right nearby? And having delivered so much of its former swarming life to a new construction and having its rhythms and footfall, its sweet and acrid muggy smells and voices somewhat sucked out of it, or at least in the end diverted, and so succeeding in creating something else, was it not somewhat the author of its own new incarnation? Was it somewhat like a snake shedding its skin, only to have the skin come alive, or like an extraterrestrial mothership hatching out a fantastic new creature? Like the old eastern span of the Bay Bridge that one could still see as

one crossed the new Bay Bridge, one could photograph them together before the original became first a husk and then a memory and then a kind of biographical criticism.

Does the author – initially living, then dead – become the silhouette or shadow or shade of the newly written book? Perhaps somewhat, even right from the start, but certainly more so as time accumulates. I have no idea when demolition finally came the old airport’s way. I failed to watch and register its demise. But the novel one lives on, with much accidentally trapped nature and scheduled soaring, as well as singing and shopping and wine.

In this way, then, a novel lives alongside its author’s life, much the way Schrödinger’s two cats lie side by side in parallel and contradictory existences: that is, if one refuses to collapse two realities into one (and novelists and readers of novels should always refuse). A novel lies adjacent to its author and recirculates that author’s blood. It then does the same thing for a reader’s. The novel is the live cat when the other cat no longer lives. The novel is the new construction going up across the way and soon you – reader, author – will be there instead of where you are now. For a while. Planes will still land and take off, delivering and departing. This sort of journeying and hunger for parallel lives and multiple, uncollapsed realities and new designs and stories that are not explanations or contrivance or brand-promotions or TED talks but repositories of mystery and questions can never come to a full stop. Because how could they? Real life gets trapped within the structure every time an author builds something new. The characters sing. The birds sing. The monorail zips by. Those are just the nameable things. The unnameable things – essential and considerable and yet so strange in an art deeply tasked with naming – are what people will always come to the novel for. Voice, heart, spirit . . . yet again the monorail zips by. There are souls inside and their faces can almost be glimpsed.

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Two Theories

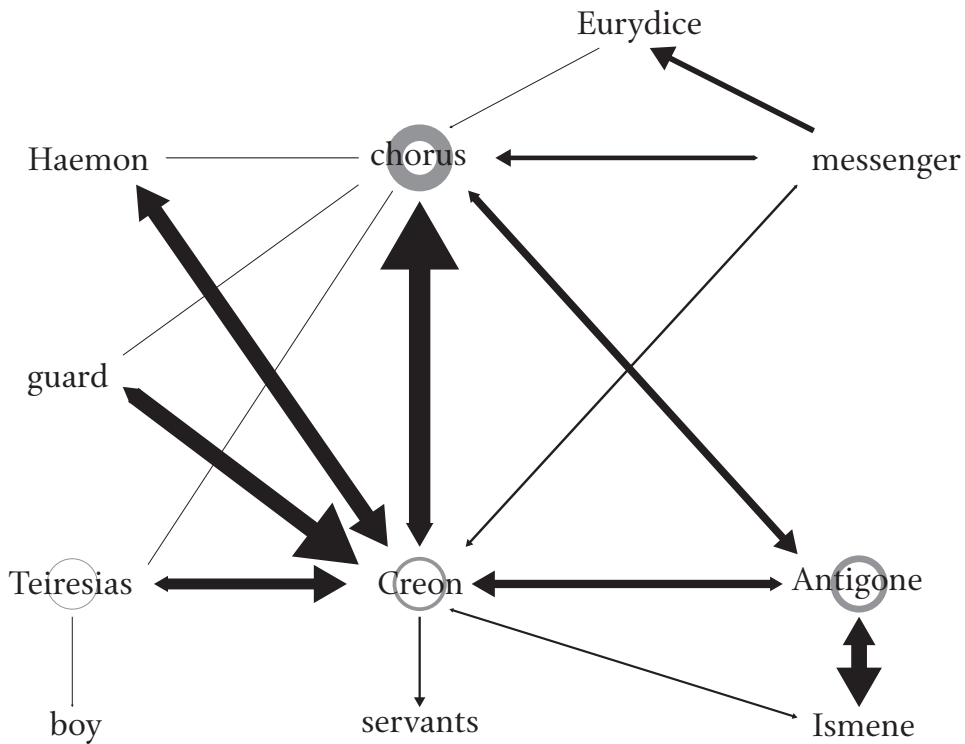
Franco Moretti

Let me begin with two images: the character-networks of *Antigone* and *Les Misérables*. Both plots have been turned into networks on the basis of the interactions among characters, and yet the outcome couldn't be more unlike.¹ While Sophocles's system is small, tight, and visibly centered around the fatal figure of Creon, *strategos* of Thebes, Hugo's crowded network shows dozens of figures with a single link to the body of the text, evoking the "minor-minor" characters of Alex Woloch's *The One vs. the Many*.² One can still study minor characters in tragedy, of course – "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead" – or the centripetal pull of certain scenes in Fielding, or Dostoevsky, or even *Ulysses*. But, at bottom, tragedies and novels pose different questions to critical reflection, encouraging it to move in opposite directions. And that is indeed what the theory of tragedy and the theory of the novel have done.

Beginning with Plato and Aristotle – and then Hume, Voltaire, Schelling, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche... Scheler, Unamuno, Heidegger, Camus... Foucault, Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe, Žižek, Butler, Menke – philosophers have dominated the theory of tragedy. At times, they have done so by addressing strictly aesthetic issues, like the structure of tragic plot in the *Poetics*, the one-sidedness of dramatic characters in Hegel's *Aesthetics*, or the function of the chorus in *The Birth of Tragedy*; more often, they have taken tragedy to be the ideal terrain for general issues like the threat of emotions to political stability (*The Republic*), the clash between liberty and the course of the world (Schelling's *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*), the struggle between the imperatives of the State and the bonds of the family (Hegel's *Phenomenology*), the internal contradictions of the will (Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Representation*), the distinction between ancient pain and modern sorrow (Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*), all the way to Nietzsche's critique of the *homo theoreticus*, Lukács's aptly titled "Metaphysics of Tragedy," and Heidegger's "attempt... to assess who the human being is" via his reading of *Antigone*'s second choral ode in the *Introduction to Metaphysics*.

Under the weight of these questions, the analysis of a specific literary form that was the object of the *Poetics* was replaced by a philosophy of "the tragic" as a self-standing entity: an "essentialization" or, better, a "derealization of tragedy," as William Marx has called it,³ which was further exacerbated by the frequent

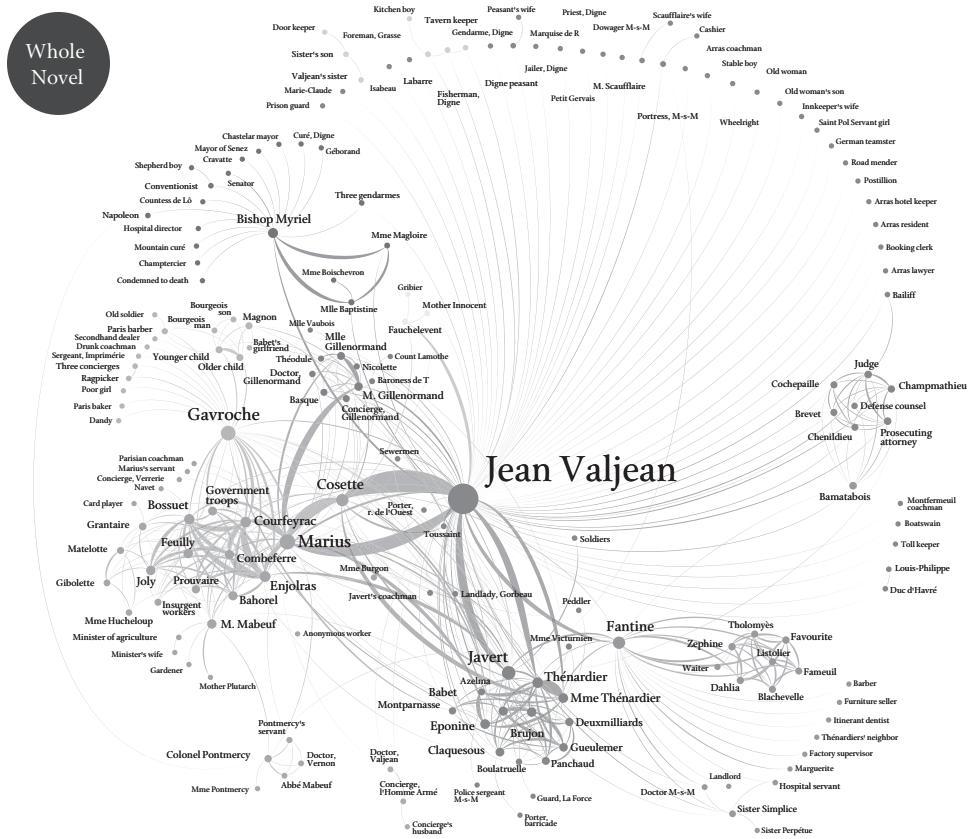
Figure 1
Antigone



“Four hours of action, that become this. . . . What do we gain, by turning time into space? First of all, this: when we watch a play, we are always in the present: what is on stage, is; and then it disappears. Here, nothing ever disappears. What is done, cannot be undone. Once the Ghost shows up at Elsinore things change forever, whether he is on scene or not, because he is never not there in the network. The past becomes past, yes, but it never disappears from our perception of the plot.” Source: Franco Moretti, “Network Theory, Plot Analysis,” *New Left Review* 68 (2011).

focus on just a handful of notions – “catharsis,” “collision,” “reconciliation,” the chorus – as the key to the whole enterprise.⁴ The “generic understandings of tragedy” in Schiller, Schelling, Schlegel, Hegel, and Hölderlin, Joshua Billings has written, are “substantially based on a single play” (typically, *Oedipus Tyrannus* or *Antigone*);⁵ in the past two hundred years, we have managed to add a couple more. Within literary studies, the theory of tragedy is clearly the model for the study of a single form with an exclusive canon, and very sharp boundaries.

Figure 2
Les Misérables



“The novel has many, many more characters than readers (myself included) remember or even notice while reading. Most of these forgotten, unrecognized characters are nameless, play a marginal role in the novel’s plot, appear only briefly before disappearing without leaving a trace. . . . I would argue, however, that their presence is of the utmost importance since they stand precisely for ‘les misérables’ of the novel’s title. Thus our habitual reading practices demonstrate the problem Hugo sought to bring to our attention: the invisibility of the miserable ones to the social world we, the readers, represent.” Source: Michal P. Ginsburg, “Characters and Characters’ Networks in *Les Misérables*,” Visualizing *Les Misérables*, <https://lesmiserables.mla.hcommons.org/>.

Socrates was said to be a friend of Euripides; Plato, to have composed tragedies himself. True or not (almost certainly not), these views express the fact that the study of tragedy arose simultaneously with tragedy itself. For

its part, the theory of the novel took shape approximately two millennia after the composition of the earliest novels. Almost certainly due to the feeling that the novel was an illegitimate form, with no place within the spectrum of classical genres, this colossal hiatus between texts and theory was filled by all sorts of short-term commentaries, generally dismissive or downright censorious. Philosophical interest shrank to a few great intuitions of German romanticism, the most memorable of which – Schlegel’s fragment 116, from the *Atheneum* of 1798 – pursued the exact opposite of an essentialization of novelistic form:

Romantic poetry is a progressive, universal poetry. Its aim is not merely to reunite all the separate species of poetry and put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric. It tries to and should mix and fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature; and make poetry lively and sociable, and life and society poetical; poeticize wit and saturate the forms of art with every kind of good, solid matter for instruction, and animate them with the pulsations of humor.⁶

Philosophy, rhetoric, poetry, prose, criticism, nature, life, society, wit, instruction, humor . . . Too much! In practice, this universal-progressive utopia was disarticulated among a plurality of critic-historians – Shklovsky, Lukács, Bakhtin, Auerbach, Watt, Barthes, Jameson – with the occasional incursions of anthropologists (Claude Lévi-Strauss, René Girard), social scientists (Benedict Anderson), historians (Mona Ozouf), or psychoanalysts (Marthe Robert).⁷ Moreover, those two millennia during which novels were being written, but not written about, created a literary landscape where – in lieu of the handful of works written in a single language over a couple of generations addressed in the *Poetics* – theorists had to confront thousands of texts of all sizes and structures, in prose and in verse, from disparate epochs, languages, and places. Having to account for Chrétien and Cervantes, Sterne and Melville and Kafka – and eventually also for *Genji* and *The Story of the Stone*, *Noli me tangere*, *Macunaíma*, and *The Interpreters* – forced literary analysis into uncharted territory: if the study of tragedy had always been openly and un-self-consciously Athenocentric, the theory of the novel had to come to terms – however slowly and reluctantly – with the *mare magnum* of *Weltliteratur*.⁸ For all practical purposes, the two theories inhabited different worlds.

As is often the case, geography had morphological consequences as well, and the theory of the novel quickly discovered that it needed to find room – *conceptual* room – for the kaleidoscope of novelistic subgenres. Their proliferation is not only a feature of modern literary systems (as in the forty-four British subgenres that I once reconstructed):⁹ the decades around 1200 had already been singled out by Cesare Segre for their “extraordinary eidogenetic activity” – “a thorough inventory of representable reality, from the *roman d’aventure* to the *roman courtois*, from the *roman intimiste* to the *roman burlesque* or *comique*, from the *roman ex-*

otique to the roman picaresque”¹⁰ – while Andrew Plaks had traced the same pattern in premodern China,¹¹ and Tomas Hägg, even earlier in time, had recognized it as the original matrix of the ancient Greek novel.¹² Theoretical reflection inclined toward historical phenomenology: still sternly logical in Lukács’s tripartite *Theory*, more open in Bakhtin’s interplay of local forms and main novelistic “lineages,” and completely explicit in the gusto for morphological ramifications of recent attempts like Pavel’s and Mazzoni’s.¹³ In fact, the most distinctive form taken by the theory of the novel may well be the unplanned collective cartography of specific subgenres: from Lukács’s *Historical Novel*, Rico’s *Novela picaresca*, Bollème’s *Bibliothèque bleue*, and Vinaver’s *Rise of Romance* to, more recently, Catherine Gallagher on the industrial novel, Katie Trumpener on the “national tale,” and Stefano Ercolino’s dyptich on the maximalist and essayistic novel.¹⁴

“A group containing many diversified species,” wrote the British ecologist G. E. Hutchinson in an essay that has become legendary, “will be able to seize new evolutionary opportunities more easily than an undiversified group.”¹⁵ They are the right words to understand the planetary success of the novel: as new social groups gained access to literacy, the novel’s formal diversification allowed it to swiftly occupy – “the novel permeates with its colour all of modern literature” observed Schlegel in the *Athenaeum* – the cultural niches that were opening up. Here, too, the difference with tragedy is unmistakable. The latter had long dominated the literary field, of course, but without ever *changing* the field itself: majestically towering above all other forms, it had left them free to pursue their less exalted aims. Not so the novel, which, by relentlessly “parod[ying] other genres,” interfered directly with their development until, as Schlegel had prophesized, the entire literary space became indeed pervasively “novelized.”¹⁶

A philosophy of the tragic; a phenomenology of novelistic subgenres. Not surprisingly, the interaction between history and form differs markedly in the two traditions. “Aeschylus increased the number of actors from one to two,” wrote Aristotle, “reduced the choral component, and made speech play the leading role. Three actors and scene painting came with Sophocles.”¹⁷ And this was it: “tragedy ceased to evolve, since it had achieved its own nature.” Tragedy continued to evolve, to be sure, but not that much, really, in the two-and-a-half millennia that have elapsed since the *Poetics*. Between the direct reincarnations of great ancient figures – mostly women: Medea, Elektra, Iphigenia, Helen, Hekuba, Phaedra, Antigone – and more subterranean metamorphoses (Oedipus turning into Hamlet, Sigismundo, Don Carlos, Gregers Werle), the theory of tragedy has had to measure itself against this stubborn vitality of the tragic past: a spectral *longue durée* in which the initial form has been exceptionally successful at resisting historical change. Though never quite a narrative of decline – after all, how could it: Shakespeare, Calderon, Racine, Büchner, Ibsen – the study of trag-

edy has thus been characterized by an increasingly fatalistic mood, well encapsulated – *The Death of Tragedy* – by its major postwar bestseller.

The Death of Tragedy, *The Rise of the Novel*. No gloom at all in the other camp, and not much respect for the past, either. Theory of the novel, theory of the new. “We have invented the productivity of the spirit,” declares one of Lukács’s most eloquent pages,¹⁸ and one couldn’t choose a better motto for an aesthetics of modernity. “Other kinds of poetry are finished,” had observed Schlegel in the *Athenaeum*, but “the romantic kind of poetry should forever be becoming”; “only that which is itself developing can comprehend development,” echoed Bakhtin in “Epic and Novel.”¹⁹ Here, historical change – Bakhtin’s “present in all its openedness” – is no longer an obstacle to morphological achievement, but the very basis of its unprecedented plasticity.

Why tragedy? Answers have converged around its ethico-political significance,²⁰ from Aristotle’s Delphic dictum – “through pity and fear accomplishing catharsis”²¹ – to Christian warnings on the hazards of worldly greatness, early modern awe at the implacable energy of ambition and the antinomies of freedom in German idealism. “Speaking in general,” Leo Strauss has observed, “pre-modern thought placed the accent on duties, and rights, when they were considered at all, were viewed only as a consequence of duties.”²² An emphasis on duties: “the jurisdiction of the stage begins where the domain of secular laws ends,” declared Schiller in his 1784 speech on the influence of the theater: “only here do the great of the world hear what they never or seldom hear – Truth – and see what they never or rarely see: Man (*den Menschen*).”²³

This ethico-political dominant has made it notoriously difficult to spell out what kind of pleasure is associated with tragic form. Schiller’s “Of the Cause of Pleasure We Derive from Tragic Objects” has much to say about reason, ethics, and even pain – “the highest moral pleasure is always accompanied by pain”²⁴ – and very little about enjoyment. Even *The Birth of Tragedy*, which provided the most celebrated attempt in the opposite direction, sounds often like a *petitio principii* about the “health” of pre-Socratic Greece – “what then would be the origin of tragedy? Perhaps joy, strength, overflowing health, excessive abundance?”²⁵ – rather than a genuine account of the sources of tragic pleasure; while the famous paragraph on the world being “justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon,” rests for its part on a Wagnerian mood that would have been inconceivable in the ages before *Tristan*.²⁶

Why the novel? “Caramelos y novelas andan juntos en el mundo,” wrote Domingo Sarmiento around the middle of the nineteenth century: “candy and novels go hand-in-hand in the world, and the culture of a nation can be measured by how much sugar they consume and how many novels they read.”²⁷ Sugar had been a protagonist of the eighteenth-century “consumer revolution,” and Sarmiento’s

sarcasm highlights the novel's status as the archetypal literary commodity – one that promises easy and immediate gratification. “Unlike other genres,” observed Lukács, the novel “has a caricatural twin almost indistinguishable from itself . . . : the entertainment novel.”²⁸ Where the problem, it seems, is less the existence of *Jack Sheppard* or *The Wide Wide World* than the fact that *all* novels incorporate at least some of the vulgarity of *Unterhaltungslektüre* (entertainment novel). Too much sugar, in the novel's recipe, whence the Sisyphean attempt to “nobilitate” it (Fielding, Flaubert, James, Proust) by severing all links with plebeian taste.

Too much pain, too much candy. Each in its own way, tragedy and the novel seem to drift away from the “right” amount of aesthetic pleasure, forcing their respective theories to struggle with this lack of measure. A problem? I don't think so. As two extreme cases, tragedy and the novel help us delimit opposite dimensions of the aesthetic realm, suggesting that its pleasure should not be seen as a fixed category, but as a spectrum of divergent outcomes. It is one thing to concentrate on a play about the fate of the *polis* knowing that we may be involved in it, and quite another to lose ourselves in an improbable adventure that we'll never experience; but there is pleasure in both, and we should try to recognize the centers of gravity around which it has clustered over time. A historical anthropology of literary pleasure(s) will not by itself unify the two theoretical traditions, but will at least place them within a single conceptual landscape. *That* would be a new starting point.

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ENDNOTES

¹ In the case of the *Antigone* network, created by Holst Katsma, an interaction is defined as an explicit verbal exchange among characters; in the case of *Les Misérables*, to be found at “Visualizing *Les Misérables*,” <https://lesmiserables.mla.hcommons.org/>, they include “all encounters, whether they are shown or told.” The two texts, incidentally, have not been chosen at random. Apart from being very well-known, they embody, if not exactly extreme cases—*Persians* has a smaller cast than *Antigone*, and *The Story of the Stone* a larger one than *Les Misérables*—the inner tendency of each genre toward compression or expansion of their character-systems.

- ² Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).
- ³ William Marx, *Le Tombeau d'Édipe: Pour une tragédie sans tragique* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2012), 57. The shift from tragedy to the tragic is at the core of Peter Szondi's *Essay on the Tragic*, which opens with the trenchant assertion that "since Aristotle there has been a theory of tragedy. Only since Schelling has there been a philosophy of the tragic." Peter Szondi, *Essay on the Tragic* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002 [1961]), 1.
- ⁴ The never-ending debate on the Greek chorus is the most arresting instance of this state of affairs, from the grand cognitive metaphors of German philosophy ("living wall," "ideal spectator," "Dionysian cortege") to the factual and interpretive controversies among contemporary classicists (Vernant, Vidal-Naquet, Calame, Goldhill, Young, and more).
- ⁵ Joshua Billings, *Genealogy of the Tragic: Greek Tragedy and German Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014), 11.
- ⁶ Friedrich Schlegel, "Athenaeum Fragments" [1798], in *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 249; italics mine.
- ⁷ René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965 [1961]); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Origin of Table Manners* (London: Cape, 1968); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology II* (New York: Basic Books, 1976 [1973]); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983); Mona Ozouf, *Les Aveux du roman: Le XIXe siècle entre Ancien Régime et Révolution* (Paris: Fayard, 2001); and Marthe Robert, *Origins of the Novel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980 [1972]).
- ⁸ If one looks at the most influential recent collection on the topic—Christopher Prendergast, ed., *Debating World Literature* (London: Verso, 2004)—world literature appears to be unimaginable without the novel, but barely affected by the existence (or not) of tragedy: not only is the presence of the two forms disproportionately tilted in favor of the former (with a ratio of about twenty to one), but the term tragedy does not even qualify for an entry in the index to the volume.
- ⁹ See Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005), 18–33.
- ¹⁰ Cesare Segre, "What Bakhtin Left Unsaid: The Case of the Medieval Romance," in *Romance: Generic Transformations from Chrétien de Troyes to Cervantes*, ed. Kevin Brownlee and Marina Scordilis Brownlee (Hanover and London: New England University Press, 1985), 34.
- ¹¹ See Andrew H. Plaks, "The Novel in Premodern China," in *The Novel: History, Geography, and Culture*, vol. 1, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006 [2002]), where he points to the existence of various noncanonical genres, including "talent and beauty" stories, "military romances," "wandering heroes," "court cases," "fantastic journeys," and "encounters with ghosts and demons," plus, of course, the variegated erotic corpus of Chinese prose.
- ¹² Tomas Hägg's key texts are *The Novel in Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); and the more synthetic and radical statement in "The Ancient Greek Novel: A Single Model or a Plurality of Forms?" in *The Novel*, vol. 1, ed. Moretti, where—along-

side the better-known forms of the Greek novel—he examines the “oral-popular background” of Ephesian tales, the “oriental military novel with a love subplot,” fictionalized biographies of historical individuals, epistolary novels, and the *unicum* of *The Wonders beyond Thule*.

- ¹³ See Thomas Pavel, *Lives of the Novel: A History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013); and Guido Mazzoni, *Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017 [2011]): two studies that are also unusual for the philosophical intensity with which they address the ethical (Pavel) and epistemological (Mazzoni) aspects of the novel as form.
- ¹⁴ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983 [1937]); Francisco Rico, *La novela picaresca y el punto de vista* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1970); Geneviève Bollème, *La Bibliothèque bleue: Littérature populaire en France du XVIIe au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1971); Eugène Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997); Stefano Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon’s “Gravity’s Rainbow” to Roberto Bolaño’s “2066”* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014); and Stefano Ercolino, *The Novel-Essay, 1884–1947* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
- ¹⁵ G. E. Hutchinson, “Homage to Santa Rosalia, or, Why Are There So Many Kinds of Animals?” *The American Naturalist*, May–June 1959, 155.
- ¹⁶ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel: Towards a Methodology for the Study of the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 4–5.
- ¹⁷ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449a.
- ¹⁸ Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1971 [1914–1915]), 31–32.
- ¹⁹ Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel,” 7.
- ²⁰ Ethico-political in the sense that tragic conflict activates supra-individual (political) values by showing their force at the (ethical) level of individual choices: a hybrid dimension between public and private that appears to be the specific domain of the tragic imagination.
- ²¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b.
- ²² Leo Strauss, *Gerusalemme e Atene: Studi sul pensiero politico dell’Occidente* (Torino: Einaudi, 1997), 55.
- ²³ Friedrich Schiller, “Was kann eine gute stehende Schaubühne eigentlich wirken?” [1784], in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 5, ed. Carl Hanser (München: Verlag, 1980), 823, 828.
- ²⁴ Friedrich Schiller, “Of the Cause of Pleasure We Derive from Tragic Objects,” [1791], in *Aesthetic and Philosophical Essays*, trans. Nicholas Dole (Hadley, Mass.: Hadley Press, 2015), 537.
- ²⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* [1872], trans. Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin, 2003), 6–7.
- ²⁶ Here is the entire passage, from the penultimate chapter of *The Birth of Tragedy*:

existence and the world seem justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon. Accordingly, the tragic myth has to convince us that even ugliness and discord are an artistic game in which the will, in the eternal abundance of its pleasure, plays with itself. But this primal and difficult phenomenon of Dionysiac art is only intelligible and can only be immediately grasped through the wonderful significance of musical dissonance. . . . The pleasure produced by the tragic myth has the same origin as the pleasurable perception of dissonance in music.

Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 115. Adorno's diagnosis of the role played by dissonance in Wagner is the most appropriate comment:

In Beethoven and well into high Romanticism the expressive values of harmony are fixed: dissonance stands for negation and suffering, consonance for fulfilment and the positive. . . . That suffering can be sweet . . . is something that composers and audience learned uniquely from [Wagner] . . . and few aspects of Wagner's music have been as seductive as the enjoyment of pain.

Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2009 [1966]), 56.

²⁷ Sarmiento's 1856 article "Las novelas" is quoted by Alejandra Laera in *El tiempo vacío de la ficción: Las novelas argentinas de Eduardo Gutiérrez y Eugenio Cambaceres* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004), 9.

²⁸ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1971 [1920]).

Finding the Time for Ancient Novels

Simon Goldhill

This essay looks at the history of the novel, starting from the influential postwar critical insistence on the importance of the novel as a nineteenth-century genre. It notes that this tradition singularly fails to take account of the history of the novel in antiquity – for clear ideological reasons. It then explores the degree to which the texts known as the novel from antiquity, such as Longus’s Daphnis and Chloe, Petronius’s Satyricon, or Heliodorus’s Aethiopica, constitute a genre. Although there is a great deal of porousness between different forms of prose in antiquity, the essay concludes by exploring why the ancient novel, ignored by critics for so long, has now become such a hot topic. It argues that much as the postwar critics could not fit the ancient novel into their histories, now the ancient novel’s interests in sophisticated erotics, narrative flair, and cultural hybridity seem all too timely.

There was a schoolmaster at my junior school who was feared for his violent and debilitating outbursts of temper. Once, my classmates and I earnestly reported to each other, he actually had a fit and the class had to be stopped. We explained this with nine-year-old knowingness: “because he had been in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp.” In those days, Holocaust memorial days had not yet been institutionalized; the curriculum did not relentlessly privilege World War II; Primo Levi and the huge industry of the writing about war crimes or posttraumatic stress had not yet become a staple. We had no idea what “being in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp” actually meant. It is hard now to remember the stoic or traumatized silence of that generation of fighters. My own father, who had been wounded three times and survived thanks to an operation in a French cellar, where calvados was both the antiseptic and anaesthetic, never spoke of his war-time experiences, except, when pushed, in the barest of outlines. As children, we played at war, without correction.

As I reached the higher classes of the school, I was given Ian Watt’s book *The Rise of the Novel* to study, along with F. R. Leavis’s *The Great Tradition*.¹ Particularly for my adolescent idealism, these books were inspirational because, as literary critic Stefan Collini reflects, they embody a “moment when literary criticism seemed important in part because it was about so much more than literature.”² I did not know then that Ian Watt had been in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp. He had been reported dead to his family, spent three-and-a-half years in horrific

conditions building the bridge over the River Kwai, suffered disease and malnutrition so severely that he was hospitalized for months after the end of the war, and experienced the psychological torment of watching lethal violence meted out to his comrades.

How this wartime experience affected Watt's critical agenda has recently become the subject of debate, largely due to biographer Marina MacKay's book *Ian Watt: The Novel and the War-Time Critic*. Watt's book, one of the most influential critical studies of the twentieth century, established a story for the rise of the novel that became an integral part of postwar understanding of literature. His explanation of the emergence of the novel as a form in the eighteenth century is intellectually ambitious and insists on a broad comprehension of social change. For Watt, the scientific, social, economic, and intellectual developments of the eighteenth century were key to the literary expressivity of the novel. For him, a new empirical and, above all, realistic representation of individual experience was the hallmark of the new literary form: "The novel is surely distinguished from other genres and from previous forms of fiction by the amount of attention it habitually accords both to the individualisation of its characters and to the detailed presentation of their environment."³ This new narrative form entailed a new reading public and created the imaginary of this modern audience. The novel was a product of its time and spoke to how the times were a-changing.

By the 1980s, particularly with the rise of critical theory, Watt's account came under severe attack, but was never fully displaced. That he placed *the rise of the novel in England* – in London, indeed – was decried as essentialist, oversimplified, and excessively nationalist, not to mention historically short-sighted in its ignoring of prose fiction from the sixteenth century onward, not least in Spain.⁴ Even to take the category of "the novel" for granted took the sword to this much more complex and longer history of prose fiction. His book, in short, was marred because it was a product of *its* time and was thus no longer fit for how the times were now a-changing.⁵ Yet Watt's influence has persisted. His was still the story to fight against when the late and much missed Srinivas Aravamudan subtitled his 2012 study of Orientalism "Resisting the Rise of the Novel."⁶

Watt himself was publicly and stridently critical when David Lean's movie *The Bridge over the River Kwai* appeared, the same year as *The Rise of the Novel*. He hated the film precisely because of what he specified – from personal experience – to be its fantasy of escape and its focus on the deeply unconvincing story of one American's individual heroism. That is, he hated it for its *novelistic* qualities: the movie's collapse of multiple perspectives, conflicting possibilities, and downright mess into a nicely ordered teleological plot. Watt knew well how any person had to be selfish to survive in the camps, but also wrote: "All our circumstances were hostile to individual fantasies, surviving meant accepting the intractable realities which surrounded us."⁷ Nonetheless, none of Watt's critics, as far as I am aware,

for all their attempts to dismiss his book as a product of the political blinkers of a particular moment, sought to link his writing with his experience as a survivor of the horrors of war, at least until very recently. It is not hard to hazard some reasons why Watt's war should be thought now to be so significant. In recent years, the situatedness – Donna Haraway's productive term⁸ – of a writer has become a route to move beyond naive identity politics into a more complex idea of how an author inhabits a time, a place, a network; the development of a personal voice in critical discourse has combined with studies of life-writing to explore the complexities of self-representation, even and especially in genres that eschew any explicit narrative of the self. Criticism of the novel, a genre that still so often narrates the story of an individual or individuals in a set of contingent circumstances, inevitably, it seems, provokes reflections on how the self is placed in history. Yet to make the connection between Watt's personal experience in the camps and his critical writing, for all MacKay's careful exegesis, remains a fearsomely complicated task, and threatens to slip back into a misplaced and uncomprehending knowingness: "because he was in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp."

It might seem easier to see Watt alongside other great critics of the immediate postwar period, who constructed large-scale narratives about literary tradition. F. R. Leavis, who had been an ambulance worker in World War I, published *The Great Tradition* in 1948; Erich Auerbach, exiled to Istanbul, produced *Mimesis* in 1946.⁹ Auerbach's topic was the representation of reality in Western literature; Leavis defined a tradition of moral seriousness that he saw as central to the history of the novel. For many, Watt, Auerbach, and Leavis mark a moment when, after the violence and horror of World War II and the threat of continuing global conflict, the memory of the literary history of Europe, with its shared heritage of writing and intellectual engagement, offered a cultural hope to set against political despair. We could add many others, of course: Ernst Robert Curtius's *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, for example, appeared in 1948 or, on a far smaller scale, but with considerable influence, T. S. Eliot's essays "What is a Classic?" (1944) and "Virgil and the Christian World" (1951).¹⁰ Literary criticism indeed was about "more than literature." At stake was what culture might mean after World War II. If "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," as Watt's friend Theodor Adorno paradigmatically declared, what is the worth of literary culture?

For a classicist today, however, Leavis's *Great Tradition* and Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* immediately appear to embody a strikingly blinkered historical perspective. For if there is any genre that has come back into the limelight of classical studies in the last thirty years, it is the ancient Greek and Latin novel, and neither Watt nor Leavis show any interest in this deep history of the genre. For them, what matters in the novel – its privileged place as sign and symbol of the values of European civilization – is likely to be dissipated by telling a longer, more intricate, more variegated history. I aim to explore not just the history of the history of the novel with

an eye specifically on its ancient Greek and Latin forebears, but also, more precisely, what such a history can tell us about the situatedness of the literary critical engagement with prose fiction. Why is it now that the Greek novel has proved so compelling to so many readers? When texts from antiquity, silenced for so long, begin to speak to modernity, what does this changing understanding of the history of literature indicate?

It would be as well to begin with three sets of summary starting points. The first concerns the ancient Greek sources. There is no explicit ancient category of “the novel” (as there is of “epic” or “tragedy,” say). Nor is there a category of “romance” (a term often used to denigrate some fictions as subnovelistic).¹¹ But there are five extended prose fictions in Greek, written between the first and the fourth centuries, which survive in full, and fragments of many others, all of which are usually known today as “novels” (the convenient, anachronistic title self-servingly helps tie classics back into the Great Tradition). All these novels are love stories, and each involves the travails of a young and beautiful couple who are in different ways separated from their goal of a happy marriage, until the last page of the book. Probably the best known of the Greek novels today is *Daphnis and Chloe*, not least because of Ravel’s music (the lovers are separated from marriage in this novel by their ignorance of sex: even naivety is a sophisticated and ludic plot device in the novel). Although there is no word for “novel” in ancient Greek, all five Greek texts have internal markers of generic self-awareness: they have similar tropes and narrative structures, and they play games with the expectations of such tropes (love stories, above all, will have their clichés and their ideological presuppositions). The novels are written in a developed literary language, with many echoes of earlier literature, which implies – or calls for – an educated audience, aware of the history of love stories back to Helen of Troy. These are self-conscious, amused, and amusing narratives. As we will see, these texts are generically porous, with links to travel writing, philosophy, rhetoric, historiography, and epic. There are also many other forms of prose – again we will discuss this below – that border on these central “novels,” including Jewish and Christian prose texts. A good deal of recent criticism has incisively outlined the elements of the genre of the ancient Greek novel, the limits of its definition as a genre, and the connection between the different types of Greek and Latin prose, especially the shared strategies of erotic novels and the Christian scriptures.¹² The novel is now a staple of classical curricula and scholarly publication, though it is still rare for even literary scholars of later periods to be fully aware of these funny and sophisticated texts.

It was not always thus. The history of the reception of the Greek novel in particular – my second starting point – swerves between moments of excited rediscovery, aggressive disdain, and total ignorance. In the West, the rediscovery of

Longus's *Daphnis and Chloe* and of Heliodorus's *Aethiopica* are significant cultural events of the Renaissance; and the Greek novels are consequently present and instrumental as models or resources for the era(s) when the modern novel is said to rise. Both books are translated into English and French from the sixteenth century, both are very widely read and imitated, but they are treated quite differently. Where *Daphnis and Chloe* is very much a tale of pastoral love (itself a genre attractive to so many forms in the period, from literature to art to opera), Heliodorus's prose is welcomed as an epic – in terms to delight Lukács.¹³ Its combination of travel, romance, and adventure fueled many a book in the early modern era. In the nineteenth century, by stark contrast, even when studied, the novels were usually regarded as late and degenerate forms, heavily scarred by their origin in the dangerous East. Erwin Rohde, who was a great friend of Friedrich Nietzsche, and who spent many years researching the novels, nonetheless dismissed *Daphnis and Chloe* as “revolting, hypocritical sophistication” (his book was hailed by Mikhail Bakhtin as the best book on the Greek novel).¹⁴ The origin of the novel was debated within racist polemics about the Orient: its location in the Greek East (Asia Minor) was often taken as a sign and cause of its separation from the true well-springs of classical Hellenism.¹⁵ In short, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the novel had been largely banished from the hallowed halls of Hellenism, except as an example of degeneracy in prose. This Victorian disdain helps explain why the ancient novel is still unknown to many modern readers.

The Latin novel, my third starting point, has had a different trajectory, without the ideological framing of Philhellenism, which defines so much of the nineteenth-century response to antiquity. There are two main extant Latin novels, and one of these, by Petronius, does not survive in a complete form. Both Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* (also known as *The Golden Ass*) and Petronius's *Satyricon* have authors who are known from other texts (unlike any of the Greek writers), and we have other extant works by Apuleius. Petronius is, it is usually assumed, the established figure in the court of Nero, described by Tacitus's wonderful phrase as “the connoisseur and judge of what is tasteful,” *elegantiae arbiter*, a man of “sophisticated extravagance,” *erudito luxu*.¹⁶ Apuleius was a notable in Roman Africa, a philosopher and rhetorician, once accused, according to his own defense speech, which may be fictional, of using magic to gain the attention of a rich widow. Both authors had lives fit for a novel.¹⁷ Both novels have passages that could not be given to schoolchildren because of their explicit, exuberant, and delightfully perverse sexuality, which also guaranteed them a readership elsewhere. (Petronius's *Satyricon* provides a plot and a style for Fellini.) Both also have passages of a quite different sort that have stimulated art of multiple forms, and both enter the history of the novel in English easily. Apuleius's tale of “Cupid and Psyche,” for example, is translated in full in the middle of Walter Pater's novel *Marius the Epicurean*, a centerpiece of the role of classicism at the heart of British aestheticism;¹⁸ the orig-

inal title for F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* was "Trimalchio in West Egg," after the *Cena Trimalchionis*, "The Dinner Party of Trimalchio," an extended scene in Petronius's *Satyricon*. The Latin novels' bawdy and episodic fiction feeds into picaresque and erotic narrative, especially in the early modern era.¹⁹ Apuleius's tale of the hero's transformation into a donkey and back again was a particularly stimulating narrative to recalibrate ideas not just about the limits of the human but also about conversion, an integral crisis of the Reformation. If in the eyes of the nineteenth-century Greek novels were texts of the degenerate East, the Latin novels were texts *about* degeneracy, and were read within a broadly Christianizing context as signs of the moral and social decline of the Roman Empire. As many a novelist, artist, and filmmaker have discovered, to show a Roman orgy is a particularly gratifying way to assert a moral superiority.

So, why has the Greek novel in particular come back into such prominence now? I think there are four main reasons. The first concerns erotics. Rohde, as I just indicated, hated *Daphnis and Chloe* because of its "revolting, hypocritical sophistication." He disliked that the novel used the innocence of its hero and heroine to expose the lasciviousness of its readers: the text flirts and titillates its readers with a naivety they cannot share. When Chloe, wracked by a desire she cannot name or understand, exclaims, "I wish I were a flute, so that he could blow me," or when she secretly touches her own body to test "which bits of herself were softer than him," it is easy to see what upset Rohde.²⁰ But for Michel Foucault, the Greek novel was a key juncture in his history of sexuality. Foucault's *History of Sexuality* was a defining work of the 1980s. His return to antiquity to explain how Christian sexuality took shape emphasized how the asymmetrical, temporary Greek erotic partnerships, which recognized controlled pleasure as good and male-male relationships as acceptable, were reconfigured into symmetrical, long-term relationships between men and women. The Greek novel, he argued, was precious testimony of this transition. The novels know of the history of Greek erotics, but privilege at their heart a young male and female couple of the same age and background who seek a permanent tie of mutual affection. These books, claimed Foucault, demonstrate how a community could change not just its normative structures but its cultural imaginary. The novels, which are published during the period when Christianity comes into prominence across the Roman Empire, trace such a transition. When the heroine of Heliodorus's *Aethiopica* is said "to make a divinity of her virginity," the imminence of Christian morals looms.²¹

Foucault's broad history has proved hugely influential. It has been extensively criticized, for sure, for its focus on a restricted set of texts, for its focus on a masculine story, and, with regard to the ancient novel, for his failure to deal either with the humor of the texts – the transgressive laughter of sexuality also can be disruptive to the normative structures Foucault insisted upon – or with the persistence

of the hierarchies of gender relations, which outlive any epiphenomena of equality. Nonetheless, Foucault's claim that sexuality was not pathologized before the nineteenth century – you could not “be a homosexual” in terms of medical, legal, and other normative discourses before this era – has resulted in a corresponding interest in texts that are not only before such pathologization but also mark the transition between the culture of Christianity and the inherited and different normativities of Greco-Roman culture. Both anthropology and cultural history have used the otherness of different sexual regimes to explore and criticize the rhetoric of naturalness with which sexual propriety is invested. This exercise in defamiliarization has found the Greek novel *bon à penser*, “good to think with.” The Greek novel, that is, may have offended public Victorian moral commitments, but it speaks with purpose to our contemporary debates about sexuality. When Achilles Tatius stages a (very sexy) debate about whether it is better to sleep with a boy or a girl, its easy assumption of multiple sexual choices and polymorphous pleasures fits excitingly with a certain modern self-representation of metrosexuality. The combination of the novels' self-conscious wit, narrative glee, and eye-opening variety of erotic expectations makes the genre extremely attractive to contemporary critics, ever keen to express their own modernity through a rediscovered, authoritative past.

The second reason for the novel's return to favor concerns the very idea of genre. It has become a commonplace in the history of literature that the novel became a dominant genre in the nineteenth century, reaching a new large audience and replacing epic or drama as the form that expressed reality in a normative way. Whether we turn to the huge popularity of a figure such as Walter Scott to see a changing image of the historical past, or Charles Dickens to appreciate the changing urban environment as a social map, or Charlotte Brontë to appreciate shifting patterns of emotional inner life, the novel came of age, it is argued, in the nineteenth century, as a key, formative guide to a culture's imagination as well as its narratives: it is a product of its time and a witness to that time. Consequently, the history of the novel becomes invested with a special authority, which makes attempts at re-dating the genre's emergence and hence its impact especially provocative. Rewriting this history changes our sense of modernity and its self-assertions. To keep the standard narrative in place, one response to the evidently much longer history of prose fiction has been simply to ignore any works before the eighteenth century, with an inevitable reaction that draws pointed attention to such gaps. Another has been to try and delimit what counts as a novel. The word “Romance” in English (though not in other major European languages) has been repeatedly used to reserve the authority of the title of novel for whichever elements of the Great Tradition are thought supreme. It might seem hard to deny Cervantes's *Don Quixote* the title of novel – this is the beginning of the *seventeenth* century – but *Don Quixote* is already also a parody of earlier forms. Defin-

ing and dating the novel turns out to be a project replete with ideological commitments about the place – in all senses – of cultural value. To establish the Greek novel in this tradition is not so much the traditional gesture of classicism – finding a genealogy for Western values in an idealized classical antiquity – as an attempt to recognize a longer and more nuanced history than the most self-important narratives of nineteenth-century preeminence can allow.

The fullest and richest version of this revisionist argument is found in Margaret Anne Doody's aggressively if parodically titled *The True Story of the Novel*. This long critical study aims to reveal "the connections of ancient fiction and our own." She offers a sprawling, partial account, under the immediately provocative principle that "Romance and The Novel are one." The first three hundred pages of her book consist of two sections: "The Ancient Novel" and "The Influence of the Ancient Novel"; in the remaining 185 pages, on the "deep rhetoric" of the novel, Doody takes her defining tropes also from the ancient novel: Eros, Ekphrasis, the Goddess, and the like. For her, the connection between the ancient and modern novel is "inescapable," all pervasive, and only requires a shift in perspective to become visible, a shift her book sets out to provide.²² Now, Doody's desire to find such connections also erases many a major historical and ideological difference (for her, unlike Foucault, whom she does not cite, Eros flies without change across time and culture). She spends no time wondering if fiction itself is a transferable category. It is an account that knows exactly what counts as a novel, and she is all too happy to list her candidates from antiquity.

But it is here that the argument about genre becomes insistently difficult and shows the problem at the heart of the issue. Doody includes in her list of novels "Joseph and Aseneth"; Lucian's *True History*; and "Paul and Thekla," for example. "Joseph and Aseneth" is a short prose version of the marriage of the biblical figure, Joseph, and the wars of succession that follow from it.²³ It expands a verse or two from Genesis, primarily to explain how Joseph, a founding father of the Jewish people, could have married a non-Jew. It exists in two different forms (at least) and seven different languages, and if it started out as a Jewish text, it is adopted by and adapted to a Christian readership through translation. It combines tropes from erotic Greek narratives with intertestamental narratives such as Maccabees or Esther. If such a text is included in the history of the novel, is there any good reason not to include the Gospels, though the genre of the Gospels has vexed scholars for generations, and simply to put the Gospels under the category of fiction would certainly upset many of Scripture's readers?²⁴ Lucian's *True History*, by contrast, is a wonderful parody of historiography and travel writing within historiography. It announces from the start that unlike other historians, he at least knows that everything he says is false (a paradox that wilfully plays with the category of fiction). It smartly mocks the reader's desire for certainty and closure, not least by announcing at the end of its second book that everything will become clear in

the next book, a book that does not exist. Lucian, with his typical narratological panache, announces his own lost book, his own absent conclusion and closure. If a parody of historiographical travel writing is included as a novel, what of historiographical travel writing such as Pausanias? “Paul and Thekla” is a hagiographic narrative of Thekla’s conversion to Christianity and her subsequent life and death. It has scenes that seem to echo the novel of Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Cleitophon*, one of the sexiest and most intellectually rich of the ancient Greek novels.²⁵ But it is a saint’s life, and there are hundreds of such texts. Again, to call all these works “novels” is to stretch the definition to the breaking point, not least because of their use as devotional texts in ritual settings. Doody’s list of novels, that is, points out that alongside the five texts we have been calling novels, there is a string of other prose texts of varying lengths, different implied audiences and uses, and different intellectual frameworks, which narrate stories, parody narrative styles, and adopt and adapt narrative styles. The five novels include passages that look like historiography, philosophy, art history, travel narrative, and rhetorical speeches; and by the same token, hagiography, history, rhetorical speeches, travel narratives, philosophy, and so forth include passages of narrative that look like the prose of the novels, and may even take the shape of what we might call novellas.

This mutually infecting dynamic of porousness raises serious questions for the notion of genre. Does the lack of a word for “novel” alter our recognition of the five, polyphonous texts as belonging to a not-yet-named tradition that will retrospectively claim them for itself? Does the very polyphony of the ancient novel – something that even Bakhtin, who both knew the ancient novel and wrote about polyphony, failed to address – make affiliation to a generic tradition necessary or impossible? The five novels, that is, *both* have the generic markers of repeated tropes and narrative expectations *and* borrow from and are echoed in other prose works of the same period. This makes it especially hard to settle on any hard and fast criteria of generic affiliation even for these five central test cases.

“What are the signs of generic affiliation?” is one pressing question provoked by the fragmented and incremental styles of modernism and taken up by recent literary theorists. So, too, have critics begun to explore the self-interest and ideological presuppositions of literary history, especially as a teleological account of the self in history. The ancient novel is a fascinating test case for both agendas. We must ask not only whether some or all of ancient prose fiction should belong to the history of the novel, but also what is at stake for us in such a determination. When we try to include or exclude particular texts from the genre and history of the novel, what is at stake for the critic? The ancient novel thus becomes a particularly testing example for a major debate in literary criticism, and this too brings it to the fore for contemporary scholarship.

The third driving force behind the resurgence of the ancient novel follows from the second, and concerns narratology: the study of the techniques of nar-

narrative. One particularly influential genealogy of modern literary criticism starts with Viktor Shlovsky and the Russian Formalist critics from the beginning of the twentieth century.²⁶ They aimed to explore how literary narrative functioned as a form. In one branch of influence – Marxist analysis of literature like Lukács, say, or Raymond Williams – the representation of reality as a political truth is directly linked to the forms of expressivity used: socialist realism. Bakhtin, whose work between the wars became influential only after it was translated into French in the 1970s, is perhaps best seen as an extension of such formalist analysis into particularly sophisticated areas of time and space and multiplicity of voices.²⁷ In another branch, Gérard Genette in Paris in the 1970s and 1980s, followed by Mieke Bal and others, developed such formalist analysis into a full-scale system of description of narrative's tropes and strategies of expressivity.²⁸ Yet it is striking the degree to which such analyses depend on nineteenth-century prose fiction for their test cases. Even Bakhtin uses the ancient novel primarily as a fall guy to contrast the polyphony and complexity of other forms from the static models of a classical idealism.

One of the most charismatic studies of the ancient novel that helped stir its more general revival was Jack Winkler's *Auctor et Actor* (1985), significantly subtitled *A Narratological Reading of Apuleius' "The Golden Ass."* Winkler used a fluid, narratological analytic to explore the playful self-consciousness of Apuleius's narrative technique, articulating the tensions between the author as character and the author as writer in the first-person narration. Winkler brilliantly showed how the narrative techniques of Apuleius led the reader down the garden path of inevitably failing acts of (mis)interpretation. The journey of the novel's hero from curious traveler to donkey to religious initiate mapped a reader's equally bumpy and picaresque journey of reading. Above all, Winkler demonstrated that modern literary critical desire to contrast the complexity of modern narrative technique with an imagined white temple of simple and austere classical idealism was a self-serving fantasy. The ancient novel was as complex and engaging as any modern text. Heliodorus's *Aethiopica* is an even more intricate text, whose nested narratives, multiple narrators, and intricate journeys of interpretation and misinterpretation seem designed to drive a reader to distraction, as we try, like the hero and heroine, to stay on the path toward a narrative conclusion in marriage, a scene never quite reached, though often promised.²⁹

Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* would have us believe that his description of the material plenitude of Homer and the gap-marked narrative of the Bible define the modes of ancient representations of reality. The ancient novel, with its brilliant exposure of both the self-deceptions and lures of the first-person narrative, and its recognition of the role of the reader as interpreter in the third-person narrative, stands as a vivid rejoinder to such oversimplifications of antiquity. Ancient literature is nobody's childhood, and the ancient novel, in the hands of such fine narra-

tological analysis, has been one route for classicists pointedly to demonstrate this to other disciplines, still beholden to Auerbach's and other similarly misplaced visions of a simpler time.

There is a politics to all this, however, which makes up the fourth transformation of the ancient novel. The Greek novels are all written from within the Roman Empire. But none mentions any Roman word, any Roman institution, or recognizes the power structures under which the authors of the novels lived. The men and women who identified as Greek lived as subjects of the empire, and while the elite continued to maintain their local status, and engaged with Rome and its institutions in a range of ways, the power battles of the imperial court and the marching of armies passed the Greeks by: they held such office as they did, as Plutarch bitterly observes, "like children walking in their parents' shoes."³⁰ Yet Greek was the language of the Roman elite too (*kai su, teknon*, "and you too, my son" was what Caesar said in Greek to his killer Brutus, not the Shakespearian Latin *et tu, Brute*). Greek culture – its art, drama, philosophy, music, and literature – dominated the Roman scene. One of the most surprising elements of the empire, and an element recognized as surprising by the Romans themselves, was that the dominant power was itself dominated – captured, as Horace puts it – by the culture of one of its captured countries. The novels have provoked thus a passionate discussion within classics about the literature of resistance. This writing from below turns a blind eye to the realities of Rome, and turns its gaze back toward a classical past when there was no gap between Greek prestige and Greek political action. The Greek novel has become a key resource for thinking how the culture of the Roman Empire functioned for those who were not its Roman masters.³¹

Heliodorus's *Aethiopica* starts its story (if not its narrative) in Delphi, the center of the Greek world, and travels to Ethiopia, a country known since Homer as "the end of the known world," where it reestablishes its heroine as not the Greek maiden she has appeared to be, but as the princess of Ethiopia.³² It reverses Homer's *Odyssey*, which takes its hero, Odysseus, from the belly button of the ocean, as far from human inhabitation as one can be, to his bed in the center of his house on an island in the middle of the Greek world. What's more, Heliodorus's heroine, Charikleia, is White, but her parents are the Black king and queen of Ethiopia. (Her mother had looked at a picture of Ariadne as the child was conceived, which imprinted the fetus with that image of a Greek girl.) The novel does not merely trace the topography of empire from center to margins but revels in cultural difference, fluidity of identities, and the contingencies of status.

The Greek novel thus provides striking testimony from the mother of empires of how the colonized can write back. When so much current literary criticism is concerned with both identity (national and cultural) and the postcolonial – that is, with how literature speaks to power – the Greek novel gives a particularly fascinating example of how complex the dynamics of cultural prestige and self-

representation within imperial society can be. It is especially fascinating to see how much Christian prose of the era appropriates and reshapes the narrative forms of such fiction. As Christianity comes to take over the institutions of empire, its own narratives are based on the fictional strategies of the culture it inhabits. Winning hearts and minds depends on the persuasive stories that the desire for power can tell. The transformation of the Roman world is articulated through its changing fictions. Again, the most pressing concerns of contemporary literary criticism, where it is about “more than literature” – identity, power, social change – find its questions rivetingly explored in and through the ancient novel.

Especially in these four ways, the ancient novel has been made to speak loudly and clearly to modernity. Is, then, this recent critical reevaluation no more than a product of its time? Is literary history no more than a mirror of contemporary interests? Have I simply described how fashion re-clothes and re-brands? Such glib historical determinism does no service to literature nor to its critics and historians. Better to ask what makes texts readable, now. Much as literature contests and creates the imaginary in which the normative is shaped – the novels’ erotics and Christian erotics are also in competition with each other’s normative vision – so the *attachment* of scholars to their object of study and the *affect* with which they approach their study requires a far more complex sense of situatedness, certainly a more nuanced analytic than the flying of identity politics allows. To inhabit modernity is the condition from which we must read the texts of antiquity, but it is a condition that is negotiated, disavowed, contested. What it means to be of one’s time or, indeed, to be untimely requires deep reflection and care, if we are not going to revert to the misplaced and inadequate knowingness of “because he was in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp.”

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ENDNOTES

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Some Endangered Feeling

Nancy Armstrong

This essay sees the recent trend in novels that feature damaged, partial, or wayward protagonists as the ascent of a tradition of formal outliers as old as the novel itself to a position of dominance. Rather than formulate a self-contained individual capable of defending itself against whatever forces of nature or society might disperse and refigure it, this other tradition gave into those forces, releasing human subjectivity from the confines of the self-regulating individual. Why now? How does this major turn in the history of the novel contribute to the current reconsideration of human motivation and behavior in light of affect theory? If Robinson Crusoe provided a bellwether for the individual to come, then what can the damaged protagonist of Tom McCarthy's 2005 novel Remainder tell us about the selves we are likely to become?

Looking to establish a continuous history of novels in English from *Robinson Crusoe* and *Clarissa* through the major novels of Jane Austen to those of George Eliot and Henry James, a handful of postwar critics identified the novel's literary form with the complexity of the problem it posed for its protagonist. Only by surviving what amounted to an identity crisis could that protagonist become as internally nuanced as the literary text itself. As opposed to those who considered the formation of a self-governing individual a more rudimentary process, literary critics and historians who sought to add their own favorites to the list of novels distinguished by F. R. Leavis and Ian Watt were obliged to observe the same principle.¹ They, too, favored novels that defended their protagonists against modernity's periodic assaults on individual autonomy and did so with all the finesse of an established classic. Looking at this tradition from a twenty-first-century vantage point, British novelist Tom McCarthy places his own work in an entirely different tradition, which he traces back through Thomas Pynchon, Samuel Beckett, and Franz Kafka to Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. From there, McCarthy's lineup of idiosyncratic novels threads its way through the nineteenth-century fiction of Lewis Carroll, Herman Melville, and Charles Dickens to the eighteenth-century experiments of Lawrence Sterne.² These novels continue to persuade readers that it is far more interesting, if not more accurate, to experience the material world through a partial, dispersed, damaged, immature, or wayward sensibility.³ To the degree that this retrospective account, with only a

few substitutions, also applies to many of McCarthy's best-known Anglophone contemporaries – J. M. Coetzee, Kazuo Ishiguro, and W. G. Sebald come first to mind – it makes little sense to consider his lineup of idiosyncratic novelists all that idiosyncratic, certainly not in twenty-first-century terms.

Having for more than two centuries occupied a subordinate relation to the great works of realism, it seems, a form of novel that damages liberal individualism beyond repair has suddenly come into dominance. In launching their memorable assaults on an individual whose form and social character are generally considered those of “the novel” itself, such novels have gone to war against the very form in which they are writing – and won. George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* offers an instructive demonstration of the havoc such narrative misbehavior wreaks on the traditional novel form. As Daniel uncovers proof of his Jewish heritage, he finds himself overcome by a sudden rush of feeling that sweeps away the habits of mind and social interaction that distinguished him as a British subject and adopted son of the gentry. For F. R. Leavis, the sudden glitch in a marriage plot that seemed destined to put Daniel in a position of renewed responsibility within a crumbling social elite was the straw that snapped the back of Eliot's final novel. By throwing Daniel off his game, the flood of feeling that washes away his Britishness – and not Daniel's discovery of his Jewishness – calls into question the individual autonomy on which Leavis based his “great tradition.” While it made a good deal of sense for the midcentury canon-makers to look to the history of the novel for a principle of continuity between the Britain of the past and the one in which they found themselves stranded after two world wars, that canonical impulse cannot explain why McCarthy saw fit to place himself in a tradition of formal outliers that runs parallel to Leavis's.

To the question of what principle binds these traditions to one another while keeping them apart, we find intimations of an answer in the broken form of *Daniel Deronda*. The same flood of feeling that carries off the protagonist with his newfound kinsmen to found a Jewish homeland also forces his once intended Gwendolen Harleth to curb the errant spirit that attracts her to Daniel. Gwendolen, by contrast to the protagonist for whom Eliot named her novel, undergoes a long and heroic struggle to head up the household left headless by the death and departure of the only two men slated for that position. In Leavis's view, this struggle makes Gwendolen the novel's rightful protagonist, prompting him to propose that the publisher excise “the Jewish parts” and reissue the novel as *Gwendolen Harleth*.⁴ In all likelihood, very few readers, perhaps only Eliot herself, understood Daniel's sudden transformation as the novel's rejection of the mind-body distinction essential to the formation of a liberal individual in favor of a concept of sociality that observes some innate impulse.

My point in dwelling on this curious bit of literary history is to underscore the mutual incompatibility of the national tradition of realism with its idiosyncratic

counterpart. As the translator of Spinoza's *Ethics*, Eliot was only too familiar with this argument. The difference between the form of her novel and the redaction that Leavis proposed almost a century later boils down to two incompatible ways of addressing the very same problem. The canonical form characteristically adopts the strategy of defending the autonomy necessary to sustain a protagonist's social character over time, while the recessive tradition is marked by a struggle against the confinement of individuated thought that bursts its bubble and floods the setting for human action with uncharted currents of inexpressible feeling. Were it not for the fact that both traditions grapple thus with the problem of individual autonomy, there would be no way that the history of the novel could have continued for centuries along these parallel trajectories, as it has until now.

In view of the novel's longtime commitment to provide a home for the personal lives and private thoughts of literate individuals, one must sit up and take notice when so many prominent novelists cease to do so. In addition to novels by Coetzee, Ishiguro, and Sebald, which preceded McCarthy's *Remainder* as already classics of a tradition bent on challenging realism's enduring attachment to the individual, we are now witnessing something of a worldwide boom in novels that would be considered idiosyncratic were there not so many of them.⁵ Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Michel Houellebecq's *Submission*, Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, Rachel Kushner's *Mars Room*, Yuri Herrera's *Signs Preceding the End of the World*, Rachel Cusk's *Trilogy*, Daniel Kehlman's *Fame*, and Dinaw Megestu's *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* are only the first of this generation that come to mind. Why novels that refuse to focalize experience through an exemplary individual are now in ascendance – if not at every level of the book market, then certainly in the competitions for major prizes and prestigious venues for global distribution – is a question with no easy answer. Convinced that novels generally offer their own best explanation for significant revisions of the form, I rely on one that conspicuously performs the reversal of formal priorities marking our moment in the history of the novel. To reconsider the way novels used to think, not as a given of the form and a phase in its own development, but as a pair of formal options, I look briefly to Fredric Jameson's timely updating of the essay entitled "Narrate or Describe?": Georg Lukács's defense of realism.

In his *Antinomies of Realism*, Jameson sees the novel's present assault on traditional realism as only the most recent in a history of such assaults that periodically provide the novel with a source of human energy to be formally managed and incorporated within historically new systems of belief and desire. In that the protagonist acquires the means to deal with these disruptions in the course of growing up, his or her maturation should provide a milestone in the history of the novel form itself. Where a more traditional reading would stress the way in which particular novels attach their form to that of the modern individual, as if their status as novels depended on it, Jameson focuses on how periodic eruptions of uncoded

feeling, or “affect,” expand and update the possibilities for managing such feeling. What simply feels necessary, desirable, and right from a traditional perspective might actively limit what human beings might do – for good or ill – if freed from the obligation to become self-contained individuals.⁶ To show how, from the very beginning, there was indeed another way of viewing the social imperative to become one, I offer a reading of *Robinson Crusoe* that downplays the pragmatic problem-solving that arguably made its protagonist the first modern individual. Such an openly anachronistic reading throws its hermeneutic weight behind the same response to traditional realism that prompted Jameson’s revision of Lukács as well as McCarthy’s claim as a novelist to descend from a distinguished line of outliers.

To work my way through such a reading from *Robinson Crusoe* and the double history of the novel in English inaugurated by Defoe to an explanation for the recent displacement of the tradition of realism by its schizophrenic double, I will have to venture outside the history of the novel to a recent turn in modern thought that novels had long anticipated. I plan to sketch in overly broad strokes the culture-wide debate generally known to academics as “the turn to affect” and to a new generation of nonacademic service workers as “emotional intelligence.” This debate, as I read it, observes the same antinomies whose tension organizes the novel form and the history of its relation to outliers that periodically assault the representative individual. The current argument over affect within the academic disciplines and between the academy and other sectors of the service economy consequently raises a question that bears directly on the recent eclipse of that tradition. Rather than a question of what causes emotion to irrupt and threaten the very principle of government, the turn to affect calls into question whether or not the apparent surge of uncoded human feeling can be said to originate in the individual at all. The novel enters directly into this argument by showing why our moment in history fails to provide the material suitable for formulating even some radically new version of the autonomous individual that readers once imagined we were.

I am at a loss to name a social scientific theory or popular belief system that does not assume one is born, perhaps not as an individual, but with the potential to become one, an assumption that dooms us to struggle against our present state of being in order to become the person we imagine it is necessary, desirable, or right to be. The novel sets this process of self-discovery in motion by introducing a certain restlessness of spirit that diverts the individual from the predictable path toward an anticipated identity in much the same way that Magwitch’s appearance in *Great Expectations* sets Dickens’s protagonist on an uncertain course to London. Where the protocols of Pip’s adoptive family and relative social obscurity all but guarantee he will remain in that position, a restless im-

pulse has put that identity at risk even before Magwitch can sponsor his unwitting protégé's progress from village to metropolis. As that struggle to become someone was repeated by countless protagonists who felt compelled to do so at the risk of becoming no one at all, an expanding readership came to regard the restless factor as essential both to individual maturation and to the progress of the nation as a whole.

At the dawn of the modern period, John Locke attributed the desire that instigates the process of becoming an individual citizen-subject to an "uneasiness" of the mind,⁷ which prompts the faculty of reason to venture outward in search of new sensations to sort and arrange in a cognitive map of its material environment. Fast-forward from 1689 to the decade following the French Revolution and one finds Thomas Malthus attributing the accumulation of unrest on the Continent to the unchecked sexual passion that produced an excess of mouths to feed.⁸ Differ as they might as to whether this restless body syndrome was an affliction of the mind or a condition of its embodiment, both Locke and Malthus saw human restlessness as the instigator of a process that would inevitably bring the wayward impulse under rational control. Though a century apart, each understood the individual as divided against itself, so that its maturation was necessarily a struggle, on the one hand, against a social system that undervalued the body's sensations and, on the other, against an innate instability that would destabilize the social system that failed to accommodate it. So long as it eventually subjected the restlessness of embodied subjectivity to a problem-solving process that made it productive of a self that was itself productive, both men considered this experimentation worth the risk.

It was with something like this cultural balancing act in mind that Fredric Jameson undertook a revision of Georg Lukács's theory of literary realism, a revision that depends on one subtle but absolutely decisive move. Where Lukács argues that too much description works against realism, Jameson relocates description within realism as one of two poles between which a narrative must navigate if it wanted to be recognizably realistic. Were we to see description as Lukács did, as the limit where narrative time pools up and swamps narration, then plot would have to provide the antithetical pole, Jameson reasons, at which narration loses its traction in the historical particularities of things and people.⁹ For want of the flesh of life, narration begins feeding on itself, he suggests, and vanishes into abstraction. Having thus established description and narration as the formal poles of the contradiction that realism struggles to resolve, Jameson shifts attention onto the undervalued term of this opposition. Whenever it emerges from the background and overwhelms a plot, the setting that should provide the background for human actions becomes an expression of the eternal restlessness that he equates with affect.¹⁰ Henry James deliberately pushed this principle to the descriptive limit of realism, I would add, when *The Turn of the Screw* animates the setting so

aggressively that it drives the plot into hiding, and neither James's several narrators nor his readers can say for sure what if anything has happened.

To address the question of how the novel manages affect, let me disentangle what I see as the decisive move on Jameson's part from what is a wide-ranging and deeply learned book. This one move, I have suggested, makes description integral to the work of realism as one of two cultural antinomies that constitute the problem for which the novel strives to formulate a resolution. Were we to lift the opposition of description and narration, so reconfigured, and bring it to bear on the history of the novel, we would find the same narrative principle operating at the macronarrative level as well.¹¹ Whether this same problem-solving mode of thought holds true for most British novels over the entire history of the British novel, I cannot say, much less whether the same principle obtains for other national traditions. But if these antinomies do determine the formal limits that a narrative must observe in order to be received as a novel, then it would seem to follow that the same opposition shapes the history of the novel as well. As they unfold an individual capable of enduring over time, the novels Leavis selected for *The Great Tradition* can be said to pursue the impulse toward narration. The novels with which McCarthy identifies his own work, by contrast, exploit description in order to draw attention to indexical details and displays of technical virtuosity that disable the canonical defenses of individual autonomy. With the loss of that autonomy, the setting emerges from the background in a novel like *Alice in Wonderland* and choreographs human action.

To offer a thumbnail sketch of what a history of the British novel might look like if periodized in these terms, I would call attention, first, to the frequency with which the Gothic setting of eighteenth-century novels arrests a heroine's search for the man who can secure her social identity and sends her on an extended detour through winding tunnels, dark hallways, and tomb-like inner chambers whose labyrinthine interiors threaten to engulf even the crumbling walls that once distinguished it as a space in which aristocratic passions had free reign. By 1798, when Malthus wrote, the novel had enclosed the passions in the human body for which they provided instincts and drives that simultaneously ensured the continuation of the species and sealed the doom of populations that had yet to develop the means of harnessing those instincts for productive ends. It was in the form of survival instincts that the passions returned with a vengeance nearly a half-century later to provide the wrecking ball for Victorian novelists to demolish a country-house culture that had served the polite eighteenth-century reader as individualism's first line of defense. Within its walls, the passions could no longer be broken up, sorted out, and reassembled according to elaborate protocols of reason and decorum. Skipping then to the end of that century, we find Sigmund Freud teaming up with Josef Breuer to discover an unconscious repository of thwarted desires within certain women that could bypass social censorship and speak in body

language. During the period of his first attempt at naming and systematizing the impulses responsible for the disturbing symptoms of hysteria, Freud would certainly have come across the novels of Bram Stoker, and if not Stoker, then Rider Haggard or Robert Lewis Stevenson, all of which accosted men and women of the new professional classes with the same fantasies of haunted bedrooms, live burial, incest, multiple selves, and cannibalism that Freud held responsible for the social dysfunctions of his patients.¹² Like those other *fin de siècle* narratives, his case studies featured female protagonists who struggled against demonized personifications of their passions that assailed the conscious mind through the biological body housing it.

Even so cursory a survey as this should suggest that the form registered major turning points in its history by staging new and sensational outbreaks of unclassifiable feeling. Whether it was seen at the time as a passion, a drive, or an affect, novels responded to these outbreaks as to a pathogen, which they then struggled to name and systematize, until they brought it under cognitive control. Nor did the arts and human sciences fail to respond to the challenge, which sent what would become their most prominent representatives scrambling for a conceptual vocabulary that would lend intelligibility to the outbreak, its causes, and its effects. It should come as no surprise that such periodic remappings of the human emotions corresponded too exactly to moments of major change in the way the nation lived and worked to be dismissed as literary phenomena alone. During periods of economic crisis that seemed to come out of nowhere, novels leant imaginary substance to a phenomenal world that had suddenly turned against its inhabitants and seemed intent on consuming those who depended on it for their livelihood. In providing protagonists who sallied forth onto that landscape and subdued its demons by incorporating and domesticating them, the successful novelist offered readers something like a popular model of emotional management, the first and still paradigmatic of which is Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.

A prodigious writer of prose, Defoe did something with the journal of a fictional traveler that set *Robinson Crusoe* apart from all other prose narratives then in circulation: He split off a restless protagonist who hungered for new experiences from the cool-headed narrator who accounted for those experiences in writing. I am far from the first of Defoe's readers to dwell on his retrospective narrative and how it revisits each problem that confounds the protagonist until it can incorporate that encounter in a continuous narrative of problem-solving, a form of self-mastery that lends order to the island as well. Along the way, one particular episode stands out for defying the narrator's best efforts to rationalize it: namely, Crusoe's discovery of the "Print of a Man's naked Foot on the Shore" of an island that he assumed was his alone to occupy. Why does the sight of a single human footprint make him stand "like one Thunder-struck, or

as if [he] had seen an apparition”? How can a mere footprint render Crusoe “like a Man perfectly confus’d, . . . mistaking every Bush and Tree, and fancying every Stump at a distance to be a Man”?¹³

To regain his footing on the very land that he so laboriously transformed into an extension of himself, Crusoe distinguishes what he can still imagine as his from the side of the island on which the footprint has put the stamp of no-man’s-land. It takes no more than the sighting of a single bonfire on his side of the island to dissolve the boundary distinguishing his property and return the island to a landscape of malevolent intent. As if to insist that it takes an unwilling act of imagination to conquer a threat instigated by an unwilling act of imagination, Defoe has the solution to the problem of the unidentifiable footprint occur to Crusoe in a dream, in which he either kills or scares off potential enemies while naming and clothing those willing to become his servants and companions. On waking, Crusoe puts this fictional narrative into practice as a method of dispatching enemies as those bent on violence from potential friends with a legitimate need of his protection. Having solved the problem of the footprint, he devotes half again as much of his journal to establishing a government to carry out the same method of distinguishing enemies from those in need of protection.

Historically inclined to read this novel as the transformation of a religious dissenter into entrepreneurial man, which in equal parts describes Defoe himself, distinguished readers from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Karl Marx and Virginia Woolf threw their weight behind the novel’s managerial narrator. This tradition of critical commentary anticipated that of Leavis’s contemporary, Ian Watt, who attributed the unrivaled popularity of *Robinson Crusoe* to its formulation of an “autonomous individual . . . as the quasi-divine mastering of the environment.”¹⁴ Were we, however, to take a second look at the ending of *Robinson Crusoe* from the perspective of a novelist like Tom McCarthy, we might be struck by an alternative that characterizes not only today’s superhero movies and television serials, but also a novel like *Alice in Wonderland* that leaves the menacing landscape of girlhood open for successive generations to experience. In sending Crusoe back to England intent on settling down, Defoe established the basis and point of departure for *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*.

The sequel appeared in 1719 as *Robinson Crusoe* was barreling through four editions, only to be followed a year later by Defoe’s *Serious Reflections During the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, a collection of essays on solitude, religious freedom, and epistemology supposedly authored by the fictional castaway himself. Together illustrating the formal bipolarity that organizes the original, the pair of sequels launched the “Robinsonade,” a tradition of sequels that either recounted a sequence of adventures or set the stage for extended bouts of self-reflection, but in either case acknowledged the gravitational pull of the opposite narrative mode. Beginning in 1726 with Jonathan Swift’s satiric uptake of Defoe’s novel

in *Gulliver's Travels*, new versions of the model extended its life as the consummate adventure novel from *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1826) and *Treasure Island* (1882) to Andy Weir's 2007 novel *The Martian* narratives that also saw translation into other languages and media and redaction for different reading levels. I credit that solitary footprint with prying open the gap between sign and referent that sends the reader on a fool's errand to discover a stable basis for meaning, whether in the world of things and people or in the science and philosophy of mind. Without a trope that can bridge the same ontological gulf between subject and object worlds that it opens, Defoe's fictional travel journal would remain just one more travel journal, incapable of generating a succession of narrative attempts to formulate purely imaginary resolutions of the mutually conflicting worlds to which individualism was about to condemn the English readership.

Is emotional intelligence an oxymoron? If recent novels were alone in dismantling the prevailing model of the emotions, we might consider the novel's current assault on individual autonomy but another of those periodic mood swings by which the form renews itself. But a glance beyond literary studies to the larger debate now raging over the biology of the human feelings in relation to the models we use to classify them suggests otherwise. Prompted by a combination of contemporary breakthroughs – chiefly in brain science and the technologies of medical imaging and artificial intelligence – the onset of “the affective turn” has shifted the focus of the disciplines away from depth models of human emotion and equally contentious methods of empirical observation of human behavior. These discoveries have staked out a conceptual space between body and mind, where the biological body sometimes thinks for the individual without that individual knowing that it is doing so. By sidelining questions of how to define either mind or body, the recent turn to affect not only calls new attention to the interface between the human being as subject and the human being as object but also resurrects the old question of how to draw that very line. Certain subareas of interdisciplinary research have in turn gained unprecedented influence by casting doubt on whether it can be drawn at all without calling into question the individual whose existence depends on negotiating that line.¹⁵

Along with Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of carnival as “the world turned upside down,” Lukács's notion of class consciousness as the (revolutionary) self-realization of “a collective subject-object in history” shares Freud's hydraulic theory of emotion.¹⁶ According to this libidinal economy, if contained or submerged, human energy will accumulate until sheer compression forces it to rise up and push against the social interdictions that limit self-expression. To endure in any form, a government must develop permissible means of periodically releasing that collective energy, or what amount to safety-valve policies of population management. Should such forms of release or self-expression persist to the point of putting gov-

ernment itself at risk, forms of resistance aimed at church, family, classroom, or police will authorize forced compliance. Rather than depend upon pressure from above to energize forms of resistance from below that in turn call for top-down measures, affect makes its presence felt in a manner resembling sound waves that pulsate through the body and occasionally reach a level of audibility requiring modulation. The fact that we lack a vernacular explanation for such “intensities” does not render them any less real and corporeal than the traditional emotions or the natural instincts, but it does force us to resort to analogies by way of accounting for its operations and effects. To understand what affect theory means by the intensities that set affect apart from the qualities of feeling associated with the various emotions, I err on the corporeal side and fall back on the experience of restless leg syndrome, a feeling perversely absent when one is in motion but likely to break through and set the legs and feet in motion when one is at rest. That a vaguely vertiginous feeling accompanies any attempt to ward off or resist the sensation that compels those legs to move distinguishes this feeling from forms of resistance as something the body is simply disposed to do. Such restlessness is not to be confused, I am suggesting, with repetition compulsive disorders that can be folded into a hydraulic model and attributed to interdicted desires that reappear in some fantastic form to disrupt our conscious life. As the novel summons and activates it, then, affect can neither be restricted to an individual character nor folded into his or her development. More in keeping with the behavior of Epicurean atoms, affect seems to behave as would a current that passes through the body untroubled by our volition and so might be regarded as a form of volition in its own right.

If there is any truth in this comparison, then to think in terms of affect requires us to throw into reverse the disciplinary trope that subjects one’s spontaneous responses to a form of retrospection and self-correction that builds, rounds, or individuates his or her character. When subject to affect, by contrast, the individual is attracted to certain stimuli and avoids others, so that experience becomes a matter of incorporating some and suppressing or ignoring other bits of information. So construed by William James, human consciousness is neither a bounded nor a sovereign space but a process of “rivalry and conflict [among] one’s different selves.” These part-selves must cooperate as “a community” to overcome breaks in any one of several modes of perception, its coherence thus requiring some kind of recognition on the part of these scattered bits of thought that they somehow belong together.¹⁷ The hodge-podge of part-selves could maintain its sense of coherence over time, James speculated, only by continuously adjusting the relation among parts to accommodate the changing relation to their immediate environment and thus to one another. Being so in flux, such a loosely knit community can disperse and recollect, as dramatized by brother Henry’s *The Turn of the Screw*, but never adequately explain itself.

If, as a more traditional novel would insist, the discipline of retrospective self-remediation is essential to the pedagogical production of a modern individual, then it would seem important to understand precisely what turn of thought succeeded in calling the viability of that model into question. In sifting through the critical literature, I was struck by the combination of demonstrable rhetorical force and scant scientific evidence that did so much to make “the turn to affect” a familiar phrase. Working in the interdisciplinary discourse of critical theory, philosopher Brian Massumi introduced us to an arresting example of Ronald Reagan’s extraordinary success as a political candidate that located the politician’s remarkable popularity in the actor’s ability to “produce ideological effects by non-ideological means.” On seeing an image of Reagan’s face, Massumi concluded, prospective voters decided to vote for him before they had an inkling that they had done so.¹⁸ In historian of science Ruth Leys’s account, a concept borrowed from the well-known but soon discredited scientific experiment conducted by Benjamin Libet, Nobel Prize-winning pioneer in the physiology of consciousness, was crucial to Massumi’s case for the precognitive response of Reagan voters. In this experiment, Libet asked a group of students to move their index fingers, signaling with a timer exactly when each decided to do so. The results revealed a slight but consistent lag between the finger’s motion and the signal indicating exactly when each became aware of commanding it to move.¹⁹ Massumi uses this “half-second delay” as the rhetorical means of detaching human volition both from the survival instincts of the body and from an individual’s cognitive processes by locating it in the brain’s impulse to move toward what it finds attractive and away from what repels or terrifies it. The half-second delay between this reaction and the conscious decision to react thus provides the trope allowing him to think of affect as an untapped source of unmediated self-expression.

Daniel Goleman, best-selling author of *Emotional Intelligence*, drew a comparable trope, known as “the neural tripwire,” from another neuroscientist, Joseph E. LeDoux, to develop the method of self-management Goleman marketed as emotional intelligence.²⁰ LeDoux belongs to a “fresh breed of neuroscientists who draw on innovative methods and technologies” and can, in Goleman’s view, “bring an unknown level of precision to mapping the brain at work . . . putting the amygdala at the center of the action.”²¹ In the face of danger, the amygdala, which LeDoux identifies as the part of the brain responsible for coding our emotional reactions to sensory information, allows a portion of the original sensory information to bypass the cognitive centers of the brain and go straight to the muscle centers that trigger action. Goleman’s considerable reputation rests on his method of teaching people to control such backdoor responses. To acquire emotional intelligence, one must learn to recognize the signals of insurgent feeling and slow down the response, allowing the cognitive faculties to catch up and transform that energy into marketable “social skills.”²² By training ourselves to second-guess our

spontaneous reactions – anger being the most “toxic” in his view – we can reroute the information that activated the neural tripwire through the visual cortex and repurpose that surplus energy to promote the smooth operation of the contemporary workplace.²³ By means of this application of the neural tripwire, Goleman deftly updates the Hobbesian assumption that only top-down modification of natural human aggression can defend society from the very impulses that Massumi identifies with an innately human creativity endangered by the ascent of a disciplinary society and the self-governing individual that it produces.

Where Massumi casts the emergence of our precognitive potential in a utopian light, Goleman identifies it with an “uneasiness” within the individual mind that harks back to the Enlightenment concept of restlessness, an impulse he considers positive only to the degree that it extends the acquisitive mind and eventual cognitive control. Beyond the cubicles and tract housing that Goleman’s readership would seem to traverse on a daily basis, then, we can sense a lawless landscape haunted by invisible forces that economically ruin those who fail to harness their impulses for social success in both domains. With the evaporation of such institutional captivity, by contrast, Massumi imagines a new and potentially utopian basis for human community. Taken together, these two accounts of affect propose incompatible ways of describing the same future, one in which affect plays, respectively, the roles of protagonist and antagonist. What has changed in recent years is not the opposition between these two positions, then, but the fact of their consensus that affect is now poised to ascend to the position of protagonist. As the form that has long experimented with this possibility, it remains to consider how the novel deals with an apparent collapse of the opposition so basic to its form.

Given that Defoe makes mastering “fear itself” a matter of life and death in *Robinson Crusoe*, a novel in which the landscape – in the form of feral cats, a typhoon, and tainted turtle soup – periodically endangers the narrative, we might see the footprint as another occasion for the protagonist to establish his autonomy. To imagine the bounded and sovereign being whose story would become virtually indistinguishable from the novel form, Defoe has indeed put his castaway and author-surrogate in a situation where assaults on his individual autonomy pose a threat to his human identity. In writing *Remainder* – a novel that quickly became a staple of undergraduate and graduate classrooms, a preferred example of literary critics, and a popular success with something of a cult following – Tom McCarthy crafted a protagonist whose autonomy has been irrevocably damaged before the novel begins. So far as we can grasp them, the thoughts and feelings of this protagonist, along with the content of his experience, are indistinguishable from those of a twenty-first-century city, and to survive in that environment, he must, like Crusoe, unmake one self and make another. Their similarity in this respect is the measure of their difference.

The novel begins shortly after the narrator-protagonist leaves a hospital, having physically recovered from the injuries received from “something falling from the sky. Technology: Parts, bits. That’s really all I can divulge.”²⁴ To repair the damage to the right temporal lobe responsible for motor functions on the right side of his body, a physiotherapist did some “rerouting,” which the narrator describes as “exactly what it sounds like, finding a new route through the brain for commands to run along.”²⁵ After an extended period of relearning the sequence of minute commands required to perform such simple actions as picking up a carrot, commands we never remember learning unless we have to learn them twice, the narrator embarks on his new life with a brain able to fire off commands to his various limbs and digits and have them carried out. He soon discovers that his body, thanks to the accident, has acquired another master. As he pauses on a sidewalk outside a tube stop for the second time in two days, the process of recalling the route to his broker’s office is abruptly preempted by “the same tingling, the same mixture of serene and intense” he had experienced at the moment of his accident. Indeed, it is all he recalls of that decisive moment, and “remembering it sent a tingling from the top of my legs to my shoulders and right up my neck . . . I felt different, intense: both intense and serene at the same time.”²⁶ Outside the tube stop, the “feeling of intensity” increases until he automatically extends a hand and demands “spare change” from passers-by, a gesture that tells us less about his past than about the impulse that will direct him to his broker.²⁷ To occupy the position of protagonist, a character was once obliged to demonstrate some degree of the self-awareness that comes with having schooled his impulses to meet the demands of urban life. While at his broker’s, this protagonist abandons all effort to “think for himself” and obeys an impulse that Massumi might characterize as “a never-to-be-conscious autonomic remainder,” some residual quality of being human that is “social in a manner ‘prior to’ the separating out of individuals.”²⁸ Reading *Remainder* with this in mind, one sees this visit to his broker as the moment when the novel launches a sequence of experiments choreographed by something that, in key respects, fits this description and so tests its impact and limitations.

As in making his way from the tube stop to his broker’s office, so in making economic decisions, this impulse preempts what the protagonist learned in rehab. As he recounts the experience, “the tingle” bypasses his conscious brain functions and triggers an autonomic response that deviates sharply from the wisdom of the stock market as his broker explains it. The value of shares in today’s market is propelled upward not by “what they actually represent in terms of goods and services,” he contends, but “by what they *might* be worth in an imaginary future,” which, as his broker assures him, need never arrive. “By the time one [disappointing] future’s there, there’s another one being imagined.”²⁹ “Telecommunications and technology,” he recalls blurting out: “As soon as he’d explained how [the futures market] worked, I’d known exactly what I wanted, instantly.” When advised

to consider a more diversified portfolio, he objects, “rather than be everywhere and nowhere, all confused[,] I want to have a . . . a . . . I searched for the right word for a long time, and eventually found it: ‘position.’” Before he can materialize his position in the futures market, the protagonist must possess the means of doing so.³⁰ Crusoe brought only his own labor to the task of remaking a *terra nullius* in his image – a fortress, a field of grain, a pasture, a cave, a secluded harbor – while his money worked for him through the slave labor it had funded for a plantation in Brazil. His twenty-first-century counterpart, in turn, sets his investment in the futures market to work for him as he renovates a once run-down neighborhood in Brixton – an apartment building, a tire repair shop, a random street homicide, a bank heist – into smoothly operating self-contained machines. Once he brings each enactment to the point at which it will repeat itself without his oversight, the game is played, and the “tingle” directs his attention elsewhere. The result is a sequence of the disaggregated and redundant institutions of a society sustained by the spatial capture, reproduction, and commodification of human energy, the very society that Defoe had written into existence, or so Crusoe claims, out of the materials of nature itself.

Though confined to small-scale experiments, the process triggered by the tingle, funded by an unlimited supply of capital, envisioned by the protagonist, overseen by his manager, and carried out by hired actors gnaws away at the vestiges of individuated motivation. The process simultaneously subjects all participants, including the protagonist, to a force that extends the probing fingers of financial capitalism into the social networks that govern relations between self and world. This force transforms Brixton, institution by institution, into real estate that efficiently reproduces the sensations of a bygone way of life but without the inconveniences that would make it less attractive to upscale consumers.³¹ In that McCarthy’s protagonist wants to fill his apartment building with anything but such consumers, however, we must assume that this novel has no intention of fulfilling the promise of a remedial *Bildungsroman* by having him move up in society. While the detailed account of his time in rehab encourages expectations that this protagonist will struggle against his disability and earn our admiration by recovering a level of independence necessary to survive in the new economy, it soon becomes clear that it is his lack of any desire to be like one of us that makes him different from earlier protagonists.

McCarthy is among a growing list of novelists to take up the task of bringing legibility to changes in the way we are connected to one another as a society. Within but a paragraph or two, *Remainder* takes us behind the institutional curtain concealing a small piece of the global machinery – at once narrative and governmental – that simultaneously sets the novel in motion and renounces all responsibility for the string of minor catastrophes that follow. The rehabilitation center that reroutes the protagonist’s neural infrastructure is clearly in cahoots with

an invisible economic conglomerate that his lawyer designates as “these parties, these, uh, institutions, these uh . . .”³² In return for the protagonist’s nondisclosure agreement, this conglomerate provides him with the funding necessary to become a new social person who can in turn reshape the workforce that materializes his projects, as well as the bioengineers, programmers, lawyers, financial advisors, and bureaucrats who plan and finance these projects. Equally bound by the infrastructure installed in the protagonist, those at the highest levels of these “institutions” serve a government that requires not a population of self-regulating individuals but the mathematical smoothness of a single machine that capitalizes on its own disruptions by reducing resistance to the repetition of synchronized and replaceable parts.³³ Rather than rationalize ruptures in the protagonist’s experience as part and parcel of the maturation process, then, *Remainder* transfers all sensory information to something like a machinic memory that gathers, sorts, and stores that information to be accessed at any time. So transformed, experience provides a form of compensation for the protagonist’s complete inability to interact directly with other things and people.

So complete is that loss that the protagonist initially recollects life before “the accident” in terms that progressively cancel themselves out: “a blank, a white slate, and black hole.”³⁴ This suggests that his lack of memory after the accident generates his apparent nervousness concerning the impending arrival of a woman with whom he had been living off and on before the accident. It is certainly understandable that he is fixated on the logistics of her visit – how to get to the terminal to meet her and when to set up the extra bed – rather than how he feels about this woman. But where the prospect of resuming a romantic relationship falls significantly short of the excitement accompanying the vision that emerges, soon thereafter, from a crack in his friend’s bathroom wall, we know this is no traditional memory:

There’d been that same crack . . . and a window directly above the taps just like there was in this room. . . . Out of the window there’d been roofs with cats on them. Red roofs, black cats. It had been high up, much higher than I was now: the fifth or sixth or maybe even seventh floor of an old tenement-style apartment building . . . neighbors beneath me and around me and on the floor above.

Although his description lacks any trace of personal feeling for this place, he nevertheless claims to have “remembered all this very clearly. There’d been liver cooking on the floor below – the smell, the spit and sizzle – and then two floors below there’d been piano music.”³⁵ Where his reunion with Catherine rapidly evolved from overthought to awkward to annoying, the vision triggered by the tingle “had been seamless, perfect.” Having “cut out the detour” through self-awareness installed at the rehab center, he achieved the sense “I’d been real – *been* without first understanding how to try to be” and recalls this sensation “with all the force of an epiphany.” With the fervor traditionally reserved for lovers and zeal-

ots, this man without feelings decides on the spot to find and renovate an apartment in a shabby section of Brixton that exactly matches the vision. “I knew on the spot, what to do with my money,” he proclaims, “I wanted to reconstruct that space and enter it so that I could feel real again . . . nothing else mattered.”³⁶ So begins a sequence of “enactments” that emerge where and when the tingle demands.

These reconstructions are designed to dismantle neglected sites in the protagonist’s old neighborhood and retrofit the activities performed with infrastructure that synchronizes its human parts to run no less automatically than the Taylorized factory and so carries its economic project into new social territory. In this respect, the setting produced by the novel mirrors the condition of its protagonist. Like the cinematic Robert De Niro he had always admired, his body has been broken open and reassembled, much of it remaining on the cutting room floor, to perform on movie sets constructed from pieces of devalued London real estate. It takes but a phone call to his multilimbed and tentacled production manager to summon the materials and human actors from anywhere in the world and have them arrive simultaneously at the assembly site, a method of imaginary world-making that calls to mind not only the on-location movie set but also the just-in-time automobile assembly plant. These artificial worlds capture the sights, sounds, and smells of an earlier cityscape so exactly and reproduce them on a daily basis at such great cost of human energy that their ingenuity, quite like that of Kafka’s diabolical writing machine, overwhelms mere analogy. Behaving in a manner resembling the invisible machinery of today’s real estate market, the protagonist’s enactments mindlessly reproduce the cycle of deflation, foreclosure, investment, demolition, and gentrification that drives up property value.³⁷

It seems somehow appropriate that a renovated Brixton should turn out to be more vigorously and unabashedly stereotypical than its past, not because the protagonist’s past experience was commonplace, but because the futures in which he invests are repetitions that were reproductions in the first place: scenes from popular cinema, photographs, newspapers stories, forensic reports, and advertising. As the director, voiceover, scriptwriter, and star of a sequence of enactments, he secures for himself a future as a sequence of minutely detailed scenarios in which figure and ground exchange roles on a cyclical basis. To relocate the source of man’s world-making power in the material from which he or she assembles it, the novel strips that material of any discernible emotional investment and turns those procedures over to technologies of mediation that, like the image of Ronald Reagan’s all-American face, substitute for encounters with the world external to the self.

In lieu of a concluding statement, let me circle back to the question that initiated this inquiry and try to explain why it has to remain open-ended: to what purpose has the novel turned against its own form and dismantled a narrative that had for centuries artificially integrated the making of a modern individ-

ual into that of a national community? This question in turn begs the question of whether such an individual is indeed the source of human creativity and thus of the energy that once fueled and now resists any cultural narrative that would incorporate it in a hydraulic model of the subject. If the source of economic value originates in the creative expression of individuated subjectivity, it seems clear, then such an individual would have to be the means both of reinforcing and of resisting the production of capital. If, on the other hand, individuated subjectivity is not, as *Remainder* suggests, the source of human creativity but its product, consumer, and means of regulation, then where does a novel imagine that the past and future power of imagination might come from?

This is the very question that novels, to be novels, have always been obliged to open up, as well as to resolve in terms that provide a local and temporary answer. From Defoe through Pynchon and Beckett's grand paranoid implosions of the individual subject, as a result, the question of whether man's world-making capability could truly be captured by the aesthetic duplicity of class consciousness has remained a stubbornly open one. Major novelists still think within the same cultural antinomies that shape the history of the novel, a framework that depends on man's immanent restlessness to fuel periodic attempts at containment on the part of some new theory of human motivation or desire that will succeed only so long as it can intellectually account for that restlessness. Premised on an increasingly vexed concept of subjectivity as the repository of potential human creativity, such an individual is programmed to assemble narrative futures from imagined pasts by means of personal recollection via the *passé antérieur*. This is the very rhetorical strategy that *Remainder* disallows. Without the language of emotion to set subjectivity within and apart from a world of material objects, McCarthy contends, the reservoir of human creativity will reside in an exponentially expanding media environment. This is what provides his protagonist with the memory and technology to string together a continuous identity across repeated temporal breaks, much as the novels of the great tradition did for Leavis and Watt. But where their tradition insisted that the more things change, the more we remain the same, *Remainder* has reversed that axiom.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ENDNOTES

¹ In *The Great Tradition* (1848), Claudia Johnson explains,

Leavis mapped out how novels were to be understood in qualitative relation to other novels, and he set the terms on which novels were to be discussed as a collectivity; in short, he invented the idea and the practice of the modern novelistic canon. And, in raising novels to the level of art deserving and requiring disciplined study, he created novel studies as a field whose work was to be differentiated from the chit-chat of genteel readers who regarded novels as entertainment.

Claudia Johnson, "F. R. Leavis: The 'Great Tradition' and the Jewish Part," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 56 (2) (2001): 200. Based on Sir Walter Scott's *Lives of the Novelists* (1825), Ian Watt's influential *The Rise of the Novel* (1857) established a national tradition of the novel beginning with Daniel Defoe and concluding with Jane Austen, with whom Leavis had already picked up and extended the canon through George Eliot to Henry James and a curious assortment of modernists.

² McCarthy explained his relation to this tradition in a keynote address to the Society for Novel Studies, University of Pittsburgh, 2016, later published as Tom McCarthy, "Vanity's Residue," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 51 (2) (2001): 166–175.

³ Witness the fact that Gilles Deleuze made *Alice in Wonderland* the model and inspiration for his *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

⁴ Leavis declared that "Henry James wouldn't have written his *Portrait of a Lady* if he hadn't read *Gwendolen Harleth* (as I shall call the good part of *Daniel Deronda*), and of the pair of closely comparable works, George Eliot's has not only the distinction of having come first; it is decidedly the greater." F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1848), 104. As Johnson explains,

the pressure that *Daniel Deronda* puts on Leavis's claims on behalf of the English novel is clearest in his last and least-known essay, "Gwendolen Harleth," written in 1974 to preface the abridgement of *Deronda* that he eventually undertook, and published posthumously in 1982. In 1973 James Michie, editor at the Bodley Head Press, invited Leavis to produce a redacted *Gwendolen Harleth* and so "win a new range of readers for George Eliot."

Johnson, "F. R. Leavis," 215.

⁵ Continuing the argument begun by Richard Todd in *Consuming Fictions: The Booker Prize and Fiction in Britain Today* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), James English calls the Booker nothing more than "cultural money laundering," in the *Economy of Prestige* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2019), 199. Sarah Brouillette argues that the global distribution of literacy and literature has become an instrument for "development-oriented U.S. policy [to promote] its international operations as the building of partnerships in the making of a new global community . . . with U.S.-style social organization at its center." Sarah Brouillette, *UNESCO and the Fate of the Literary* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2019), 139. A cursory glance at the transformations of the prestigious Booker Prize in fiction after it was taken over by the Man Group PLC, an alternative investment firm traded publicly on the exchange market, suggests that more than great reading is responsible for this boom. The question ultimately posed by these novels, then, is whether and how they can participate in the global expansion of Anglophone cultural and financial power while providing an inside view that sufficiently

critiques those systems; I suggest that their ability to accomplish both aims at once is the source of their appeal.

- ⁶ The phrasing of this opposition does not imply that the release of affect is inherently subversive, resistant, or emancipatory. Nor is the capture and classification of disruptive human feeling inherently conservative. I tend to see these oppositional impulses as two sides of a single historical process in which one side presupposes the other. To translate such a formal opposition into political terms, one would have to account for the fact that periodic activation of the affect/emotion dialectic coincides with moments of dissensus: uncanny moments in which an acute division within the reigning common sense “puts two worlds in one and the same world.” By translating these worlds into subjective states of being, novels that let affect take the upper hand may very well not be encouraging so much as psychologically containing the latest threat of political upheaval. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus*, trans. Steven Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2010), 69.
- ⁷ In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), Locke puts it this way: “A power to direct the operative faculties to motion or rest in a particular instance, is that which we call the *Will*. That which in the train of our voluntary actions determines the *Will* to any change of operation, is some present uneasiness, which is, or at least is always accompanied with that of *Desire*.” John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1975), 282–283.
- ⁸ In *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), Malthus proceeds from the assumption that all plants and animals “are impelled by a powerful instinct to the increase of their species, and this instinct is interrupted by no reasoning or doubts about providing for their offspring” to the conclusion that, as a result, “the superior power of population cannot be checked without producing some misery or vice.” These principles proved notoriously true when carried out as British policy on the Irish people during the period of the potato famine. Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), 26.
- ⁹ As Lukács explains with special clarity in the essay “Narrate or Describe?” narration allows us to experience the emergence of “the general social significance . . . in the unfolding of characters’ lives,” while description renders characters, by contrast, “merely spectators, more or less interested in the events.” When this happens, “we are merely spectators” as well. Georg Lukács, *Writer and Critics and Other Essays*, trans. Arthur D. Khan (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1970), 116.
- ¹⁰ Writing in a subdiscipline in which affect theory has run rampant in recent years, Jameson usefully specifies “a very local and restricted practical use of the term ‘affect’ . . . by incorporating it into a binary opposition which historicizes it and limits its import to questions of representation and indeed of literary history.” Moreover, he links its rise to “the bourgeois body, as we now call it,” and considers this relationship a means of periodizing “a competition between the system of named emotions and the emergence of nameless bodily states.” Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (New York: Verso, 2013), 29, 32. I would push this argument back to the beginning of the eighteenth century and locate the emergence of unclassified human feelings in a mutually constitutive relation to a new class body with the rise of the novel against a background already disturbed by the first impulses of a new mode of production.
- ¹¹ This move makes a great deal of sense if we see the novel’s way of using affect to challenge the prevailing systems of emotion as a means of self-periodization. Such breaks

in the history of the form configures with Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "the chronotope" as the spatialization of time as a single "carefully thought-out whole," where "time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history." Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas, 1981), 84. Here, Bakhtin distinguishes the history of literary chronotopes from the history of the novel as such, which he describes as an ongoing struggle among past and present chronotopes, both literary and not, for control of literary space. These warring chronotopes endow the modern period with a distinctive character that cannot be folded within a single stable chronotope, as the signature narratives of other periods can, and thus must periodically renew their conflict on new historical turf.

- ¹² In the early *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), Josef Breuer formulates a theory of "affects" as "intracerebral tonic excitations" that erupt when the brain's normal oscillation between sleep and excitation is disrupted, resulting in a "surplus of excitation" that requires a release. Thinking with this hydraulic principle, Sigmund Freud held some unnamed "mechanism of the retention of large sums of excitation" responsible for the hysterical symptoms of Frau Emmy Von N. See Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1957 [1955]), 192, 102. It is an easy matter to see the same principle at work throughout the field of characters in a novel like *Dracula* (1897).
- ¹³ Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 130.
- ¹⁴ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 74.
- ¹⁵ I identify this turn of critical theory with the appearance of two breakthrough works, both of which first appeared in print during the mid-1980s to declare the end of the bourgeois individual: Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (1984); and Donna Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism for the 1980s," *Socialist Review* 80 (15, 2) (1985): 65–107.
- ¹⁶ During carnival, according to Bakhtin, social protocols were temporarily suspended, "all were considered equal. . . . Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age." Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Katrina Clark and Michael Holquist (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 10. In modern culture, by contrast, Lukács asks us to understand the history of consciousness as the history of institutions that produce "false consciousness" to harness popular energy and direct it toward individual interests rather than those of the people as a whole. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1968), 70–74.
- ¹⁷ In his *The Principle of Psychology*, vol. 1, rev. ed. (New York: Dover, 1950), William James notes that "even within the limits of the same self, and thoughts all of which have this same sense of belonging together, a kind of jointing and separateness among the parts." If what is actually a continuous flow of thought appears to be a disjointed "chain" of separate segments, he contends, it is because of "breaks that are produced by sudden contrasts in the quality of the stream of thought." *Ibid.*, 239.
- ¹⁸ Brian Massumi, *Parodies of the Virtual* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 29.

¹⁹ In “The Turn to Affect: A Critique,” *Critical Inquiry* 37 (3) (2011), Ruth Leys offers an overview of the impact of affect on critical theory. At the end of her discussion of Libet’s influential experiment, Leys concludes,

both Massumi and Libet seem to be in the grip of a false picture of how the mind relates to the body. The mistake they make is to idealize the mind by defining it as a purely disembodied consciousness and then, when the artificial requirements of the experimental setup appear to indicate that consciousness of the willing or intention comes “too late” in the causal chain to account for the movements under study, to conclude in dualistic fashion that intentionality has no place in the initiation of such movements and therefore it must be the brain which does all the thinking and moving for us.

Ibid., 452–457.

²⁰ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 2005).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

²² *Ibid.*, 27. In “Down with Love: Feminist Critique and the New Ideologies of Love,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 45 (3–4) (2017), Kathi Weeks attributes the workplace that generates this bifurcated view of affect to the “passage from a Fordist to a postfordist regime of accumulation” in which “traditional forms of women’s work have come to characterize so many kinds of employment.” An increasing number of jobs comprising the contemporary workforce call upon the worker to cultivate “a deep love for work comparable to the stereotypical feminine attachment to romantic love.” *Ibid.*, 48.

²³ Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, 144.

²⁴ Tom McCarthy, *Remainder* (New York: Vintage, 2005), 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 44, 9.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁸ Massumi, *Parodies of the Virtual*, 25, 9.

²⁹ McCarthy, *Remainder*, 46.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

³¹ A district of South London, Brixton is now a residential area and tourist attraction known for its music, arts, central market, arcades, and club scene. Its history as such began in 1948 when the *HMT Windrush* brought a population of immigrants from Jamaica to Brixton, many of whom established its present Afro-Caribbean character. During the economic downturn of the late 1970s, social unrest among the working population exacerbated by an aggressive stop-and-search policy came to a boiling point in the riots of 1981 and again 1986, during a period of attempted gentrification. Following the explosion of a neo-Nazi nail bomb on the main commercial street during shopping hours, Brixton became a prime site for gentrification (marketed as regeneration) and tourism, which won it The Great Neighborhood Award in 2013. Set in 2005, the spaces of the enactments providing the events of *Remainder* take place in just the run-down sort of neighborhood that would be ripe for rebuilding even though there is little attempt in doing so to reproduce marketable characteristics of its ethnic past.

³² McCarthy, *Remainder*, 12.

³³ Mark McGurl graciously shared a chapter titled “Generic Love” from his book in progress. Here, McGurl explains in some detail why Christian Grey, protagonist of the best-seller *Fifty Shades of Grey*, is “more than a poster boy for neoliberal capitalism . . . he is also the symbolic vehicle by which that system is ‘softened’ and made caring again in the little welfare state . . . of a loving marriage.” I consider it significant that *Remainder*, by contrast, strips the Alpha Billionaire of all the qualities that might “soften” the new economy, especially his sympathetic status as its victim. Nor, as it turns out, is his character precisely tailored as the agent of financial capitalism. Like the urban protagonists of Teju Cole’s *Open City* and Brett Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, McCarthy’s protagonist advantageously occupies multiple characters while neither becoming nor achieving control of anyone.

³⁴ McCarthy, *Remainder*, 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁷ In *Literature and the Creative Economy* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2014), Sarah Brouillette identifies a new class formation that includes major novelists and poets, as well as their publishers and critics. Preferring weak to strong social ties, this “highly educated and mobile group . . . are typically city dwellers who encounter within the urban milieu the cultural and experiential diversity necessary to their self-conception.” *Ibid.*, 21. When they move into neighborhoods “whose residents were dispossessed when manufacturing jobs moved overseas,” gentrification comes with them. *Ibid.*, 30.

Henry James in – and out of – the Classroom

Ruth Bernard Yeazell

Henry James did not write for the classroom. His personal experience of the institution was erratic at best, and most of his work was published at a time when the novel had yet to be formally recognized as a subject of academic study. But he believed strongly that “art lives upon discussion,” and the undergraduate classroom can be an invigorating space in which to keep that discussion going. Drawing both on my own experience of teaching James’s novels over the years and on an informal survey of Yale undergraduates who have studied the novelist with me in recent decades, this essay addresses some of the ways in which his work continues to resonate both in and out of the classroom.

I have been teaching and writing about Henry James for half a century, but it was only the other day that I realized how closely I associate him with the classroom. I was a bookish child who spent much of her adolescence consuming nineteenth-century novels indiscriminately with twentieth-century best-sellers, but while I have vivid memories of weeping over *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* and impressing adults with my capacity to read all of *War and Peace*, I do not recall encountering James until my sophomore year in college, when a course on the English novel introduced me to both *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880 – 1881) and *The Ambassadors* (1903). I must have been drawn to the late James even then, since I also recall writing a paper on the latter novel, though what I chiefly remember about that exercise is a gentle suggestion from the instructor that I was not as clear as I might have been about what exactly its innocent protagonist, Lambert Strether, discovers in the climactic episode. The document in question is no longer available, but I strongly suspect that I was hedging my bets: between James’s obliquity and my own innocence at the time, I am not sure I was ready to say explicitly that the “virtuous attachment” in which Strether so wished to believe proves an adulterous relation after all, a discovery whose sublime comedy is now among my favorite moments in the novels. Like many of James’s protagonists, in other words, I was good at not quite knowing what I actually knew, though it was not until I read *The Golden Bowl* for the first time in graduate school that I succumbed completely to the excitement of following his characters as they negotiate between their de-

sire for knowledge and their terror of it. I had arrived at Yale vaguely imagining that I might write a dissertation on the poetry of W. H. Auden; I left having written on the style of James's major late novels. That, in turn, became both the subject of my first book and the endpoint of a series of courses I have been teaching ever since.

Not that James himself ever wrote for the classroom. His own experience of the institution was, to say the least, erratic: the offspring of a restless father, who believed in a liberal education but was perpetually dissatisfied with the usual means of providing it, the young Henry endured "small vague spasms of school," as he charmingly put it in his autobiography, punctuated by a sequence of tutors and extended periods of travel back and forth across the Atlantic.¹ Though his older brother William would dip in and out of German universities before eventually earning a medical degree from Harvard and settling down to teach there for over thirty years, Henry's sole attempt at a university education was an abortive year at Harvard Law School: "proceeding to Cambridge," in his words, "on the very vaguest grounds that probably ever determined a residence there," only to spend most of his time in an effort "to woo the muse . . . of prose fiction."²

Unlike James Joyce, who famously quipped to his French translator that *Ulysses* would "keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that's the only way of insuring one's immortality," James never seems to have imagined that literary success might be determined by becoming the province of academics.³ Doubtless the difference was partly generational: though English literature had begun to be accepted as a university subject by the mid-nineteenth century, modern works, including novels, took far longer to enter the curriculum; and James, who was born almost forty years before Joyce, had been publishing fiction for more than two decades before American professors controversially began to offer university courses on the subject in the early 1890s.⁴ James's efforts to elevate the status of the novel may have contributed to a split between elite and popular fiction that sometimes appears to have culminated, among other things, in works deliberately aimed at the college syllabus, but James himself never abandoned the hope of appealing to a wide audience.⁵ Even while composing the Prefaces to the so-called New York Edition of his works (1907–1909), whose meditations on point of view and narrative form would later help inaugurate the austere-named discipline of narratology, he retained the wishful expectation of "their perhaps helping the Edition to sell two or three copies more!"⁶

But if there is no reason to think that James wrote for the classroom, there is abundant reason to think that vigorous discussion was for him the very lifeblood of the novel. "Discussion, suggestion, formulation, these things are fertilising when they are frank and sincere," he proclaimed in his influential essay "The Art of Fiction" (1884); and one of the principal complaints he lodged in that essay against the tradition he had inherited was that, until very recently, "the English

novel was not what the French call *discutable*.”⁷ James’s brief bilingualism is a useful reminder that the Anglo-American association of literary theory with France has a long history, though he was probably thinking more immediately of his own experience as a young writer nearly a decade earlier, when he had spent a formative year in Paris socializing with a group of prominent novelists and other intellectuals who gathered in Gustave Flaubert’s apartment. “They are all charming talkers,” James had written to William Dean Howells of his new company: a group that included Ivan Turgenev, Edmond de Goncourt, Émile Zola, Guy de Maupassant, and Alphonse Daudet, as well as, of course, Flaubert himself.⁸ James, who was thirty-two at the time, had already published two novels and was working on a third, but by comparison with the members of Flaubert’s circle, he was something of a *naïf*, to adopt another word he used in “The Art of Fiction”: both eager to soak in their worldly wisdom and repelled by what often seemed to him their coarseness and vulgarity.⁹ As the literary scholar Peter Brooks has shown, it took James several decades to assimilate his Parisian education: a not uncommon reaction, perhaps, even for those whose schooling takes less heady forms than hanging out in Flaubert’s apartment.¹⁰ By the winter of 1876, the experiment had run its course, and the year concluded with a permanent move to London.

Yet James’s belief that “art lives upon discussion” long outlasted his decision to quit his informal seminar in French fiction, as even a casual reader of his letters – let alone his criticism and Prefaces – would recognize.¹¹ Throughout his career, he engaged in a conversation with fellow novelists and the public alike about the potential of his chosen form, a conversation less systematic but perhaps more lively than his subsequent reputation would sometimes suggest. When I am teaching *The American* (1876 – 1877), for example, I cannot resist introducing students to his extended back-and-forth with Howells over the novel’s ending: a debate obviously shaped by Howells’s position as editor of *The Atlantic*, where the work was then being serialized, but also by the latter’s own reactions to the unfolding narrative. Though we lack Howells’s side of the correspondence, it is clear that he both wanted and expected the novel to conclude with a marriage between its wealthy American hero and its aristocratic French heroine, and that James’s determination to resist that prospect had finally more to do with his feeling for “the tragedies in life” – the phrase is James’s – than with the arguments with which he tried to placate his friend. To Howells, however, he chose to defend his plot on the grounds of verisimilitude. “They would have been an impossible couple, with an impossible problem before them,” he protested, half-facetiously:

For instance – to speak very materially – where could they have lived? It was all very well for Newman to talk of giving her the whole world to choose from: but Asia & Africa being counted out, what would Europe & America have offered? *Mme de Cintré* couldn’t have lived in New York; depend upon it; & Newman, after his marriage (or

rather *she*, after it) couldn't have dwelt in France. There would have been nothing left but a farm out West.¹²

Yet whether he was exchanging literary ideas with friends like Howells, reviewing his contemporaries, both famous and otherwise – the list ranges from Flaubert and George Eliot to the long forgotten Henry Kingsley – or composing memorials to such distinguished predecessors as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Honoré de Balzac, James was also engaged in a lifelong dialogue with himself; and by the time he came to revise *The American* for the New York Edition thirty years later, what he saw in the ending was not a testament to realism but a peculiar form of wish-fulfillment. Rather than reject Newman as too vulgar, his creator now concluded, a family of impecunious French aristocrats would have jumped at the opportunity to acquire the American's wealth. The youthful novelist had been so determined that his hero "be ill-used," he belatedly realized, that he had managed to overlook the more plausible outcome and ended by "plotting arch-romance without knowing it."¹³

For the older James, that discovery in turn precipitated one of his best-known theoretical formulas, a distinction between "the real" and "the romantic" that he elaborated in the novel's Preface and that continues to influence many accounts of nineteenth-century fiction, my own included.¹⁴ For my students, James's distinction also continues to serve as a touchstone for conversation, as we work our way through a selection of his novels over the course of a semester. A contemporary classroom can hardly hope to replicate a writer's lifelong exchanges with self and others, but I like to think it can go a little way to keeping them going. In what follows, I want to give a brief account of such talk as I have experienced it over the years, focusing especially on an undergraduate seminar that I have taught with some frequency in the new millennium. That class has been among the highlights of my intellectual life, and it is a tribute to the students as much as to James himself that I have found it so exhilarating.

First, however, some crucial disclaimers are in order. I have chosen to focus on the undergraduate rather than graduate classroom both because undergraduates have less professional stake in their reading and because courses on a single writer have become comparatively uncommon in the graduate curriculum. There are a number of reasons for this, ranging from the skepticism about individual authorship promulgated by some literary theorists in the 1980s and 1990s to the opening up of the canon that has made an entire semester – or critical book – devoted to one figure seem excessively narrow. Of course, the classes still exist, as do the books: indeed, the conventional wisdom that publishers no longer want such works is somewhat belied by the roughly ninety critical or biographical studies of James alone, by my count, that have appeared in multiple languages since the turn of the present century, and that is without including new editions

and collections of his works, both fictional and nonfictional, or the thirteen volumes thus far available of over forty projected in an ongoing edition of his complete surviving letters. I myself last taught a (small) graduate seminar on James and narrative theory a half-dozen years ago, though I am more likely to include him among several writers in graduate courses on broader themes or theoretical questions: *The Portrait of a Lady* and some of his art criticism in a seminar on visual portraiture and literary character, for instance, or *What Maisie Knew* (1897) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904) in a class devoted to the representation of consciousness in third-person narrative from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf. After more than a century of critical writing on Henry James, it can seem very hard – if not impossible – to say anything new; and for doctoral students anxious to make their distinctive marks on the intellectual world, let alone to find employment in an extremely straitened market, the opportunity to live for an extended time with the mind of a single author increasingly looks like an unaffordable luxury.

Happily, undergraduates do not suffer from the same constraints, and that remains true even if they later decide to pursue advanced work in their turn. Much as I would like to think otherwise, however, I cannot pretend that those who end up in the James class therefore speak for the common reader, assuming that mythical creature can even be said to exist. Yale is a highly selective institution, with a tradition of attracting students particularly drawn to the humanities, and the majority of those who enroll in the seminar are English majors, who arrive in the class with at least some expectation that reading James will be worth the effort. This is not to say that they always know what they are getting into: though they have often encountered a short work or two – *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) is a particular favorite – and some have already read *The Portrait of a Lady*, whether for school or for pleasure, prior experience with the late fiction is understandably rare; and it is not uncommon for students to take the course simply because they have heard, by one means or another, that they should read some James before they graduate. Yale is also unusual, as far as I know, in the emphasis it continues to place on the study of poetry, and among the most responsive readers of James I have encountered over the years have been students with little formal training in the novel but considerable experience analyzing – and writing – poems. I vividly recall one such student who told me that the only thing he knew about James before signing up for the course was that poets he admired, like T. S. Eliot and Marianne Moore, in turn admired the novelist. It is probably also relevant that a growing number of our students are would-be writers enrolled in a program premised on the belief that the craft to which they aspire is primarily learned through extensive reading. That, of course, is how James himself became a novelist, and while the fact that our writing concentrators, as we call them, are also expected to complete the regular requirements of the English major may help to account for their presence in the class, the resulting mix feels especially appropriate for a writer who comment-

ed so abundantly on his own practice. That he often did so by addressing both ordinary readers and fellow novelists means that he speaks to such students with a particular resonance.

Conscious of the challenge that James's late style can pose even for sophisticated readers, I always begin the first meeting by urging everyone to try a page or two of his Preface (1909) to *The Golden Bowl* before finally signing up for the course. ("Among many matters thrown into relief by a refreshed acquaintance with 'The Golden Bowl,'" the opening sentence reads, "what perhaps most stands out for me is the still marked inveteracy of a certain indirect and oblique view of my presented action; unless indeed I make up my mind to call this mode of treatment, on the contrary, any superficial appearance notwithstanding, the very straightest and closest possible.")¹⁵ Though I love the late work, I tell the students, they are not required to follow suit: indeed, it is perfectly acceptable to view the mid-career *Portrait of a Lady* as the summit of James's achievement and to regard his later novels as appealing to a more specialized taste. But what I do ask is that they be willing to tackle the difficulties and at least try to imagine why people like me find the exercise so exhilarating. I do not know how many potential students this warning discourages – though I can recall a few who confessed to backing out as a consequence – but I think its principal effect is to make those who stay feel proud of themselves for doing so and more committed to the collective project. When we finally arrive at *The Golden Bowl*, I urge them to play Colonel Bob as much as they like, an invitation to which they usually respond with nervous laughter, since it means modeling themselves on that novel's chief skeptic, Bob Assingham, who characteristically cuts through his wife's tortured syntax by asking bluntly what it all amounts to. ("But what the deuce did they *do*?" he inquires at one point, after she offers a particularly evasive account of the future adulterers' previous romantic history.)¹⁶ Behind my advice lies the hope that the group will likewise imitate Colonel Bob in eventually learning to appreciate the value, both moral and aesthetic, of Jamesian obliquity; but for readers just beginning the novel, clarifying what's at stake clearly takes precedence. I also make a point of telling the class that there are sentences in *The Golden Bowl* – and in the late James more generally – of whose meaning I still remain uncertain, despite having edited the text for Penguin about a decade ago. This is the simple truth, but knowing they are not alone also encourages students to seek help when they find themselves baffled. James is mysterious enough without mystifying him further.

He was also prolific enough to overwhelm the best efforts of a syllabus-maker, even one willing to assign a lot of reading. In addition to twenty novels and more than a dozen plays, there are over one hundred short stories, multiple volumes of literary essays, art criticism, and travel writing, including the book-length account of his late return to his native land, *The American Scene*

(1907), a commissioned biography of the American sculptor, *William Wetmore Story* (1903), and two haunting works of autobiography: *A Small Boy and Others* (1913) and *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914). And that is not to mention two novels and a third volume of autobiography left unfinished at the time of his death, or the vast amount of writing he never intended for public eyes, like his letters and notebooks. (The last of these, first published in 1947, is a book I always recommend to the aspiring writers in the class, as well as to anyone curious as to how James arrived at his plots or decided, for example, what names to bestow on his large cast of characters.) As I usually observe on the first day, choosing among these possibilities for a single course bears some resemblance to the activity in which James himself engaged when deciding what to include in his New York Edition: a process that was governed in his case not merely by retrospective judgments of quality – in one baffling decision, he dismissed *Washington Square* (1880) on the grounds that he could not bear to reread it – but by practical considerations like the costs of negotiating copyright with different publishers or the question of how many stories would fit in a single volume.¹⁷ Which novels to teach is also a question of length and availability, as well as the history one is hoping to tell. I have never felt tempted by *Watch and Ward* (1871), a rather queasy-making novel about a man who ends up marrying the orphan he adopted when she was a girl, but it was not until 1983 that a reliable text was even in print. James’s disowning of this early effort was so complete that he not only excluded it from the New York Edition but introduced that opus by characterizing *Roderick Hudson* (1875), published four years later, as “my first attempt at a novel.”¹⁸

My courses on James usually follow his lead, beginning with *Roderick Hudson* and concluding with *The Golden Bowl*, a trajectory that helps students see how James reworks certain patterns again and again, even as it also traces a particular story about his development as a novelist. *Roderick Hudson* opens with a wealthy American, Rowland Mallett, who idly plans to help some native city establish an art museum by going on a collecting tour of Europe and who impulsively decides to bankroll a promising young sculptor’s aesthetic education in Italy instead; *The Golden Bowl* begins with a penniless Italian prince on the brink of marriage to an American heiress whose fabulously wealthy father has been collecting art for just such a museum as Rowland contemplates in a place baldly dubbed “American City.”¹⁹ With the partial exceptions of *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) and *What Maisie Knew*, both primarily set in England but with protagonists who take crucial journeys to the Continent, the other novels on this syllabus are likewise variations on what’s become known as James’s international theme: *The American*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, and *The Ambassadors*. More important, perhaps, is how this sequence enables students to follow James as he continually rewrites his earlier work, whether by reviving the charismatic Christina Light of *Roderick Hudson* in the eponymous heroine of *The Princess Casamassima*, or by returning to particular

character types and situations and radically transforming them, as when the out-worn affair between Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle in *The Portrait of a Lady* becomes the sympathetically imagined and erotically charged – if morally problematic – adultery of *The Golden Bowl*.

Before settling on this syllabus, I briefly experimented with another format, a course on James and the movies that focused less on his reworking of certain themes than on the potential and limits of his medium. The idea was to ask what novels could do that films could not – and vice versa – and the choice of texts for the course was necessarily constrained by the prior choices of the filmmakers. When I last taught the class in 2004, the list included *Washington Square*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Bostonians* (1886), *The Turn of the Screw*, and *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), each of which had inspired one or more cinematic versions in the second half of the twentieth century. Perhaps the most interesting case from a film buff's point of view was François Truffaut's *The Green Room* (1978), a very loose riff on several James tales, *The Altar of the Dead* (1895) most prominently among them, updated to France in the aftermath of World War I. I had initially designed the course in the hope of attracting students who might not otherwise be drawn to James, but the results of the experiment were rather mixed, perhaps because it was hard to make the materials cohere or because my own ambivalence about some of the films was catching. As is often the case in my experience, the best films were either those that had comparatively simple material with which to work – like *The Innocents* (1961), Jack Clayton's adaptation of James's "shameless pot-boiler" *The Turn of the Screw*²⁰ – or those that took the greatest liberties with their source texts, like the Truffaut.

James is an intensely visual writer, but he is also of course an elaborately verbal one, and films struggle to get the balance right. Despite a script that adheres quite closely to the original, for example, Jane Campion's *Portrait of a Lady* (1996) repeatedly feels off to me, not least when John Malkovich's over-the-top performance as Gilbert Osmond turns psychological abuse into overt physical violence, a possibility the novel explicitly rules out. The clumsy dialogue in Iain Softley's adaptation of *The Wings of the Dove* (1997), by contrast, owes virtually nothing to James, and, like Campion, Softley literalizes the action: in his case by dramatizing a sex scene that the novel leaves implicit. But somewhat to my surprise, I often found myself admiring the film's visual effects, especially the skill with which the actors and cinematographers translated the novel's triangular erotic relations into a subtle language of glance and gesture.²¹ It is not clear that I persuaded others on this point, however; and after the second iteration of the course, a few students complained that we were wasting our time with inferior examples of cinematic art. Though I have often suspected that stringent verdict emanated from a handful of film studies majors in the group – their remarks were anonymous – the solution seemed obvious. Henceforth, the novels would have to stand on their own.

Immediate responses to a class are one thing, subsequent memories, another. In preparation for this essay, I tried something I had never done before: writing to former students to ask what afterthoughts they might be willing to share about their semester with James. Did they ever think about the novels they read? Continue to read or reread him? Did encountering him have any effect on their subsequent literary or artistic tastes? Their careers or lives more generally? While I anticipated that some would have gone on to academic or literary work, I also expressed my eagerness to hear from those whose current lives had less obvious Jamesian reverberations. Nor did I only ask for affirmative responses: it is possible, I suggested, that his fiction feels dated now in a way it did not then, or that they had always harbored reservations about the novelist that had only grown over the years. Between the two versions of the course, I had taught almost one hundred students since the beginning of the present century, but I could only find email addresses for sixty-five, twenty-nine of whom chose to write back. As anticipated, a number of these remain in the classroom, though at least some former students are now teaching students of their own at every level from elementary school to university, and a number are writers in one genre or another, including several journalists, a prize-winning poet, and three editors at major literary publications. A few are following more directly in the novelist's footsteps, including one woman who sent on a story about a pair of elderly Californians in which the couple's divided perspectives on their marriage are rendered through a split narrative avowedly indebted to *The Golden Bowl*. Others work in the theater, law, medicine, philanthropy or NGOs, and museums: a strikingly Jamesian list, on the whole, and one that recalls the two generations of the novelist's own family who were "never in a single case," as he put it, "guilty of a stroke of business."²² The results of this small survey, in other words, hardly count as scientific. Still, a response rate of over 40 percent is not bad, and says something, I hope, about James's continuing future as a novelist. "The writer makes the reader very much as he makes his characters," James memorably wrote in an early review of George Eliot; and "when he makes him well, that is, makes him interested, then the reader does quite half the labor."²³ Not everyone from whom I heard remains a party to this contract, though a number report continuing to read or reread him – *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Ambassadors*, and *The Golden Bowl* receive particular mention – and two describe working their way through the entire canon. (Having finished the novels, one is now "ambling . . . through the short stories" in chronological order: he is currently somewhere around 1893.) Those who still turn to James do not always do so professionally: indeed, the only member of the group who has thus far begun a career as a professor of literature confesses to having read no James since college, though his recollections also include struggling through *The Wings of the Dove* on his own one summer "during bumpy *matatu* rides in rural Uganda." The same writer apparently talked his way into the course while still a

sophomore because he was on the rebound from an unsuccessful encounter with vector calculus and James was “the hardest English class” he could find. “I wanted difficulty above all,” he recalls, and “part of what drew me in was the intense abstraction of the prose, the sense that I was as close as one could get, within a novel, to the blank formal mechanisms of mathematical proof. It reassured me to think that English prose could be inscrutable too.”

These thoughts of math are less idiosyncratic than they may appear, since James’s characters often engage in abstruse forms of proof, as when Fanny Assingham in *The Golden Bowl* attempts to convince herself that no prior affair took place between Charlotte Stant and the Prince, an effort James explicitly compares to a new kind of “arithmetic.”²⁴ But while only this respondent explicitly affirmed such a preference for the inscrutable, he was hardly alone in recording a fascination, however ambivalent, with the challenges of Jamesian prose.

It was not until the class ended and she began reading “novels *not* by James,” a recent student testified, that she realized how much she had “not only gotten used to but also started to enjoy – and to crave – reading [those] impossibly winding, opaque sentences.” Whether this made her “a book snob,” or “just a better reader – and hungrier for harder books,” she was not yet prepared to say. Another writer, at a longer remove from the course, nicely described how his partial bafflement at the time had eventually yielded to fuller understanding by invoking the temporal delay that so often structures James’s late style itself. “I knew I was too young, at twenty, for a novel like *The Ambassadors*,” he wrote,

but part of the reason I loved it so much was it gave me (valorized, aesthetic, pre-redeemed) structures of feeling I could live toward until I developed my own. And I think the intense reverence I had toward that Jamesian tensing of experience toward a future recall, call it the future subjunctive perfect, helped me to redeem a lot of the waste inherent to one’s twenties, even as it held me back in other ways.

What he has in mind, I believe, is a temporal trick that recurs throughout the late James, but especially in *The Ambassadors*, as the narrative shifts from Strether’s present experience to his future understanding or recollection of that experience. We are told, for instance, that “he was to know afterwards, in the watches of the night” how the sudden appearance of Chad Newsome at the opera has affected him, or that “he was to remember again repeatedly the medal-like Italian face” of Gloriani when he encounters that dazzling sculptor for the first and last time in his Parisian garden.²⁵ In *The Ambassadors*, as I have recently argued, such temporal shifts not only enact the delayed comprehension that is at the heart of Jamesian narrative generally but anticipate the memories that will prove the only recompense for the fifty-five-year-old protagonist’s belated expedition to Paris.²⁶ I find it oddly moving, then, to learn of a twenty-year-old anticipating such “future recall” of his own encounters with the novelist.

Of course, most of James's Americans abroad are considerably younger than Strether, and a few students headed off to Europe after graduation keenly aware that their stories might already have been scripted for them. One woman, now resident for over a decade in England, describes measuring all her early experiences against the standard set by Isabel Archer. "Whenever 'Isabel' appears in one of my emails home," she writes, "it's a sign that I'm about to complain that my expat life is cruder or grubbier than I'd hoped it would be." Even as she determined not to be the kind of "loud . . . self-important" American about which her new acquaintances complained, she "hadn't moved to England to become English" but to prove "James's version of the 'American girl': a heroine down to her fingertips." A male student who also headed to England before traveling on the Continent likewise describes adopting James as a "prism" through which to view his new experiences, though his alternative was not the Ugly American but the distinctively English world of Evelyn Waugh. While his fellow students at Cambridge "all aspired, more or less openly, to find their parts in a reenactment of *Brideshead Revisited* (the early chapters only, of course)," he preferred to imagine himself "a vaguely perplexed American, attracted by class systems he didn't fully understand, spending the money of industrial America" – not the self-made fortunes of Christopher Newman or Adam Verver in his case, but a Mellon fellowship – "in Gothic settings on both sides of the Channel." James, he says, provided him "with a sort of spiritual geography" by which to map his European travels, whether he was carrying the *Italian Hours* (1909) on a first visit to Italy or simply passing by the French seaside on a train or plane and recalling "a certain memory of alienation and of coming to knowledge" that he associates with *What Maisie Knew*. He never made it to Boulogne itself, but he continues to identify its location with the end of Maisie's childhood.

Memory of novels appears to resemble other kinds of memory, attaching less to events in chronological order than to psychological or emotional patterns, on the one hand, and particular moments or images, on the other. A woman who admitted to feeling "hazy on the details" of *Maisie's* plot nonetheless testified to still thinking about the young girl's consciousness in relation to her own, while James's "description of Isabel Archer preferring to look inward at the garden within her mind, as opposed to outward at the world," continues to provide her with a monitory image of egoism. Several correspondents recalled how James's characters awaken to knowledge and learn to grapple with other people – the discovery of "the sheer, unbelievable depth of the human individual," as a recent graduate put it, and how that resonated with their own coming of age or professional development. "I don't know if I realized at the time how deeply I identified with Isabel," confessed a woman who had written her final essay on that heroine's struggle to fulfill her potential, "but I used to think about it a lot as I faced my own choices about various paths to take" – choices, she hastened to add, "mostly about career,

not mate” that “fortunately” did not end with an Osmond. A woman now beginning to publish fiction herself similarly recalled how she approached “the sudden precipice of life after school” as if she were the protagonist of a novel, one whose future might be grasped if she could understand herself as fully as James understood his characters. “What would happen to me? And who was I?” she recalled asking. “Thinking about the way those two questions were linked – and James certainly suggested that they were – fueled a lot of my early adulthood. Of course, I am sure I would have thought about that anyway, even without James” she acknowledged, “but I felt less lonely doing so after reading him.”

A lawyer in Los Angeles likewise associated the reading of James with the process of self-reflection, while also remarking the affinities between the novelist’s interest in “why people know what they think they know” and the development of evidence in the American legal system, a connection that might have amused that law-school dropout. “I think that what most stuck with me from James (besides the prodigious length of his sentences),” wrote another man now settled in Israel, “was the awareness that the journeys we make inside our own consciousness are every bit as dramatic as those we undertake in the ‘real’ world. In a deep way, perhaps, these are the most significant roads we travel.” A medical resident in Boston, inspired by an encounter between a dying patient still in his forties and the female cousin whose arrival had visibly reanimated him, chose to share with them a passage from *The Portrait of a Lady* in which Isabel pays a similar visit to her dying cousin, Ralph Touchett. “I don’t know if these lines gave any comfort,” the doctor writes. “I know James had no intention of being used as a Hallmark card. . . . But this patient, at least, has not required any more opiates since I handed him that passage.” The passage culminates in the memorable line, “nothing mattered now but the only knowledge that was not pure anguish – the knowledge that they were looking at the truth together.”²⁷

Looking over these responses, I am struck by how often what continues to reverberate in readers’ minds is the wording of such individual lines or even phrases. “Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost”; “Live all you can . . . it’s a mistake not to”; “I want a happiness without a hole in it”; “the shriek of a soul in pain”; “the balloon of experience”: these fragments came echoing back in my students’ memories, as apparently happened to James himself when his own words from “The Art of Fiction” resurfaced to describe the protagonist of *The Princess Casamassima* as “a youth on whom nothing was lost.”²⁸ James’s style may be notoriously elaborate, but the capacity of his language to compress experience and emotion in this way is one reason, perhaps, that some of his best readers are otherwise drawn to poetry. Indeed, a poet among my correspondents recalled how her own style began to morph after reading him: a shift to “long lines with grammatically reticulated sentences” that felt like “a revelation” to some-

one still in search of her voice. Another described writing poems “infused with imagery and associations” suggested by his work. But you do not need to mimic James’s style in order to appreciate its effects, as many of these respondents testified. One of those who recalled his advice to be someone “on whom nothing is lost” confessed to having struggled painfully with the novelist’s prose as a student, even while taking courage as an aspiring fiction writer from James’s suggestion that good work need not be limited to the author’s immediate experience. A reporter interning at a national newspaper understandably observed that his editors would “kill” him if he wrote like James. Still, he too invoked the phrase from “The Art of Fiction” as a model for his own kind of work: a journalism ideally alert to how the smallest cues may signify.

All of which is not to say that James emerges unquestioned from these reminiscences. An online journalist observes regretfully that he no longer reads such “intricate prose” as James’s, lest its reverberations interfere with the crisp style his profession demands. “This is part of the sadness of adulthood,” he writes: “we nurture the parts of us that are useful to the world and shear off the rest. That sadness is much of what James means to me now; he is part of that sheared mass that cannot be reconciled with the requirements of the world.” An elementary school teacher admits that he never quite took to the novels, in part because he thought their social interactions dated, though he did enjoy writing a paper on the Jamesian uncanny: an experience he now uses as an object lesson when his students balk at some required reading, by suggesting that they too can find something of interest even in an author they dislike. A correspondent who recalls the “quiet dazzlement” with which he initially responded to James now finds himself questioning the language in which the novelist formulates aesthetic judgments, wondering, for example, whether terms like “fine,” on the one hand, and “vulgar,” on the other, are not too nebulous to capture the specific effects of artistic craftsmanship. Others describe resistant afterthoughts about the ethical values that appear to govern the novels – protesting the “solipsism” that marks the close of *The Ambassadors*, for instance, with its determined sacrifice of Maria Gostrey to an ideal of conduct seemingly endorsed by Strether and James alike, or wondering if a morality grounded in not imposing one’s will on other people is adequate to a world whose well-being increasingly seems to require collective action. For yet another correspondent, the questions are not so much ethical as metaphysical. “I keep wondering,” he writes, “why reality – a real encounter between two people – is always something sinister in the Jamesian universe . . . why so much of life seems to happen in the imagination, and whether that’s something to celebrate or something to mourn.” In his case, at least, such doubts have not precluded a determination that someday he will have read everything James wrote.

“The whole conduct of life consists of things done, which do other things in their turn,” James declared, as he approached the end of his Prefaces for the New

York Edition. The “doing” he had in mind, characteristically, was the act of writing, and in looking over these responses, I have been struck above all by the truth of this claim.²⁹ Sometimes the “other things” James’s work is doing here takes the form of more writing; sometimes, of more reading, not just of James himself but of novels and short stories by his contemporaries like George Eliot or Edith Wharton or by more distant heirs like James Baldwin, whose intense admiration for his predecessor one student excitedly discovered only after she too had thought of James while reading the ending of “Sonny’s Blues.” But art also lives, as James said, upon discussion, and there appears to be plenty of that too, both in and out of the classroom. I heard from a beginning graduate student whose devotion to James has already become the stuff of rumor among her cohort and an advanced student who has started to teach him, but also from a woman whose early morning bus rides have been enlivened by chats with a software programmer who happens to be an avid Jamesian, as well as from a recently graduated couple who continue to debate just how “slightly” they prefer *The Portrait of a Lady* to *The Ambassadors*. A wife explains to her husband how the meaning of James’s sentences comes through despite their difficulty; a daughter recommends *The Portrait of a Lady* to her mother and helps decode some puzzling passages; another daughter triggers “a bit of a James mania” in her household, which results in her parents’ listening to *The American* on tape, having mistaken it for *The Ambassadors*, and in her own acquisition of a box of old James novels that had once belonged to her grandfather, a Chinese mathematician. These, too, are among the things that the novelist’s deeds make happen.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others*, in *Autobiographies: A Small Boy and Others, Notes of a Son and Brother, The Middle Years, Other Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Philip Horne (New York: Library of America, 2016), 108.

² Henry James, *Notes of a Son and Brother*, in *Autobiographies*, ed. Horne, 435, 463.

- ³ Richard Ellman, *James Joyce*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 521.
- ⁴ For competing claims as to priority in this regard – the rival claimants taught at Columbia and Yale, respectively – see Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 124. On the first university courses in English literature in Britain, see Alan Bacon, “English Literature Becomes a University Subject: King’s College, London as Pioneer,” *Victorian Studies* 29 (4) (1986): 591–612.
- ⁵ See Mark McGurl, *The Novel Art: Elevations of American Fiction after Henry James* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).
- ⁶ Henry James to William Dean Howells, August 17, 1908, in *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, ed. Philip Horne (London: Penguin, 1999), 463.
- ⁷ Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” in *Henry James: Literary Criticism – Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*, ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 45, 44.
- ⁸ Henry James to William Dean Howells, February 3, 1876, in *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, ed. Horne, 66–67.
- ⁹ James, “The Art of Fiction,” 44.
- ¹⁰ See Peter Brooks, *Henry James Goes to Paris* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).
- ¹¹ James, “The Art of Fiction,” 44.
- ¹² Henry James to William Dean Howells, March 30, 1877, in *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, ed. Horne, 83.
- ¹³ Henry James, Preface to *The American*, ed. James W. Tuttleton (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 11, 4.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9–11.
- ¹⁵ Henry James, Preface to *The Golden Bowl*, ed. Ruth Bernard Yeazell (London: Penguin, 2009), 3.
- ¹⁶ James, *The Golden Bowl*, 76.
- ¹⁷ See Michael Anesko, “Friction with the Market”: *Henry James and the Profession of Authorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 141–162.
- ¹⁸ Henry James, Preface to *Roderick Hudson*, ed. Geoffrey Moore (London: Penguin, 1986), 36.
- ¹⁹ James, *The Golden Bowl*, 34.
- ²⁰ Henry James to Frederic William Henry Myers, December 19, 1898, in *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, ed. Horne, 314.
- ²¹ For more on Softley’s film, see Ruth Bernard Yeazell, “Sex, Lies, and Motion Pictures,” *Henry James Review* 25 (1) (2004): 87–96.
- ²² James, *A Small Boy and Others*, 118.
- ²³ Henry James, “The Novels of George Eliot,” in *Henry James: Literary Criticism*, ed. Edel and Wilson, 922.
- ²⁴ “Yes, it was distinctly as if she had proved what was needing proof . . . Old arithmetic had perhaps been fallacious, but the new settled the question.” James, *The Golden Bowl*, 81.

- ²⁵ Henry James, *The Ambassadors*, ed. Adrian Poole (London: Penguin, 2008), 119, 162.
- ²⁶ Ruth Bernard Yeazell, "Remembrance of Things Present in *The Ambassadors*," *Henry James Review* 38 (3) (2017): 231–237.
- ²⁷ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert D. Bamberg (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 478.
- ²⁸ James, "The Art of Fiction," 53; James, *The Ambassadors*, 176; James, *The Golden Bowl*, 483, 538; James, Preface to *The American*, 10; and Henry James, *The Princess Casamassima*, ed. Derek Brewer (London: Penguin, 1987), 164.
- ²⁹ James, Preface to *The Golden Bowl*, 21.

The Hole in the Carpet: Henry James's *The Bostonians*

Sharon Cameron

"The Hole in the Carpet" examines the ways in which Henry James deflates and nullifies value in The Bostonians. The essay raises a question of whether a novel that has no stable repository for value creates in its stead an ethical vacuum that is costly for a reader.

Henry James repeatedly mused on the "bemuddled question of the objective value" of a "subject," but value for a novel's reader is never abstract.¹ It is uniquely perceptible in the twists of plot, in narrative cues; in the testimony of dialogue; and of course in what Henry James called the "economy of treatment"² whereby the novelist reveals disparities among characters: "one seeing black where the other sees white . . . one seeing coarse where the other sees fine" (P 7). The basis for imputing worth must be developed throughout a novel so the reader can evaluate it.

Sometimes, however, said reader is preemptively alerted to the value of a novel's subject (a word denoting character, and in other instances theme) even before it begins, as in James's preface to the 1907 text of *The Portrait of a Lady* where, prematurely, he identifies Isabel Archer, the protagonist (a "young woman affronting her destiny" [P 8]), and also rhetorically elevates the novel's topic, designated as "the high attributes of a Subject" (P 9). The theme, or matter the novel will divulge, concerns the question of what will happen to "my treasure" – to that "rare little 'piece'" that has been "placed in" James's "imagination" in "the back-shop of [his] mind" (as though he were "a wary dealer in precious odds and ends," ready "to disclose its merit afresh as soon as a key shall have clicked in a cupboard-door" [P 8]). In such hyperboles, James authenticates Isabel's priceless quality even before he opens the "cupboard-door" in the novel's first sentence. The preface is overrun by idioms of compensation (the "living wage" [P 13]; the "gratuity" [P 12]; the "charming 'tip'" [P 13]) by which the author will be remunerated for his work; and by more sweeping calculations of "the high price of the novel as a literary form" (P 7). These computations include James's insistence that "no such provision" for "the creation of an interest" in the subject (the girl, or what happens to her) "could be excessive" (P 11), given the "measure of the worth

of [such] a subject”) which for James includes “the amount of felt life concerned in producing it” (P 6).

How a novelist deflates and even nullifies value is also not theoretical. The erasure of value in James’s *The Bostonians* (1886) is the focus of my essay, but I turn to it only after reflecting on the novel’s comic brilliance in which its ethical vacuity lies buried. For *The Bostonians*, which James published five years after *Portrait*, is a case study in depreciation (of both characters and subject matter). James called *The Bostonians* “a very American tale” that would address “the social conditions” of the times, “the situation of women” – specifically, their emancipation – “the decline of the sentiment of sex” and “the agitation on their behalf.”³ The novel unravels the story of a woman who wants to possess a girl and a man who wants to possess the same girl. The woman is Olive Chancellor, a passionate feminist, who lives in the Back Bay, a fashionable neighborhood of Boston. The novel’s disparaging assessments are disseminated across diverse perspectives, including the narrator’s, and slip in and out of each other unstably. “Olive” is “a spinster as Shelley was a lyric poet, or as the month of August is sultry.”⁴ She is argumentative (“of all things in the world contention was most sweet to her though . . . it always cost her tears, headaches, and a day or two in bed” [B 14]); self-sacrificing (“the most sacred hope of her nature was that she might some day . . . be a martyr and die for something” [B 13]); addicted to unhappiness (“the prospect of suffering was always, spiritually speaking, so much cash in her pocket” [B 97]); ashamed of her wealth and privilege (in mitigation of which “she had an immense desire to know intimately some very poor girl” [B 31], but “the attempt had come to nothing” [B 31]); and idealistic. Olive has “sympathy for reform” (B 30), but with no “talent . . . no self-possession, no eloquence,” she herself can only contribute capital to the “crusade” for women’s rights (B 33). Her adulation for the feminists is tempered by disappointment at their befuddled sense of class and style (B 30). Thus, Mrs. Farrinder, a “mixture of the American matron and the public character” (B 27), who “lectured” on “temperance” (for men) and “rights” (for women) (B 28), strikes Olive as “grand . . . it lifted one up to be with her” (B 30). But Mrs. Farrinder lets Olive down by treating her as “a representative of the aristocracy” (B 31). In “reality,” Olive correctively thinks, “the Chancellors belonged to the *bourgeoisie*,” and it was “provincial” for Mrs. Farrinder not to understand. “There was” also “something provincial in the way she did her hair” (B 31). Though Olive is a mass of contradictions, on this matter she is clear: Olive “hated men . . . as a class” (B 21). Basil Ransom, the man who wants to possess the girl, expresses an equally elementary understanding of how to categorize people: “the simplest division it is possible to make of the human race is into the people who take things hard and the people who take them easy. He perceived very quickly that Miss Chancellor belonged to the former class” (B 11). “It came over him that it was because she took things hard she had sought his acquaintance” (B 17), an assessment that coincides

with Olive's own: "If she had supposed he would agree [with her], she would not have written to him" (B 14).

Basil Ransom, Olive's cousin, is a Mississippian who has fought on the wrong side of the Civil War; believes "Secession" was "a good cause" (B 187); and is a "social and political . . . reactionary" (B 164). He accepts Olive's invitation to visit because "Mississippi seemed to him the state of despair." Specifically, "his family was ruined; they had lost their slaves, their property, their friends and relations" and "their home" (B 13). He has also failed as a lawyer. Though he submits "articles" to "weekly and monthly publications," they are "all declined with thanks" (B 163), except for a paper on "the rights of minorities" to which a "disagreeable editor" replies that "his doctrines were about three hundred years behind the age; doubtless some magazine of the sixteenth century would be happy to print them" (B 163). Basil Ransom arrives in Boston on the eve of a gathering at Miss Birdseye's, an "old Abolitionist" (B 19), at whose dwelling there is to be "inspirational speaking" (B 20) on the emancipation of women. This is where Olive incongruously takes her cousin. Ransom, sizing up the assembly (mostly "ladies" in "bonnets" and some men "in weary-looking overcoats"), "had a general idea they were mediums, communists, vegetarians" (B 29).

Ransom has yet to reveal his conviction that "women" are "essentially inferior to men" (B 167), so the "use of a truly amiable woman is to make some honest man happy" (B 206–207). When Mrs. Farrinder, the "great oratress" (B 40), declines to speak because she can only deliver her message "when I see prejudice, when I see bigotry, when I see injustice . . . massed before me like an army" (B 40) – like the novel's other feminists, she thinks in hyperboles – Verena, the "poor girl" (B 31) with whom Olive and Ransom fall in love, steps up to address the gathering. Olive will be inspired by the girl's platitudes, while Ransom abhors them: "it was all about the gentleness and goodness of women, and how, during the long ages of history, they had been trampled under the iron heel of man. It was about their equality – perhaps . . . even about their superiority" (B 53). Verena too has her conditions. To speak, she must have "her father" (B 47) Selah Tarrant (an itinerant vender of lead-pencils, a "medium," and a mesmeric healer [B 62]) to "start her up" (B 47). When Tarrant puts his hands on Verena's head to get her going, Ransom, looking at the spectacle, "simply loathed him" (B 51), feeling Tarrant was "the cheapest kind of human product" (B 51).

Although Verena is a different kind of "product" than her father, she too has a flair – not for quackery (reports of Tarrant's healing lacked facts) or channeling – but, as seen through Ransom's eyes, for the circus: she "had . . . an air of being on exhibition, of belonging to a troupe, of living in the gaslight" (B 51). When, later in the novel, Verena holds forth on the rights of women in the music room of a Mrs. Burrage, the mother of one of Verena's suitors, Ransom stares at her "in very much the same excited way as if she had been performing, high above his head,

on the trapeze" (B 228). To Olive, gazing at Verena's debut performance at Miss Birdseye's: "she . . . seemed to belong to some queer gipsy-land or transcendental Bohemia. With her bright, vulgar clothes, her salient appearance, she might have been a rope-dancer, or a fortune-teller; and this had the immense merit, for Olive, that it appeared to make her belong to the 'people'" (B 70). Mrs. Luna, Olive's sister (who "cared for . . . the fallen aristocracy" in distinction to Olive, "who took an interest only in the lower class, as it struggled to rise" [B 179]), calls Verena "a perfect little adventuress, and quite third-rate into the bargain" (B 176) who "cared as much for the rights of women as she did for the Panama Canal; the only right of a woman she wanted was to climb on top of something, where the men could look at her" (B 177). Whether Verena is "a parrot or a genius," what matters to Farrinder is only that "she would be effective" (B 57), an outcome calculated by the indelicate newspaper man, Mathias Pardon, as profit: "There's money for some one in that girl; you see if she don't have quite a run!" (B 56).

The leitmotif of this onslaught of impressions from characters who have virtually nothing in common is that whether Verena is a charlatan, a "preposterous puppet" (B 293) mouthing inanities she doesn't understand from the "trash" her father fills her with (B 54), or simply a "prima donna" in a "costume" that is sometimes "chastened" and sometimes "parti-colored and bedizened" (B 194), she possesses "a singular hollowness of character" (B 54). Even Dr. Prance, the shrewd female physician, diagnoses Verena as "rather slim" (the pronouncement "leaked" "out of the crevices of her reticence" [B 335]). Only Olive believes that "Miss Tarrant might wear gilt buttons from head to foot, her soul could not be vulgar" (B 70). The plot will prove Olive wrong. The prize Olive and Basil fight over has no intrinsic value.

These are the novel's principals. But Verena is not the only character whose value is marked down, and it is not only Basil and Olive who are the butt of each other's ridicule. Even agreeable characters are magnets for depreciation. Miss Birdseye is extolled for the scope of her philanthropy: her "charity began at home and ended nowhere" (B 25), and for her verdict on the political squabble between the feminists and their adversaries. Thus, her innocently (or is it ignorantly?) rhetorical: "Doesn't it seem as if we had room for all?" (B 314). The question would be ignorant because the dispute is not over an inclusion of all but over the equality of all. When this "confused, entangled, inconsequent, discursive old woman" (B 25) meets Basil Ransom, she gives "the young man a delicate, dirty, democratic little hand" (B 25). Beyond the alliteration of those d's, the restrictive adjectives modifying "hand" are drawn into each other so that the elegance implied by "delicate" is contaminated by "dirty," and its median position in the sequence of qualifiers also sullies the attribute "democratic." In the same paragraph, Birdseye is less subtly tarnished when the narrator downgrades what initially passes for admiration (Miss Birdseye's "best hours had been spent in fancying that she was helping

some Southern slave to escape" [B 26]) by adding "it would have been a nice question whether, in her heart of hearts, for the sake of this excitement, she did not sometimes wish the blacks back in bondage" (B 26).

Similarly, Dr. Prance in some ways enjoys James's favor. Her "hard good sense" (B 51) shines through the blunt judgment: "There is room for improvement in both sexes. Neither of them is up to the standard" (B 37). When at the end of the evening at Miss Birdseye's, Ransom asks Prance her "opinion of the capacity of the ladies," she replies: "They've got a capacity for making people waste time" (B 43). But Prance's gender indeterminacy and even her species indeterminacy (the frisky gait signified in her name obliquely affiliates her with an animal) neuters her for Ransom, through whose perspective we see her: "She looked like a boy. . . . It was true that if she had been a boy she would have borne some relation to a girl, whereas Doctor Prance appeared to bear none whatever" (B 36–37). The narrator's unbridled devaluations of the novel's characters and their snide judgments of each other single out everyone for rebuke, often more than one character in a sentence, even though each is parodied in unique terms, according to varied standards, and to different degrees. These deflations are replicated in the remainder of the plot (summarized below) where all aspects of the conflict between those who contend for possession of Verena are depicted as ludicrous.

Soon after the evening at Miss Birdseye's Verena comes to visit Olive who, "before she had been in the room five minutes jumped to her point": "will you be my friend . . . beyond every one, everything . . . forever and forever?" (B 71). Such a promise involves "renunciation" (B 71) certainly of marriage, but also of everyone who is not Olive and every passion that does not embrace the cause of "the suffering of women" (B 74). In Olive's agonized dread two threats could imperil Verena's mission, which the girl compares to that of Joan of Arc (B 74). The first is the Tarrants, who regard their daughter as a social resource (B 89). Selah Tarrant yearns to see Verena "burst forth" (B 92) in the "*penetralia* of the daily press" (B 91). The second, more ordinary peril is young men who might want to marry her. Olive contemplates a solution to the first danger by imagining that "if she should offer [Mr. Tarrant] ten thousand dollars to renounce all claim" (B 100) to his "remunerative daughter" (B 90), "he would probably say, with his fearful smile, 'Make it twenty, money down, and I'll do it'" (B 100). When she *does* write him "a cheque for a very considerable amount" with the proviso: "'Leave us alone – entirely alone – for a year, and then I will write you another. . . .'" the document disappeared . . . into some queer place on his queer person" (B 144). By these tactics, Olive purchases Verena with an option to renew on a yearly basis.

The suitors are presumptively eliminated by the exaction of a promise not to marry that Olive solicits when she sees that two Harvard men, Mr. Gracie ("short . . . unkempt, almost rustic" who "said good things with his ugly lips"[B 105]) and Henry Burrage (a rich and sophisticated New Yorker with "chains and rings and

shining shoes" [B 106]), pay court to Verena. Mathias Pardon, the newspaper man, takes Verena to the theater, but "gave no sign of offering himself either as a husband or as a lecture-agent" (B 129). Yet "It was amazing," Olive thinks, "how many ways men had of being antipathetic" (B 106). Burrage is the most immediately alarming (what if he should "fall in love with her and try to bribe her . . . to practise renunciations of another kind – to give up her holy work" [B 106] and become his "wife"? [B 106]). "Young men in search of sensations" is how Olive regards all three (B 106).

Burrage proposes marriage to Verena (B 148), but Ransom is the real danger. No matter how long Olive and Verena burrow deeply into the "history of feminine anguish" (B 158); take "in the red sunsets of winter" together (B 152); discuss the ways in which "women . . . intrusted with power . . . had not always used it amiably" ("the public crimes of Bloody Mary, the private misdemeanours of Faustina, wife of the pure Marcus Aurelius" [B 153]); listen to "symphonies and fugues" that "excited their revolutionary passion" (B 155), these cozy exertions in which the two misconstrue what they encounter – the music of Bach and Beethoven is not a call to rebel against misogynists who deplore female oratory – have no weight to withstand the assault of Basil Ransom's amorous interest in the girl. When Verena lectures in Mrs. Burrage's drawing room with Ransom in attendance, he silently denounces her speech as "vague, thin, rambling, a tissue of generalities" (B 232). But "he found himself rejoicing that she was weak in argument" (B 233); tone-deaf; (earlier: a "ranter and a sycophant," yet "so engaging" [B 203]) because "he was falling in love with her" (B 232). Falling in love means that though he assesses her ideas as "third-rate palaver" (B 277), "if he should become her husband he should know a way to strike her dumb" (B 278). To start her up, to strike her dumb, or to teach her to dislike "men, as a class, anyway" (B 21) can all be accomplished by handling her.

Ransom takes Verena for a saunter in Central Park (B 283), where he becomes a ranter himself against a "generation [that] is womanized" (B 290). "My plan," he tells her, "is to keep you at home and have a better time with you there than ever" (B 291), seducing her with an image that pivots between the absurd and the erotic: "the dining table itself shall be our platform, and you shall mount on top of that" (B 337). For while women are "second-rate" for "public, civic uses . . . privately, personally, it's another affair" (B 294). Ransom follows Verena to Cape Cod where Olive has unsuccessfully sequestered her from his advances and there proposes marriage (B 317). When she is past all saving (from Olive's point of view), Ransom rescues her from the music hall – it "reminded him of the vomitoria that he had read about in descriptions of the Colosseum" (B 371) – where Olive has slated her to speak to "the city of Boston" (B 382). Ransom's abduction of Verena (on which the novel closes) mirrors Olive's earlier seizure of the girl from the Tarrant's parlor when she, "with a sort of blind, defiant dash," bolts into "the dark freshness" of

"a splendid sky" (B 115), tearing Verena away from Gracie and Burrage who clamor for entertainment: "give us the whole programme" (B 113).

Once outside, Olive importunes: "Promise. . . Never to listen to one of them. . . Promise me not to marry!" (B 117). As she exacts this vow, Olive flings "the fold of a cloak that hung ample upon her own meagre person" (B 117) over Verena. Rushing out of the theater, Ransom also shrouds the girl: "by muscular force" he "wrenched" her from Olive and "thrust the hood of Verena's long cloak over her head, to conceal her face and her identity" (B 389). But Verena *has* no discrete identity. She is a conduit for alternative domestic and political arrangements. She likes to be "overborne" (B 285), and when the romance of the lecture hall cedes to the romance of the dinner table, the narrator glosses the switch chiasmatically: "She was to burn everything she had adored; she was to adore everything she had burned. . . The truth had changed sides" (B 332). If this is a betrayal of Olive, it also scraps the political topic (was that ever the novel's subject?) and replaces it with a juicy love story that plays itself out first in a homoerotic and then in a heterosexual union, a sequence that starkly reveals the thrall of male allure. In Olive's bitter analysis: "A man had only to whistle for" Verena "and she who had pretended most was delighted to come and kneel at his feet" (B 327). But Olive has also whistled for Verena: her high-minded interest in the girl is equally "personal, not controversial" (B 275). As Mrs. Luna insists Olive "wants to keep" Verena "above all, for herself" (B 224) – a claim echoed in Ransom's: "She's mine or she isn't, and if she's mine, she's all mine!" (B 383). Though Ransom gets the girl, it's a pyrrhic victory: "beneath her hood, she was in tears. It is to be feared that with the union, so far from brilliant, into which she was about to enter, these were not the last she was destined to shed" (B 390). In other words, though "the truth had changed sides" (B 332) and the options are not identical, it's a lose-lose choice.

The satiric pleasures of *The Bostonians'* plot and the thrill of James's comedic writing are nowhere exceeded in his *oeuvre*. But these don't compensate for, and in fact they contribute to, the novel's ethical vacuity, and not only because James's farce can't be extricated from its mean-spirited glee at the imbecility of its characters. One source of the desolation – a strange but apt word for my experience of the novel's enduring bleakness – are perspectives that cancel each other out or that are absent in the first place, as, in the novel, is the omission of James's own point of view – never clear – on *The Bostonians*, which he once implausibly called "rather a remarkable feat of objectivity."⁵ Thus, unlike "the figure in the carpet" – that image for a secret, discovery of which would explain everything in James's story of that title – in *The Bostonians*, there's a hole in the carpet, a void, nothing that identifies the overarching perspective that would allow us to decipher the target of the satire.⁶ Here are some possibilities. This is a misogynist novel because of its venom toward the feminists; or because Verena

is an empty vessel; or because if the “truth” can “change sides” (B 332), a political position is evacuated of meaningful difference from its antithesis. Or: this is a parody of a misogynist novel, because the idea of feminism as “balderdash” (B 275) is Ransom’s, not James’s. Or: this is a misogynist novel because, as evidenced in his 1906 “The Speech of American Women,” James shares Ransom’s point of view about the dangerous “license” taken by a woman who speaks “as she likes” without “submission . . . to form”: “we might accept this labial and lingual and vocal independence as a high sign of the glorious courage of our women if it contained but a spark of the guiding reason that separates audacity from madness.”⁷ Or the source of James’s disparagement is not hysterical feminism or unhinged male chauvinism, but the confusion of public and private space and what should transpire in each.⁸ What James called the “effect” of Verena’s “verbal gush”⁹ and of her exhibitionism assumes center stage in the novel’s plot. But the novel also asymmetrically takes aim at and bombards other targets with comic disdain, often in the same passage, even the same sentence, as when Olive’s insulting adjective for Tarrant’s deposit of her check “into some queer place on his queer person” (B 144) rubs off on her, since that word also characterizes her perverse bid to purchase Verena.¹⁰ Sentence after sentence provides evidence that there’s little to admire in any point of view, for if scorn is tucked into one corner, it nonetheless also sticks out from another.

Nor is Olive the only character who pays to wrest control of Verena. In another “pecuniary transaction” (B 100), though Mrs. Burrage sends Verena the “largest cheque this young woman had ever received for an address . . . it was as if it [the check] came to” Olive “as well” (B 263). Mrs. Burrage “seemed to be offering Olive all the kingdoms of the earth if she would only exert herself to bring about a state of feeling on Verena Tarrant’s part which would lead the girl to accept Henry Burrage” in marriage (B 264 – 265). Olive waves away Mrs. Burrage’s bribe, just as she dismisses Mathias Pardon’s proposal, to which it is akin: “She was a great card and some one ought to play it” (B 123); “Couldn’t they run Miss Verena together?” (B 124). When at the music hall Verena hesitates to take the stage, Mr. Filer, who counts the money, bypasses Olive and Verena and addresses himself above their heads directly to her father: “Is she aware that every quarter of a second . . . is worth about five hundred dollars?” (B 381). “Who is Mr. Filer?” Ransom asks. Answer: “He’s the man that runs Miss Chancellor. . . . Just the same as she runs Miss Tarrant” (B 378). So the appropriation comes full circle. At each turn of the novel (except the denouement, where Ransom’s medium of exchange is sweet-talk), the girl or her fate is secured by legal tender, the currency shared by all but Ransom, who is poor.

The co-optation of agency, whether it is bought (by Olive and Mrs. Burrage); or manipulated (by Dr. Tarrant whose “grotesque manipulations” [B 52] “start” his daughter “up” [B 47]); or exploited for profit (as Pardon proposes); or simply

transacted as an exchange of property to the highest bidder (from Olive to Basil), authenticates Verena's cry at the novel's beginning to explain the impact of her motivational speaking: "'It is not *me*, mother.' . . . It was some power outside" (B 49). Some outside – scopic – power also nullifies the distinctive features of Miss Birdseye and Dr. Prance. Basil Ransom's initial vision of Miss Birdseye shifts to the narrator's: "She had a sad, soft, pale face which . . . looked as if it had been soaked, blurred, and made vague by exposure to some slow dissolvent. The long practice of philanthropy had not given accent to her features; it had rubbed out their transitions, their meanings" (B 24), while Dr. Prance "except her intelligent eye . . . had no features to speak of" (B 37). The quick disparagement, or "slow dissolvent" (B 24), of the features that identify a person, or distinguish a person, or, most generally, attribute value to him, are compounded by the nihilistic activity James delegates to intersecting perspectives of *The Bostonians*' characters and its narrator.

According to her sister, Mrs. Luna, Olive is not a "radical. She's a female Jacobin – she's a nihilist" (B 7). But no person in *The Bostonians* is as ruthless as the freewheeling and shifting perspectives, since the novel's frequent free indirect style – a third-person narration that slips in and out of a character's consciousness – in *The Bostonians* also atypically merges with the narrative voice.¹¹ Thus, Ransom's jumbled impression of Miss Birdseye when he shakes her "delicate, dirty, democratic little hand" (B 25) degenerates into the narrator's skeptical question of whether "she did not sometimes wish the blacks back in bondage" (B 26) so she could free them, without so much as a mark that punctuates the distinct perspectives that constitute this sliding evaluative scale. Devaluation is thus not only a privilege novelistically accorded to Olive and Ransom vis-à-vis their rivals, but also is the lens through which characters in *The Bostonians* see each other and are seen. In contrast to *The Portrait of a Lady*, in *The Bostonians*, vision is de-idealized. To see is to impoverish the value of what is seen.

Thus, Mathias Pardon on Mr. Tarrant: "Mathias had a mean opinion of Mr. Tarrant, thought him quite second-rate, a votary of played-out causes" (B 108). One paragraph later, this is Olive on Mr. Pardon: "She thought him very inferior; she had heard he was intensely bright, but there was probably some mistake": he had "a mind that took merely a gossip's view of great tendencies" (B 109). Reciprocally, Mr. Pardon on Olive, who has asked "whether he took a great interest in the improvement of the position of women": "The question appeared to strike the young man as abrupt and irrelevant, to come down on him from a height with which he was not accustomed to hold intercourse. He was used to quick operations" (B 111). And Olive on Mrs. Burrage's request that Verena visit for two weeks: "People like Mrs. Burrage lived and fattened on abuses, prejudices, privileges, on the petrified, cruel fashions of the past" (B 264). But then, Mrs. Burrage on Olive: "she was considerably exasperated . . . at seeing herself regarded by this dry, shy, obstinate, provincial young woman as superficial. If she liked Verena very

nearly as much as she tried to convince Miss Chancellor, she was conscious of disliking Miss Chancellor more than she should probably ever be able to reveal to Verena" (B 270).

Further, a sanguine perspective is often indistinguishable from a deluded one, as when Verena ascribes to "the temperance of" Olive's "speech" about "Verena's accessibility to matrimonial error... an antique beauty" that "reminded her of the qualities that she believed to have been proper to Electra or Antigone" (B 121). But the qualities of Greek tragedy are not Olive's qualities. So in *The Bostonians*, in one direction or another, perspective warps value. Or the disparity between what is praised and what the reader sees denatures the attribute – heroic courage – here illegitimately attributed to Olive, while discrediting the perspective of anyone who could make such a blunder. If James's satire fixes on opposite but equally foolish ideologies, where is its value – whose value is being espoused – if there is no edge to the irony, thus leaving no one and nothing unscathed?

Against the perspectival assaults leveled by *The Bostonians*, the novel represents three unimpaired visions immune to the degradations considered above. I will treat them as the single phenomenon that, I argue, they constitute. In the first, when Henry Burrage plays Schubert and Mendelssohn in the Burrage drawing room, at once

soothed and beguiled. . . . It was given to Olive, under these circumstances . . . to surrender herself, to enjoy the music . . . to feel as if the situation were a kind of truce. Her nerves were calmed, her problems – for the time – subsided. Civilization under such an influence, in such a setting, appeared to have done its work; harmony ruled the scene; human life ceased to be a battle. (B 134)

That this near-happiness lasts only for "half an hour" is irrelevant to its solace or its dignity (B 133 – 134).

In the second passage, clandestinely walking with Basil Ransom around Cambridge, Verena guides him to Harvard's Memorial Hall, pausing especially in

a chamber . . . consecrated to the sons of the university who fell in the long Civil War . . . they lingered longest in the presence of the white, ranged tablets, each of which, in its proud, sad clearness, is inscribed with the name of a student-soldier. The effect of the place is singularly noble and solemn, and it is impossible to feel it without a lifting of the heart. It stands there for duty and honour, it speaks of sacrifice and example, seems a kind of temple to youth, manhood, generosity. Most of them were young, all were in their prime, and all of them had fallen; this simple idea hovers before the visitor and makes him read with tenderness each name and place – names often without other history, and forgotten Southern battles. For Ransom these things were not a challenge nor a taunt; they touched him with respect, with the sentiment of beauty

... he forgot, now, the whole question of sides and parties. . . . The monument around him . . . arched over friends as well as enemies, the victims of defeat as well as the sons of triumph. (B 209 – 210)

Though the narrator proclaims the unique nobility of the place, Ransom's perspective, rendered midparagraph in free indirect style, deepens the recognition that discord in the face of death could only be trivial. The "beauty" Ransom experiences washes over and dissolves individual passions and allegiances, making it possible to see the similitude of "sides and parties," "friends" and "enemies" (B 210) (and even, implicitly – curving over a larger opening, like the arch of the monument that calls it to mind – the neutrality and "beauty of general benevolence")¹² that elicits "tenderness" not as a principle but as a "sentiment" (B 210). In the same way, Olive's "surrender" to the "harmony" (B 134) of Schubert and Mendelssohn opens into affability toward the once-odious people listening to that same music.

The third passage from which I excerpt the sentences below records Olive's premonition that Verena will abandon her:

Olive lived over, in her miserable musings, her life for the last two years; she knew, again, how noble and beautiful her scheme had been, but how it had all rested on an illusion of which the very thought made her feel faint and sick. What was before her now was the reality, with the beautiful, indifferent sky pouring down its complacent rays upon it. The reality was simply that Verena had been more to her than she ever was to Verena . . . the girl had cared for their cause because, for the time, no interest, no fascination was greater. . . . These hours of backward clearness come to all men and women, once at least, when they read the past in the light of the present. . . . The journey behind them is mapped out and figured, with its false steps, its wrong observations, all its infatuated, deluded geography. They understand as Olive understood, but it is probable that they rarely suffer as she suffered. The sense of regret for her baffled calculations burned within her like a fire, and the splendour of the vision over which the curtain of mourning now was dropped brought to her eyes slow, still tears, tears that came one by one, neither easing her nerves nor lightening her load of pain. (B 354 – 355)

It was, above all, that she felt how *she* had understood friendship, and how never again to see the face of the creature she had taken to her soul would be for her as the stroke of blindness. (B 356)

Though amity suffuses the first two passages, and torment the third, a deeper basis for accord argues their consonance. In each, vision no longer disfigures what Olive calls "the reality" that is "before her now . . . with the beautiful, indifferent sky pouring down its complacent rays": thus a "reality" whose beauty (B 354) is

indivisible from impartiality. Here James bestows on his characters an objectivity he claimed for his own perspective in the writing of the novel, even though for Olive, searing clarity, cleansed of delusion, only arises from miserable hindsight. “Reality” (B 354) dislodges grotesque perceptions and puts in their place an optics purged of bias and enmity, yielding serenity for Olive, neutrality for Ransom, and, again for Olive, grief before each vision recedes. Structurally – the structure is one in which confusion falls away – the passages are identical. “Reality” (B 354) is staid, not opulent: in contrast to the splendid delusion that dazzles, and also in contrast to Olive’s “pain” whose extreme violence bequeaths her a vision no longer fatally at odds with truth.¹³ In the novel’s penultimate pages, before they return to farce, Olive’s vision of herself is mirrored in Ransom’s lucid vision of Olive when she sees in “the hours of backward clearness [that] come to all men and women, once at least” (B 355), as though, momentarily, Olive and Ransom saw through the same pair of eyes, so that the monocular vision of harmony each is initially given to perceive in segregation from the other is here superimposed:

She was upright in her desolation. The expression of her face was a thing to remain with him for ever; it was impossible to imagine a more vivid presentment of blighted hope and wounded pride . . . her pale, glittering eyes straining forward, as if they were looking for death. Ransom had a vision, even at that crowded moment, that if she could have met it there and then, bristling with steel or lurid with fire, she would have rushed on it without a tremor, like the heroine that she was. (B 388)

Seeing “backward” into “deluded geography” (B 355) that one’s deformed vision has led one astray is punctuated as a climax across James’s novels, as when in *The Portrait of a Lady* Isabel Archer sees her husband accurately: “she had imagined a world that had no substance . . . she had not read him right” (P 357); as when Maggie Verver in *The Golden Bowl* suddenly sees that her marriage is a structure from which she is excluded;¹⁴ and as when in *The Wings of the Dove* Densher sees that Milly Theale knows he has betrayed her and, wanting to die, “has turned her face to the wall.”¹⁵ In *The Bostonians*, however, such insight is neither a focus nor a turning point: it is the *value* term in the novel, even as the brief passages glossed above cannot withstand the novel’s pull in the other direction toward travesty.

In Aristophanes’s satiric plays, everything is tarred: no lofty attributes or virtues can be identified in either politics or human nature; in Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, satire equally savages antebellum racism and its obdurate survival after Emancipation; and in “A Modest Proposal,” Swift levels universal contempt against all for England’s legal and economic exploitation of Ireland. These classic examples exhibit the generic privilege of satire in which an impersonal, sweeping, global negation is itself a value that reveals by inversion how things should or might be otherwise. Thus, the satiric deformation of value, when flipped, evinces an ideal – in the instance of Twain and Swift, a political ideal – that has been des-

ecrated. For this reason, satire, while comedic, is also shadowed by tragedy. *The Bostonians* doesn't fit the model because incommensurable objects, some trivial, some substantial – hair style, suffrage, lesbianism, chauvinism, exhibitionism, slavery, publicity, and the jaundiced points of view held by all including the narrator – indiscriminately provoke scorn, from which no legible counterideal could be extracted. Moreover, the logic that from one perspective explains in what sense James's novel evades the satiric coupling of nihilism and idealism is compounded by the recognition that it equally slips free of such a paradigm because the value perceptible in the three passages discussed above registers only evanescently, melting away as of no consequence. Thus, in *The Bostonians*, it's not just the objects of satire that lack a common measure, but also that satire's relation to questions about value is now one thing, now another. From either vantage, the vacuity in *The Bostonians* is neither grand nor tragic.

It might be that value is never stable because the mind's fidelity to its allegiances – its avowed truths – is not stable, or that value cannot endure because nothing endures. But that insight (or truism) is far from the drift of the novel's sustained interests.

The *Bostonians* was not a success. James omitted the novel from the New York Edition, and in one explanation of the exclusion, he wrote: "I left it out partly because I hadn't the courage really to look at it again – & felt that revision would be formidable."¹⁶ When the novel was serialized, critics condemned its "tedium"; its "over elaborate and alembicated passages"; and the "nebulous mazes" that replace "discernible plot." With "no sense of real strength anywhere," the novel was thought to be "unreadable."¹⁷ Readers also flinched at the "indefensible liberties" of James's "portraits" in which character is transmuted into caricature.¹⁸ Horace Elisha Scudder's review of *The Bostonians* identified a more involuntary response: "When we say that most of the characters are repellent, we are simply recording the effect which they produce upon the reader by reason of the attitude which the author of their being takes toward them. He does not love them. Why should he ask more of us?"¹⁹

Love – or the attributes that contribute to the worthiness or substantiality that renders characters fit objects of a reader's attention, if not of his affection (even if they are evil, or merely hateful) – is not the only novelistic value. Whether in a personal, social, or novelistic context, value – even so-called universal value – is heterogeneous and contingent, shifting from one site to another; for some, from one moment to another; and certainly from one novel to the next. In James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, for instance, value inheres in Isabel Archer's fidelity to the choice that defines her autonomy; in *The Wings of the Dove*, in Milly Theale's uncompromised ethical purity; in *What Maisie Knew*, in the child's farewell to her beloved, adulterous step-parents. For James, urbanity is also a container of value;

thus, in *The Ambassadors*, Lambert Strether, the “hero” from Woollett, Massachusetts, arrives in Paris and learns how to relish pleasure. James described this “process” as “the expression, the literal squeezing-out, of value.”²⁰ To glance at other nineteenth-century novels: in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, value abides in the vastness of the ocean and in the white whale’s embodiment of that sublime inscrutability. In Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables* and “Ethan Brand,” value is lodged in the “universal throb” that magnetically binds a character to humanity, even when he resists the bond.²¹ In James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*, it lies in the silence of the seas: “the roar of a waterfall” and “at no great distance water” that “seemed piled against the heavens.”²² In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, in the battle for freedom. Value is secured in the acerbic title of Melville’s *The Confidence-Man*, for although the trust there signified is continuously betrayed, it is also repeatedly extended. Whatever the archive of novelistic value, a novel, at least a nineteenth-century American novel, must not only establish and endorse a source of value but also sustain it, to ward off the odium expressed in the early reviews of *The Bostonians*. Novelistic value must reside somewhere, even if only by inference.

The imperative – for the presence and endurance of novelistic value – is not to humanize the reader. It is not to educate, indoctrinate, prescribe, provide information, model understanding (though it may do all of these). It is not to yield pleasure that might arise from the thrill of compound sentences whose diverse lines of thought go now in one direction, now in another, or from the marvel of a novel’s architectonic structure. Nor is the imperative of value to distract from what lies outside a novel’s covers, though diversion may be one consequence. As with negative theology in which one may only say what God is not, or Dostoevsky’s insistence that “religious essence” can only be defined as “*ne to*,” or “not that,”²³ so novelistic value, which might grip a reader (is it in an ethical vise?), eludes any attempt to pin it down categorically, or to any category. At the same time, one could move from an enumeration of what value is not to what it might be – or where its necessity might inhere – for a specific author or novel. James makes it easy for us when he declares an *interest* to be a *value*. “Really,” he wrote, “at bottom” it is “only difficulty that interests me.”²⁴ To unearth the necessity of novelistic value from the banalities in which it is buried is – at least for James – to touch on an optics in which the difficulty of a complex problem or character is not eroded or degraded by its representation. In *The Bostonians*, value shows its face briefly in the three passages touched on above, where vision – James’s vision of his characters (and, only subordinately, their visions of themselves and each other) – is almost sufficient ballast, but *not* sufficient ballast, to countermand the diatribe against nearly everything in the reader’s line of sight. For those passages that transiently locate value – in the peace of musical harmony; in the names of the Union dead memorialized by stone; in Olive’s backward look – are also outside the fray: that is, outside the coordinates of the social conflict around which the novel bounds

its subject. Of course, the insufficiency of value is the point, and maybe even the achievement, of James's parsimonious treatment of value: in the passages discussed above he offers us a glimpse of value, then snatches it away, insisting on its scarcity in the world the novel reflects. As for ballast: readers have different needs. For some, there's an ethical problem experienced as an omission. They find something left out or scanted in *The Bostonians*, while others read for pure enjoyment of the satire and find it good enough value. The reader who enjoys can become the reader who also craves more than enjoyment, but I don't suppose the reversal occurs in the other direction, for that would mean a subtraction.

A reader of *The Bostonians* might conclude, as does Verena – the character least equipped to render a sound judgment – that, listening to Ransom, she “had never encountered . . . so much bitterness as she saw lurking beneath his exaggerations, his misrepresentations,” his “disparagement” and his “sarcasm” (B 283), an analysis whose depreciation also applies to Olive's, to Mrs. Farrinder's, to the Tarants', to Mathias Pardon's, to Mrs. Luna's, and certainly to the narrator's disfiguration of a reality that Olive and Ransom each briefly discern as such before their eyes cloud over. The vision of the cherished Miss Birdseye is not exempt from James's blackening, along with her politics and her motives. Notwithstanding her “eighty years of innocence and activism,” she is said to wear “undiscriminating spectacles” (B 158). In an unrelated passage, her “large, benignant face” is “caged in by the glass of her spectacles, which seemed to cover it almost equally everywhere” (B 183 – 184). Does the expanse of glass provide a sharp as well as a sweeping view of things as they are, or does it contort her view? Still elsewhere, Ransom injuriously wonders whether Birdseye sees through “open” eyes or whether her “closed, tired, dazzled eyes,” phrases sealed tight, despite the commas, by dental liaisons at d/t/d/d, only see the world through “imagination aiding” (B 310). This fundamental contrast of pellucid vision and vision stupefied by enchantment (the latter intensified by the adjective “dazzled”) echoes as a transient half-rhyme against Olive's splendid (but imaginary) vision of a future with Verena. When at the novel's end Birdseye is given the task of fathoming what turns out to be Ransom's proposal to Verena, she only “dimly made out” what transpires between the figures viewed “at” a “distance” (B 317). Is everything Birdseye sees similarly indecipherable, including the causes that inspire her activism? Birdseye may be heroic, but James's successive descriptions of her flawed or bedazzled vision insist that she too is someone who can't see straight. The bleak world of *The Bostonians* unwittingly calls up these reflections about novelistic value that rise up in its absence.

In hearing the expressions *valuable jewelry* and *valuable life*, we immediately understand the difference between these two points on the scale of value: for one pertains to appurtenances while the other evokes the vital purposes that

enrich a life from within, rather than lending it external value in possessiveness or display. Yet both usages of the term *valuable* are relative, since there is no agreement about what counts as a valuable life, and perhaps also for what counts as valuable jewelry. In his 1929 *Lecture on Ethics*, Wittgenstein wrote that when we try to express “absolute value” – in ethical and religious language – we are constantly using “a simile” or an “allegory,”²⁵ in distinction to relative values which can be expressed in propositions to which *true* or *false* could be applied. He writes: “If I want to fix my mind on what I mean by absolute or ethical value . . . the best way of describing it is to say when I have [the ‘experience’ of it] *I wonder at the existence of the world*. And I am then inclined to use such phrases as ‘how extraordinary that anything should exist’ or ‘how extraordinary that the world should exist.’”²⁶ He adds: “the experience of wondering at the existence of the world . . . is the experience of seeing the world as a miracle.”²⁷ Manifestations of novelistic value are a far cry from this epiphanic expression in which the “existence of the world” is viewed as “supernatural,” a “miracle,”²⁸ but nor can novelistic value be only monetary (in the sense in which jewelry that can be pawned and then redeemed is valuable) or momentary without cost to the reader.

The Bostonians raises a question of how much value is too little or too fleeting; of whether value isolated to individual perception but restricted from the social arena where the novel defines its conflict demonstrates a scarcity that is a dearth or a singularity whose exception should strike us as a marvel – that any plenitude should flash before us when its glimmer is all but extinguished in *The Bostonians* as a whole. Yet the privileging of sight in those evanescent moments when Olive and Ransom see authentically rather than deceptively is nonclimactic, and calls up by contrast the paucity (or is it the absence?) of that laudatory sense of the visionary as transcendent, which simply does not register here except fugitively.

At the time James wrote *The Bostonians*, the achievements of women activists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Julia Ward Howe were palpable, but James was not interested in depicting a political movement that had substance. Rather, the savage comedy of the novel arises from his skewering of fringe types: failed utopians, quacks, and media celebrities. The same could be said about James’s marginal representation of the Civil War. Though at Harvard’s Memorial Hall Ransom becomes a “generous foeman” who feels “respect” and “tenderness” for “the sons of triumph” as well as “the victims of defeat” (B 210), nothing in the novel disputes Olive’s assessment of Ransom’s bitterness at the Union victory – at losing not only his “home,” but also his “slaves” (B 13). Thus, the representations of the Civil War, as well as of the suffrage movement – and of course of those warring ambassadors of romantic love and principle respectively caricatured in Ransom and Olive – are travesties of fact as well as of value, with insubstantial reference to the very “reality” James extols in the moments of perspicacity he grants to his characters and then withdraws. *The Bostonians* dramatizes

(almost it seems unconsciously) the actual schism in the culture between the erotic pleasures of the body and the ethical satisfactions of the mind committed to the rigors of social justice. The novel's aggressive antagonism between these two compensations is perhaps the foundation of its satire, as though there were no hard question about how such clashing desires might be related or even consolidated. Since in James's representation of that rift neither source of attainment is shown to have value, there is nothing to integrate or even to ponder.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Henry James, preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, Second Norton Critical Edition, ed. Robert D. Bamberg (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 6. All quotations of the novel are from this edition, hereafter abbreviated *P* and cited parenthetically in the text.

James's reflections on value are articulated in the prefaces to the works that James revised and republished in the twenty-four volumes of the New York Edition (1904–1907). In David McWhirter's description, in the New York Edition: "James entered into a massive work of self-monumentalization: revising the texts extensively; writing prefaces that have become classic texts on prose aesthetics and the novelist's art; and omitting many works, among them some major novels"; see David McWhirter, ed., *Henry James's New York Edition: The Construction of Authorship* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), text on book flap. The prefaces often reveal James to be conceptually rewriting his novels as much as describing how it came to him to write the novels. I elaborate in Sharon Cameron, *Thinking in Henry James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 32–82.

² Henry James, preface to *The Wings of the Dove*, Second Norton Critical Edition, ed. J. Donald Crowley and Richard A. Hocks (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 12.

³ Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers, eds., *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 20. The entry is a transcription of part of a letter written to J. R. Osgood, James's publisher for *The Bostonians*.

⁴ Henry James, *The Bostonians* (London: Penguin, 1966, 1969), 17. All references are to this edition, abbreviated *B* and cited parenthetically in the text.

⁵ The phrase occurs in a letter from Henry James to Edmund Gosse, August 25, 1915; *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, ed. Philip Horne (New York: Penguin Classics, 1999), 559.

- ⁶ “The Figure in the Carpet” is a short story published by James in 1886 in which a critic sets out to discover the meaning of an author’s writing, the secret of which he likens to “a complex figure in a Persian carpet” that, discerned, will be the key to the author’s literary work. Henry James, *Complete Stories, 1892 – 1898* (New York: Library of America, 1996), 586.
- ⁷ Henry James, “The Speech of American Women,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, 1906, reprinted in Pierre A. Walker, ed., *Henry James on Culture: Collected Essays on Politics and the American Social Scene* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 62. See also James’s “The Question of Our Speech,” an address at Bryn Mawr, June 8, 1905, reprinted in the same volume.
- ⁸ In Philip Fisher’s analysis, the novel is “a response to the historical rise of ‘conspicuous’” performances during the 1880s when too much “high visibility,” along with “a magnification of personality,” leads to a “society...of self-display”; hence in James’s “romance of fame,” Verena becomes a star. See Philip Fisher, “Appearing and Disappearing in Public: Social Space in Late Nineteenth Century Literature and Culture,” in *Reconstructing American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 155, 163, 174, 178.

Earlier strands of classic twentieth-century criticism on *The Bostonians* align James with the political ideology of his characters. Thus Lionel Trilling’s claim that James found Ransom’s position traditional and therefore natural, while Olive, a radical, is unnatural; Lionel Trilling, “The Bostonians,” in *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism* (New York: Viking Press, 1955). Judith Fetterley oppositely argues James means us to see Olive, the stronger character, as a victim of an oppressive patriarchal system that is social, not natural; Judith Fetterley, “*The Bostonians*: Henry James’s Eternal Triangle,” in *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978). Irving Howe demonstrates that the novel offers *competing* ideas of the natural; Irving Howe, Introduction to *The Bostonians*, Modern Library College Edition (New York: The Modern Library, 1956). David Van Leer concludes that nothing in the novel is normal or natural, not Boston marriages and not “the compulsory heterosexuality” that is its ostensible antithesis; David Van Leer, “A World of Female Friendship: *The Bostonians*,” in *Henry James and Homoerotic Desire*, ed. John Bradley (New York: Macmillan, 1999), 107. Alfred Habegger historicizes the idea of the natural and the normal via James’s response to John Stuart Mill’s profemale *The Subjection of Women* and Horace Bushnell’s antifeminist *Women’s Suffrage: The Reform Against Nature*, and also via a biographical incident in which an intimate detail (Henry James Sr.’s “apparent admission that his wife had not afforded him full sexual satisfaction”) appeared in 1874 in “the most outrageous American scandal-sheet of the nineteenth century.” Habegger writes: “From this point on, the novelist would repeatedly associate social reform with the violation of family life”; Alfred Habegger, “Henry James’s *Bostonians* and the Fiction of Democratic Vulgarities,” in *Henry James and the Culture of Publicity*, ed. Richard Salmon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 111, 115.

A second strand of criticism concerns James’s representation of the contemporary derangement of private and public life, a topic introduced by Howe in 1956, extended by Fisher (see above), and recently taken up by John Sampson’s focus on the situation of women in James’s novel as “related not simply to sexual/gender difference but to the separate functions of men and women in the production of urban space”; see John Sampson, “The Re-formation of Urban Space in *The Bostonians*,” *The Henry James Review* 37 (2) (2016): 163. Adelais Mills avers that *The Bostonians* records what Charles Taylor called an “emergent ‘politics of difference’” in “individuals’ deepening allegiance to sectarian

identities – northern, southern, male, female, radical, reactionary” as these threatened “the imagined community of nationhood”; Adalais Mills, “‘Absolutely Irresponsible’: Representations of Life in *The Bostonians*,” *Henry James Review* 40 (2) (2019): 97.

Value as a topic does not figure in these discussions.

⁹ James, “The Speech of American Women,” 80.

¹⁰ In a brief diagnostic analysis of *The Bostonians*, Eve Sedgwick maintains that James’s “vindicative” assaults against his characters might be fueled by his refusal to ask how “the ventriloquistic, half-contemptuous, hot desire of Olive Chancellor for a girl like Verena Tarrant” is parallel to “the ventriloquistic, half-contemptuous, hot desire of Henry James for a boy like Basil Ransom.” To the extent that neither “same sex desire” nor a “cross-gender liminality” is acknowledged, the “authorial surface of James’s writing” is “rupture[d]” and what “shoves through” is not the representation of a male erotic but “less daringly of a woman-hating and feminist-baiting violence of panic”; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Willa Cather and Others,” in *Tendencies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 172–173. Implicitly, were James able to identify how forms of desire can become alibis for each other, and can move in more directions than one, including affirmation and negation, what I have called a “hole” would become a totality or an ambiguous, fragmented whole. But this utopic repair of the hole (or of what Sedgwick calls a “rupture”) is not James’s vision.

Emerson, not James, celebrated such inclusiveness when he wrote: “Hermaphrodite is then the symbol of the finished soul”; cited in George Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, 1995), 123.

¹¹ An early critic missed the point of free indirect style when he described James’s “habit of reporting the mind as well as the conversation of his baser characters” as “a sort of third personal evasion of elegance”; Horace E. Scudder, *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1886, reprinted in *Henry James: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 170. There is a problem of clarity, not elegance, with free indirect style, which relays the perceptions of all the characters—not just the “base” ones. In one helpful diagnosis, the narrator is “neither wholly internal nor wholly exterior to the fiction” but is “caught in an interstice between diegesis and action,” where it is impossible to “integrate . . . perspectives in the name of a shared reality”; Mills, “‘Absolutely Irresponsible.’”

¹² Jonathan Edwards’s expression in *The Nature of True Virtue* for “consent and good will to Being in general,” the only foundation of “true virtue”; *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 540–541.

¹³ Georg Lukács would call this redemption through violence, in which a character achieves an objectivity ordinarily reserved for narrative as a whole, “metaformal grace,” a counterweight to satire; Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1971), 102. Garrett Stewart’s *Novel Violence: A Narratology of Victorian Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) examines the ways in which such brutal moments punctuate the stories that give them context.

¹⁴ Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (London: Penguin Classics, 1985 [1904]), 327.

¹⁵ Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove*, Norton Critical Edition, ed. J. Donald Crowley and Richard A. Hocks (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 331.

¹⁶ James, *A Life in Letters*, 532.

¹⁷ *The Springfield Republican* [Massachusetts], April 18, 1886; *The London Daily News*, February 1886; *The Boston Evening Traveler*, March 19, 1886; *Contemporary Review* [England], August 1886; and *The Independent*, April 22, 1886, are reprinted in Hayes, *Henry James: The Contemporary Reviews*, 166, 153, 157, 171, and 167, respectively.

¹⁸ *The Springfield Republican*, April 18, 1886.

And what a transmutation. William and Henry James Sr. were both fascinated with the spiritualism that James made seedy in the squalid Dr. Tarrant. The lifelong companionship of Alice James, Henry's sister, with Katherine Peabody (and that Olive desired with Verena) is mocked as risible in *The Bostonians*. The dotty Miss Birdseye, alternately praised and pilloried, was thought to be modeled after Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, the nineteenth-century reformer. When *The Bostonians* was issued in volume form, the New York agent of Macmillan, its publisher, noted: "I never knew a book being more thoroughly condemned." See Michael Anesko, "*Friction with the Market*": *Henry James and the Profession of Authorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 99.

As for the novel's theme—the rights of women—one critic denounced the "triviality of the object analyzed"; another argued that "the real nobility of the movement for equalizing women with men in the rights of a government by the people is utterly scorned" by James; and a third, that *The Bostonians*' "aim is to justify the life of women in the sphere most natural to it—the sphere of home and family influence, and to show how much is lost alike to her and to the world whenever she makes any attempt to pass beyond it" (*British Quarterly Review*, April 1886, in Hayes, *Henry James: The Contemporary Reviews*, 160)—three opposing takeaways. See *Chicago Tribune*, April 3, 1886; *Springfield Republican*, April 18, 1886; and *British Quarterly Review*, April 1886.

¹⁹ Scudder, *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1886.

²⁰ Henry James, *The Ambassadors*, Second Norton Critical Edition, ed. S. P. Rosenbaum (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 4.

²¹ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Nathaniel Hawthorne's Tales*, Norton Critical Edition, ed. James McIntosh (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), 241.

²² James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans* (Ware, United Kingdom: Wordsworth Classics, 1992), 38.

²³ See Nancy Ruttenberg's analysis of Dostoevsky's "*ne to*" to indicate "the inadequate expression or enactment of an as-yet inarticulable . . . belief, idea, or ideal." Nancy Ruttenberg, *Dostoyevsky's Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), 18.

²⁴ This is the whole passage from James's letter of December 31, 1908, to William Dean Howells: "I find our art, all the while, more difficult of practice, and want, with that, to do it in a more and more difficult way; it being really, at bottom, only difficulty that interests me." Percy Lubbock, ed., *The Letters of Henry James*, vol. 2 (New York: Scribners, 1920), 528.

²⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Lecture on Ethics," in *Philosophical Occasions 1912 – 1951*, ed. James Carl Klage and Alfred Nordmann (Cambridge, Mass.: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 42.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 40, 43.

“A Woman Is a Sometime Thing”: (Re)Covering Black Womanhood in *Porgy and Bess*

Daphne A. Brooks

This essay reexamines the legendary opera-musical Porgy and Bess by first tending to its origins in the dual phenomenon of early 1920s racialized sonic experimentation and the Southern literary conceits of DuBose Heyward, author of the 1925 novel Porgy on which the theater production was based. It traces the ways in which Heyward and George Gershwin’s undertheorized fascination with “the vice of Black womanhood” effectively shaped the form and the content of a work often referred to as “America’s most famous opera,” and it ultimately considers the ways that Black women artists navigated, complicated, and transformed the charged aesthetics of a Porgy and Bess. Their performance labor ultimately subverts an archetype whose novel roots threatened to circumscribe their representational and artistic possibility.

We are being teased, abruptly invited to linger for no more than a moment in the billowy flutter of a flirtatious trill. So we begin in the register of both seduction and weariness, a clarinet glissando synonymous with the languor and steaminess of precoital mating calls, of postcoital exhaustion and other bedroom rituals moves swiftly out the window of cramped tenement housing into the bustling streets below where European immigrant hustle meets the grandeur of metropolitan possibility framed by “colorline” encounters, charged interracial socialites, and the dizzying opportunity to make art and commerce out of this noisy urban “experiment.”

Perhaps Leonard Bernstein’s 1959 version of George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* is closer to being “a sonic manifestation of the American Dream”¹ than the original performance was, but Gershwin famously participated in this kind of mythmaking from the start: that is, from 1924, when orchestra leader Paul Whiteman premiered the work at New York City’s Aeolian Hall. It’s the rhythms of a locomotive, Gershwin would insist years later, that shook something loose in him while traveling from New York to Boston, sparking in him a vision of “a definite plot of the piece... a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America,” a symphonic rendering of a “vast melting pot, our unduplicated national pep, or of blues, our metropolitan madness.”²

Only mildly implicit here is the suggestion that the shtetl and the ghetto, so to speak, would have to mix it up in this piece in order to capture this “modern” moment like lightning in a bottle. Son of Russian immigrants George Gershwin’s remarks attest to this, just as early jazz history’s well-known tales of racial proximities, cultural expropriations, “black skin and white noise” forever remind us.

But it’s that opening phrase, that glissando, a citational gesture that swiftly threads together New Orleans woodwind lyricism with klezmer ascent, that holds my attention, fascinates and frustrates me, and is the key to understanding something deeply submerged yet central to what would become the most influential, most well-known, most lasting, lauded, beloved yet persistently controversial, and also loathed work in the Gershwin archive, the 1935 “folk opera” *Porgy and Bess*.

That 1924 Gershwin sound is, to me, *everything*: the synecdoche to the secret history of Black womanhood and sonic modernity that yet still receives scant mention in Gershwin studies and in studies of cultural modernisms more broadly. That sound is to me the place where literary critic Michael North’s classic claims about white “linguistic rebellion through racial ventriloquism” meet up with African American literature scholar Farah Griffin’s equally landmark observations about the “spectacle” of sonic Black women as the hinge by which a nation comes to define itself as resuscitated and renewed, as resilient, shiny, and new. It is the sound of a racially and gendered idea about jazz, about America’s “modern” music that white male composers, conductors, and critics would cook up together in tux and tails, deep in the heart of the 1920s concert hall, a place where they could sublimate all sorts of complicated impulses, ideologies, and desires in putative pursuit of their own self-aggrandizing innovation.³

This musical moment is where everything jumps off, where the “dialect of modernism” (pace North) diverges to such an extent that we are hearing neither pure mimicry nor excessively aestheticized, Steinish racial masquerade but rather a staged encounter between the composer and the racially feminized personification of this music whose name bears the markings of sexual derisiveness (“jis” becomes “jazz”) conjured up by outsiders.⁴ This is the launching pad where the women of the so-called slum, the sisters who cut an “errant path” through the city as Saidiya Hartman has so beautifully shown us, those sisters who remain “abstracted dark forms” in the archive that is also the white cultural imaginary, take shape as sonic allegory and come aurally into view in this orchestrated *Rhapsody*.⁵ This is the moment, then, when George Gershwin and Charleston, South Carolina, novelist DuBose Heyward would begin to call out to each other through and across the figure of Black womanhood in their work for the next eleven years.

What’s new to some ears strikes my own as something more nagging, a musical figuration of Blackness and womanhood subtending this sonic rapture, a kind of wretched enchantment inasmuch as it signals the sound of 1920s white

musicians’ racialized and gendered approaches to jazz as a self-indulgent exercise in “conquest and discipline.” Think of esteemed music critic Walter Damosch’s infamous line in the program notes to Gershwin’s 1925 *Concerto in F* (which I thank my friend and colleague Brian Kane for sharing with me) that traffics in white patriarchal clichés, the intent to “make a lady out of jazz.” Or consider critic Deems Taylor’s review in the immediate wake of the *Rhapsody* concert in which he mused that “Mr. Gershwin will bear watching . . . he may yet bring jazz out of the kitchen.”⁶

Yet the “kitchen,” as we know, “was the field and the brothel,” thus making it ever more clear that if jazz “is a woman,” as many a musician (from Whiteman to Ellington) would suggest across the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, if jazz was either a “hot thing” to be “tamed” or provincial servant awaiting her Pygmalion-esque calibration and transformation, if this was the undercurrent of “modern music” ideologies framing the conditions of Gershwin’s rise among the ranks of popular composers, then it stands to reason that one could draw a parallel between what he was up to in his “rapturous” transduction of ideas about gendered Blackness with that of DuBose Heyward’s oft-overlooked yet egregiously disturbing figuration of Black womanhood in his 1925 novel *Porgy*.⁷

Though I begin with these imaginings conjured up by this cadre of white male artists, the renderings of and references to Black women and Black female iconicity often with, early on, nary a Black woman thinker of any sort in the room with them, the larger context of my essay would have to include the recentring of the avant-garde practices of Black women culture workers – vocalists, musicians, actors, playwrights, and arrangers – who not only managed but who also, for some eighty-five years now, actively adapted, translated, and rearranged an archive of concatenate cultural works: *Porgy* the novel (written by Heyward in 1925), *Porgy* the play (cowritten by Heyward and his dramatist wife Dorothy in 1927), and the opera that Gershwin, lyricist brother Ira, as well as Heyward would bring to the Broadway stage in 1935.⁸

What other work comes to mind that presents a series of affective and aesthetic claims about Black womanhood and manifests itself across literary, dramatic, and musical forms and has so persistently captured the cultural imagination on so vast a global scale and for such a long-lasting period of time? Perhaps there will come a day when Toni Morrison’s prodigious meditation on the afterlives of slavery will rightly assume this title.⁹ But for now, we are left with *Porgy and Bess*, an opera that once was a novel, and continues to spin out a mythical novel of its own.

Oh yes, *Porgy and Bess*. To be sure, Black folks have been wrestling with the musical-theater-meets-operatic whale since the show’s 1935 debut: celebrating it as J. Rosamond Johnson (James Weldon Johnson’s bro) did when he called it “a monument to the cultural aims of the Negro” (he also had a small part in the show); chastising it as Duke Ellington did when he infamously declared that “The

times are here to debunk Gershwin's lampblack Negroisms"; or trying to reject it altogether, as did Sidney Poitier unsuccessfully when the role of Porgy was offered to him in the ill-fated 1959 Otto Preminger train wreck film adaptation.¹⁰

As music scholar Gwynne Kuhner Brown points out in her fine work on the collaborative history of *Porgy and Bess*, this is a show that African American performers "have . . . engaged . . . from the beginning: helping to create and shape it in a variety of ways, taking roles or refusing them, and deepening" our "understanding of its various meanings through analysis, criticism and commentary."¹¹ The grooves in the archival record reveal the extent to which Black actors and vocalists return again and again to *Porgy and Bess*: a grandly ambitious symphonic experiment in both racial mimicry as well as interracial encounter, a dual dynamic that begs for active forms of critical listening.

From its earliest performances when the libretto was riddled with the "N-bomb" to its most recent and "controversial" 2012 revival as musical theater on the Great White Way, *Porgy and Bess* is a show that continues to both trouble and encapsulate American culture's canonical tales of racial aesthetic power and appropriation to such an extent that post-civil rights era Black casts and, much more often than not, their white directors have had to negotiate its terms like a theatrical SALT treaty.¹²

Which begs the question: why bother? And more to the point, what specifically does this text offer Black women performers who played the legendary role of Bess and transformed that character's sonic repertoire into an alluring, abstract riddle, a sociopolitical, cultural, historical, and aesthetic problem as well as an opportunity? If, as opera critic Burton Fisher argues, the "composer of opera or 'music drama,' becomes the 'dramatist' and 'narrator' of the story through the music," then it should be ever so clear that these women were counter-composers as well as arrangers, artists who have remained committed to "disobeying" the constrictions of the "script" handed to them, yet nearly never in theater histories of *Porgy and Bess* referred to as such.¹³

As adapters, translators, and arrangers in their own right, these were artists who interpolated their own interpretative vision into a work that asked both everything and nothing of them aesthetically, that required them to dwell in the violence of plantation time while drawing on the virtuosity and risk of a sonic cosmopolite. They were artists who employed a whole range of performance strategies that subtly and yet consistently turned the *Porgy and Bess* archive of content and multigeneric forms into their own objects of inquiry, thus enabling them, in turn, to produce their own rhapsodic proclamations of the "new" and to, likewise, announce a patent refusal to sustain the "regime of brutality so normalized" within the Gershwin and Heyward repertoire. It was their sound and aesthetic fury (like that which Dilsey most surely suppressed) that shook the archive that two men were building brick-by-brick in that pivotal year of 1924.¹⁴

She first appears as detritus in the literary landscape that DuBose Heyward dreamed up for her as he wrote his debut novel in a feverish rush, deep into that summer of 1924.

Through the early night a woman had lain in the dust against the outer wall of Maria’s cook-shop. She was extremely drunk and unpleasant to look upon. Exactly when she had dropped or been dropped there, no one knew. Porgy had not seen her when he had driven in [in his “goat cart”] at sunset. But he had heard some talk of her among those who had entered later. One of the men had come in laughing.

“I seen Crown’s Bess outside,” he said. “Must be she come aroun’ tuh look fur um . . .”¹⁵

Casual racial misogyny is endogenous to Heyward’s homegrown literary aesthetics. It shapes his strategy of characterization, operates as the engine of his plot, and fuels the suspense framing his narrative involving a junky “strumpet” (as some critics would refer to her) and the ill-fated love triangle in which she finds herself, bound on the one hand to Crown, a “brute” “monstrosity” of menacing Black manhood, and on the other to the so-called “crippled beggar” Porgy. The latter was a figure for whom Heyward and his wife Dorothy took equal pride in citing as having been inspired by disabled local African American Charleston resident Samuel Smalls (whose family would for decades seek from the Heywards – unsuccessfully, I might add – financial compensation for the use and distortion of Smalls’s image). As is the case in the stage versions that would follow, the fleeting rehabilitation of Bess as a result of her intimacy with Porgy, the moral economy of the grace he bestows on her shifts the affective mood of the text from graphic sociological tragedy to dime-story romance. The woman who was once “gaunt” is “rounded out, “bringing back a look of youthful comeliness . . . her face,” we are told, “was losing its hunted expression.”¹⁶

Heyward, the grandson of Charleston planter-class parents whose familial vicissitudes hit rock-bottom following the “War of Northern Aggression,” would claim throughout the course of his literary career that the financial precarity framing his postbellum childhood combined with his own community’s regional proximity to vibrant and populous Black life in Charleston – Gullah life that he and his mother Janie had watched with intent and great interest – thereby instilled in him a supposed local color authority and credibility to invent and narrativize the fictional “Catfish Row,” the setting for *Porgy and Bess* and a place that he and the city’s increasingly booming tourist industry would unite in claiming was based on an actual neighborhood: what became known as “Cabbage Row.”¹⁷

As historian Ellen Noonan makes clear in her marvelous and exhaustive study of Charleston, *Porgy and Bess*, and long civil rights history, by 1922, the location that was Cabbage Row “had been ‘vacant for some time,’” due, in part, “to a petition,” she speculates, that had been “brought to the Charleston City Council” that year “by indignant neighbors . . . who demanded the immediate eviction of all of the Af-

rican American tenants there.” White Charlestonians claimed that Cabbage Row’s inhabitants were, according to Noonan’s account of the petition, “involved in a range of illegal and unsavory activities, ‘including the prostitution of black women to white sailors and civilians, knife and gun fights, deplorable sanitary conditions, and the continual usage of ‘the most vile, filthy, and offensive language.’”¹⁸

It was a site that would become the grist for Heyward’s runaway literary ambitions first nurtured in the Poetry Society of South Carolina, which he cofounded in 1920 with Ohio transplant and obsessive low-country Gullah culture amateur ethnographer John Bennett. That group staked its identity on contrasting itself with other all-white literary enclaves in the South who were galvanized to respond to H. L. Mencken’s infamous 1917 throw-the-gauntlet-down excoriation of Southern artistic life (in his essay “The Sahara of the Bozart”), and who “embraced a nostalgia for a time long gone,” as Heyward biographer James Hutchisson points out in his study of the author.¹⁹

Unlike, for instance, the New Orleanian group whose members included so-called adopted Creoles like “Faulkner, Dos Passos, William Spratling, and Roark Bradford,” who wholly embraced the postwar modernist experimental winds blowing their way as the 1920s unfolded, the Charlestonians pushed back on Mencken’s criticisms of the South as “a vast plain of [aesthetic] mediocrity, stupidity, and lethargy.”²⁰ They doubled-down on an inward-looking preservation of local lore as well as what was in their minds an emphasis on the “artistic mission” of “representing southern black life,” as Hutchisson refers to it. Many of the group’s members were white women, painters and poets who gravitated to Gullah tales and portraiture that they cultivated and shared among themselves. Such rituals would have been very much familiar to Heyward, who grew up admiring the started-from-the-bottom-now-we’re-here successes of mother Janie DuBose Heyward, a widow who kept the household afloat by turning herself into an in-demand, local, “darky recitalist” and author of several blackface song and sketchbooks in the 1910s and 1920s.²¹

Note that Junior Heyward shared with his mother and the majority of his fellow white Charleston brethren a deep and abiding resentment toward Black social and cultural autonomy and self-making masked as a familiar desire for “simpler times.” Like his Mama, as Noonan reveals, “Heyward’s authentic South was unhurried, earthy, and perfectly symbolized by its resilient and forgiving black workers. His poetic antimodernism,” she argues, “had a nonfiction counterpart in the [1930] manifesto, *I’ll Take My Stand*, a collection of essays” featuring Southern writers “who dubbed themselves ‘Agrarians’” and “argued that industrial development fostered a culture of consumption that undermined small-town, rural southern values.”²²

Somewhere in that place between a celebrity minstrel mom and the busy literary conceits of a group dually invested in an unreconstructed South and the pres-

ervation of their own parasitic ideas about local “blackness,” Heyward was developing a style of writing that trafficked in the white writer racial dialect craze that would flourish particularly between 1922 and 1927 on the transatlantic scene. And while his brand of literary primitivism does not garner substantial attention from critics the way say a Stein, a Pound, or an Eliot does – for any number of reasons but largely as a result of what Heyward’s poetry and prose lack in terms of originality and invention (called “florid” by more than a few scholars, DuBose Heyward’s poems and fiction were cringe-worthy for reasons that went well beyond its racial macro- and microaggressions) – my interest in his work lies at the level of what we might think of as his adaptive technique and aesthetic translation skills that seem to run parallel to Gershwin’s creative energies and impulses during what would turn out to be the same period of time.²³

As Heyward would gradually distance himself from Bennett’s leadership in the Poetry Society, as he would look to seize upon “the prospect of artistic liberation and a plumbing of his social conscience with the unfettered spirit he had glimpsed among the Gullahs,” as he would “grow,” as he put it, “to see the primitive Negro as neither a professional comedian, nor an object for sentimental charity, but a racially self-conscious human being, living out his destiny beside us, and guided by a code,” he set to writing a novel that could, in part, follow the path set by his mother, a racial ventriloquist and racial fetishist who gravitated to mimicking and reifying the sounds of “black womanhood,” first in print and then perhaps on record (there is indication in the archive that she may have attempted to take her act to the Victor label).²⁴ From Janie Heyward’s nameless Sea Island seafood peddlers (to which she composed odes in her pamphlets), then, to the mythical drug addicted heroine at the center of her son’s lifelong lucrative artistic passion project, the figure of “black womanhood” emerges as adaptive grist, the ghost in the machine of what would ultimately become a particular white modernist turn toward innovations in sound and performance.²⁵

And crucial to that turn, the one that Heyward and the Gershwins would eventually make once they set to working together in earnest on *Porgy and Bess* in the fall of 1933, was a fascination with aestheticizing their perceived notions of the “vice of Black womanhood”: the thief, the sex worker, the jook joint brawler, the women who turned to survival by way of an “informal economy” (as Cynthia Blair and LaShawn Harris and other wonderful Black feminist historians have put it) and who, in turn, were subject to the “juridical production of black female deviance [which] meant that,” as Sarah Haley has powerfully shown, Black “women were arrested more often, and were forced to endure protracted periods of captivity” in the early twentieth-century makings of the carceral state.²⁶

The figure of the “too-too” girls, as Griffin has called them, women of excess who elude and reject social mores and who were (and are) acutely vulnerable to surveillance and subjection, the women of which there is both too much and too

little of them in the archive, as Hartman and others have shown, was the figure on which to capitalize, to mine the depths of old school naturalist tragedy crossed with the thrill of syncopation and the sheer immensity of Black sound's cultural heterogeneity, the constitutive power of a sound that encapsulates the spectrum of modern musicking – from spirituals to the blues, from ragtime to jazz.

It makes sense, then, to read Heyward's circling around the mythical vice of Black womanhood in his first iteration of *Porgy* as a novel as a continuity with his mother's blackface womanhood and yet also a pivotal departure from her plantation hangover scenarios. Here he continuously lingers on the idea of Bess's criminal precarity.

In this first narrative versioning of her, she is the woman who will go from "dust" to dawn in the arms of a lover living his own fragile existence in the imagined Gullah neighborhood of "Catfish Row," only to "fall" again: into jail for a time sharing "a steel cage" with other women that "resembled a large dog-pound," where a "peculiarly offensive moisture clung to the ceiling." Here the narrator's pontificating is especially pronounced when stating that "when all was said and done, what must one expect if one added to the handicap of a dark skin the indiscretion of swallowing cocaine and indulging in a crap game."²⁷

Though carceral Bess makes no further appearances in either the play or the opera that would follow, we might consider the ways that Heyward is here setting in motion a translation of the performative colonization of Black womanhood from one medium (white supremacist "dialect recital" live act) he'd grown up observing to another (a literary rendering of a white supremacist racial romance-tragedy as his first novel). Just as well, he was likely looking askance at someone like the racially liminal Jean Toomer, who, extraordinary as it may seem, had been a "non-resident member" of the Poetry Society of South Carolina in 1923 on the eve of the publication of his masterpiece *Cane*.²⁸ The subsequent "exposure" of Toomer's Blackness led to the threat of his expulsion from the group (a decision against which Heyward apparently vehemently fought) but the more fascinating point to probe is the extent to which *Cane* would have served as a rich model for Heyward to mine the figure of the melancholic Black woman: the "Karinthas" and "Ferns," the ones whose "skin like dusk" you can barely see ("oh can't you see it") as the "sun goes down," the ones whose "eyes said to [men]" that "they were easy."²⁹

Heyward, like his mother, like Gershwin, turns to Black womanhood and turns, in a moment of creative emergence in his career, to literary Black womanhood, illicit and socially dangerous, just as Toomer was breaking through, and just as Bessie (Smith) was breaking out with her first single from Columbia Records. Such a cultural context, it would seem, has much to do with the "Bess" anatomy, as she would continue to transition from literary archetype to operatic and musical theater Black dame noire, doomed to utter tragedy. Caught in the crucible between Black rural angst and urban blight, she is a figure who absorbs and man-

ifests Heyward’s multiple fantasies and aspirations, his proximity to and ersatz renderings of Toomer’s oblique visions of languid and aching Black women in the early 1920s South and the sensual declarations of empress musicians finally getting their sounds down on and for the record for the first time.³⁰

The crude cartography of Heyward’s heroine is the summation of all these influences. Her character’s fatalistic plotting yields its own crescendos, a series of “falls” in the narrative that extend to the point of violation at the hands of Crown (scripted in the novel ambiguously somewhere between rape and utter sexual surrender), to her ultimate recidivism turning back to narcotics and finally fleeing for the big city with her pimp in the play and the opera. Most critics don’t even bother to comment on the fact that, in the novel, she is “carried away on de ribber boat” after having drunk herself into a stupor with “a dozen of de mens gang” at the close of the narrative.³¹ But make no mistake, while his narrative either sells her down the river or lets her loose into the “wild” of the city, DuBose Heyward needs his Bess. He needs this figure as something more than leitmotif, as in fact a catalyst for the kind of dramatic experimentation that would drive his shared operatic ambition with Gershwin.

If, as Linda Hutcheon makes clear in her germinal study of this subject, that “adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication,” Heyward and Gershwin set their sights on repeating an idea about Blackness and womanhood and vice in another form without purely replicating it.³²

On an evening in the early summer of 1926, George Gershwin set to reading a copy of Heyward’s bestselling novel, allegedly devouring it in one sitting, and swiftly soon after sending a letter off to the author expressing his desire to explore *Porgy* as a sonic venture, as an opera that he might use as a platform to essentially pursue the “pseudomorphosis,” as comparative literature scholar Brent Edwards has put it, at the heart of Heyward’s narrative. The “process of pseudomorphosis,” he adds, “can be a way to expand boundaries . . . discover new possibilities . . . transform a medium precisely by making it become other.”³³

In their joint adaptation of the text into a “folk opera,” which begins in earnest in 1933, the Gershwins along with Heyward deepened and showcased the angle of the “love triangle” between that aforementioned disabled “beggar,” the “drug addicted strumpet,” and the brute, lascivious lover Crown who struggles to seize back control of Bess as she falls for Porgy and as she contemplates a life free of that “happy dust” supplied by her pusher Sportin’ Life. All this set against the backdrop of the fictional world of rural Black squalor where tight-knit community nonetheless endures. Spectacular tragedy of operatic proportions ensues.

In October 1935, *Porgy and Bess* made its Broadway premiere, running for a “disappointing” (by musical theater rather than opera standards) “124 shows” before closing. But Gershwin’s first and last opera before succumbing to a brain

tumor at the age of thirty-eight was the fullest manifestation of that “jazz thing” he’d been chasing all along. *Porgy and Bess* was a production that bristled with formalistic complexity and cultural cross-pollination. Heyward and the Gershwins rode the dissonant edge of “modern” musicking hard in their work, offering their mannered interpretations of the “blues,” crossed with “spirituals,” crossed with “jazz,” “Tin Pan Alley,” and “classical . . . recitatives . . . canonic techniques . . . the leitmotif.”³⁴

And it was a project that was polarizing from the start. There were the critics, some of whom were unsettled by its “Negro folksiness” all mixed up with classical fugues and arias, others who were undone by vaudeville musical theater and Harlem cabaret-era jazz infusing itself into the “form” of the opera. And that’s just the white folks. Prominent African Americans’ reactions to the show range from the aforementioned Ellington’s write-off to that of sociologist Harold Cruse to Lorraine Hansberry, who was featured in a 1959 *Variety* article entitled “Lorraine Hansberry Deplores *Porgy*.” In 1959, as well, James Baldwin would greet the arrival of the film – which he describes as “lumber[ing]” into theaters all “grandiose, foolish, and heavy with the stale perfume of self-congratulation” – by declaring in trademark fashion that “what has always been missing from George Gershwin’s opera is what the situation of *Porgy and Bess* says about the White world.” Black suffering, “bizarre sexuality,” as *New Yorker* critic Hilton Als refers to it, sonic blackface hokum. This is the racial mountain that we’re asked to climb so often when attending a night at this particular opera.³⁵

Gershwin the composer and Heyward the librettist would work to adapt, to transpose the errant woman of “the slum” from the discursive realm, across the dramatic form cowritten by Heyward and wife Dorothy and a Broadway hit in 1927. They would work to “transcode” this Bess in their bid to “elevate” jazz to the realm of the classical, to adapt a racial and gender figuration and situate it within a fully “sung play” whose structure, as Fisher notes, “incorporates” the genre’s “inherent techniques . . . songs” and “arias, duets and ensembles, sung recitatives that provide action and link its songs . . . leitmotif themes that provide reminiscence, or identify ideas or characters.”³⁶

We might think of this aural, visual, and kinesthetic palimpsest of the 1925 source text as a kind of “remediation” (as Hutcheon would have it) of that *Rhapsody* note, an elongated Barthesian “stereophony of echoes, citations and references” in not just Heyward’s racial repertoire but Gershwin’s as well. The composer’s nearly wholly overlooked 1923 blackface operetta *Blue Monday*, which features a scorned “Black” murderess hell bent on short-circuiting another love triangle³⁷ demonstrates his own persistent interest in the figure of Black female vice as muse.³⁸

By the time Gershwin set out in search of the quasi-ethnographic material he collected on three trips to Charleston in 1933 and 1934, he was ready to push forward with what would seemingly become a kind of odd and unusual cross-poll-

nation of forms of racial mimicry that combined urban racial caricature with that of the mythical “folk.” During this period, Gershwin engaged in a series of expeditions – part Charleston research project, part promotional press junket – with Heyward to Folly Island in the two years leading up to the production’s premiere, heading to “a Negro meeting ... ‘shouting’” along with the worshippers, “catching the beat instinctively and later working it into his music,” according to a 1935 *New York Times* article.³⁹ Such anecdotes showcase the Gershwins’ and Heyward’s active participation in a long tradition of racialized transcription.

No doubt, Heyward and the Gershwins walked a complicated line in the business of notating and transcribing Black vernacular sound, oscillating between notational violence and a fascination with and fetishistic reverence for audible “Blackness” that seemingly resists incorporation (what we might think of as a kind of Derridean archival violence that shelters, preserves, and presents itself as revealing, even as it conceals, histories of subjugation).⁴⁰ Or perhaps even more aptly we might think of this transcriptive endeavor as endemic of the kind of “violence” that Baldwin theorizes as undergirding the fantasy of the *Porgy and Bess* opera itself.

This “cruellest” of fantasies, Baldwin observes, in which “Negroes seem to speak to [white America] of a better life, better in the sense of being more honest, more open, and more free: in a word, more sexual” and are therefore “hideously” “penalized ... for what the general guilty imagination makes of them.” “This fantasy,” he continues, “which is at the bottom of almost all violence against Negroes,” underwrites the entire Gershwin-Heyward project. Yet Gershwin scholars even today still liken this process to acts of “interpreting the music through the filter of his own tastes and experiences.” As does music historian Anna Harwell Celenza, who characterizes this kind of phenomenon as a translation of “feelings” and “impressions,” the kind of which are, in my opinion, as familiar as jumping Jim Crow.⁴¹

But there has to be more to say about this old school love and theft; we can and should put more pressure on examining the relationship between the idioms and aesthetics erupting out of this line of interpretation and the nameless subjects – out in the streets, up the dark hallways, perched on the fire escapes, or maybe even placed on Gershwin’s wall – who were interpolated into a project for which they most certainly never asked to be included. Celenza’s reading of one famous 1934 photograph of Gershwin “sitting at the piano supposedly working on *Porgy and Bess*” hinges on the contention that this “portrait of a young African American girl he painted in the early 1930s ... is not,” she argues, “a photograph depicting the girl as she actually is,” but of “how he envisions her. It shows *his* interpretation of who she is, painted in response to *his* encounter with her.”⁴²

And don’t we know it.

If anything, it is an image of an image that reminds us of the extent to which Gershwin, his brother Ira, and the Heywards – both mother and son – were at the

forefront of a battle over Black women artists' vocality, their sonic ontology, their interpretative radicalism, their aesthetic will to survive. They were crafting, collaborating with one another, some would say colluding with one another in the production of what musician and conceptual artist Mendi Obadike has influentially termed an "acousmatic blackness" particular to Black womanhood: that is, they were developing the sound of the "perceived presence of the black body in a vocal timbre, whether or not that body is determined to be black by other metrics."⁴³ Such moves are as old as the American culture industry, as numerous critics have long reminded us. But the stakes, I would argue, could not have been higher for Black women artists in those early years of blues recordings, when systemic structures had enabled white women like Sophie Tucker and Marion Harris to lay down tracks for the mass market in the 1910s, in the decade before the sisters gained entrance into the studio booth.⁴⁴

If, as the brilliant musicologist Nina Eidsheim insists, we have to think of voice as "co-articulation," if we have to think of vocality and vocal timbre as what she calls a "thick event," a "collective" phenomenon that is informed – at once – by embodied performance and manifestations of networks of listening (singers listening to other singers, critics and historians listening to and recording and characterizing their own culturally dense perceptions of performers), a "chain of associations," Eidsheim argues, "made by an individual under the pressures of the social and cultural contexts in which that individual participates," then we have reached the point of finally paying much closer attention to both the Heywards' as well as the Gershwin's pivotal role in inventing, producing, and branding a deeply influential and lasting "sound of black womanhood" that they delivered to the masses in the era that competed with the 1920s rise of the classic blues queens as well as in the decade after the decline of their popularity.⁴⁵

The sisters were quietly furious about this, even as they made their own sounds.

It is time now, then, to ask: what, if anything, has this grandly imposing hybrid musical text offered Black women artists, and what have these artists done to deform the Gershwin form? Time to ask whether there's another generative method of listening to the way that this production archives interracial encounter in sound and also creates spaces where Black women performers might improvise heroically complex, opaque, and mischievous ways of sounding out their subjectivities. How might we listen against the grain to the Gershwin and Heyward archive that these artists carry with them, translate, redeploy, and revise by way of virtuosic performance strategies? How might we think differently about the politics of cultural appropriation and racial mimicry by way of their work?

A range of Black women artists have taken up the challenge of wrestling with Gershwin and Heyward's invention, performing an aesthetically demanding work, a work in which Black women performers in particular are made to coun-

tenance varying modes of representational violence and dramaturgical labor, a work that simultaneously calls upon them to tap into their most heterogeneous virtuosic abilities (to be able to sing in “wide vocal ranges” and with “great physical stamina” folk, Broadway, opera, and spirituals) while also asking of them simultaneously to re-inscribe the most familiar of Black female caricatures. And it is my contention that these virtuosos in various versions of the show have innovated ways of turning the clashing tension between the sonic form of Bess and the content of her caricature into an experimental genre unto itself. Each of these women crafted vocalities that enabled them to traverse and mediate social spaces and ultimately keep a different time to that of the production’s gauzy, incandescent vision of “Summertime” for its Black rural laborers. In this way, too, these women ultimately strategized ways of scoring the conditions and possibilities of being aesthetically on the edge and “outside” the histo-temporalities and racial geographies set for them, and they passed that secret on to generations of artists who followed the paths that they paved. This is part of the continuing life of the larger “novel” that, for sure, exceeded the boundaries of Heyward’s original plans and dreams.

From the opera icons and musical theater actresses who have inhabited the role of the lead heroine through the years to the myriad performers who have served in supporting roles and the all-important chorus: think of everyone from *The Living Is Easy* novelist Dorothy West who was in the cast of Heyward’s 1927 play to theater veterans Abbey Mitchell and Etta Moten, from opera legends like Leontyne Price to classical upstarts like Clamma Dale in 1976, from ingenues like a young Maya Angelou to midcentury stars like Pearl Bailey and Diahann Carroll, to say nothing of the magnificent and tremendously influential Eva Jessye, who served as the opera’s longtime choral director.⁴⁶ Clearly, the Gershwin production has been a gateway for Black women musical artists who have invoked a range of aesthetic practices to tackle its troubling constructions of Black womanhood, its rendering of a tragic heroine as a sonic adaptation of those “social documents” and data that eviscerate the human, convert them into “statistical persons,” as Hartman reminds, “reduce[s]” them to “human excrescence of social law and the slum.” In Gershwin and Heyward’s “hot hands,” she is not a heroine able to “joy her freedom,” in the words of historian Tera Hunter.⁴⁷

Yet I want to suggest that, even in her original rendering, remaining perched on the edge of the community, the edge of the play, the edge of morality, the perpetual edge of her operatic diva emotions, Bess provides a way for numerous artists to mine fraught performative spaces. There is, of course, a distinction between the state of Bess’s being “outside” versus the state of being “put outdoors,” in Toni Morrisonian terms. “There is a difference,” Morrison writes in a legendary line of *The Bluest Eye*, “in being put *out* and being put *outdoors*. If you are put out, you go somewhere else, if you are outdoors, there is no place to go. The distinction was

subtle but final. Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition.”⁴⁸

Both the novel as well as the opera flirt with this kind of haunting precarity as Bess’s presumptive destiny. But in its theatrical iteration, I would suggest that her positionality on the fridge presents itself as something of a fugitive opportunity. There is room, in other words, to consider Bess as *outside* and on the edge of the narrative as holding the potential for her to move in ways unlike the other women on Catfish Row who (save for the capricious Clara who rushes into a hurricane looking for her man) remain resolutely static, committed to the joys of strawberry picking and picnics. Bess is by no means “free,” like the “old women” at the close of Morrison’s novel whose eyes bespeak “a synthesized” “puree of tragedy and humor, wickedness and serenity, truth and fantasy.”⁴⁹

Rather, her edginess and her “rough edges” linger and resonate across Black women’s sonic histories. They evoke her constitutive “resonant meaning” as a character who is listening in the ways that perhaps Jean Luc Nancy had in mind. “To be listening,” Nancy claims, “is always to be on the edge of meaning, or in an edgy meaning of extremity.”⁵⁰

In Gershwin’s epic, Bess listens: to Clara’s opening “Summertime” before singing it herself, to Porgy’s proclamations of love, to Crown’s seductive come-ons (which, in most versions save for the latest, turn lightning fast into sexual coercion), to Sportin’ Life’s call for her to follow him to New York.⁵¹ Tractable throughout the course of the narrative? Perhaps. But in that surfeit of listening, in that absorption of voices singing lullabies, love songs and temptation songs to her, she figuratively (re)arranges a new musical future for the women who (re)cover her and provide her with (performative) cover.

What I am suggesting here is that Bess’s fate is an aesthetic – as well as historical – question mark that has inspired Black women artists to “worry the line,” as Black feminist literary critic Cheryl Wall might put it, and to “worry *her* line” so as to sonically shake it loose from the constrictions of its putative, predetermined outcome.⁵² To worry the line of Bess, then, is to take up the Black feminist literary practice that Wall cites as borrowing from blues idioms, the “changes in stress and pitch, the addition of exclamatory phrases, changes in word order, repetition of phrases within the line itself.” Such a move beckons us to retrace the undertheorized, unheralded performance strategies of artists who transformed the Bess role into avant-garde musicking.

Let us not forget that long and esteemed line of performers – actors, vocalists, and multihyphenate musicians – who worried about Bess and went their own distinct, resourceful, and imaginative ways about worrying her line. From Anne Brown, the Julliard phenom who first tackled the role and brought her to Broadway, on through to that megastorm of modern theater, Audra McDonald. Generation after generation of Black women artists have put the *Porgy and Bess* repertoire

to their own ends, repurposing a text that had, according to Alex Ross, a “score” that “invites considerable freedom of interpretation. Once the chords of ‘Summertime’ start rocking,” he continues,

they become a steady-state environment in which a gifted performer can move around at will. She can bend pitches, add ornaments, shift the line up and down. Billie Holiday and Sidney Bechet made “Summertime” their own; Miles Davis, on his *Porgy and Bess* album of 1958, actually discarded Gershwin’s chords and kept only the melody. The same freedom of expression is permitted in the opera’s other set pieces such as “Bess, You Is My Woman Now,” “My Man’s Gone Now,” and “It Ain’t Necessarily So.”⁵³

It is the form, then, finally – a form originally developed in deep consultation and collaboration with Anne Brown – that begs for fluidity and movement, that beckons its own revisions and refusals, that inspires rigorous, theatrical virtuosic attack in order to burst its protagonist into the realm of polyvalent representational possibility, in order to enable these women to move to a space of their own sonic creation: outside of the fictive pastoral and the present absence of the metropolis and toward an “insistence on potentiality . . . and possibility for another world.”⁵⁴

Think, for instance, of Billie Holiday. With her 1936 version of “Summertime,” *Lady Day*, one year removed from the *Porgy and Bess* premiere, audaciously and artfully streamlines the “Summertime” melody and reminds us that she is, according to Farah Griffin, “the first really modern singer,” with her complex affective gestures, her “careful juxtaposition of notes,” her trademark subtlety, her fearlessness in “running ahead of the band” at times, lagging behind at others. Holiday’s ironic vocals dance with Bunny Berigan’s trumpet and bask in the luxurious thematic dreamscape of the song. It is her sinuous, roving version of Gershwin that (as Farah Griffin reminds me) clears a space for and inspires Miles’s panoramic 1958 rendition two decades later.⁵⁵

Could it be any more fitting that Holiday would record the first pop chart version of this song? Baldwin suggests that there could be no other way since he imagines that “she was much closer to the original” Bess “than anyone who has ever played or sung [the role].” But while his analogy is fueled by the drugs and tragedy nexus that he draws in eulogizing these two figures, my interest in mining the relationship between Holiday and Gershwin pays attention instead to Holiday’s craft as what so many have referred to as “a jazz musician’s vocalist,” one who, when performing “Summertime,” assumes the role of an Albert Murray blues hero, a chance taker, an artist who gambles with and changes up the temporality of the lullaby by way of exploiting the “steady state” open frontier of the song and inserts her own play into the formalistic structure of the tune.⁵⁶

Lady Day and her sister brethren – Mahalia Jackson, Nina Simone, Lena Horne, Pearl Bailey, Sarah Vaughan, to name but only a luminous few, the ones

who would follow her in answering the Bess riddle by carrying her to center of the pop world – are forever busy drawing out the human in this opera-musical repertoire, lighting out across the sonic universe, elegantly critiquing and engaging in prodigious conversations with its malevolent roots while yet still gathering up all those women out on the edge.⁵⁷ Their brave and fiercely intelligent performances in the *Porgy and Bess* archive take us all the way back to the kitchen where jazz is nobody’s lady other than her own.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Ryan Raul Banagale, “The Afterlife of *Rhapsody in Blue*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Gershwin*, ed. Anna Harwell Celenza (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 246.
- ² Richard Crawford, *Summertime: George Gershwin’s Life in Music* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 123.
- ³ Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Farah Jasmine Griffin, “When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women’s Vocality,” in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). On white culture workers, jazz, theater, and mass culture, see David Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).
- ⁴ On the history of jazz in relation to systemic racism, see Gerald Horne, *Jazz and Justice: Racism and the Political Economy of the Music* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2019).
- ⁵ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019).
- ⁶ The “lady jazz” phrase appears in multiple iterations across works by white cultural critics and historians of the early jazz era. Erma Taylor cites composer and conductor Walter Damrosch as having “enthused [that] ‘Gershwin has made a lady out of jazz’” in reference to *Rhapsody in Blue*. Erma Taylor, “George Gershwin—A Lament” (1937), in *George Gershwin*, ed. Merle Armitage (New York: Longmans Green & Co., 1938), 189. Damrosch famously commissioned *Concerto in F*. See also Henry O. Osgood, *So This Is Jazz* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1926), 204. Lawrence Gilman, “Mr.

George Gershwin Plays His New Jazz Concerto” (1925), in *The George Gershwin Reader*, ed. Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 85–87. My great thanks to Brian Kane for engaging in conversations with me about this topic and pointing me in the direction of these works. Kane also reminds that the phrase is “always attributed” to Paul Whiteman “but apparently without citation.” Brian Kane, email to the author, March 4, 2020, emphasis his. He notes that Bañagale cites Whiteman in Ryan Bañagale, *Arranging Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue and the Creation of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). Deems Taylor as quoted in Crawford, *Summertime*, 113.

⁷ Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 47. For examples of the “jazz is a woman” trope, see Shane Vogel’s discussion of the 1957 televised broadcast of Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn’s *A Drum Is a Woman*. Shane Vogel, *Stolen Time: Black Fad Performance and the Calypso Craze* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 102–131.

⁸ DuBose Heyward, *Porgy* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001); DuBose Heyward and Dorothy Heyward, *Porgy* (New York: Players Press, 2006); George Gershwin, *Porgy and Bess: Opera in Three Acts* (New York: Gershwin Publishing Corporation, 1935); and George Gershwin, DuBose and Dorothy Heyward, and Ira Gershwin, *Porgy and Bess: Vocal Score* (New York: Alfred Publishing, 1993).

⁹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage, 2004); *Beloved*, dir. Jonathan Demme (Burbank, Calif.: Touchstone Pictures/Harpo Films, 1998); and Toni Morrison and Richard Danielpour, *Margaret Garner, Opera in Two Acts* (New York: Associated Music Publishers, 2006).

¹⁰ J. Rosamond Johnson as quoted in Joe Nocera, “Variations on an Explosive Theme,” *The New York Times*, January 21, 2012. See also Edward Morrow, “Duke Ellington on Gershwin’s ‘Porgy,’” *New Theatre* (1935): 114–115; and *Porgy and Bess*, dir. Otto Preminger (Culver City, Calif.: Samuel Goldwyn Productions, 1959). Joseph Horowitz notes that Morrow’s own debunking of “Gershwin’s lampblack Negroisms” was widely attributed to Ellington, who subsequently disassociated himself from the article, but not without adding that Gershwin’s music, though “grand,” was “not distinctly or definitely Negroid.” Joseph Horowitz, “Porgy and Bess at the Met,” *The American Scholar*, October 9, 2019, <https://theamericanscholar.org/porgy-and-bess-at-the-met/>.

¹¹ Gwynne Kuhner Brown, “Performers in Catfish Row: Porgy and Bess as Collaboration,” in *Blackness and Opera*, ed. Naomi Andre, Karen M. Bryan, and Eric Saylor (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 179–180.

¹² See, for instance, the all-Black casts of the original 1935 production directed by Rouben Mamoulian, that of the 1942 Broadway revival directed by Cheryl Crawford, the 1952 touring production directed by Robert Breen, and the 1976 Houston Opera production directed by Jack O’Brien. For more on racial politics and the history of the casts, see Ellen Noonan, *The Strange Career of Porgy and Bess: Race, Culture, and America’s Most Famous Opera* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

¹³ George Gershwin, *Porgy and Bess (Opera Study Guide with Libretto)*, ed. Burton Fisher (Boca Raton, Fla.: Opera Journeys Publishing, 2018), 22. My thinking with regard to the concept of the “counter-composer” draws inspiration from Margo Jefferson’s theories of the “counter-diva.” See Margo Jefferson, “The Trolley Song: Cecile McLorin Salvant,” *The New York Times Magazine*, March 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/03/09/magazine/25-songs-that-tell-us-where-music-is-going.html?smid=tw-nytimes&smtype=cur&mtrref=undefined>.

- ¹⁴ On Black women artists as arrangers, curators, and archivists, see Daphne A. Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2021). On theories of arrangement, critical listening, and the role of the arranger, see Peter Szendy, *Listen: A History of Our Ears* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); and Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 27.
- ¹⁵ Heyward, *Porgy*, 47.
- ¹⁶ See Noonan, *The Strange Career of Porgy and Bess*, 105, 250–254; and Heyward, *Porgy*, 66.
- ¹⁷ James M. Hutchisson, *DuBose Heyward: A Charleston Gentleman and the World of Porgy and Bess* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000).
- ¹⁸ Noonan, *The Strange Career of Porgy and Bess*, 128–129.
- ¹⁹ Hutchisson, *DuBose Heyward*, 26. From this critic’s standpoint, Hutchisson’s meditations on race and racial politics in the life and work of Heyward are, at best, antiquated, and, at worst, profoundly problematic and oversimplified at various points in his biographical study of the author.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.
- ²¹ Janie DuBose Heyward sustained a lucrative career as a “dialect recitalist in Charleston, South Carolina, in the 1910s and 1920s. Janie DuBose Heyward, *Songs of the Charleston Darkey* (unidentified publisher, 1912). See my manuscript-in-progress *One of These Mornings: Black Feminist Genius and the Gershwin Problem* (forthcoming) for an extended discussion of Janie DuBose Heyward’s blackface dialect repertoire. For more on Janie Heyward, see Hutchisson, *DuBose Heyward*, 1–19.
- ²² Noonan, *The Strange Career of Porgy and Bess*, 17.
- ²³ See DuBose Heyward, “Gamester’s All,” All Poetry, <https://allpoetry.com/Gamesters-All>. On DuBose Heyward’s poetry career, see Hutchisson, *DuBose Heyward*, 20–48.
- ²⁴ Hutchisson, *DuBose Heyward*, 52, 53. On Janie Heyward’s potential recording career, see Ethan J. Kytte and Blain Roberts, *Denmark Vesey’s Gardens: Slavery and Memory in the Cradle of the Confederacy* (New York: The New Press, 2019), 203. See also “Mrs. Heyward’s Dialect Reading,” *The Charleston Evening Post*, December 4, 1922. My thanks to Ethan Kytte for his assistance with regard to this material.
- ²⁵ Heyward, *Songs of the Charleston Darkey*.
- ²⁶ Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 56; Cynthia Blair, *I’ve Got to Make My Livin’: Black Women’s Sex Work in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); and LaShawn Harris, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Number Runners: Black Women in New York City’s Underground Economy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016).
- ²⁷ Heyward, *Porgy*, 78, 79.
- ²⁸ Hutchisson, *DuBose Heyward*, 47. Toomer apparently engaged in correspondence with Rex Fuller, Heyward’s successor as the secretary of the Poetry Society, and he also contacted Heyward directly about this. See “Jean Toomer letter to Rex Fuller, February 19, 1923,” in *The Letters of Jean Toomer, 1919–1924*, ed. Mark Whalan (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1926), 131–132. See also Cynthia Earl Kerman and Richard Eldridge, *The Lives of Jean Toomer: A Hunger for Wholeness* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 95. My great thanks to Emily Lutenski for discussions regarding Toomer and Heyward and for bringing these works to my attention.

“A Woman Is a Sometime Thing”

- ²⁹ Hutchisson, *DuBose Heyward*, 47; and Jean Toomer, *Cane* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).
- ³⁰ On Bessie Smith’s early recording career, see Chris Albertson, *Bessie Smith* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005).
- ³¹ Heyward, *Porgy*, 157.
- ³² Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 7.
- ³³ Brent Hayes Edwards, *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017), 17.
- ³⁴ James Standifer, “The Tumultuous Life of Porgy and Bess,” *HUMANITIES* 18 (6) (1997).
- ³⁵ Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2005), 101–106; “Lorraine Hansberry Deplores ‘Porgy,’” *Variety*, May 27, 1959; and James Baldwin, “On the Horizon: Catfish Row,” in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998). Hilton Als argues that this “show about black people, created entirely by white people, has never been a favorite of black audiences. In traditional stagings, [the characters] Porgy and Bess come together amid their community’s will to destruction; there is no uplift, just sweat, blood carnality, and resignation.” Hilton Als, “A Man and a Woman: ‘Porgy and Bess’ Reimagined,” *The New Yorker*, September 26, 2011.
- ³⁶ Fisher, *Porgy and Bess*, 19.
- ³⁷ This is a work that my grad colleague Allison Chu is now brilliantly interrogating.
- ³⁸ Roland Barthes as quoted in Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 6. See also Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986); Allison Chu with Brian Kane and Daphne Brooks, “Porgy and Bess at 85 and Gershwin Remixed,” Yale University Black Sound and the Archive Working Group Online Public Conversation, October 9, 2020.
- ³⁹ George Gershwin, “Rhapsody in Catfish Row; Mr. Gershwin Tells the Origin and Scheme for His Music in that New Folk Opera Called *Porgy and Bess*,” *The New York Times*, October 20, 1935.
- ⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).
- ⁴¹ Baldwin, “On the Horizon”; Anna Harwell Celenza, “Exploring New Worlds: An American in Paris, Cuban Overture, and *Porgy and Bess*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Gershwin*, ed. Anna Harwell Celenza (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 153–181.
- ⁴² Celenza, “Exploring New Worlds,” 174.
- ⁴³ Mendi Obadike as quoted in Nina Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2019), xi. See also Mendi Obadike, *Low Fidelity: Stereotyped Blackness in the Field of Sound* (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2005).
- ⁴⁴ For more on the racialized and gender politics of the early recording industry, see my *Liner Notes for the Revolution*.
- ⁴⁵ Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 22–23.
- ⁴⁶ Dorothy West appeared in the premiere production of the drama *Porgy* in 1927. Abbey Mitchell appeared as Clara in the 1935 premiere production of *Porgy and Bess*. Future

- diplomat Etta Moten Barnett appeared as Bess in the 1942 Broadway production. Leontyne Price achieved her breakthrough in the role of Bess in the 1952 touring production and Clamma Dale appeared in the lead role in the Houston Opera high profile 1976 revival. Maya Angelou joined the 1954 cast of the touring production in Italy, and Pearl Bailey and Diahann Carroll appear in the motion picture adaptation.
- ⁴⁷ Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 19; and Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).
- ⁴⁸ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Vintage, 2007), 18.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 159.
- ⁵⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 7.
- ⁵¹ Gershwin, *Porgy and Bess*.
- ⁵² Cheryl Wall, *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).
- ⁵³ For more on Anne Brown, see Kuhner Brown, "Performers in Catfish Row." See also *Gershwin & Bess: A Dialogue with Anne Brown*, dir. Nicole Franklin (Los Angeles: Epiphany Inc., 2010); "Audra McDonald: Shaping Bess on Broadway," *Fresh Air* (NPR), May 15, 2012, <https://www.npr.org/2012/05/15/152693314/audra-mcdonald-shaping-bess-on-broadway>; Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Picador, 2008), 162; and Miles Davis, *Porgy and Bess* (Columbia Records, 1959, audio recording).
- ⁵⁴ Jose Munoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).
- ⁵⁵ Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be A Mystery* (New York: One World Press, 2002); and Billie Holiday, "Summertime" (Sarabandas, 1993, audio recording; first released 1936).
- ⁵⁶ Baldwin, "On the Horizon"; and Albert Murray, *The Hero and the Blues* (New York: Vintage, 1996).
- ⁵⁷ Mahalia Jackson, "Summertime" and "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," *Summertime* (CBS Records, 1956, audio recording). See also "Summertime and I Feel Like a Motherless Child by Mahalia Jackson," YouTube, uploaded September 28, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hohnr22zTxc>; Nina Simone, "Summertime," *Nina Simone at Town Hall* (Colpix, 1959, audio recording); Lena Horne, "Summertime," on Lena Horne and Harry Belafonte, *Porgy and Bess* (RCA, 1959, audio recording); Pearl Bailey, *Porgy and Bess* (Roulette Records, 1958, audio recording); and Sarah Vaughan, *Sarah Vaughan Sings George Gershwin* (EmArcy, 1958, audio recording).

We “Other Victorians”? Novelistic Remains, Therapeutic Devices, Contemporary Televisual Dramas

Rey Chow & Austin Sarfan

*In reference to the work of Michel Foucault and to residual Victorian novelistic features, this essay explores the biopolitical dimension of contemporary televisual dramas, focusing on the popular crime genre as seen in *The Sopranos* (1999 – 2007), *Breaking Bad* (2008 – 2013), and *The Fall* (2013 – 2016). Emphasizing the confessional context of criminality and policing, we demonstrate how such shows rely on the conventions of modern psychological discourse in depicting criminals, thus foregrounding what Eva Illouz in *Saving the Modern Soul* (2008) has called the “therapeutic emotional style.” By updating aspects of D. A. Miller’s conception of the policing plot in *The Novel and the Police* (1988), we argue that confession in contemporary televisual dramas exemplifies a cultural transition from power as force to power as communication. The ascendance of communicative power pathologizes aspects of masculinity and introduces a new dramatic/narrative device: the therapeutic couplet.*

Near the end of the acclaimed TV serial drama *Breaking Bad*, Walter White, the chemistry-teacher-turned-methamphetamine-manufacturer, questioned by his wife as to why he has pursued such a self-destructive enterprise, memorably announces: “I did it for me. I liked it.”¹ This defiantly joyous response to what amounts to a demand for his confession – a demand that his wife makes throughout the series in the form of repeated questioning of his behavior – is significant in ways that go beyond this one popular show. The relation between a protagonist’s enigmatically transgressive acts and the demand – personal, familial, social, metaphysical – for his accounting for them constitutes a type of dramatic and narrative scene that furnishes a thought-provoking intermedial connection between the contemporary televisual serial drama and well-known elements of the canonized novel.

At one level, of course, such a connection between the older and newer forms can be quite easily established. Among the connective features is, first and foremost, the serial format, recalling the time in centuries past when some now-classic

novels, by authors such as Alexandre Dumas *père*, Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and their contemporaries, began as periodic installments in newspapers or magazines. With that format comes the important feature of an episodic development of narrative plots and events. The considerable duration of such episodic development allows for a detailed embellishment of characters and the everyday trivia and social relations around them. (This is one reason the contemporary televisual dramas are not exactly formal successors to film, the brevity of which tends to dictate the modes of narrativization and dramatization peculiar to it.) Also noteworthy is the centrality of dialogue, indeed, of verbal exchange itself (including the regularity of subtitles on those shows involving multiple languages, so that audiences are, literally, reading words on the screen as they watch a story unfold). Not infrequently, in cultures with long-standing literary traditions, some televisual dramas are based on actual novels (such as *Bailuyuan*, *Wo de qianbansheng*, *Renmin de mingyi* and numerous other series in the People's Republic of China and *Call the Midwife* in the United Kingdom) and sometimes adopt the convention of a narrator in the form of a voiceover.

These obvious links to novels aside, televisual serial dramas are exemplary of an age when an immersed engagement with a fictive or illusory world is a matter of individual option, the times and manners of entry into and exit from that world typically dependent on the viewer's location, mobility, and other preferences. Just as printed materials can be carried around and read in solitude during travel, in public places, or at home, so can televisual dramas (once beyond their first runs) be streamed or downloaded on laptops, tablets, and smartphones, in addition to being watched as DVDs or through smart devices on television screens. Technological and commercial advancements, in other words, combine to turn the mere presentation of a story into a potentially endless viewing experience, through an endlessly generative process of choices. In this multiplicities-driven, transnational engagement with fiction, it is tempting to argue that televisual serial dramas are spectacular updates to novels. These dramas recycle and repurpose a cultural form that, for some, has become something of a relic (one whose rise corresponded in time with the rising hegemony of the bourgeoisie in the West, broadly defined).² In so doing, they bring to the fore "novelistic" attributes that might have escaped attention before and that are now noticeable in a newer, cross-medial ecology of fiction production and consumption.

Some of these televisual dramas are absorbing endeavors to represent specific historical periods. The first three seasons of *Babylon Berlin* (2017 – present), for instance, capture Weimar German society just a few years before 1934, the year that marked the rise of Adolf Hitler. *Xuanya/Cliff* (2012) portrays a variety of actors in the city of Harbin – including underground Chinese communist spies pretending to collaborate with the Japanese-controlled Manchukuo regime, exiles from the Soviet Union plotting to assassinate Stalin, and fascist representatives of

the Chinese Republican police state – during the politically tense period of 1939–1945. Or we watch portrayals of clandestine communist activities and emotionally charged social relations in Villeneuve, a village near Paris, under the collaborationist Vichy French government, during the years 1941–1945 and decades beyond in *A French Village* (2009–2017). Alternatively, the sociopolitical events in England are presented by way of its imperial figureheads of governance as they travel around the British Commonwealth (*The Crown*, 2016–present), by way of religious and medical caretakers of lower-class English families (*Call the Midwife*, 2012–present), or by way of the blood-stained saga of an ethnically marked (gypsy) mafia family as it establishes its fortune and standing in Birmingham (*Peaky Blinders*, 2013–present). There are also the depictions of a charismatic woman prime minister and her coalition government in contemporary Denmark (*Borgen*, 2010–2013), and a charismatic woman secretary of state and her diplomatic maneuvers in the fraught relations between the contemporary United States and different countries around the world (*Madam Secretary*, 2014–2019).

The historic success of these shows requires a full-fledged study documenting the impact of their viewer ratings as well as the cultural nuances of their national and international receptions. (For instance, what do we make of the fact that many of the Chinese shows are freely available on YouTube and other platforms, while other shows are available only through paid portals such as Netflix and Amazon Prime?) While such a study is obviously beyond the scope of this essay, what we would like to undertake instead is a sketch of the thematic connections between televisual serial dramas and novels by way of a set of pronounced characteristics.

Owing to the necessity for captivating and prolonging audience attention across episodes, narratives of serial television find support through the indefinite development of characters, inscribing the form within a horizon of *biopolitics*.³ While there is an elective affinity between the relative brevity of film and narrative plots organized around the intensity of shocks typical of action and horror genres, the serial form in contemporary television has, in contrast, been notably successful through plots organized around the slower pacing of character development. As a means to keep alive interest in characters’ struggles for self-realization, *therapy* has emerged as a recurring motif. In fact, a surprising number of contemporary televisual dramas associated with the “Golden Age” of TV feature therapy as a key component, including *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), *Mad Men* (2007–2015), and *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013). This recurrence of the therapeutic also suggests an increasing deployment of the unconscious as a narrative agent, as in the many episodes depicting Tony Soprano’s dreams in *The Sopranos*, or the lengthy speculations on Paul Spector’s coma in *The Fall* (2013–2016).

This psychic approach to character leads to a paradox in contemporary television’s narrative form: specifically, a kind of double-bind regarding narrative closure. For how can a narrative form that consists in prolonging character develop-

ment also provide a satisfying dramatic resolution? On the one hand, a concrete resolution obviously violates the potential for further episodic development, and yet, on the other hand, a conclusion that gestures toward further development is abandoning the traditional function of an ending. This double-bind regarding narrative closure informs the dissatisfaction that contemporary audiences have been known to express when faced with the endings of many series. As Slavoj Žižek notes in an editorial about viewers' dissatisfaction with the conclusion to the HBO series *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), contemporary audiences desire from their serial plots endless continuity.⁴ Žižek writes, “In our epoch of series which in principle could go on indefinitely, the idea of narrative closure becomes intolerable.”⁵ At the very least, this raises an interesting question about the biopoliticality of form: in the era of online debate and fan fiction, could one not measure a series' success in terms of its ability to polarize and inflame sentiments, thus deepening, multiplying, and extending the life of narrative elements?

Often already banking on reboots or sequels, conclusions to televisual dramas can seem overburdened with the biopolitical conventions of televisual seriality. This is recognizable in endings that simply suggest the series' potential continuation. As Brett Martin writes in his history of the “television revolution”: “In the new world of television . . . there may be nothing more unnatural than an ending. In a perfect TV world, no door shuts forever, no show ever dies.”⁶ The famous last episode of *The Sopranos* confronts this formal requirement for continuity over ending directly: the series concludes by suspending any sense of resolution, as the final shot – an ordinary family evening at a diner – abruptly cuts to black, providing no information as to how or whether the lethal plot on Tony's life, in the works for seasons, might come to an end. Legend has it that many viewers wrongly interpreted this conclusion as a disruption of their cable service, misrecognizing the more immediate narrative possibility that Tony Soprano's struggles just might carry on without us.⁷ In this sense, the ending to *The Sopranos* also recalls *The Wire*'s handling of the double-bind of contemporary narrative closure, by dissolving each season's characters into a greater, subsequently networked story about Baltimore. Should we be surprised that, incidentally, *The Sopranos* itself is soon to become sequentialized postmortem in *Many Saints of Newark* (forthcoming 2021), or that *Breaking Bad* has found yet another sequence in the recent *El Camino: A Breaking Bad Movie* (2019)?

If these narratives specialize in the biopolitical extension of character development, tension can result when character development – aimed at keeping audience attention – intersects with the sensationalizing of violence that may be identified as another common feature of televisual dramas. According to Martin, in the Golden Age of American television (inaugurated, in his view, by *The Sopranos*), “It would no longer be safe to assume that everything on your favorite television show would turn out alright – or even that the worst wouldn't happen.”⁸

The sensationalized violence now common to plots of Golden Age television can be traced to the acclaimed “College” episode of *The Sopranos*, in which Tony garrotes a stalking hitman as his daughter Meadow, in classic fulfillment of the immigrant family’s class aspirations, interviews at a nearby college.⁹ Reportedly, the producers of the show originally resisted fully depicting the shocking murder on the grounds that doing so would be distasteful for viewers; but ultimately, they included it. In retrospect, the graphic scene of Tony’s killing of the hitman was not only acclaimed as a watershed in *The Sopranos*’ signature sensationalism, it also announced a shift in the televisual aesthetics of violence.¹⁰ Henceforth, even the worst of human behavior is subject to narration in complex serial plots that engage viewers by plausibly developing the lives of infamously transgressive characters.

Generally speaking, the serial format is conducive to representing – indeed, it virtually requires – narrative plots in which a dialogic relationship between the known and unknown obtains a pivotal role, as in the example of detective fiction. The suspense resulting from this relationship between known and unknown elements, which facilitates readers’ and viewers’ engagement across episodes, underwrites the indispensability of what could be called, after D. A. Miller’s *The Novel and the Police*, a “policing plot,” whether in the case of the novel or in the case of televisual serial drama.¹¹ In the latter, such a plot combines themes from detective and romance fiction: both crime and desire can become objects of episodic investigation, but such an investigation is typically integrated in a complicated story of personal development, often fleshed out in a therapeutic process, as in Tony Soprano’s visits to his psychiatrist, Dr. Melfi, or in Walter White’s treatment for lung cancer in *Breaking Bad*. Therapy, insofar as it is a socially legitimate site for the verbalization of thinking, recurs frequently in televisual plots of self-development. As a milieu of talk, therapy in these shows effectively functions as a form of novelistic *self*-narration that would otherwise be difficult to capture on screen.

The policing plot centers on a protagonist’s practical and social control of his self-development by clinical means. *The conceptual question that follows is whether such policing leads to increased transparency or increased opacity – and for whom.* In the major examples mentioned thus far, a male protagonist’s need to monitor the process of his self-development leads the story line to revolve around his increasingly secretive relationship with stages in a clinical process that is supposed to help him feel better. In *The Sopranos*, Tony’s visits to Dr. Melfi’s office, where he is tasked with baring his all under the promise of therapist-client privilege (when for the most part this confession is encouraged by his wife, Carmela), are nonetheless considered by his associates to be damaging evidence of his emasculation, making him unsuitable for running a criminal mafia organization. In the end, it is Tony’s own interest in policing his self-development that makes him try to preserve the

secrecy of his visits to Dr. Melfi. In a comparable fashion, in *Breaking Bad*, Walt's secretiveness, manifesting in a disavowal of his cancer and an aversion to clinical treatment, takes the palpable form of a self-designed policing plot: motivated by his own sense of alchemical mastery, he succeeds in keeping his terminal illness secret from the criminal enterprise that employs him, thereby obscuring his own inability to maintain his monopoly and defend against competitors.

As evident in these examples, the policing plot renders crime as an allegorical test of masculinity; as this plot unravels, the therapeutic process becomes, in turn, symbolic of androgenization, if not effeminization, and hence a counterpoint to the macho criminal enterprise. For these reasons, the domestic space of the family often emerges as a charged, antagonistic arena in which masculine aggression (crime) and feminine risk management (care) are showcased and rationalized, yet rarely reconciled.¹² This said, the wives (Carmela in *The Sopranos* and Skyler in *Breaking Bad*) are actually integral to the activity of the policing circle: namely, those accomplices, witting or unwitting, for whom the crimes are, in Miller's words, an "open secret."¹³ As *The Sopranos* progresses, Carmela establishes herself as a role model of mafia-wife secrecy for Tony's young daughter, Meadow, and in *Breaking Bad*, Skyler mobilizes her accounting expertise to orchestrate Walt's monumental money laundering operation. In the British televisual series *The Fall*, set in Belfast, these relatively clear-cut positions of masculinity and femininity, of crime and care, are clouded by an alternative kind of pairing: Paul Spector, the Irish serial killer of attractive young professional women, is himself a bereavement counselor (and thus a care provider), while his nemesis, the authority figure charged with the responsibility of catching him, is Stella Gibson, a charismatic English female police superintendent. In this case, because the officially therapeutic – that is, feminized – position has been preempted by the male predator himself, Stella, while performing her task as the police, structurally doubles up as the unofficial *psychotherapist*, determined as she is to get to the bottom of Paul's repeated killings by tracking the mental designs behind them. The series is staged in such a way as to literally merge the policing plot and the therapeutic process: Stella "gets" what each of Paul's moves means both through her policing expertise with criminal behavior *and* her empathetic understanding of his psychic maneuvers. By contrast, Paul's wife, a neonatal nurse, is for a long time kept in the dark about his deeds. As she busies herself with her job and her young children, the wife may be regarded as an unwitting keeper of Paul's secret within the bounds of their domestic partnership.

In charting feminine care's struggle to reform the masculine criminal, the policing plots in these televisual dramas stage the rise of what Eva Illouz in her book *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, the Emotions and the Culture of Self-Help* calls the "therapeutic emotional style" of late modernity.¹⁴ Formalized and reproduced in psychological discourse, usually with an emphasis on ideas such as empathy and communication, the therapeutic emotional style has been instrumental to

the consolidation of the middle class in postindustrial Western society. As such, emotions are rationalized in terms of their value as capital, which is informed by the demand for efficient interpersonal labor in a service economy. According to Illouz, the therapeutic emotional style is organized principally around the concept of emotional *control*. As conceived by the psychology of management, emotional control simultaneously involves restraint and facilitates communication, with both motivated by an interest in efficiency. That is to say, emotional control requires tempering intense emotions (such as anger) that threaten to decompose interpersonal relationships. Such control also produces the very conditions for empathy, since restraint supposedly makes it possible to interact with others. The rise of this therapeutic emotional style means that criminal secrecy within the policing plot is now subject to new pressures: the confessing person at once risks incrimination and benefits, as it were, by displaying adaptation to the virtues of communication.

In its successful popularization of control, the therapeutic emotional style has, arguably, brought about a transformation of “the cultural definition of power.”¹⁵ Departing from the traditionally masculine conception of power as force – or, in Michel Foucault’s words, as the sovereign power to take life (represented by the sword) – the therapeutic emotional style correlates power instead with the ability to restrain oneself, to talk things through, and, most important, to empathize with others. This new cultural definition of power not only remakes “models of sociability” (as in the case of the emotionally controlled workplace) but also “re-draw[s] the cognitive and practical emotional boundaries regulating gender differences.”¹⁶ Specifically, the therapeutic model, in advocating control, redefines social interaction through the “feminization of emotional culture.”¹⁷ In Illouz’s words, “the ideal of self-control mark[s] a clear departure from traditional definitions of hegemonic masculinity, understood as a model prescribing men to be self-reliant, aggressive, competitive, oriented to mastery and dominance, emotionless, and, when necessary, ruthless.”¹⁸ By *pathologizing* the ideals of hegemonic masculinity against a new emotional style of cooperative communication, therapeutic discourse thus encourages the coming of a “new form of masculinity more compatible with ‘feminine’ models of selfhood . . . viewed by the reigning therapeutic ethos as the only healthy form of masculinity.”¹⁹ In the televisual dramas considered here, the conflict between pathological (hegemonic) masculinity, on the one hand, and healthy (feminized) masculinity, on the other, structures the male criminal’s eventual reconciliation with the family, whose interests are represented by the joint agencies of the wife, children, close relatives, police, and therapist.

To this extent, contemporary televisual dramas have incorporated the policing plot, and in particular the trope of secrecy, in what we propose as a *cultural form’s staging of the new therapeutic style*. In this staging, criminal secrecy signifies not

the integrity of a criminal enterprise but rather its failure. Hence, what marks the masculine criminal in these televisual dramas is his increasing obligation to negotiate with what Illouz calls the “only healthy form of masculinity,” as cited above. In *The Sopranos*, Tony must learn the reflexive art of self-control in his sessions with Dr. Melfi, and her lessons in the therapeutic style resonate in the background of the show’s final season, as escalating violence forces Tony to a “sit-down” during which he negotiates the terms of a truce between warring families. In *Breaking Bad*, Walt’s effeminate and even hyper-controlled manner provides the perfect, healthy cover for his enterprise, in sharp contrast to emotionally explosive criminals like Tuco Salamanca. It also signals his adaptability to the more powerful international corporation, Madrigal, whose criminal operations are spearheaded by the similarly poised mastermind Gus Fring. (In fact, the actor Giancarlo Esposito credits his regular yoga practice for generating Gus’s signature emotionally controlled style.)²⁰ In these examples, through the reiterated trope of the criminal-molded-by-the-therapeutic-style, televisual serial dramas capture in a fascinating manner the cultural transition from one model of social power to another.

Even as they use the television screen as their platform, these examples of contemporary televisual dramas also bear intimate linkage to classic instances of the modern novel. We think in particular of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, Vladimir Nabokov, Albert Camus, and John Fowles, among others, in whose works the ostensible manifestation of unspeakable crimes often goes hand in hand with another manifestation: namely, an endeavor to talk, to tell stories, to fabricate a collective or socially acceptable rationale to make sense of what happened. These twin manifestations are not a universal feature of televisual dramas about criminality: shows such as *The Practice* (1997–2004), *L.A. Law* (1986–1994), *NYPD Blue* (1993–2005), *Law and Order* (1990–2010), and *Oz* (1997–2003), while partaking of a similar orientation toward crime and punishment, do not narrate consciousness in a psychological fashion (as is the hallmark of the next wave of television serials beginning with *The Sopranos*) and rather come across as attempts to spotlight the penal investigative infrastructure of contemporary society. Because of their more straightforward emphasis on the policing actions of capture, investigation, and punishment, these shows tend to proceed through the repetition of a certain formula episode after episode, so that the audience knows more or less what to expect in terms of the structuring of events even while the contents of events vary. With shows such as *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, and *The Fall*, on the other hand, the presence of at least one figure, typically female, designed with the function of empathetic reception, signals a different kind of narrative and dramatic loop, the playing-out

of which requires not only the solving of crime but also, more important, an interlocutor, respondent, and psychic accomplice to the criminal.

Insofar as the therapeutic process in these televisual dramas concerns the emotional reformation of subjects, especially the production of new masculinities, it is possible to align such shows' use of confession with the novelistic convention of spirituality, in Foucault's sense of "the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth."²¹ The practice of spirituality, thus broadly defined, involves a process of *transformative retrospection* that accounts for the formal resemblance between televisual and novelistic narrative. In their emphasis on the change of subjects through therapeutic regimes of truth, televisual dramas refashion conventions from the "long tradition of self-analytic retrospection in the novel" in literary theorist Dorrit Cohn's phrase.²² For Cohn, this tradition consists in attempts to narrate originally obscure forms of experience, such as the "lost time" of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, or the "heart of darkness" of Conrad's titular novel. As examples of self-analytic reflections, these narratives are organized around "the retrospective cognition of an inner life that cannot know itself at the instant of experience."²³ In both modern novels and television serials, what is episodically dramatized is, we might say, the relationship between an "experiencing self" and a "narrating self," as defined by their modes of cognition (or access to truth). Yet between the novel form and televisual serial form, the characterization of these two selves differs in fundamental ways. While the dynamic of retrospection in many novels tends to resemble autobiography in its focus on self-analysis (as in Jane's account of her life in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* or Marcel's remembrance of his past in Proust's *Recherche*), in contemporary televisual dramas, retrospection tends to pass through the *external authority* of "narrating" experts (as in Tony's dependence on his therapist for self-knowledge). In televisual dramas, moreover, the power of narration is often embodied by feminine experts of therapeutic care, who provide a diagnostic and explanatory language for masculine experience. We suggest that this splitting of narration and experience between two different individuals, masculine and feminine, may be seen as a reification – and a retrofitting – of Victorian conventions of gendering domesticity.

Frederick Karl's description of spirituality in the modern novel provides some suggestive guidance at this juncture. Basing his discussion on an overview of spirituality in writings from different historical periods, Karl comments that modern spiritual novels deploy "the intensity of spiritual crises within the framework of realistic characters, real places, more or less sequential narratives." This, he says, is in contrast to earlier versions of spiritual autobiography, which "tended to contain imaginary characters in imaginary locales: middle states of consciousness and behavior." According to Karl, the presence of a realistic frame of reference in modern spiritual novels means that "the protagonists' problems, whatever their

kind, do not exist solely as intense episodes or brief periods. They must now be integrated into his life as a whole.”²⁴ A consequence of the emergence of this paradigm of a *modernized, supposedly integrated* spirituality is that spiritual crises now tend to manifest through the middle-class domestic sphere, which becomes the predominant site for recurrent emotional breakdowns. This is perhaps one reason the protagonists in question tend to be family men: husbands and fathers. In fact, both the first episodes of *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* begin with a married guy fainting in the presence of family symbols (ducklings for Tony, an RV for Walt). As a catalyst for seeking therapy, such fainting directs attention to how the family is integrated within the horizon of spiritual development. As it occurs in contemporary televisual dramas, this process of spiritual development indeed differs, as Karl suggests, from chronologically earlier versions, such as are depicted by Athanasius in *The Life of St. Anthony*. In that work, spirituality for Anthony (unlike the cases of Tony and Walt) rests on a distancing from, rather than intimate entanglement with, the family. Thus, the first signs of the Devil’s attempt to derail Anthony from his progress toward self-knowledge include the lingering of loving thoughts for his former wealth (derived from his father) and for familial belonging: “First he [the Devil] attempted to lead him [Anthony] away from the discipline, suggesting memories of his possessions, the guardianship of his sister, the bonds of kinship.”²⁵ By contrast, in televisual dramas of the new therapeutic style, Victorian forms of gendered domestic partnership figure as a significant aspect of the characteristically modern intimacy between spiritual development and the family.

This point about the inextricability of the family in the modern spiritual paradigm illuminates Foucault’s description of the so-called *psy* disciplines (such as clinical psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and talk therapy) as they operate in modern family sexual politics.²⁶ In their vulgarization of aspects of these disciplines, policing plots in therapeutic televisual serials involve the family as a unit organized and mobilized by criminal secrecy. The therapeutic process demonstrates how the confession of a secret motivates the alliance of a family, through the Victorian trope of a gendered distribution of emotional abilities.

In Foucault’s words, “The confession is a ritual discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority.”²⁷ Reformulating the confessional schema, the authoritative women in the therapeutic serials in question who deal with criminal men – the guys who resist confession and who are virtually incapable of speaking about their past experience – usually proceed with a type of interpretative reasoning that highlights the family’s relevance for these men. In *The Sopranos*, Dr. Melfi imputes to Tony childhood injury by psychologically abusive parents; in *Breaking Bad*, Skyler imputes to Walt mari-

tal infidelity and indifference to their children's welfare; and in *The Fall*, Stella imputes to the orphaned Paul the failure of foster care. By drawing on the significance of family relations for various kinds of psychic deficiency and deformity, the *psy* disciplines make their presence felt in these shows like a popular refrain, demonstrating what Foucault has observed about psychoanalysis: that it functions as "a mechanism for attaching sexuality to the system of alliance."²⁸ Ultimately, this strategy of using authoritative women to impute confessions (and with them, secrets and truths) to men amounts to a *remodeling of the narrative form of retrospection*: departing from the reflexive terms of self-analysis in the novel, the narrative of the therapeutic process in televisual serials devolves into what can henceforth be viewed as a noticeably gendered analytic: the *therapeutic couplet*.

In these shows, then, analytic retrospection operates through a gendered pair that synchronically splits, between two subjects, the functions of narration (that is, rationalization) and experience. A female subject, who functions as the narrating or explaining self, supplies meaning to a male subject, who functions as the experiencing but inarticulate self. In concrete terms, the therapeutic scene consists in the female "narrating self" eliciting and interpreting information from a male "experiencing self," with the intention of not only giving him the truth about his life but also reforming his conduct. This typical scene foregrounds a procedure by which feminine care, in the guise of psychiatric hermeneutics, seeks to ferret out meaning from compulsive violence, supposedly originating in hegemonic masculinity. Not surprisingly, the masculine position in this couplet often involves various lacunae in memory, literalizing the notion of meaningless experience and designating a zone of meaningful interaction, indeed of clarification, that must be supplied externally from the feminine position. One thinks, for example, of Walt's fugue states, used as an alibi for his criminal enterprising in *Breaking Bad*; Paul's brain injury, which causes him to forget his crimes in *The Fall*; and the repressed memories of Tony's childhood in *The Sopranos* that preclude him from adequate self-knowledge.

Because the therapeutic couplet credits femininity with the cognitive privilege of the narrating or explaining self, hegemonic masculinity is, by default, presented in the therapeutic process in terms of a burden, a toxic experience that resists narrativity. The drama then takes the form of an impossible reconciliation effort, orbiting around a dialogue determined by the feminine imputation and masculine evasion of meaning. Consider, for example, the culmination of Tony's complaints against therapy in his revolt against Dr. Melfi in the episode "Calling All Cars," as he realizes that her psychiatric emphasis on emotional control is in conflict with his basic duty as the boss of a criminal "business": to use violent force, sometimes without hesitation.²⁹ Tony's skepticism regarding therapy in this case illustrates the gender differences that structure the failed reconciliation characteristic of the therapeutic couplet. Even as femininity is assigned the project of reforming he-

gemonic masculinity, the terms of the therapeutic couplet seem locked worlds apart in advance, following the effectively divorced functions of narration and experience distributed between gendered subjects. *Breaking Bad* provides another version of this impossible scenario. Beginning in season one, with increasing pressure, Skyler attempts to elicit confessions from Walter regarding his secretive behavior as he disappears in order to manufacture methamphetamine. Faced with his resistance to communication and his obvious lies, Skyler ultimately, with great success, designs Walt's confessions for him. In the season four episode "Bullet Points," for instance, after studying the language of gambling addicts in group therapy, Skyler makes Walt rehearse a lengthy confession that she has scripted in order to provide a cover-story for his illegal acquisition of wealth.³⁰ As Walt performs this confession at a family dinner with his in-laws, his hitherto baffling behavior becomes not only meaningful but also credible within the disciplinary frames of reference of Skyler's sister, Marie, and her husband, Hank, respectively a nurse and a DEA agent.

The pronounced gendering in contemporary television of the narrative structure of the therapeutic couplet points to an unanswered question regarding Foucault's arguments about confession: to what extent might confession be understood as serving the function of maintaining alliances for families, rather than producing sexualities for individuals?³¹

Obviously, of course, confession recalls what Foucault terms the "normalizing society" of biopolitics that emerges in the nineteenth century; accordingly, it is possible to consider feminine narration in the case of contemporary television as (performing) a kind of biopolitical interpellation of criminally perverted men (as a class of people). At the same time, though, the gendered therapeutic couplet does not so much require the normalization of masculine experience in the context of a *population* (as Foucault suggests) as it proposes the obedient subjection of masculine experience to feminine narration within the context of a *family*. This family-centered proposal inscribes the therapeutic couplet within a domestic project of discipline, with the intent of transforming hegemonic males into docile bodies. Furthermore, the specific pairing structure of the couplet, noticeably relying on essentialist (that is, heterosexual) notions of gender, recalls the basic terms of Foucault's model of pastoral power, which involves a relationship of obedience between a master and a disciple.³² This relationship is borne out in this case by a feminine or feminized master narrative of the therapeutic style that, nonetheless, continues to meet with resistance from the disciple who is supposedly guided toward spiritual rejuvenation through his reformed masculinity. In sum, as it is played out in contemporary television, the therapeutic couplet has moved away from the familiar *scientific* terms of biopolitics as described by Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* (terms that include *normalization* and *population*). Instead, the ther-

apeutic couplet reveals the narrative importance of pastoral power for the *ethical* formation of alliance. The form of this alliance is organized by the “cognitive and practical emotional boundaries regulating gender differences” in the therapeutic style, as discussed above in reference to Illouz’s work.

Importing a heterosexual arrangement of gender into the structure of hierarchical obedience that is integral to pastoral power, the therapeutic couplet seems to us a telltale reemergence of prevalent Victorian gender conventions in contemporary television. Comparison of the series *Breaking Bad* with its novelistic source material, James Hilton’s *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, for example, reveals the effective, if surprising survival of Victorian ideals within modern family narratives.³³ Indeed, Vince Gilligan, the creator of *Breaking Bad*, alludes to Hilton’s aforementioned novel in describing the series to television executives as “a story about a man who transforms himself from Mr. Chips into Scarface.”³⁴ This reference to the schoolteacher protagonist of Hilton’s novel sheds light on the residual Victorian novelistic elements that continue to inform views of gender and intimacy through the widely deployed trope of the therapeutic couplet. Both *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* and *Breaking Bad* depict the feminine as an emotional power supposed to succeed in the project of directing, reforming, and optimizing men’s development in a domestic context. In this originally Victorian framing, to recall Walter E. Houghton’s analysis in *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830 – 1870*, the emotions are distributed to men by women, whose superhuman emotional capacity enables them – as the so-called Angel in the House – to exercise control over the emotional progress of others.³⁵

Despite echoing these lingering Victorian features, however, the gender tropes in *Breaking Bad* are subject to the impossibility of reconciliation that characterizes the contemporary therapeutic couplet. The difficulties that attend the therapeutic process for families in shows such as *Breaking Bad*, which after all ends in Walt and Skyler’s separation, suggest that our contemporary fascination with the therapeutic style takes the form of what Lauren Berlant has called “cruel optimism.”³⁶ By staging – and thus soliciting – cultural attachment to a failed therapeutic process, *Breaking Bad* radicalizes an anxiety regarding the persistence of a transgressive masculinity that haunts contemporary narratives of crime. To that extent, *Breaking Bad* confronts the therapeutic style as an instance, to borrow Berlant’s words, of the neoliberal “retraction” of fantasies regarding the “good life” as promised by progressive social institutions such as therapy. (After all, it is the absence of affordable health care that forces Walt to manufacture methamphetamine.) As described by Gilligan’s formula of a transformation from “Mr. Chips to Scarface,” Walt’s criminal behavior and aggression triumph over and against the good life of the communicative family as envisioned by the therapeutic style. Meanwhile, Walt’s own adoption of the persona “Heisenberg” (drawing on Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle) subjects the purportedly clear distinction between Mr. Chips

and Scarface to an ultimate ambiguity. (Does Walt ever really become Scarface? And when exactly does Scarface replace Mr. Chips?) Such a moniker points to the arrested process of the therapeutic style in its attempts to negotiate, indeed to reset, cultural definitions of power and the profound irony that results when the therapeutic style becomes itself the face of criminality.

AUTHORS' NOTE

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ *Breaking Bad*, "Felina," dir. Vince Gilligan, wri. Vince Gilligan, aired September 29, 2013, AMC.
- ² For a helpful study, see Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (New York and London: Verso, 2014).
- ³ For an interesting historical account of the marketing of attention in North America, see Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads* (New York: Knopf, 2016); "Life's once inviolable precincts—the home, even the school and the restroom—were now fair game. The cumulative result was our present state of unprecedented distraction, a way of life in which the precious resource of our attention is under assault from commercial solicitation in virtually every waking moment, a mostly unremarked transaction woven seamlessly into the fabric of our existence" (from the dust jacket).
- ⁴ See Slavoj Žižek, "Game of Thrones Tapped into Fears of Revolution and Political Women—and Left Us No Better Off than Before," *The Independent*, May 21, 2019, <https://>

www.independent.co.uk/voices/game-thrones-season-8-finale-bran-daenerys-ersei-jon-snow-zizek-revolution-a8923371.html.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Brett Martin, *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution – From The Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 279.

⁷ Although critics continue to speculate that this conclusion signifies Tony’s death, David Chase has insisted on its more open-ended dimension. In a *New York Times* interview, for example, responding to the question, “Is there a correct answer to the question of whether Tony is alive or dead?” Chase says concisely, “I don’t think so.” Jeremy Egener, “David Chase on ‘The Sopranos,’ Trump and, Yes, That Ending,” *The New York Times*, January 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/07/arts/television/david-chase-sopranos-interview.html>.

⁸ Martin, *Difficult Men*, 6.

⁹ *The Sopranos*, “College,” dir. Allen Coulter, wri. James Manos Jr. and David Chase, aired February 7, 1999, HBO.

¹⁰ On this point, see Sean O’Sullivan, “Epic, Serial, Episode: *The Sopranos* and the Return Voyage of Television,” *Narrative Culture* 4 (1) (2017): 62.

¹¹ D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

¹² For an illuminating series of studies on these topics of gender and the emotions, see Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, the Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); and Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), among other works.

¹³ Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, 205–207.

¹⁴ Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 15.

¹⁵ Ibid., 84. See also Earl Gammon, “The Psycho- and Sociogenesis of Neoliberalism,” *Critical Sociology* 39 (4) (2013): 521–523.

¹⁶ Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 82.

¹⁷ Ibid., 124.

¹⁸ Ibid., 80.

¹⁹ Ibid., 231.

²⁰ “In this particular case the possibility that Gus could be so . . . very placid, very relaxed, very polite, very thoughtful was interesting to me. And that’s something I had not cultivated to this extent before now. So it was a real challenge and exciting to sort of develop that and that came through my idea that he should be a very good listener. It came to me through my yoga class.” James Poniewozik, “Interview: Talking Gus Fring with Giancarlo Esposito,” *Time*, October 10, 2011, <http://entertainment.time.com/2011/10/10/interview-talking-gus-fring-with-giancarlo-esposito/>.

²¹ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981–1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 15.

²² Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), 152.

²³ Ibid, 146.

- ²⁴ Frederick Karl, *Modern and Modernism: The Sovereignty of the Artist* (New York: Atheneum, 1988), 175.
- ²⁵ Athanasius, *The Life of St. Anthony*, trans. Robert C. Gregg (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1980), 33.
- ²⁶ We borrow the term *psy* from Nikolas Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power and Personhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- ²⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 61.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.
- ²⁹ *The Sopranos*, “Calling All Cars,” dir. Tim Van Patten, wri. David Chase, Robin Green, Mitchell Burgess, and David Flebotte, aired November 24, 2002, HBO.
- ³⁰ *Breaking Bad*, “Bullet Points,” dir. Colin Buckse, wri. Moira Walley-Beckett, aired August 7, 2011, AMC.
- ³¹ On the distinction between the deployment of alliance and sexuality, see Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I*, 105–114.
- ³² See Michel Foucault, “‘*Omnēs et Singulatim*’: A Critique of Political Reason,” in *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984*, ed. James D. Faubion (London: Penguin, 2012).
- ³³ James Hilton, *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* (New York: Open Road, 1935). As Eva Illouz writes, “Despite their many contrasts, the modern family entertains more affinities with its predecessor, the Victorian family, than meets the eye”; Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 107. On the importance of Victorian ideals for modern American marriage, see Carol Zisowitz Stearns and Peter N. Stearns, *Anger: The Struggle for Emotional Control in America’s History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 68, 82.
- ³⁴ Paul MacInnes, “*Breaking Bad* Creator Vince Gilligan: The Man Who Turned Walter White from Mr. Chips into Scarface,” *The Guardian*, May 18, 2012.
- ³⁵ Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830–1870* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979), 341–353.
- ³⁶ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012), 3.

The Survival of the Unfit

Wai Chee Dimock

*Is there room for weaklings in Darwin's theory of evolution? The "survival of the fittest" – that muscular phrase taken from Herbert Spencer – would seem to suggest not. A more nuanced and counterintuitive picture emerges, however, when fitness is remapped: as a form of mutuality between the human and the nonhuman, rather than an exclusively human attribute vested in a single individual. I explore that possibility in the contemporary novel, a genre evolving steadily away from its Victorian antecedent, and circling back to the epic to reclaim an elemental realism, alert to the reparative as well as destructive forces of the nonhuman world. In Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* and Richard Powers's *The Overstory*, these non-human forces turn the novel into a shelter for disabled characters, granting them a testing ground and a future all the more vital for being uncertain.*

In the fifth (1869) edition of *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin added a subtitle, "The Survival of the Fittest," to his pivotal Chapter 4, "Natural Selection." Taken from Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Biology* (1864), this muscular phrase gives the impression that evolution is also a muscular reflex, a straight path from effortless strength to effortless victory. Featuring sure winners chasing superlatives, there is no surprise in its outcome. Those who are the fittest – most equipped to survive – survive.

It is a ringing tautology, but there would have been no need for *Origin* if things were that simple. Complications arise right away, for evolution does not seem to be a straight path for anyone, not even those who win out. Survival is chancy, circuitous, the effect of complex adaptation, and by no means guaranteed. It does not seem to be an autonomous process, and it is never without its ugly twin. Darwin insists there can be no survivals without a matching number of extinctions, a volatile endgame making evolution not the self-evident triumph of those destined to come out on top, but endlessly fluctuating, with winners and losers continually recalibrated, their fates tangled up to the end.

That tangled fate is clearly at play in a section of Chapter 4 titled "Extinction Caused by Natural Selection." Here Darwin says: "as new forms are produced, unless we admit that specific forms can go on indefinitely increasing in number, many old forms must become extinct."¹ Extinction is a correlated development, the system-wide housekeeping done by a planet with finite resources. It is integral

to the workings of any ecosystem, indeed the only thing we can count on. Darwin returns to it, with great eloquence, in the penultimate paragraph of *On the Origin of Species*:

Judging from the past, we may safely infer that not one living species will transmit its unaltered likeness to a distant futurity. And of the species now living very few will transmit progeny of any kind to a far distant futurity; for the manner in which all organic beings are grouped, show that the greater number of species in each genus, and all species in many genera, have left no descendants, but have become utterly extinct.²

In this and scores of other similarly haunting passages, Darwin depicts the future as a closed door to most of Earth's inhabitants. He could not have known about the mass extinctions of the twenty-first century, but he would have been unsurprised – if also horrified – by the May 2019 UN report predicting that one million species will go extinct within the next decades.³ Writing before the impact of human behavior on the climate was understood, Darwin seems nonetheless to have anticipated its stark reality. So he is with us again today, speaking with eerie prescience not of the fossil records from the distant past, but the daily headlines from our immediate present. Still, things are not altogether hopeless. What Darwin says, after all, is that “not one living species will transmit its unaltered likeness to a distant futurity.” *Unaltered likeness*, it seems, is the problem. It is going nowhere. For those that manage to evolve and adapt, a path to the future is not out of the question.

What might this stern but sometimes forgiving prophet have to tell us about the fate of the novel, looking ahead to a century of great turmoil, with outsized unknowns greeting us at every turn? Literary scholars Gillian Beer and George Levine have alerted us to the many overlaps between Darwinian evolution and narrative fiction.⁴ Adam Gopnik points out that this naturalist writes like a novelist, raising the possibility that literary observations about humans might have something in common with scientific observations about the nonhuman world.⁵ I will be exploring the contemporary novel through this lens, drawing especially on Darwin's insight that survivals and extinctions are correlated and continually evolving, system-wide events with cascading effects. These cascading effects cast an interesting light on the past and future forms of the novel as it takes note of the fate of adjacent forms and adapts accordingly, with not always predictable outcomes.

In an unintentionally prescient moment in *Origin*, Darwin writes: in “the case of a country undergoing some slight physical change, for instance, of climate, some species will probably become extinct” right away. But “from what we have seen of the intimate and complex manner in which” all life is “bound together,” we may predict that “any change in the numerical proportions of the in-

habitants, independently of the change of climate itself, would seriously affect the others.”⁶

Darwin is speaking, of course, only of biological species. However, biology for him is also a conceptual template, a way to think about evolving forms. Languages, for instance, are much like biological species in their nested classifications, their correlated flourishing and decline, as he takes pains to emphasize in *The Descent of Man* (1871):

Languages, like organic beings, can be classed in groups under groups, and they can be classed either naturally by descent, or artificially by other characters. Dominant languages and dialects spread widely, and lead to the gradual extinction of other tongues. A language, like a species, once extinct, never, as Sir. C. Lyell remarks, reappears. The same language never has two birth-places.⁷

So far, a strict zero-sum game is in play in both the biological and linguistic realms. Yet, while the extinction of languages is well-known and well-documented, the extinction (or not) of other classes of linguistic objects – for instance, the “artificial” class called the novel, or the epic – is not so clear-cut. How fixed and long-lasting are these genres? Are they here for good, or are they mutable, ephemeral? And is there a built-in end date to these narrative forms, making extinction inevitable at some point? By his own example, Darwin seems to suggest that there is considerable fluidity here, evidenced by the low-probability survival of certain linguistic objects that, on the face of it, might not seem the fittest.

Darwin’s own “Abstract” (his name for *On the Origin of Species*) is an example of such a low-probability survivor. He had not meant to publish it in this guise. But as the full treatise “will take me many more years to complete,” and as “my health is far from strong,” he had been urged by geologist Charles Lyell and botanist Joseph Hooker to get it out even in an “imperfect” form, especially since another naturalist, Alfred Russel Wallace, “who is now studying the natural history of the Malay archipelago, has arrived at almost exactly the same general conclusions that I have on the origin of species.”⁸

Published under duress, the resulting volume is hardly optimized for survival. Fortunately, unlike languages that go extinct thanks to a strict zero-sum game, his own linguistic creation seems subject to a different calculus. Darwin is not without hope that it would have a future, though arrived at through a peculiar process: “I can here give only the general conclusions at which I have arrived, with a few facts in illustration, but which, I hope, in most cases will suffice. No one can feel more sensible than I do of the necessity of hereafter publishing in detail all the facts, with references, on which my conclusions have been grounded; and I hope in a future work to do this.”⁹

The existing weakness of *Origin* turns out to justify its bid for a future. Rushed into print by the actions of others – including the unwelcome but crucial input of

Wallace – it adapts by claiming time as a medium of remediation. Not entirely fit at the moment, it promises to do better the next time around. Second try is an evolutionary necessity. Variants are a must, since the only way *Origin* could survive is as a long-term project, a work-in-progress kept afloat by future editions, with gaps to be filled, new information to be added, and shaky points to be shored up. The survivors here do not have to be the fittest, for the unfit, with ongoing help, can sometimes beat the odds and gain traction over time. Such assisted outcomes turn the zero-sum game into a statistical unknown, with the future anyone's guess.

It is this statistical unknown that I would like to bring to bear on Mikhail Bakhtin's account of the rise of the novel, a zero-sum game correlated with the demise of the epic. We come upon the epic "when it's already completely finished, a congealed and half-moribund genre," Bakhtin says. Because "it is walled off from all subsequent times, the epic past is absolute and complete. It is as closed as a circle. Inside it everything is finished, already over. There is no place in the epic world for any openendedness, indecision, indeterminacy. There are no glimpses in it through which we glimpse the future."¹⁰

Fans of "epic" science-fiction novels, movies, TV shows, and video games would have no idea what Bakhtin is talking about. This supposedly extinct genre is not behaving like one. Morphing from noun to adjective, it is everywhere, showing up on every platform and in every shape and size, a variant-rich survivor with a future stretching far into the distance. Taken apart and repurposed in countless ways, it is versatile and tenacious, responsive to crises thanks to its continual updating. At once the most ancient and most recent, it is able to offer glimpses of monstrous futures, elided or censored in other genres but given an airing here, as befits an old-timer schooled by nonhuman catastrophes from the first.

In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), Amitav Ghosh pays tribute to the "awareness of nonhuman agency" in ancient epics, even as he takes a swipe at what he imagines to be the dominant form of the contemporary novel.¹¹ According to him, elemental forces and off-scale events have no place in this hidebound genre, an absence especially noticeable in the "serious fiction" featured in *The New York Times Book Review* and *The New York Review of Books*. Unchanged since Victorian times, these literary dinosaurs continue to assert the stability of the human world even when that stability is no longer tenable, banning anything cataclysmic:

To introduce such happenings into a novel is in fact to court eviction from the mansion in which serious fiction has long been in residence; it is to risk banishment to the humbler dwellings that surround the manor house – those generic outhouses that were once known by names such as the gothic, the romance or the melodrama, and have now come to be called fantasy, horror, and science fiction.¹²

Like Bakhtin, Ghosh seems to be describing an object deliberately ossified for the sake of argument. This disaster-averse form of the novel has ceased to be the dominant form some time ago, as writers as different as Norman Mailer, Toni Morrison, and Don DeLillo could have attested. More recently, the novels of Margaret Atwood, Ian McEwan, and Cormac McCarthy show just how far catastrophes have been integrated into our experience of the everyday: as a realism rendered epic by the Anthropocene, a realism of the nonhuman returning with a vengeance as the superhuman.

In a recent interview with David Wallace-Wells, author of *The Uninhabitable Earth*, Ghosh conceded that “the ground had shifted,” that the hidebound novel was finally changing, citing Richard Powers’s *The Overstory* (2018) as a “major turning point – not just because it is a great book, which it is, but because it was taken seriously by the literary mainstream.”¹³ The house of fiction is a different house when a novel about trees can win the Pulitzer Prize. Lest we forget the bad old days, Ghosh offered Barbara Kingsolver as a cautionary tale, an author whose reputation had suffered because her nonhuman subjects – say, monarch butterflies in *Flight Behavior* – had always been dismissed as a fringe concern.

Kingsolver herself, in her *New York Times* review of *The Overstory*, seems to echo this point. Titled “The Heroes of This Novel Are Centuries Old and 300 Feet Tall,” the review begins with a taunt to the reader:

Trees do most of the things you do, just more slowly. They compete for their livelihoods and take care of their families, sometimes making huge sacrifices for their children. They breathe, eat and have sex. They give gifts, communicate, learn, remember and record the important events of their lives. With relatives and non-kin alike they cooperate, forming neighborhood watch committees. . . . Some of this might take centuries, but for a creature with a life span of hundreds or thousands of years, time must surely have a different feel about it.¹⁴

All interesting to Kingsolver herself, but not necessarily to the general public. “People will only read stories about people,” she observes. Knowing this all too well, Powers has come up with a “delightfully choreographed, ultimately breathtaking hoodwink,” fooling us into thinking that the novel is about humans, when it is gradually revealed that these are just the “shrubby understory.” In time, these shrubby characters will become ecoterrorists, tree defenders, necessary to the fleshing out of the plot, but the animating core of the novel belongs to the trees towering above them. It is these trees that give the novel its experimental form, a web of connectivity initially unemphatic but eventually inexorable, making it possible for Powers to tell a converging tale about a cast of mostly strangers.

Powers is the “winner of a genius grant,” Kingsolver reminds us, known for his brainy creations. Given that he has “swept the literary-prize Olympics, he should be a household name, but isn’t quite. Critics have sometimes blamed a certain

bleakness of outlook, or a deficit of warmth in his characters.” It is an odd moment in the review, a sly jab at an author she otherwise admires. Powers is not quite a household name when the standard is set by Kingsolver herself, whose books since 1993 have all been *New York Times* bestsellers. And that 1993 novel that set her on this path, *The Poisonwood Bible* – an Oprah’s Book Club selection and a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize – in fact has more than a little in common with *The Overstory*. From the tree-centric title to the cast of characters revolving around it, this novel, written at the end of the last century, has already decided that business as usual would not do, that a new literary form is needed to tell a different story about the world: who inhabits it, what disasters look like, and what it takes to keep going.

The poisonwood makes its appearance almost as soon as the novel begins. The year was 1959. Nathan Price, Baptist missionary newly arrived in the Belgian Congo with his wife and four daughters, is alerted by Mama Tataba, his housekeeper: “‘That one, brother, he bite,’ she said, pointing her knuckly hand at a small tree he was wresting from his garden plot.”¹⁵ And sure enough, when Nathan wakes up the next morning, his arms and hands are covered with rashes. “Even his good right eye was swollen shut, from where he’d wiped his brow. Yellow pus ran like sap from his welted flesh.” As his daughter Leah observes, “Among all of Africa’s mysteries, here were the few that revealed themselves in no time flat.”¹⁶

Initiation into the mysteries of Africa begins with bodily mortification. On this continent, the nonhuman bites. It has no trouble fighting back when an intruder tries to impose his will on a native habitat. With pus running down his good right eye, Nathan has been taught a lesson in local knowledge, one that also teaches him something about himself. Shining a light on his preexisting condition (his left eye was injured in the war), it reveals just how invisible many disabilities are, how less than fully intact many functional humans prove to be. His appearance as well as his vision now compromised, Nathan looks not unlike Mama Tataba, who has a “blind eye. It looked like an egg whose yolk had been broken and stirred just once.”¹⁷

The deformity is hard to miss, but nobody pays it any mind around here, for in this community as in many others in Africa, “they’ve all got their own handicap children or a mama with no feet.” Another neighbor, Mama Mwanza, was even more seriously disfigured when her house burned down. Her “legs didn’t burn all the way off but it looks like a pillow or just something down there wrapped up in a cloth sack. She has to scoot around on her hands.” Not having the use of her legs, however, is not necessarily disabling. She carries all her laundry in a big basket on her head, and “when she scoots down the road, not a one of them of them falls out. All the other ladies have big baskets on their heads too, so nobody stares at Mama Mwanza one way or another.”¹⁸

Is “disability” even the right word here? Mama Mwanza is able-bodied, though not by a standard yardstick. Literary scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson

refers to these nonstandard characters as “extraordinary bodies.”¹⁹ In her fire-ravaged form as in her off-the-charts performance, Mama Mwanza is far outside the bounds of normalcy. She would have been stared at anywhere else but not here, a fact hugely gratifying to Adah Price, no standard character herself:

My right side drags. I was born with half my brain dried up like a prune, deprived of blood by an unfortunate fetal mishap . . . we were inside the womb together dum-de-dum when Leah suddenly turned and declared, Adah, you are just too slow. I am taking all the nourishment here and going on ahead. She grew strong and I grew weak. (Yes, Jesus loves me!) And so it came to pass, in the Eden of our mother’s womb, I was cannibalized by my sister.²⁰

Disability is not an African problem, symptomatic of a backward continent. It is everywhere, back home in Georgia, inside the Eden of the womb, shorthand for a kind of congenital imbalance plaguing the world, a root inequity with no obvious solution. Pieties such as “Jesus loves me!” can only be a sick joke here, for this Eden is Hobbesian rather than Christian, a state of nature in which life is “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.”²¹ Here humans will cannibalize one another, showing that we are matter after all, edible morsels that can be gobbled up. Bodily harm is simply something that happens, as it happens to other embodied creatures, a random and not infrequent fact of life. Our vulnerability speaks to our kinship with the nonhuman world.

That certainly seems to be the case with Adah. But it is not the whole story either, for as we have seen, the nonhuman world, vulnerable as it is, is not altogether helpless, not without means of self-affirmation. So too with Adah. Her disabled right side has not stopped her from quoting poetry (Emily Dickinson and William Carlos Williams are her favorites) or learning the Kikongo tongue. It is she, knowing that tongue, who gives us an inside view of what happens to Christianity when, like Nathan, it too comes into contact with the poisonwood tree, in this case, linguistic contact: “‘Tata Jesus is Bangala!’ declares the Reverend every Sunday at the end of his sermon,” Adah reports, and she adds: “*Bangala* means something precious and dear. But the way he pronounces it, it means the poisonwood tree. Praise the Lord, Hallelujah, my friends! For Jesus will make you itch like nobody’s business.”²²

It is not for nothing that the novel is titled *The Poisonwood Bible*, for the scripture being disseminated here is indeed a sharply local variant, touched by the Kikongo tongue and the vengeful tree that bears its signature. This is a bible founded not on a special dispensation for humans, but the impartial matter-of-factness of elemental forces, giving *Homo sapiens* no special status, treating our physical bodies as just that, physical bodies. What Kingsolver is offering here is not a novel speaking to one particular catastrophe, but rather the generalized coordinates of a newly chastised realism, no longer insulated or human-centric, and not looking

away from any unthinkable future it might bring. This elemental realism will have tremendous consequences for how twenty-first-century disasters are perceived and responded to.

The power of this new realism is fully on display in the novel's climactic scene, featuring the African equivalent of "the Hand of God," the arrival of the flesh-eating *nsongonya*, the army ants. These ants feel like "burning liquid that had flooded our house . . . that had flooded the world," Leah says. "Every surface was covered and boiling," like "black flowing lava in the moonlight." Adah, so often aligned with the nonhuman world, is trapped for once in her inadequate humanness. *Help me*. This cry of desperation sums her up and holds her prisoner. Endlessly playful and expansive on other occasions, she is reduced to just these two words now, unadorned and involuntary. They come out of her mouth almost to spite her, for they will be in vain. Her mother, already carrying her younger sister, Ruth May, will ignore these words. "She studied me for a moment, weighing my life. Then nodded, shifted the load in her arms, turned away."²³

Adah goes under almost instantly and is trampled upon, but regains her wits at just this moment, getting from anonymous strangers the help she fails to get from her own mother, a means of locomotion that propels her forward:

I found my way to my elbows and raised myself up, grabbing with my strong left hand at legs that dragged me forward. Ants on my earlobes, my tongue, my eyelids. I heard myself crying out loud – such a strange noise, as if it came from my hair and fingernails, and again and again I came up. Once I looked for my mother and saw her, far ahead. I followed, bent on my own rhythm. Curved into the permanent song of my body: *left . . . behind*.

I did not know who it was that lifted me over the crowd and set me down into the canoe with my mother. I had to turn quickly to see him as he retreated. It was Anatole. We crossed the river together, mother and daughter, facing each other, low in the boat's quiet center. She tried to hold my hands but could not. For the breath of a river we stared without speaking.²⁴

In that unworded and unforgiving stare between mother and daughter, Kingsolver translates her new realism into terms no one can fail to understand. Proud monuments of civilization – the human language, for instance, or the human family – can look very different when tested by catastrophes. They are less than what we think. Kingsolver is not waving any flags here, not even going out on a limb. Still, it is the case that one of the best known topoi of the epic genre – Aeneas fleeing Troy with his father Anchises on his back and his son Ascanius by his side – is being turned upside down to yield a modern variant, a novel grappling with large-scale calamities like the epic, but doing so on a new terrain and yielding almost the opposite outcome.

In the *Aeneid*, it is the iconic trio of Aeneas, Anchises, and Ascanius that saves the day.

This beacon of hope, shining through the convulsions of a sacked city, speaks to the integrity of the family and the sanctity of the civilized tongue: “Then come, dear father. Arms around my neck: / I’ll take you on my shoulders, no great weight. / Whatever happens, both will face one danger, / Find one safety. Iulus will come with me / My wife at a good interval behind.”²⁵ Anchises’s bodily frailty is not a problem here. If anything, it is that frailty that anchors this timeless tableau, this charmed circle of filial piety and generational continuity.

The only thing that mars it is Aeneas’s inexplicable decision to have his wife, Creusa, follow at a distance. Not surprisingly, she soon gets separated and is never seen or heard from again:

Creusa, taken away from us by grim fate, did she / Linger, or stray, or sink in weariness? / There is no telling. Never would she be / Restored to us. Never did I look back / Or think to look for her, lost as she was, / Until we reached the funeral mound and shrine / Of venerable Ceres. Here at last / All came together, but she was not there; / She alone failed her friends, her child, her husband.²⁶

In Aeneas’s telling, it is Creusa’s fault that there is now this gaping hole within the family. Still, even he admits he never once looked back to make sure she was keeping up. Even more tellingly, when he goes down to the underworld, in Book VI of the *Aeneid*, the entire episode is dominated by his meeting with Anchises and the latter’s prophesy about the future glories of Rome. There is no mention of Creusa, no attempt to find her and hear from her lips what happened that fateful night.

There is a flinty core to epic, unyielding and untender. This is a pre-Christian genre, after all; salvation is not part of the script, not a legitimate hope with theological backing. Humans here are mortals and never more than mortals, finite through and through, distinct from nonhumans only for a brief spell of time. The unceremonious dispatch of Creusa, like the unforgiving slaying of Turnus at the end of the *Aeneid*, or the indiscriminate massacre of the suitors at the end of the *Odyssey*, is simply the intensified form of a finitude that will sooner or later overtake all humans. Epic realism is without illusion from the first about who we are, how we die, and how we are forgotten. This realism Kingsolver takes to heart. For her, though, human finitude is not necessarily fatal, for it is above all a form of life, clear-eyed about what it can and cannot do, pivoted on limits and energized by limits, not a lack but a need-based perseverance, a form of life daily lived by the disabled.

Adah is exemplary for that reason. Her ordeal might not be a minority report after all, but a general portrait of humanity. Being overwhelmed is nothing special in a century of floods and wildfires and pandemics. Cognitive disabilities unite us as calamities spiral beyond our control. A planet-wide need for help puts all of

us on the same footing. But then again, needing help does not have to mean helplessness either. Adah is once again exemplary here: she might not be able to move fast on her own, but her quick-thinking brain and her “strong left hand” turn the heels of others into an effective means of locomotion. Disability here goes hand in hand with an ability to use help in whatever form it comes, an inventiveness crucial to the survival of the unfit, and to the novel itself as it looks ahead to a future in which characters like Adah are probably closer to reality than characters living unhandicapped and unimpaired lives.

Some such thought seems to have been percolating in the Richard Powers corpus for the past twenty-five years. From *Galatea 2.2* (1995) to *The Echo Maker* (2006), disabled characters have always had a nontrivial presence in his fiction. *The Overstory* outdoes all of them. Best known as a novel about trees, it is more remarkable still in its cast of nonstandard characters, each disabled in a unique way. Patricia Westerford, eventually the celebrated author of *The Secret Forest*, was a “thing only borderline human” as a little girl, born with a “deformation of the inner ear” that makes her face “sloped and ursine,” and her speech a “slurry hard for the uninitiated to comprehend.”²⁷ Douglas Pavlicek, ejected from an exploding plane, his tibia shattered by a misfiring sidearm, and saved from death only by a gigantic banyan, ends up with “one and a half good legs.” And Ray Brinkman, once an articulate property lawyer, can only speak “one syllable at a time,” each syllable “mangled and worthless,” after a stroke.²⁸

Among these, none is more striking than Neelay Mehta. Falling from an oak tree when he was eleven, Neelay will henceforth be “fused to his wheelchair,” his legs “shriveled to thick twigs.” While remaining conscious for a minute after the fall, though, he has a chance to see the tree as it is rarely seen:

stacks of spreading metropolis, networks of conjoined cells pulsing with energy and liquid sun, water rising through long thin reeds, rings of them banded together into pipes that draw dissolved minerals up through the narrowing tunnels of transparent twig and out through their waving tips, while sun-made sustenance drops down in tunes just inside them. A colossal, rising, reaching, stretching space elevator of a billion independent parts, shuttering the air into the sky and storing the sky deep underground, sorting possibility from out of nothing; the most perfect piece of self-writing code that his eyes could hope to see. Then his eyes close in shock and Neelay shuts down.²⁹

Nothing can be further apart from the boiling lava of the *nsongonya*. This pulsing, swaying, photosynthesizing apparition, a miracle of sky, sun, and earth, is nature as we would like to imagine it. Yet the damage done to Neelay is tenfold greater than the damage done to Adah by the ants, even though the tree does not set out to cripple and maim. It is just an oak tree observing the law of gravity, enacting the consequences of its own height. From *The Poisonwood Bible* to *The Overstory*, the

nonhuman world has evolved still further. It is on its own now, a primary reality, densely and superabundantly inhabited, and no more solicitous of humans than nonhumans. Epic realism here is the realism of elemental forces, impartial in their power to nourish and their power to destroy.

For Neelay, the run-in with these forces is life-changing, and not necessarily for the worse. Sure, he looks helpless, but his disability, like Adah's, has turned him into something almost like a force of nature, with not a little in common with the nonhuman world. At the novel's end, his mind is once again on fire, his "heart is beating too hard for what little meat is left on his skeleton, and his vision pulses" as he thinks of the next installment of the game that already has millions and millions on the planet hooked. An even more memorable scene, though, is probably an earlier one, the epic undertaking of lifting himself from his bed into his wheelchair. This requires, first, grabbing the overhead bar, "reaching out to one of the many hanging hooks filled with gear," snagging "the U-shaped canvas sling and, in a hundred small increments," spreading "it out in the bed around his body's upright stem." Next,

He stabs out again and spears the head of the winch, drags it across its horizontal brace beam until it's positioned directly above. All four sling loops go over the winch's latches, two per side. He pops the remote in his mouth and, holding the straps in place, bites down on the power button until the winch lifts him upright. He affixes the remote to the sling and detaches the catheter's urine sack from the side of the bed. Holding the hose in his teeth to free both hands, he attaches the bag to the satchel he has wrapped himself in. Then he presses the winch button again, holds on, and goes airborne.³⁰

Powers's description goes on for two pages. This spare-no-details account of Neelay and his wheelchair is not exactly fun to read. But it is a full-throated variant on Homer's full-throated account of Odysseus, "master shipwright," painstakingly building his ship in Book V of the *Odyssey*.³¹ That ship will take him to what he yearns for day and night: "my quiet Penelope," who, he tells Kalypso, "would seem a shade before your majesty, / death and old age being unknown to you / while she must die."³² For Odysseus as for Neelay, mortality is the beginning of life rather than its terminus. And for both, that beginning can have a future only if the nonhuman world is on board as friend and foe, a means of locomotion and a projectile into the unknown. Assisted survival is multiform and endlessly inventive. Darwin has already intuited it, but it is the twenty-first-century novel that will give it its fullest expression, claiming it as the still serviceable home of the unfit.

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- ¹⁹ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Literature and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).
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- ²² Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, 276.
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- ²⁵ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Vintage, 1990), Book II, 921–925.
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- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 88, 497.
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- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 496, 194.
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Poets in Prose: Genre & History in the Arabic Novel

Robyn Creswell

*Novelists in many literary traditions have come to terms with the distinctiveness of their art form by thinking about poets and poetry. The need to differentiate the novel from poetry is especially pressing for Arab prose writers because of poetry's preeminent status in that literary corpus. Many twentieth-century Arab intellectuals have valorized the novel as the representative genre of modernity – whether conceived as an absent ideal or the epoch of consumerist capitalism – while situating poetry as a backward element of contemporary life. But poetry has also offered prose writers such as Muhammad al-Muwaylihi, in *A Period of Time*, and novelists such as Tayeb Salih, in *Season of Migration to the North*, a way to reflect on the ambivalences engendered by modernity and the experience of colonialism. This tradition of using the novel to meditate on historical rupture and the fate of poetry continues into the present, even as poetry's relation to political and intellectual life becomes increasingly tenuous.*

“A great poet of history” is Lukács’s somewhat curious judgment of Sir Walter Scott, and especially his portrayal of the Scottish Highland clans. Lukács is echoing Heinrich Heine’s praise for the English novelist, which he quotes: “Strange whim of the people! They demand their history from the hand of the poet and not the hand of the historian.”¹ Until he published *Waverley* in 1814, Scott was in fact best known for his verse. It was his long narrative poem *The Lady of the Lake* (1810) that spurred the Highland Revival after selling twenty-five thousand copies in eight months. But Lukács also means something more pointed by calling Scott a “poet.” As he emphasizes again and again, Scott’s greatness lies in his “tragic” sense of historical necessity, his clear-eyed view of the clans’ inevitable destruction despite their gallantry (as compared with the nostalgic or moralizing views of Hugo and the Romantic “elegist of past ages”). And it is Scott’s totalizing representation of popular life that constitutes, for Lukács, “the only real approach to epic greatness.”² Lukács’s terms, *tragic* and *epic*, suggest the difficulty of identifying what is truly new about any literary genre. Attempting to make a case for Scott’s pioneering efforts as a novelist, Lukács keeps turning him into a classical poet.

The passage from poetry to the novel is also a theme of Scott's fiction and essays. In *Waverley*, he converts genre difference into a narrative sequence, casting oral poetry as an art form of the heroic but ultimately doomed past, and the novel as the quintessential genre of modern life. Early on in Edward Waverley's introduction to Highland society, he attends a banquet accompanied in Homeric fashion by a recitation of Mac-Murrough, the family *bhairdh*. Though Edward cannot understand the Gaelic words, he is impressed by "the wild and impassioned notes" and the way the poet's "ardour" communicates itself to his audience. Flora, the chieftain Fergus's sister, later explains that the recitation of "poems recording the feats of heroes, the complaints of lovers, and the wars of contending tribes, forms the chief amusement of a winter fireside in the Highlands. Some of these are said to be very ancient, and, if they are ever translated into any of the languages of civilized Europe, cannot fail to produce a deep and general sensation." Flora promises to recite her own English translation of Mac-Murrough's verses, asking Edward to follow her into a picturesque landscape of craggy rocks, mossy turf, and a waterfall.

I have given you the trouble of walking to this spot, Captain Waverley, both because I thought the scenery would interest you, and because a Highland song would suffer still more from my imperfect translation were I to introduce it without its own wild and appropriate accompaniments. To speak in the poetical language of my country, the seat of the Celtic Muse is in the mist of the secret and solitary hill, and her voice in the murmur of the mountain stream.³

Like many eighteenth-century thinkers, from William Jones to Johann Gottfried Herder, Scott figures oral poetry as the typical art form of primitive cultures; it is a discourse of the passions, addressed to an equally impassioned audience.⁴ As Flora's performance suggests, it is also a circumstantial genre, dependent for its inspiration and effects on the immediate scenery and, ultimately, on one's comprehension of its language. While translations of ancient verses might impress a European audience – as the Ossian forgeries proved – all translation of this poetry is necessarily "imperfect," if only because it is displaced from the local powers of the Celtic Muse. Literary scholar Ian Duncan has noted that in Scott's historical novels, "the hidden spring of history becomes visible . . . in the difference between social and economic systems that marks the transition between developmental stages: in other words, in the difference between cultures, ways of life."⁵ In *Waverley*, the communal, passionate, and circumstantial nature of poetry plays a historical foil to the essentially individualized, reasonable, and universal genre of the novel, whose narrative paradigm is henceforth fixed as one of inexorable modernization. As Lukács suggests, Scott's delimiting of poetry's powers gives new responsibilities to the novel: the epic task of narrating a collective experience, the tragic task of analyzing the workings of necessity.

Thinking about poets and poetry is one way that novelists have historically come to terms with the distinctiveness of their own art. And the relegation of poetry to a premodern epoch, whether in sorrow or satisfaction, is a trope that has crossed borders and eras. In an essay published in 1945, the Egyptian novelist and later Nobel Prize winner Naguib Mahfouz announced, “The novel is the poetry of the modern world.” Mahfouz’s *Cairo Trilogy* (1956–1957) would become the preeminent example of the historical novel in Arabic, a suite of fictions set largely in the interwar period that tells the story of Egypt’s unsteady progress toward national liberation. The *Trilogy* hews closely to the genre strictures identified by Lukács: a detailed representation of popular life; cameos by real personages; a dynamic sense of social contradictions; and a clear narrative of progress (along with a reckoning of its costs). In his essay, Mahfouz argued that the modern age – “the age of science, industry, and truth” – could only be captured in prose, the medium of reason. Poetry, an imaginative art burdened by a long history of formal conventions, belonged to an earlier “age of myth.”⁶

The felt need to differentiate oneself from poets is perhaps especially pressing for Arab prose writers, if only because of poetry’s preeminent status in that literary tradition. An early, more openly antagonistic version of the modern novelist’s anxiety is legible in the Quran itself, which tells us that Muhammad’s speech, though evidently inspired by invisible sources and occasionally formed of rhymed utterances, “is not the speech of a poet [*sha’ir*].”⁷ As Islamic scholar Navid Kermani writes, “No objection plagued the Prophet as much, and none of his opponents’ arguments is as vehemently rebuffed in the Quran, as the assertion that he was a poet.”⁸ The prophet was not a *sha’ir* because his source of revelation was divine, while the poets’ source of inspiration was commonly understood to be djinn. The prophet’s words were true, while poets were liars, “who wander in every valley and say what they do not do.”⁹

Despite this Quranic anathema, poets did not disappear with the arrival of the new dispensation. *Al-shi’ir diwan al-‘arab*, “Poetry is the archive of the Arabs,” is a saying conventionally attributed to Ibn ‘Abbas, a cousin of the prophet. It suggests that poetry survives as the record of Arabs’ significant deeds – the feats of heroes and the wars of contending tribes – as well as the epitome of their art. An eighth-century man of letters, Ibn Qutaybah, enumerated its excellencies in terms that presage those of Flora: “Poetry is the source of the Arabs’ learning, the basis of their wisdom, the archive [*diwan*] of their history, the repository of their battle lore. It is the wall built to protect the memory of their glories, the moat that safeguards their laurels. It is the truthful witness on the day of crisis, the irrefutable proof in disputes.”¹⁰ Given this history, it is no surprise that Arab novelists were as eager to distinguish their art from poetry as they were to channel its special powers. Confirming Mahfouz’s claim about the reversal of genre hierarchies,

the Egyptian critic Jabir 'Usfur rewrites Ibn 'Abbas in a phrase that suggests this ambivalence: "The novel is the *diwan* of modern Arabs."¹¹

It is because of poetry's antiquity and prestige that it has often served Arab novelists as an emblem for the dangers of "tradition." As with Mahfouz, poetry is often associated with outmoded or supposedly unmodern ways of thinking and being. Nihad Sirees's novel *The Silence and the Roar* is a dystopian parable set in a country similar to his native Syria. Published in 2004, the story takes place on a day in which the populace is out celebrating the twenty-year anniversary of the Leader's rule. The narrator, a writer who has fallen out of favor with the regime, follows the progress of the cheering crowds with disgusted fascination.

In my country people love rhymed speech and rhymed prose and inspirational metered verse. Just watch how they will repeat phrases that have no meaning whatsoever but that rhyme perfectly well. In the end this means that if the ruler wants the masses to adore him he must immediately set up a center dedicated to the production of new slogans about him, on the condition that they resemble poetry because we are a people who love poetry so much that we love things that only resemble poetry. We might even be satisfied with only occasionally rhyming speech, regardless of its content. Didn't someone say that the era of mass politics is the era of poetry? If so, then the reverse is also true, because poetry is geared towards the masses just as the prose that I am now writing is intended for the individual. . . . Poetry inspires zealotry and melts away individual personality whereas prose molds the rational mind, individuality and personality.¹²

For Sirees, prose is the medium of the Arab world's alienated elite: intellectuals who listen from their windows to the rhyming slogans of power with a despairing sense of the absurd. Another common critique of poetry is aimed not at its proximity to power but rather its distance from everyday life. In the Egyptian Sonallah Ibrahim's novel *The Committee* (1981) – indebted, like Sirees's fiction, to Kafka – an unnamed narrator is brought before a committee for unspecified reasons. After a burlesque show trial in which he is forced to perform a belly dance and undergo a rectal exam, the narrator is asked produce "a study on the greatest contemporary Arab luminary," an assignment that involves him in a series of madcap researches into Coca-Cola's history in the region. He considers whether the greatest Arab luminary might not be a poet, but decides against the idea, "Because, perhaps mistakenly, I didn't like their high-flown language and obfuscation. Therefore, I was prejudiced against them from the start."¹³ Elsewhere, in a prison notebook he kept during the early 1960s, Ibrahim memorialized a quote from Boris Pasternak's 1960 interview with *The Paris Review*: "I believe that it is no longer possible for lyric poetry to express the immensity of our experience. Life has grown too cumbersome, too complicated."¹⁴ Ibrahim's own prose is the antithesis of lyrical obfuscation – his typical sentences are blunt to the point of ineliance – and his novels are dense with quotidian complexities.

Although Sirees and Ibrahim critique poetry from different directions, both identify the novel as the representative genre of modernity, whether modernity is conceived as an absent ideal or the degraded epoch of consumerist capitalism. Poetry, by contrast, is figured as a backward element of contemporary life – an atavistic remnant of word sorcery, now ripe for exploitation by venal rulers. But the story of poetry’s role in the self-conception of the Arab novel has other dimensions, which go beyond these relatively rigid mirror images. Poetry has even, at times, offered novelists a way to reflect on the ambivalences engendered by modernity, with its mixture of promised ruptures and tenacious survivals.

Early scholarship on the Arab novel tended to look for precursors in Europe and to consecrate works that conformed to broadly realist strictures. For most of the twentieth century, critical consensus held that Muhammad Husayn Haykal’s *Zaynab* (1914), a sentimental fiction centered on the travails of a peasant woman from the Delta, was, in the words of historian Sir Hamilton Gibb, “the first real Egyptian novel.” Writing in 1929, Gibb gave qualified praise for the novel’s psychological depth, coherent plot, descriptions of landscape, and handling of dialogue, while acknowledging that “the imaginative element in *Zaynab* is more limited than in the average European novel.”¹⁵ Gibb’s canonization was repeated many times, most notably by Egyptian scholar ‘Abd al-Muhsin Taha Badr’s seminal 1963 study *Tatawwur al-riwaya al-‘arabiyya al-haditha fi Misr* (The Development of the Modern Arabic Novel in Egypt), and as late as M. M. Badawi’s *Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (1993).¹⁶ Recent scholarship has challenged these claims, largely by exploring the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century archive of periodical fictions and popular translations, which show that realism in Arabic did not begin with *Zaynab* and that Haykal’s book was hardly representative of the wider body of fictional works, spanning detective tales, romances, and swashbucklers.¹⁷

A second strand of scholarship on the Arabic novel has looked to the native tradition, which includes such prose forms as the medieval *maqamat* (short rhyming narratives typically centered on the figure of an eloquent rogue), *The Thousand and One Nights*, travelogues, and historical works.¹⁸ This scholarly turn was preceded by Arab novelists’ own growing interest in the classical corpus. This reorientation was especially marked after the defeat of 1967, which induced a decade of soul-searching among Arab intellectuals, agonized by their dependence on foreign models and standards. An impressive example of this appropriation of the native tradition is Gamal al-Ghitani’s novel *Zayni Barakat* (1974), which tells a story of intrigues among the Cairene secret police of late Mamluk Egypt – a sly allegory of Nasserist repression during the 1950s and 1960s. Al-Ghitani’s novel was explicitly indebted to classical Arab historians, and his work suggested how the indigenous heritage might be turned into a resource for powerful self-criticism.

The Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish once admitted, “I actually envy the novelists. Their world is larger, for the novel can incorporate all kinds of knowledge, intellectual traditions, topics, concerns, life experiences. It can absorb poetry as well as all the other literary genres, from which it benefits tremendously.”¹⁹ But in fact Arabic poetry has resisted absorption into the novelistic tradition more stubbornly than other genres. It has more typically served as an antithesis (or a repressed element), highlighting the newer form’s suitability to the present. Until the twentieth century, prose genres in Arabic often included a great deal of poetry; the stories of the *Nights*, for example, are full of verse (though translations often exclude them). But as the novel becomes more and more entrenched, it seems able to absorb less and less poetry. An exception to this rule is the trope of the *atlal*, or ruined campsite.²⁰

The motif comes from the earliest strata of Arabic literature. In verse of the pre-Islamic period, composed by Bedouin poets in and around the Arabian Peninsula, a standard opening features the speaker coming across the traces of an abandoned campsite, *al-atlāl* in Arabic, which evoke the memory of a tryst he had in the same place with a now absent beloved (often from another tribe). The poet weeps at his loss, imagines the scene of departure, and is upbraided by companions for giving in to his grief. The trope combines memory and longing, and through its description of desert flora and fauna, contrasts the implacable march of human time with the cycles of natural life. Later Arab poets with no experience of Bedouin life continued to use the motif and it survives into the present. As the scholar Jaroslav Stetkevych has written, “It seems to contain a whole people’s reservoir of sorrow, loss, yearning.”²¹

A remarkable use of the *atlal* trope comes from Muhammad al-Muwaylihi’s *A Period of Time*, a prose fiction serialized in the Egyptian weekly *Misbah al-Sharq* between 1898 – 1902, during the period of the British occupation.²² The work opens with the narrator’s trip to a Cairene cemetery, where he witnesses the resurrection of a Turkish notable who lived in the early nineteenth century. The narrator takes the pasha on a comic tour of modern Egyptian institutions, including law, medicine, and the police. In the eighth chapter, the two companions search for a pious foundation or *waqf*, which the pasha endowed during his lifetime. Little remains of the former buildings – the mosque now neighbors a wine shop – and the pasha weeps “at the sight of the old ruins and houses,” reminding the narrator of old poets shedding tears over their campsites.²³ Al-Muwaylihi shows how the poetic motif, as a trope of memory, bears a narrative kernel. As the scholar Hilary Kilpatrick astutely notes,

Al-Muwaylihi’s achievement is to have realised that the *aṭlāl* can be employed in a new way, that is, to mark not only the natural changes brought about by the passage of time, but also the mutations resulting from new economic and cultural conditions. . . . Used to explore the move away from traditional institutions, the *aṭlāl* motif becomes linked to the reflection on modernisation in the Arab world.²⁴

Al-Muwaylihi borrows the trope not only for its affective powers but also to give readers a distinctly secular sense of transition. In Lukács's words, the *atlal* provide a feeling "that there is such a thing as history, that it is an uninterrupted process of changes."²⁵

A more complex instance of a prose writer relying on poetry to evoke a feeling of history is Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1966), a fiction set during the early years of Sudanese independence. More than any novel in Arabic, Salih's book has been interpreted as the rewrite of a European model, in this case Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The most influential – albeit strikingly brief – version of this interpretation is Edward Said's in *Culture and Imperialism*: "Salih's hero in *Season of Migration to the North* does (and is) the reverse of what Kurtz does (and is): the Black man journeys north into white territory." Said's contrapuntal reading, emphasizing Salih's "deliberate . . . mimetic reversals of Conrad," canonized *Season of Migration* as a classic version of the empire writing back, although in fact there is no good reason to think Salih was deliberately doing anything with Conrad (his novel bristles with allusions to Eastern and Western literature, from the poetry of Abu Nuwas to Shakespeare's *Othello*, yet there is no reference to *Heart of Darkness*).²⁶ This does not mean the two novels should not be compared, but Said's postcolonial interpretation has obscured the degree to which *Season of Migration* is a critique of independent Sudan in which there is no "hero" and the literary form at stake is not the novel but poetry.

In an interview, Salih remembered his early attempts at writing during the 1950s as dominated by a sense of nostalgia for the country he felt to be disappearing under the pressures of modernization. "Nevertheless," he says, "I tried not to be carried away by that nostalgia so that what I wrote didn't turn into mere contemplation of the abandoned campsites."²⁷ His novel opens on a scene of homecoming, not in the elegiac register of the poet, but that of a sober-minded narrator returned from studies in England to find his riverine village in northern Sudan reassuringly unchanged. Staring from the window of his family home, he reflects, "I felt not like a storm-swept feather, but like that palm tree, a being with a background, with roots, with a purpose."²⁸ But this feeling is immediately undermined by the appearance of Mustafa Sa'eed, a stranger to the village who has arrived while the narrator was abroad. During a night of drinking, the narrator is astonished to hear Sa'eed recite the final lines of Ford Madox Ford's World War I poem, "In October 1914": "I tell you had the ground split open and revealed an afreet standing before me, his eyes shooting out flames, I would not have been more terrified."²⁹

The narrator discovers that Sa'eed is a prodigy who went to London after World War I and enjoyed a brilliant career as an economist, an early spokesman for African independence, and also a version of Don Juan, seducing English women by casting himself as an Orientalist stereotype, reciting wine poetry and bragging that he would "liberate Africa with my penis."³⁰ Not surprisingly, Sa'eed

is the character most readers remember, though his story takes up only a small portion of Salih's novel. The real drama is the narrator's growing realization that he and Sa'eed are not so different: strangers in the Sudan by virtue of their foreign education, they are both also devoted to poetry, though it is a passion they repeatedly disavow or repress. The narrator has written his dissertation on "an obscure English poet," as he ruefully puts it, and his first job back home is teaching pre-Islamic literature. The morning after his recital of Ford, Sa'eed claims not to remember his performance and teases the narrator, "We have no need of poetry here. It would've been better if you studied agriculture, engineering or medicine."³¹ Here, the (traditional) claim that verse is a premodern residue is uttered by a character who clearly does not believe what he is saying, though his audience (the narrator) is afraid he might be speaking the truth.

Sa'eed belongs to the generation of romantic anticolonialism – his life exactly spans the period of British occupation – while the narrator typifies the first post-independence generation, consumed by the bureaucratic struggle to build a state, even as he suspects his efforts are futile and the state is basically a form of legalized corruption. Rather than a heroic example of the empire writing back, Salih's novel critiques both generations for their connivance with the metropole, one through its stereotyped performance of militancy, the other by chasing after the shiny objects of modernity. In the novel's finale, the narrator enters into a house owned by Sa'eed and finds it stuffed with volumes of European poetry, novels, and philosophy. He also finds a page of verse in Sa'eed's own hand, left unfinished apparently for lack of a rhyme. "A very poor poem," the narrator sniffs, "that relies on antithesis and comparisons."³² He nevertheless finishes it by adding a line that fits the rhyme scheme and metrical structure of the original.

Like many Arabic fictions, *Season of Migration* allies poetry with tradition: it is an art with no obvious use in a world of electrical water-pumps. Yet neither protagonist can renounce their passion for poetry: they compose, study, and memorize it in secret; in moments of enthusiasm, it slips from their lips. The narrator's diffidence in completing Sa'eed's poem is an acknowledgment of all the ways he is a reluctant heir of the older man (earlier in the novel he is in fact mistaken for his son), and a recognition of how the present is constrained by the rigid but also comforting conventions of the past. In retrospect, the novel's opening scene of *nostos* comes to look like an effort to ward off the melancholy wisdom of the *atlat* poet: the narrator wants to believe his world has not been altered, but as a student of literature, he surely knows there are no such homecomings, that history is an uninterrupted process of changes. This is not Scott's tragic-but-progressive view of history, nor nationalist romanticism, but a properly postcolonial ambivalence. In the novel's final scene – a clear "antithesis" of its opening – he finds himself treading water in the middle of the Nile, unwilling to choose between the north and south banks, "unable to continue, unable to return."³³

Turn now to a recent novel in Arabic, so far overlooked by scholars, which takes poetry and poets as its theme and also aims to provoke the feeling that there is such a thing as history, albeit in the form of failure or miscarriage. In Youssef Rakha's *The Crocodiles* (2013), poetry again belongs to the past – the narrator confesses at the end of the novel that he has “forsaken even poetry” – but here it is a matter of the very recent past: the fifteen years that led up to the occupation of Cairo's Tahrir Square in 2011 and the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak.³⁴ In Rakha's novel, poetry is not a metonym for tradition but rather for youthful revolution, an experience for which the novel offers itself as a kind of incomplete memorial.

The Crocodiles is composed in numbered paragraphs, ranging in length from one line to a page, and the story skips forward and backward in time between the years of 1997 and 2011. It begins with the formation of an underground association in Cairo, the Crocodiles Movement for Secret Egyptian Poetry. The group is composed of three men in their twenties – the narrator, nicknamed Gear Knob, is one of them – but recruitment is lackluster (“as a result of our philosophy [of secrecy], no one knew of our existence”),³⁵ and the group disbands four years later. For all their enthusiasm, the Crocodiles write very little verse. Much of the book concerns their febrile sex lives, but also the circle's slow drift into the material comforts offered by Egypt's version of neoliberal prosperity, as well as the increasingly restricted spaces allowed by Mubarak's security services.

The novel's narrative crux is the suicide in 1997 of Radwa Adel, “the Student Movement's (or the Seventies Generation's) most celebrated female icon,”³⁶ which occurs the same day the poetry movement is founded. (Egypt's 1970s generation was a Marxist formation, independent of the state and standing apart from older communist groups that had largely been absorbed by the regime.) *The Crocodiles*, like many of the novels we have looked at, is centrally concerned with moments of historical transition – in this case, a changing of the guard in Egypt's independent Left. Rakha treats the drama of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1990s generations of Egyptian intellectuals as the stuff of local legend and literary gossip: poets are mythological figures who can also occasionally be spotted at cafés.³⁷ But the novel's concern with generational transition does not reduce politics to biology. In tracing a genealogy of opposition, *The Crocodiles* is structured by the idea of untimely or unseasonable emergence. Radwa Adel's one written work, a draft she destroyed, is titled *The Premature* (al-Mubtasirun).³⁸ The narrator later looks up the word in a dictionary – one of the novel's many archival figures – and finds “that a date palm that's *mabsoura* has been pollinated early, out of season; that anything *mabsour* has taken place before its time.”³⁹ Rakha's novel suggests that what each generation hands on to the next is not practical wisdom, and certainly not political or literary success, so much as an experience of unripeness or unfulfillment. Though one of the protagonists is obsessed with translating Allen Gins-

berg's poem "The Lion for Real," the novel's spirit seems to owe more to Brecht's "An die Nachgeborenen":

All roads led into the mire in my time.
My tongue betrayed me to the butchers. . .
Our forces were slight. Our goal
Lay far in the distance
It was clearly visible, though I myself
Was unlikely to reach it.⁴⁰

The bohemian milieu of sexed-up young scribblers who venerate poetry while composing relatively little, who passionately dissect the esoterica of previous literary generations, who cultivate an elaborate contempt for the establishment while isolating themselves from any experience of popular life, who strike their counter-cultural poses against the backdrop of leftist defeats – in particular the rout of radical student movements – and the rise of U.S.-supported reactionaries: this is the terrain of Roberto Bolaño's fiction, which Rakha, who cites Bolaño in an epigraph, plausibly transports to downtown Cairo. For Bolaño, poetry is not a museum piece but the cultural correlative of utopian aspirations and violent repression. Bolaño's own fiction – most notably *The Savage Detectives*, but also shorter works such as *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, *Distant Star*, *By Night in Chile*, and *Amulet* – serves as a distorted or even satirical testimonial to those years of literary revolt and counter-revolution, "a mass of children, walking unstopably toward the abyss."⁴¹

Rakha's narrator also casts himself as the historian or semi-official mourner of the Crocodiles' poetry movement. He specifies the narrative present as January 25, 2012. Although street protests are ongoing against the regime, now run by the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, the narrator has holed up with his computer, creating a file called *The Crocodiles*, of which we are reading the first document, "The Lovers (1997 – 2001)." He admits that in working on his file, "I've lost the urge to descend to the battlefield of Tahrir Square," suggesting that his archival work has replaced revolutionary activism in the same way that prose has replaced poetry.⁴² As in the fictions of Bolaño, the novel figures itself as a kind of memorial or elegy to the poetry of youth.⁴³ And yet Rakha's elegy is awkwardly timed. Its subject is not exactly dead, just *mabsour*: out-of-season, unripe, arrived too early. It is notable that neither Rakha nor Bolaño represent political revolution as such. That epic or romantic history is displaced onto the everyday world of sex, gossip, and poetry. It is this stubbornly unfruitful realm of experience that Rakha nevertheless seeks to transmit or incubate in his "file." If the novel is *diwan al-'arab*, it is not a history of heroism but an ongoing archive of defeat.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 58, 56. He also quotes George Sand: “[Scott] is the poet of the peasant, soldier, outlaw and artisan.” *Ibid.*, 48.
- ² *Ibid.*, 77. “Popular” does not simply mean the life of the lower classes: “It is in his unforgettable portrayal of the survivals of gentile society, of the Scottish clans where the poetry of his portrayal of past life chiefly lies. Here in material and subject-matter alone, there is present such a powerful element of the heroic period of mankind, that Scott’s novels at their height do indeed approach the old epics.” *Ibid.*, 56.
- ³ Sir Walter Scott, *Waverley; or, ‘Tis Sixty Years Since*, ed. Claire Lamont (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 98–107.
- ⁴ This is also Scott’s claim in his “Essay on Romance”: “In a very early period of civilization . . . the poetical art, so nearly allied to that of oratory or persuasion, is found to ascertain to its professors a very high rank. Poets are the historians, and often the priests of the tribe. Their command of language, then in its infancy, excites not merely pleasure, but enthusiasm and admiration.” Sir Walter Scott, *Essays on Chivalry, Romance, and the Drama* (London: Frederick Warne, 1887), 81.
- ⁵ Ian Duncan, “Waverley,” in *The Novel, Volume 2: Forms and Themes*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 174.
- ⁶ Quoted in Jabir ‘Usfur, *Zaman al-riwaya* (Damascus: al-Mada, 1999), 9, my translation.
- ⁷ Quran 60:41.
- ⁸ Navid Kermani, *God is Beautiful: The Aesthetic Experience of the Quran*, trans. Tony Crawford (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 278.
- ⁹ Quran 26:225–226.
- ¹⁰ Ibn Qutaybah, *The Excellence of the Arabs*, trans. Sarah Bowen Savant and Peter Webb (New York: Library of Arabic Literature, 2017), 151.
- ¹¹ ‘Usfur, *Zaman al-riwaya*, 10. This notion has become a trope among Arab intellectuals, and not just novelists. In an interview, the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish admitted, “It’s tempting to say that we live the era of the novel, that it’s become the new *diwan al-‘arab*.” Mahmoud Darwish, *Entretiens sur la poésie* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2006), 37, my translation.
- ¹² Nihad Sirees, *The Silence and the Roar*, trans. Max Weiss (New York: Other Press, 2013), 11.
- ¹³ Sonallah Ibrahim, *The Committee*, trans. Marie St. Germain and Charlene Constable (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 34.

- ¹⁴ Sonallah Ibrahim, *That Smell and Notes from Prison*, trans. Robyn Creswell (New York: New Directions, 2013), 103. The original citation continues, “We have acquired values that are best expressed in prose.”
- ¹⁵ Sir Hamilton Gibb, *Studies on the Civilization* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962), 291, 294. For a full account of *Zaynab*’s canonization, see Elliott Colla, “How *Zaynab* Became the First Arabic Novel,” *History Compass* 7 (1) (2009): 214–225.
- ¹⁶ Badawi, the first lecturer in modern Arabic literature at Oxford, writes, “[*Zaynab*] is the first fully fledged novel of literary merit in Arabic.” M. M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 97.
- ¹⁷ See in particular Samah Selim, “Translations and Adaptations from the European Novel,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Arabic Novelistic Traditions*, ed. Wail S. Hassan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); and Elizabeth Holt, *Fictitious Capital: Silk, Cotton, and the Rise of the Arabic Novel* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).
- ¹⁸ For a concise account, covering many other medieval genres, see Muhsin al-Musawi, “The Medieval Turn in Modern Arabic Narrative,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Arabic Novelistic Traditions*, ed. Hassan.
- ¹⁹ ‘Abdu Wazin, *Mahmoud Darwish: al-gharib yaqa’u ‘ala nafsihi* (Beirut: Riad El Rayess, 2006), 89.
- ²⁰ See Hilary Kilpatrick, “Literary Creativity and the Cultural Heritage: The *Aḥlāl* in Modern Arabic Fiction,” in *Tradition, Modernity, and Postmodernity in Arabic Literature: Essays in Honor of Professor Issa J. Boullata*, ed. K. Abdel-Malek and W. B. Hallaq (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2000). For a study of the trope’s use by Lebanese novelists, many motivated by the ruins of Beirut, see Ken Seigneurie, *Standing by the Ruins: Elegiac Humanism in Wartime and Postwar Lebanon* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).
- ²¹ Jaroslav Stetkevych, *The Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Nasīb* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 52. The trope provides a premise for Alfred Lord Tennyson’s long dramatic monologue, “Locksley Hall,” which begins with a speaker returning to his ancestral hall and remembering a youthful affair with his cousin. Tennyson knew of the Arabic trope through the translations and commentaries of Sir William Jones.
- ²² See Roger Allen’s commentary and translation, *A Period of Time: A Study and Translation of Hadith ‘Isa Ibn Hisham* (Reading, United Kingdom: Ithaca Press, 1992). Allen argues that al-Muwaylihi “provided the necessary bridge between the narrative genres of classical Arabic literature and the emergence of a fictional tradition in modern Arabic based on European models.” *Ibid.*, 31.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 155–156.
- ²⁴ Kilpatrick, “Literary Creativity and the Cultural Heritage,” 31.
- ²⁵ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 23.
- ²⁶ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 30, 211.
- ²⁷ Cited in Wail Hassan, *Tayeb Salih: Ideology and the Craft of Fiction* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 14.
- ²⁸ Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (New York: New York Review Books), 4.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

- ³⁰ Ibid., 100.
- ³¹ Ibid., 9.
- ³² Ibid., 127.
- ³³ Ibid., 138. Elsewhere in the novel, the narrator travels through the desert to Khartoum. Making camp at night, the truck drivers sing in Sudanese dialect to their vehicles “just as the poets of old sang to their camels”: “The sweat pours down his mighty neck and soaks his massive sides / And sparks around his feet do fly as to the sands he strides.” Ibid., 93–94. In this mixing of vernacular language and classical forms, modern and traditional modes of transport, Salih conjures an experience of reconciliation that otherwise eludes his protagonists. I have tried to trace the utopian imaginaries at work in this passage in another essay, “Reimagining Arab Nationalism: Nazik al-Mala’ika and the Politics of Poetic Meter,” *Critical Inquiry* 46 (1) (2019): 71–96.
- ³⁴ Youssef Rakha, *The Crocodiles*, trans. Robin Moger (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2014), sec. 404. The English, like the Arabic original, is unpaginated. Further citations will refer to the section number.
- ³⁵ Ibid., sec. 6.
- ³⁶ Ibid., sec. 1.
- ³⁷ On the 1990s generation in Egypt, see Samia Mehrez, “Where Have All the Families Gone: Egyptian Literary Texts of the Nineties,” *The Arab Studies Journal* 9/10 (2/1) (Fall 2001/Spring 2002): 31–49.
- ³⁸ “Radwa Adel” is a fictional version of Arwa Salih, an Egyptian Marxist who killed herself in 1997. Salih’s most important work has been translated as *The Stillborn: Notebooks of a Woman from the Student-Movement Generation in Egypt*, trans. Samah Selim (London: Seagull Books, 2018). “All kinds of prodigious marvels flourished in that phantasmagorical world,” Salih writes of her generation of student radicals, in one of the many passages that rhymes with Rakha’s novel. “Dwarfs were transformed into giants and cheap comedies into fatal tragedies. Grand sacrifices were exploited to satisfy twisted caprices, and intimate friendships were born—love affairs even—between people who were incapable of knowing each other. . . . And so, when we finally walked out into the light of day, the devastation was total. We were like mummies crumbling to dust in the sunlight.” Ibid., 68.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 328.
- ⁴⁰ Bertolt Brecht, *Poems 1913–1956*, ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim (London: Methuen, 1976), 319.
- ⁴¹ Roberto Bolaño, *Amulet*, trans. Chris Andrews (New York: New Directions, 2006), 182.
- ⁴² Rakha, *The Crocodiles*, sec. 26. Another Arab novel that figures itself as an archive for the history of leftist defeats is Elias Khoury, *Broken Mirrors: Sinalcol*, trans. Humphrey Davies (New York: Archipelago, 2016). I have looked at this aspect of Khoury’s work in “Tripoli Nights with a Master of Arabic,” *The New York Review of Books*, March 9, 2017.
- ⁴³ As Bolaño put it in characteristically defiant and ambivalent terms: “More or less everything I’ve written is a love letter or farewell address to my own generation, those of us born in the fifties who chose at some point to take up arms—though in this case it would be more correct to say that we became *militants*—and who gave the little that we had, the best that we had, which was our youth, to a cause we believed to be the most generous cause in the world and that was, in a sense, though in truth it wasn’t.” Roberto Bolaño, “Discurso de Caracas,” *Letras Libres*, October 31, 1999, my translation.

Organic Reformations in Richard Powers's *The Overstory*

Garrett Stewart

*Richard Powers takes the literary concept of “organic form” to new exploratory lengths – and satellite heights – in his latest ecofiction. In particular, the novelist who has proselytized voice-recognition software for the dictation of novelistic prose offers with that advice an unexpected leverage on the structuring “understory” (the botanical term) for his Pulitzer Prize–winning novel *The Overstory* (2018). In both textual phonetics and mapped thematic links, marked patterns of recurrence are to prose, here as elsewhere, what rhyme and meter are to poetry. In a novel that seeks to attune us to the secret “semaphores” of forest life, such elicited traces of nonhuman signaling articulate a vital terrestrial network evoked through a scale of decoded pattern that, in developing its own stylistic ecosystem, answers to the environing field of narrative action, and forest activism, across eight different biographical plotlines in the novel’s convergent cast of characters.*

The woods were unfathomably complex, but they didn’t know it.

— Jonathan Franzen, *Purity* (2015)

Her maples are *signaling*. Life is talking to itself, and she has listened in. ... If she dies tomorrow she’ll still have added this one small thing to what life has come to know about itself.

— Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (2018)

With the novel as much as any genre, literary intensity is often a function of verbal density, generated under the shaping force of style or form. And density is partly a matter of harmonic intervals, whether narrow or many pages wide. To keep order, remain true to form, poetry may often decide to rhyme; to keep house, long prose must at least repeat, with a harmonizing difference each time around. Beyond and including end rhyme and meter, close recurrence is the spine and flexion of lyric verse; motif the normal engine of narrative. Lyric recurs to its own phonetic beat and measure; the novel returns at less regular intervals to its themes, and sometimes to the wording that

works them up in the first place, which may thus chime in service to this texturing of recognition. Any novelist who titles a book *The Echo Maker* (2006) would in part be naming his own procedures at one level or another. And none more obviously than American novelist Richard Powers, whose sense of phrasal patterning – not just within sentences, but among them, chapters apart – amounts to the very poetry of his fiction. With sound play in mercurial ripple across his sentences, a broader-gauge framework of schematic echo is regularly the most notable mark of his intricately linked storylines. Attending to such a scalar balance between narrow syllabic bandwidths and widely looped wording – each advanced with new exigency in *The Overstory* (2018), the most multipronged and disparately character-driven of his books yet – is only to recognize something abidingly novelistic about this tandem work of language. As a philosophical ironist who is also a luminous writer, Powers pursues unexpected connections that, beyond strict formulation, he makes us *hear* in precisely the novel form and play of his words.

Whereas Pirandello once thrust onto the surrealist stage six unfinished dramatic characters in search of an author, a century later, in *The Overstory*, Powers sends out a third again as many fictional characters in search of a plot. If that sounds like a reviewer's barb, it is not. Because they find it, the plot they are looking for, and themselves in the process, with some bitter consequences. This happens when they converge, mostly by happenstance, and in one case only via Midwest TV coverage, on antilogging activism amid the West Coast redwoods that escalates to the point of violence. Not just personified ideas, the characters jostle and suffer, hurt and purge, with a novelistic impact that remains inextricable, as always, from the linkages, tight and broad, of Powers's language, but this in a context, as never so insistently before, that exceeds these characters by definition. The conceptual threading and intermesh, it must be said, are certainly easier to track than the lives actually entwined. Each interknit subplot extends backwards into the childhoods of the divergent characters, then forward into their contingent overlap. If all this seems too much to hold in mind at once, it is. Such is the multistory in build-up, even as this dispersedly communal focus becomes instead global in the end; reading is the effort to educe just that ultimate overstory.

Part of the idea, no doubt, is that all walks of life may lay themselves open to unexpected onsets of ecological passion. The heavily loaded roster of plot agents seems engineered in this sense primarily to grid, and gird, the intersections and echoes, not of personal psychology, but of language itself in the poetics – botanically inflected this time out – of Powers's typical scientific vocabulary. Funneled together by plot, the tracked actors share their portrayed vitality with quasi-personified tree forms that take up, in a sense, their own choral speaking parts, animated, communicative, medial, bearing witness to the world from the heights and depths of an arboreal sensitivity on a par – though not a level playing field – with human motive. As distinguished from the attitude toward insentient nature

in the first epigraph from Jonathan Franzen, in Powers's novel, trees not only liaise with each other and their adjacent vegetation, but they are in themselves messages. All antennae out, the novel stages the realized urge to listen up. Moreover, its pages go so far as to figure that urge in the elicited terms – and wrought attentions – of a hypertuned vocabulary, forest lingo and otherwise, puns, echoes, and harmonic overtones included. It is a language that taps directly – often by metaphoric filaments strung across long stretches of text – into the author's familiar linguistic predilections, but with new urgency and leverage. At this pitch of fictional stylistics, to talk trees requires a borrowed and replenished discourse all its own, in the face of which the dated aesthetic shibboleth of “organic form” takes on a fresh tensile application, however contorted or arcane at times, as part of an unabashedly reformative ethic.

Bundling the separate plotlines, the fourfold structure of the novel reflects, at a glance, its emphasis on a metaphoric bond between plant life and human maturation. Written gradually into a bigger picture than the plaited strands of their human backstories in the first eponymous eight chapters – picaresques in search of an epic – the divergent characters sprout there under the section title “Roots” until their shared masterplot figuratively *thickens*, as if ring by ring, in “Trunk,” only then to spread out – by ever-widening circles, and by resulting upward thrust – into its overarching “Crown,” from which to propagate again in “Seeds.” Matching nature's cyclicality, the tacit circularity is unmistakable, as if a familiar four-volume structure from the English fictional canon (think Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*) has been turned involute and self-renewing, unrolled like a continuous looped scroll rather than an eventually closed book: from seeds to the roots of full fruition and back again in dissemination. Such titular divisions of narrative labor give away no plot, but instead give way immediately to archetype. They are tropes, but tropes all but literalized in narrative, as with the novel's first of countless plays on words: “Roots” for the separate *routes* that will carry many of the tracked characters west, along various personal paths and paved roadways, to the redwood forest, or merely forward in place to associated revelations at a geographic distance, as in the case of Ray, the property lawyer, wrestling at one point with a brief punningly called “Should Trees Have Standing?”¹ The ecological torque of this novel turns repeatedly on such subterranean turns of phrase and their tacit off-rhymes. And if we are still left asking, in generic terms, what kind of novel this could really constitute, the answer is precisely a *prose* fiction, whose understrain of assonance plumes with its own curious music.

In zeroing in on the western stands of redwoods, each vector of story may be thought to minimize the personal in deference to the conceptual – the Powers trademark – here in particular the emphasis on the ecopolitical. En route, language allegorizes, as prose, the same reformations it instigates, bioethical and

stylistic alike. Hence my title. Powers is not just a hard read, but a hard reader. Through the continually readjusted lens of his verbal attention, we learn how to decipher the world anew through the test of reading itself. And in-jokes, like “standing,” only bolster the inferential sympathy between vegetal nature and verbal invention. A passing dead metaphor, “thicket of words” (249), has already achieved full metatextual troping when the botanist Professor Westerford, known as Tree-Patty, puts the finishing touches on her botanical masterwork: “She types up the draft. She prunes a few words and pollards a few phrases” (223). As Powers well knows, such is the topiary work of prose: cut to the measure, in his every effort this time out, of botany’s organic system.

Balancing prose against plot in this way, the thinness of character psychology is framed to invoke more than it forfeits. The emphasis is to make characters learn for themselves to devalue the clench of personality in favor of collective being and purpose, and so to merge, if not entirely submerge, troubled personal stories in the vicissitudes of longer-span natural histories. These are histories that the characters must not just brush up against, but learn to decipher, in the world around them, to which end the vocation of prose fiction offers its own direct homologies. Even if one were to assume an ethic of reciprocal impersonality, in this particular naturalist saga, as converting defect to virtue in regard to what some critics see as the author’s slack “people skills,” still the insistent theme of *The Overstory* plugs directly into Powers’s eccentric strengths as well, including perhaps their signal feature: the fertile thesaurus of his lexical imagination, exercised to the full in the technical encyclopedia of botanic lore. True, a serious novelist, let alone a gifted one, engaged in any such unapologetic act of consciousness-raising about global deforestation and the sacred life of trees, has only his writing, moral fervor and political stamina aside, to build on, whether in celebration or polemic. More to the point in *The Overstory*, when the purpose is manifestly to elicit not just the venerable organic system of forest renewal but, more intimately, the very *medium* of tree life, the writing has only its own medium (the tactical channeling of its language) to draw on, and out, for exemplary cross-reference: its rhetorical medium as such, lexical, syntactic, figural; always verbal before representational, transmissive before mimetic.

More than evocative, the novelistic medium must here become programmatic in its cognate disclosure of arboreality’s own elusive communicative system. In this respect, the forest colloquy joins forces with Powers’s inveterate dictionary prose, driven by a confluence of specialist lexicons rather than any cultivated stylistic fluency. Beyond mere “windy” effusions in the rush of leaves, the summons to any true organic music – requiring close lexical transposition into human prose – is bound up in the conjured internal soundscape of the trees’ own pulsing biorhythms. One result is that, for the novel as a whole, quite apart from the recorded botanist audiobook featured at more than one point within it, reading is

listening. It is too early to prove this, but none too soon to pose it as this essay's leading hunch and heuristic. Legal *standing* in court, implied vertical *stance* in their native habitat: etymology bears covert witness in many such phrasings, including Ray the lawyer's own last name, Brinkman, an irony borne in on us when the suspended animation of his paralysis, after a stroke, holds at the border of death for pages on end. The novelist who, in *Orfeo* (2014), speaking of music, and by analogy with prose's own notation, approximates a phonetic anagram in locating the "islands of silence" between fluctuant sounds – and does so with that haunting silent *s* floated amid the sibilance of the phrase itself – arranges in *The Overstory*, we'll find, for phonetic language to ferry across just such a flow of words between insular (yet sometimes not quite insulated) silences.² This happens most tellingly, as we are to hear (without seeing), in the cross-currents of a climactic homophonic wordplay: a verbal reveal only to be apprehended under pressure from the long build-up behind it. Suffice it to say for now that *The Overstory* has no way to transliterate sylvan tongues, the forest's cellulose signaling, but through its own linguistic grid: not a loosely woven trellis of suggestion but a tight lexigraphic and etymological schema whose most striking nodes are alive with auditory stress (in every sense of that noun), as focused at one point on the punning clues of an actual crossword puzzle playing on a sound pun for the syllable "leaf." In advance of the settings required for full exemplification, we may characterize the gathering rhetorical effect of such volatile phrasing as serving to familiarize the otherwise uncanny notion of arboreal messaging with a sense, somewhat less foreign to normal reading, that alphabetic language may often slip out from under strict authorial coherence into a seemingly independent agency of its own, kindred in this way to the sometimes audited (preter)natural signage of the forest.

To this end, as a reading lesson, no novel's title could be more instructively metanarrative. The very coinage, in its tacit synonym for masterplot, is typical of Powers's associational diction in that it springs, unspoken, from the botanical argot of "understory" (think underbrush) for the blanketing of a forest's floor. This is a curious term that comes underfoot over half a dozen times in a novel whose opposite coinage, never in fact let loose into the narrative discourse, has its penultimate appearance, just before the title page itself, when copyright information assures us that the novel so-named, and if only pro forma, is "printed" with tacit ecological commitment "on 100% recyclable paper." Whatever the "overstory" may be, it goes unnoted as such throughout, a pure extrapolation as we read. By recognizing this in overview, we are closing in – by what might be called reverse zoom – on what makes Powers's trope of the closed terrestrial biocircuit and its looming overstory so different from the preceding generation of his postmodernist forebears in American fiction. The overarching is not in this case overweaning. The unmastered mysteries of a System in which human energies have found themselves embedded – that anxious horizoning frame that constitutes the stock-

in-trade of the paranoia novel (Thomas Pynchon to Don DeLillo and beyond) – is a trope turned inside out by Powers so as to limn (ultimately limb) the intricate workings of a vulnerable botanic superstructure and its tongueless signage.

In all facets of their vitality, trees (as italicized) “*pour out messages in media of their own invention*” (355). It is this overheard interplay of arboreal signals and receptors that is both manifested in, and modeled by, the audited *echology* of Powers’s prose. Across its eight parallel storylines – its “Roots” or (again, in one pronunciation) self-echoed “Routes,” together with the whole array of verbal recursions that brace and interlace them – the interpretive work of what we might call *echocriticism* is a first line of response. Only by tracing the spores and seedlings, the tubers and sudden shoots, of vocabular outcroppings, all in the linked lingo of organic interdependency, does one sense the pattern before – and beneath – its tangled ground cover and towering foliate canopy. I speak in further metaphor, of course, responding in kind to the novel’s loam and efflorescence of tropes, its figurative title included, hovering, above it all, somewhere between global abstraction and tethered emblem in its crowning bloom: a never-named or specified tale to be told only on the pulse of readerly recognition. One thinks, by contrast, of Powers’s academic satire in *Galatea 2.2*, about the learning curve of artificial intelligence, with the hero’s half-hearted effort to teach a phonorobotic computer enough language to render it an independently functioning literary critic. Robots must be programmed with our own language; trees predate us with theirs. The organic story they tell, never over, is not easy to translate.

In contrast to the novel’s supposedly entitled overview, the received (if not widely used) term “understory” takes its lexical exit with this, its eighth, appearance: “A distant branch snaps, and the crack shoots through the understory” (492) from which new “shoots,” in the other, botanical sense, will soon protrude. The subsequent prose of causal explanation is immediately elided into a reverbering declarative, playing with two odd plural singulars: “There are mink nearby, in these same woods, and lynx” (492). And links – the kind figured in this case by echoic troping in its own right: a music of interfusion between a deliberated singular plural (“mink”) and a falsely audited *s* in the equally double-duty “lynx.” Such are the frequent chiming byways of *echology* in Powers’s novel, instanced late in the day by an allegory of echo’s dying fall itself. On the verge of cabin fever in the mountain wilds of Montana, outlawed by his previous violence against the lumber industry, the character nicknamed Doug-fir is in despair about a logged-out wilderness: “This place is *dead*” (386). The italics are not just for emphasis. Doug’s is the bleated word *as word*, a spectral phonetic palindrome, about to be parsed and parlayed at once, spit back and spun round, by indifferent nature: “The *ed* bangs around the Garnet Range two or three times before giving up” (386). Even just twice, and the knell would be fully renewed in its own dying away: *dead ed ed*. Conservation of energy, diminishing returns, the larger system writ small in writ-

ing per se: a sly syllabic economy thereby at work even in this re-sounding dentalized stutter from the realm of inanimate – yet still accusatory – nature. So the prose often goes in this novel, leaving us, leaving reading, to sense detected patterns less than explicit, and regarding the organic intricacies and recursive systems of the plant realm rather than the sounding-boards of cliff faces.

In repeatedly moving from any miniscule textual detail, down in the weeds of syllabification and syntax, to the broad sweep of the overstory, however, Powers is often doing more than extrapolating from the technical idiom of his botanical topic. In all this we are kept in mind, as readers, of our own work in decrypting a set of language acts tacitly shared, in vitalist translation, across echelons of sentience between humans and the forest primeval. Verbal echoes come to sound like the reverberation of deeper bonds. Beyond all paranoia in such *uber*plotting, entanglement turns restorative. Yet how could any calculated stylistic ecosystem – or echosystem – plausibly carry conviction as a cross-species articulation of shared vital signs? The question is not rhetorical, but neither is there a ready answer. Except from – and through – the lexical texture of exemplification.

So the nagging query remains. In the face of society's most pressing global concerns, what in the world – this world of animal and vegetal rather than digital life – would such a nonelectronic ethics of *connectivity* between plant and human biology, tree being and human being, have to gain from (however ingenious) a web – or say scrub – of ground-level wordplay, even in anomalous technical forms of oblique verbal herbage? From one perspective, at least, the gain, the yield, would amount to no more, but decidedly no less, than the promotion of a certain reading posture, often just slightly askew to expectation, and, as such, an exploratory mode of epistemic notice. Reading would open in this way to a deciphered semiotics of nonhuman systems, raising the stakes of attention in the will to linger, look harder, discern otherwise. *Deep reading*, then, versus anything conceived as surface reading, would stand revealed not as its own unfeeling and predatory mode of extraction, the self-interested dredging of interpretive symptoms, but as a flexible way forward, leaving clearly in place, and further contextualized by examination, the interdependencies that style's own pressure excavates, explicates, and sometimes mimics.

Nothing in this commentary is meant to, nor could, detract from the palpable agenda of Powers's book as a genuine ecocritical text: a landmark one (to speak in its own kind of topographical dead metaphor), and this, as might be expected, from the most important contemporary novelist operating at the cross-mapped intersections of science and human desire. No question what the story *means*, politically, ecologically, for all its mysteries of organic linkage between linguistics and the loquacious “chemical semaphores” (499) of tree life, that perfectly judged phrase for the forest's nonlinguistic communiques: sublingual semiotics channeled by a minimal internal rhyme. Any interpretive emphasis on the literary, the

letteral, in assessing the linguistic scientism of the book's prose, evinced by the whole phonetic and etymological sedimentation of its lexical complexity, is only meant in turn to highlight, while always in the closest league with meaning, the revisionary stylistic organicism of his *echological means*. This is the system whose lateral resoundings serve to delineate the fugue-like structure of Powers's never more than tacit, nor less than immanent, overstory, unrolled in harmonic process across his orchestrated octet of storylines.

Which first come together around the next-to-last of them, concerning the introvert tree-loving girl – and eventual botanical guru of print and audio culture – Patty Westerford, introduced in the penultimate chapter of the “Roots” sequence in a way that anchors and codifies most of the disparate backstories so far. She thus takes her late but centering place – located as a kind of ideological clearing-house – in the through-lines of motival developments so far, her presence twining them together around her governing passion for the otherworld of trees. Daughter of an “ag extension agent” who took her with him, from a young age, as he traveled the Midwest landscape, “Tree-Patty” eventually finds herself, along with the majority of Powers's cast, drifting inquisitively – Westerfording, as it were – toward the Redwood coast. Trees have always, in the figurative sense, spoken to her, even before she could write back with her science. As a young child, she was distressingly slow in learning to articulate words in her inherited human tongue: a malfunction eventually diagnosed as resulting from a deformed inner ear. In this virtual muteness, she consoled herself with a “secret language” in her devotion to an arboreal dollhouse world of “woody citizens” made by her of “pine-cone bodies” and “acorn shell” helmets, demurely housed together in the “burls of trees.” All this compensatory play – braced by its “miniscule architecture of imagination” – generates the seedbed of a lifelong mission, with her “acorn animism” (114) eventually nurtured into a botany doctorate, scholarly renown, and even a popular print (and audiobook) audience. Literature and science cohabit, as in the novel we are reading, especially when its spokeswoman sets out to read the trees in an apperception cued to the nuances of prose form.

Beyond her tree-foraged dollhouse community, the young Patty also seeks out the messaging of “booklike bark” (119): the very phrase a layering of consonants, on prose's own part, that sends unmentioned roots into the deep etymology of *book* in the *beech* (or *birch*) on which runes were once carved. When eventually finding her words, she realizes they are not ready for social circulation. They are as ingrown as her forest sensibility. It is “her father alone” who, as prose captures it in the oscillation of internal echo, “understands her woodlands world, as he always understands her every thickened word” (113). Years later, her degree credentials eventually in hand, she nevertheless returns as soon as possible to a committed fieldwork, “the green negation of all careers” (129). It is

there that she loves to hear the wind *through* – in both senses – the trees: not just sounding its way *between* branches but *via* those appendages, a breeze strumming those limbs to help the latter breathe forth their Aeolian messages.

In another micro-ecology, the mention of leaves that “turn” in the wind are what “turn” that wind (“on”) to its associated whisperings: “The oracle leaves turn the wind audible” (130). Why not an adjective (“oracular”) rather than a noun used as modifier? Too predictable? Too portentous? In any case, whenever the nonverbal linguistics of trees is evoked, the prose of the narrative is likely to thicken or buckle its own English contours, as with the implicit surplus (or junctural elision) of “oracleaves.” And the next sentence follows suit in the self-adjustment of its own internal echo: “They *filter* the day light and *fill* it with expectation” (130). Such is the association of a forest’s macroprocess with the minims of prose’s own reflective echosystem, as made explicit when Patty comes upon trees, in her research, “etched with knowledge encoded in native arborglyphs” (113). Beach, birch, book: medium. And whenever the motif of language occurs in this way, whether as trope or epistemological datum, it tends to entail some degree of lexical kink – or, better, knottiness – in Powers’s own prose. Tree-Patty’s story sets the mold, and does so in the familiar drag on grammatical momentum induced by minor surprises or aberrations in diction. Speech impedance is not a malady in such writing, but a tactic. Reading Powers is the act of slowing over idea through the medium of words. Later in the biographic track of this seventh (recapitulative) chapter, when Patty contemplates a forest “sprouted from a rhizome mass too old to date even to the nearest hundred millennia,” its primal source is immediately restated – in a tongue-twisting syllabic node – as “this great, joined, single clonal creature that looks like a forest” (131). The very shadow of oxymoron (single/clonal) sets in as a kind of fractalized lexical node, pars pro toto for the entire overgrowth of botanical entanglements.

So it is that the “every thickened word” of Patty’s incipient speech seems to have authorized in advance the novel’s own most intimate summons of vegetal density: not just via a passing mimesis, in some broached phrasal performativity (of integrated glottal cloning), but in a more deeply probed metalinguistics linked to tree “signals,” again, an arboreal semiosis. And precisely as figured, so we are soon to note, both in – and as – the pulped wood of a book: the one we have been reading for many seemingly disparate chapters, and to whose spine the corded rhizome is now tacitly analogized as a “kinship” fostered “deep underground” (132). Out of nowhere but narrative’s own backlog, five brief paragraphs are suddenly devoted to previous characters we have met, locating them now on compass points, spatial and temporal, in regard to Tree-Patty’s present professional life of sophisticated botanical expertise. Convergence is for the first time explicit in the over(t)story – asserted almost by the sentence-level equivalent (albeit in the negative) of that *parallel montage* equilibrating the separate spans of the novel’s un-

even microplots as they have shifted until now from one character's moral trajectory to another. Yet: "These people are nothing to Plant-Patty." Not to say mean nothing; they would be meaningful to her if she knew of them, given their various conservationist passions. Instead, they simply "aren't": they do not exist for her at the plane of narrative manifestation, and never will. "And yet," as figured here, "their lives have long been connected, deep underground." Regarding the assembled characters in such "underground" filiation (a political pun as well): "Their kinship will work like an unfolding book" (132), for which a photographic folio in the first chapter is the establishing paradigm as arborist chronicle.

Few novels, intent on giving us a long-term overview of planetary dependencies and endurance, could begin more promisingly. In the multigenerational chronicle of the first chapter, named for the present-day inheritor of the family legacy, "Nicholas Hoel," history is serially sketched in, almost at the elliptical pace of its own embedded technical emblem in a pre-Victorian optical toy. Generations back, the head of the immigrant Iowa household – and farmstead – was inspired by the zoopraxiscope in launching a family hobbyhorse. With its spinning images in a glass drum offering the flicker effect of protocinematic motion, a related idea dawned. Since then, decade after decade, the men of the Hoel tribe have sustained the documentary "ritual" of photographing – from a fixed tripod in front of their house – one shot per month of a still-growing chestnut tree planted by the original settler. When the progenitor of this technological tradition has first assembled a year's worth of black-and-white images in a stack, he "riffles through them with his thumb" (11) in the manner of that other precinematic optical toy, the flip-book: in this case, the predecessor as well of time-lapse effects, each split second overleaping, by eliding, a month's growth. As if true to the family name, intermittence becomes holistic. And does so as an explicit model for the narrative's own ellipses. "Three-quarters of a century dances by in a five-second flip" (17), writes the narrator by metonymy in his own elision of any unfolded sequence – until, with the cinematic prototype now historically in place and specified, "one more flip through the magic movie, and faster than it takes for the black-and-white broccoli to turn again into a sky-probing giant, the nine-year-old cuffed by his grandfather turns into a teen" (19).

And so it is, by association, in his own arboreal picturings and scripts alike, that Nick Hoel becomes, by novel's end, the representative of the forests themselves, always haunted by "the time-lapse pictures of the chestnut his gypsy-Norwegian great-great-great-grandfather planted, one hundred and twenty years before" (20). It is in this way that the flip-book has miniaturized the time lapses of the plot so far, though not so much the irregular, shifting tempos of its anything but staccato prose – not at least, until almost five hundred pages later, when Nick is assigned the closing passage of the novel to bookend his place in the first. By now,

he has had the inspiration, less as draughtsman than as installation site artist, to use whole fallen trees to translate their own abiding message into English, trees given quite literally the novel's last word, as word, in their own anglicized witness, dragged into place to spell out "STILL" (502), a cross-hatch of vegetal legibility ultimately available only from satellite vantage. Whatever they are here made to be suggesting, it is clearly an overstory resisting the temporal rather than the spatial sense of "over." *Still* present after all these years, but with the extra twist of an ambivalent adverb (*fixedly in place* as well as *even yet*) and the adjectival double of the former (*immobile*). What we are stationed to "close read" in that lone word STILL, even from an aerial distance – and in the subdivided split seconds, as we will see, of its passage's incremental momentum – is, with its surprise organic resurgence, prose's nearest echo of nature's text. Nick's "articulated" trees compose no book, only a message, but one already taken up in time-lapse registration even as the tree artist has just completed their scriptive pictogram. Immobile, yes, but not unchanging at that, nor removed from cycles of decay and new growth.

Partly determining the power of this closing episode is its immediate convergence with what had seemed for a long time two other quite disparate lines of plot. We might by now have intuited some deep connection between Nick's tree painting, including his foliate graffiti scripts, and the precodex and tree-themed calligraphic scroll willed by her suicided immigrant father to Mimi Ma, second of the introduced characters in the eightfold cast, and whose last scene, her mind awash in arboreal messaging, abuts most closely upon Nick's own final act of woodstock "graphology." Farther afield until then – though suddenly operating in immediate counterpoint to, almost superimposition upon, Nick's final tree-built wordwork as well – is the previously marginalized story of the computer genius Neelay Mehta. Miserably injured in a childhood fall from a tree, he goes on from his wheelchair to orchestrate a Silicon Valley computer-game empire under the corporate name *Sempervirens* ("always flourishing," "evergreen"), dubbed for the designer's Redwood City studio. After his brand's floppy-disk launch with *The Sylvan Prophecies* (191), Neelay's genius takes the company product through one hi-def iteration after another, down to cutting-edge 3-D, in its signature *Mastery* series, where exponential expertise can lead its players to revel in control over whole virtual continents of their own devising, fantasies of terraforming and wealth extraction uncramped by reality. But Neelay eventually suffers an epiphany, realizing the hollowness of this model, and deciding instead to equip his gamers with the data-searching finesse needed to become "learners" rather than mere players, "mastering" the life of our actual planet (not some escapist world of their own optical concoction), and not from participatory virtualized points of view but from actual satcam overviews. The empty eschatology of total mastery over a fictive universe becomes instead the eponymous overstory of documentary narrative, open-eyed and investigative. *Sempervirens* has become globally environing, with

the epistemic urge replacing the ludic as monetized adrenaline rush. And with the “branchings” of the Internet in new sync with the actualities of organic life. One does not have to dwell for long over this conversion experience to find it figuring the intellectual voracity, rather than sheer esoteric gamesmanship, of Powers’s own polymath style.

It is precisely the last “chapter” of this evolved corporate story, realized from satellite vantage, that converges (via overview) with the final phase of Nick’s scribal endeavor. Instead of reducing cellulose to the tabula rasa of inscription, the unexpected symbolic reversal, on which the novel closes in and down, is to have Nick write *with* (not upon) the dead trees themselves. And on their behalf as well. So that, in an unspoken wordplay, their inert logs are arrayed to log in their own message for upload to Sempervirens’s orbiting camera hook-ups, of which we are not even sure Nick, the word artist in wood, is aware. When Nick as a boy first embarks on his pencil drawings of trees, based on his fascination with the photographic flip-book, he doubts he can do them justice. Yet such is the structural pivot, the cryptic metanarrative chiasmus, involved in his eventual writing of nature’s ongoing will and testament, its message immemorial, that the character once daunted by a vitality of tree forms beyond “his *powers as an artist to reveal*” (19; emphasis added) now exits the novel in figuring, by proxy, the *artistry of a Powers* in just such a materially paraphrased revelation.

This emblazoned word of razed nature, STILL, is the novel’s true coup de grace, and its tacit metatextual gambit bears more speculation than satellite photos directly bestow. What if the tired metaphor of “organic form” – in the internal feedback system of a literary text – could in its own right, as scriptive form, do more than blandly shadow a living ecosystem, but offer instead a cogent parable of a global terratext? What if the fallen trunks of trees, as well as their cross sections, could be read, in the way Nick’s labor attempts, as fashioning their own message? Could have their messages made transmissible from the right angle and distance of vision? Terra firma would become in that case no longer just a tabula rasa for predatory human imprints but a silent arboreal outcry from the forest floor.

That is what Nick’s version of terrestrial installation art, his implanted earthwork sculpture, accomplishes. As transcribed on the page, rather than reproduced, the word STILL appears in vertically elongated sans serif caps, stripped bare, even though we know that Nick’s usual ecological inscriptions have been graced with tendril filigrees like the florid margins of an illuminated “medieval manuscript” (231). This time, the medium is bark and leaves, pith and parasites, rather than pigment, the felled trees fringed, if at all, by their own withering leafy flourishes. “The learners” – again Neelay’s gamer addicts and fantasists turned planetary fetishists of biodiversity – “will puzzle over the message that springs up

there, so near to the methane-belching tundra” in what we have heard alluded to as the “boreal north” (355), as frigid, by etymological coincidence, as it is arboreal. On the novel’s last page: “Satellites high up above this work already take pictures from orbit” (502) and that adverb “already” soon becomes a threefold spatiotemporal refrain, extending well beyond the momentary “blink of a human eye.” At the data-mined pace of a global algorithmic archive, “the learners will grow connections,” with that dead metaphoric cliché for “develop” given a freshly rooted context in aerial photography. Then, too, the “giant word” spelled out in the sights of satellite telemetry by Nick’s bulking calligraphic monosyllable – as if in evoked counterpoint to the imprisonment, by now, of the other tree-terrorists, Adam and Doug – is a “shape” that at first “arrests” the learners. And in an up-ended trope “reads them their rights,” where we might expect “reads them the riot act” (501 – 502). In any case, it would seem that the tree-fashioned curt adjective/adverb for fixity and endurance alike (dead STILL/STILL changing) – almost a synonym for *sempervirens* – is therefore a word that reads its mortal readers in the throes of their own curiosity.

Yet again the lexical understory contours the literalized optic overview. For here is a vegetal “still life” of earth art that names at once its own severed condition of possibility, as text, and the transcendence of that finality, stillness and staying power respectively. Inaugurating its own time-lapse momentum, the prose now moves us through closely magnified adverbial snapshots of the dead wood’s escalating new fruition. This is to say that the aerial satellite frame of downed trees turns cinematic as we look, at least if we watch – and listen – closely. The parallel impetus is clocked by three repetitions of “Already” that exceed any fixed view. “Already, this word is greening”: the word STILL, by metonymy with the wood that fashions it. Change is still manifest in the mode of figurative inscription, as made explicit in syntax’s close convergence of “wood” and “word”: “Soon new trunks will form the word in their growing wood, following the cursive of these decaying mounds,” and “cursive,” yes, despite their block cap treatment on the page. The second adverbial impetus: “*Already* the mosses surge over”: an odd freestanding intransitive, rather than surging over *something* in particular, as if the pure *urge* of vitality itself is at one with “the beetles and lichen and fungi turning the logs to soil” (502). Imposed composition lapses to compost, replete with its own eloquence.

Soon too, in syntactic pacing, we come upon the fulcral time-lapse of the third adverbial downbeat accompanying that loan wooden monosyllable in its narrative rendering. Even within time present, the eventual is once more flashed past: “*Already*, seedlings root in the nurse logs’ crevices, nourished by the rot.” Again, that clumping of adjectival and possessive form that so often marks a thematic, not just a syntactic, flashpoint in Powers. The unsaid “nursery” of the world guides us through the densely ridged awkwardness of “nurse logs’ crevices” to the

immediate payoff in an internal phonetic rhythm of cause and outcome across the chiasmic bracket “root / nurse / nourished / rot.” In this syllabic span, the phonetic closed circuit mimes the energy of recirculation in the vegetal ecology under report.

As if in liturgical solemnity, Nick has said “Amen” at the completion of his bulking – his lumbering? – cellulose script: for “verily,” since he “remembers that he read once, back in Iowa . . . that the word *tree* and the word *truth* came from the same” – wait for it – “root” (501). It is up to us to look it up: “sturdy, firm.” Etymology carries its usual weight in Powers’s prose. But the pun itself on “root,” hardly incidental, is in fact definitive. Everywhere in the depicted world of this fictional work, words turn woodwards, and vice versa. The diegetic system is one in which – no stray analogy this – there are “trees older than moveable type” (254). And, at any age, potentially as articulate in their own defense, and even as fungible in their mobility. So we have just seen in closure, under telekinetic overview in a time-lapse aerial video that is nevertheless all prose’s own, and where the trace of typeset can itself be more moveable than meets the eye. I repeat: “Already the word is greening.” But repeat not exactly, more like simultaneously: “Already the word is screening.”

I began by suggesting that the novel’s summons to the *medium* – rather than just the organic manifold – of tree life needed the conduit of a taut prose medium in its own fibrous right: alert to its own grain, resonance, subterranean filaments; not just phrases audible in the crosswinds of enunciation but words with their underground feelers out, probing, improbable, uncanny. Operating here is a conservation of linguistic energy that remains dependent on the circulatory system of a lexicon and syntax fully enmeshed – every bit as much as the sylvan undergrowth of its championed ambience – in webs of connection and interlace. Along the inner linings of its effect, prose is an entwined capillary action not so much allegorizing the pulse of tree life from the top down, but schooling cognitive recognition from the lexical ground up, seeding its own underlay with strange depths of phonic porosity in the turf of wording.

Where inference may lie fallow until unearthed by second thoughts. Few authors dependent on the force of linguistic facility telegraph their effects so delicately, or at least with such dead-pan neutrality. Powers can be wry, satiric, enigmatic, but in his language, the intricacies of his diction, he is the least showy of wordsmiths, the least blunt of punsters. “Boreal” and “arboreal” play against each other, as noted, many pages apart, without further ado. And when typography is specially enlisted to flag an effect, it is a device cited rather than imposed: as when a website time-lapse video called, in cutesy branding fashion, “ArBoReal” (483) is downloaded by Mimi Ma under her new alias Judith (in the continuing evasion of police capture). Without any such chance of typographic intervention in the play

of flagging caps, the novel leaves it for us to note that the tree-lover, Doug, who went to prison (for arson and accidental manslaughter) instead of Mimi, to spare her after the accidental death of their fellow activist Olivia, alleviates the claustrophobia in his viewless cell by listening – innocently amazed that people with “speech impediments” are now recruited for such recording chores – to none other than Tree-Patty’s audiobook through the solacing “buds” in his ears (479). This is the same author who bestows on his hero in *Orfeo* the surname Els, and abuts it more than once with “else,” as if to suggest the split psyche of a man repeatedly other to his own motives in his self-inflicted solitude

This is also, after all, the same Richard Powers who once authored a kind of self-help guide for “writers,” encouraging them to leave keypads behind for the triggering of voice-recognition digital code. His brief *New York Times Book Review* essay on “How to Speak a Book,” despite its title, offers no advice to audiobook reciters. It details instead his devotion to writing through voice-dictation on a tablet PC, involving the feedback system of decipherment itself.³ He is quick to historicize. Over the evolution of human literacy, “most reading was done out loud. Augustine remarks with surprise that Bishop Ambrose could read without moving his tongue.” Such subvocalization was long in gestation for human deciphering capacity: “Our passage into silent text came late and slow, and poets have resisted it all the way.” Powers explains further: “Speech and writing share some major neural circuitry, much of it auditory. All readers, even the fast ones, subvocalize.” In none of this is Powers directly issuing instructions, in the role of literary critic, for that silent reading which would elicit the “phonemes” he mentions as so crucial to the shape of phrase. So Powers’s claim is finally a suitably modest, if infinitely suggestive, one: “Mostly,” when dictating, “I’m just a little closer to what my cadences might mean, when replayed in the subvocal voices of some other auditioner.” Not auditor, note, but a literate agent trying out for the role of attentive reader.

Two discrete instances of such audition near the end of *The Overstory* are found to arc within or between single words in sparking verbal microplots that immediately scale up into alignment with the whole curve of the overplot. First, there is a punning flashpoint in the story of Ray Brinkman, the Minneapolis lawyer (horrified at one point by broadcast images of police brutality against the West Coast tree activists), now a movingly bedridden stroke victim who can barely grunt out his desire to play “Crss . . . wds” (371) with his wife, as in their former marital routine. He is convulsed in frustration by not being able to articulate his solution to their attempted puzzle except in scrawling out the alphabetic tendrils of a barely legible – but relieving – cross-syllabic “Releaf” (its scribble represented graphically rather than typographically on the page) in response to the original newspaper prompt: “starts with an R. *Bud’s comforting comeback*” (374). Once again, the pun can be laid at other than our author’s door. Yet Ray’s twisted, snagged script

bears immediate comparison with a distant motif in the novel, and with the coming climax: namely, Nick's habitual way of "writing nature." The hard-edged sans serif caps that always represent, on the page, the content rather than form of Nick's arboreal word art, even long before the climactic STILL, force us to imagine for ourselves – in contrast, again, to the illuminated decoration with which they are compared – the leafy untrimmed look of his lettering, whose "borders teem," in an important analogy, "with fronds and flowers from the margins of a medieval manuscript" (231). In Ray's case, however, the impaired, pained venting in letters of the homophonic pun on "Releaf" has recruited modern digital reproduction to simulate the spastic scribal flourish of the damaged hand's involuntary squiggles and volutes: a paralytic scrawl more leafy than readily legible. The filigrees and flourishes we associate with Nick's ecological calligrams, his scraggly fronds of script, have thus been deflected, with hypertrophic visibility, onto the more cryptic, crippled scrawl of that never explicitly parsed (and indeed cross-worded) pun awaiting Ray's recognition, dug deep from the underoil of the novel: a novel where the only *relief* for arboreal devastation is precisely its *re-leafing* a process "already" inchoate in those recuperative iterative lap-dissolves we have noted on the novel's last page.

The second and far more covert node of epiphany, or echological *epiphony*, is associated with a last venture of tree art that precedes the closing STILL life. Long after his arboreal heroics in the company of ecological fellow travelers, with Nick also now on the run from the law, we find him reduced, by way of gainful employment, to "scanning bar codes" on boxed books – the doubly pulped fate (unsaid) of the arboreal – at the "enormous Fulfillment Center" of an (equally unsaid) Amazon of deforestation. The "product" there is "not so much books" as – so the sentence lisps out lazily in its own *crss-wrd* hiss – "convenience. *Ease* is the disease and Nick is its vector" (397). Worlds apart from the "booklike bark" and "arbor-glyphs" of botanical inscription and its devoted legibilities early in the plot, phonetic diagnosis names at this point an opposite syndrome, as national ailment, even before the noun of malady, the restless "disease," fully arrives in syntactic delivery. But that is an incidental slippage – a minor ironic sabotage by lexical contagion – compared to what we discover on the next page. In secret provocations apart from his day job, Nick's polemic vandalism is still bent on defacing public as well as private property with outsize tree paintings, whose "furrows of bark" – when *read*, as it were, up close – are said in this most recent case, with their dark irregular striations, to resemble a "two-foot wide UPC bar code" (380). With a pun neither explicit nor funny, opening only between and across lexical ridges, it is the inward turned, blurred "furrow" of this phrasing that claims attention: the double decryption of this *bark code* as undersong culmination to a novel-long *bark ode*.

Crucially, too, Nick's messaging, "legible from space" as a stratospheric upload on the learners' monitors, is matched on the ground by a visceral download

in the closing pages. Immediately preceding the aerial recognition of STILL, Mimi Ma, alias Judith, having refused to sell off her own inherited, tree-dedicated calligraphic scroll, a priceless relic of her father's Chinese heritage, is flooded by tree speech, where "messages *hum from out of* the bark she leans against" (499), depth itself measured (almost in metrical spondee) by an excess prepositional uprush (with the arguably tautological "from" echoing more than directing the "hum"). Immediately reverberated from this already onomatopoeic hum ("origin probably imitative," say the dictionaries), the transcendental buzz surfaces, escalates, across the vector of another prepositional doublet, and then four more such thrusts along the infrastructure of a third encompassing sentence: "Chemical semaphores home *in over* the air. Currents rise *from* the soil-gripping roots, relayed *over* great distances *though* fungal synapses linked *up to* a network the size of the planet" (499). That "network" is no dead metaphor where the learners, our wired surrogates, are concerned.

An "echological" reading of Powers's novel will, of course, not only pick up the rebound of phrases across the text, articulating its own subsystem in answer to that of the private forest's. It will attune itself as well to re-soundings that reach beyond – back into the literary "network" – for a new interplay with its previous "actors," near and far. Tree-Patty is at first mocked among academic botanists for the very claim that later makes for her scholarly and popular renown: exactly the confidence that trees communicate, sign themselves, as above, in "semaphores" rather than just spores and seeds. Short of an intuitive uprush of audition like Mimi's in the park, the work of discerning the trees' secret code is, in effect, that of a fine-tuned disciplinary stethoscope, as if eavesdropping on the leaves themselves. Their impulses are transferred to our ears by a phonically keyed (indeed, as we know from Powers's advice to writers, voice-activated) prose set in train, at times, even by more or less abstruse crossword effects. And, as part of the literary system, by implicit intertexts. Famously in *Middlemarch*, George Eliot analogizes an impossibly totalized human sympathy to the aberration of "hearing the grass grow," whose preternatural overload would mean that "we should die of that roar which lives on the other side of silence," a sonic fate quite minimally approached, as it happens, on the keyboard of her own chiasmatically launched assonance (*die/side/si*). Powers's gambit stops short of this contemplated fatality. Rather than risking obliteration by audition, he implies that an ear tuned to the inner hives and havens, the groves and coverts, of a woodland vernacular – with its parallels in involute or even recondite lexical play – might instead revitalize our senses. With it we might hear what lies on the *inside* of silence, whether in paged words or in the mute *barchives* that prose, in this novel, so vividly transliterates.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018), 247; subsequent parenthetical citations refer to this edition.
- ² Richard Powers, *Orfeo* (New York: Picador, 2014), 381.
- ³ Richard Powers, "How to Speak a Book," *The New York Times Book Review*, January 7, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/07/books/review/Powers2.t.html>.

Video Games & the Novel

Eric Hayot

In the last sixty years, the video game industry has grown from quite literally nothing to a behemoth larger than the film or television industries. This enormous change in the shape of cultural production has failed to make much of an impact on the study of culture more generally, partly because video games seem so much less culturally important than novels. No one has ever imagined the Great American Video Game. But video games have more in common with novels than you might think, and vice versa. Anyone trying to understand the combination of neoliberal individualism and righteous murderousness that characterizes our world today will do well to pay them some attention.

The scholarly study of video games dates back to the late 1990s, when the field's first major journal, *Game Studies*, was founded, and the first major work was published in the field. Perhaps typical for any new academic endeavor, the field justified itself partly via claims of video games' radical difference from other forms of culture. Unlike novels, films, or television, games, we were told, were interactive, not passive and linear; they were oriented toward kinesthetic pleasures (jumping, running, flashing lights), not intellectual or emotional ones. Games were about simulating activities, not just imitating them. In fact, games were so different from novels, films, or drama that anyone seeking to simply slot them into that longer aesthetic history would be effectively attempting to "colonize" a new medium, to strip an exciting and unique cultural form of all of its novelty and interest.

The argument for the uniqueness of video games worked best if one emphasized certain types of games, games like *Super Mario Bros.* or *Tetris*, which highlighted precisely the kinesthetic and interactive structures that early game scholars identified as the crucial distinguishing elements of the genre, and deemphasized the kinds of games, also quite popular, that involved adventure or story. And indeed if one considers games like *Super Mario*, which draw so clearly from a longer tradition of kinesthetic and antagonistic play (what one sees in a game of jacks or pin the tail on the donkey), then the game enthusiasts had point. Video games are not like novels and films, partly because they do not simply represent their story-worlds, but rather invite their users to shape them in action. Understanding games while relying solely on existing theories of the novel would be to make a significant category mistake.

And yet. Plenty of video games involve stories, enough that attempting to think about what games do or are, culturally speaking, without any sense of how storytelling works would be a pretty odd thing to do. Games, after all, did not just emerge *sui generis* from the cultural landscape, from a set of technological and social conditions that had nothing to do with anything that came before. The people who made the first video games had, after all, grown up in a cultural environment fully shaped by the existence of the novel, indeed had grown up in a world in which the novel had been a dominant cultural form. And they had grown up in a world full of television, film, and theater, a world about which one can honestly say that – in the United States of the 1960s – practically no one alive had *not ever* seen a film, watched a play, or read a novel. At some broader level, all the storytelling media, games included, borrow from a set of tropes, cultural patterns, and forms of production, distribution, and consumption that extend backwards to the very beginnings of human culture. All of which is to say: video games are not novels, but they certainly share with novels a relation to a much longer history of narrative.

To separate video games fully from the novel (to deny, even, that games are a narrative medium at all) is to make a difference of degree into a difference of kind. Even in the case of user interaction – which may well be the most distinctive formal feature of the video game genre – we would do well to notice areas of overlap, areas in which thinking more expansively will give us a less chopped-up picture of the work of culture. Consider, for instance, that interactive fiction and poetry emerge, historically, at almost the same time as do the very first video games: *Spacewar!* (1961–1962), an early precursor of *Asteroids*, appears the same year as Raymond Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*, which invited readers to make up one of a trillion sonnets by mixing and matching ten options for each of the poem's fourteen lines. Two years later, Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* invited readers to bounce around the pages of the novel rather than read them straight through. And in 1969, B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* was published as a bundle of bound chapters in a box, the middle twenty-five of which could be read in any order you liked. That same year, Ralph Baer programmed *Pong* into an early version of the video game console called the Brown Box. Aesthetic interaction was, let's just say it, more generally in the air in the 1960s and 1970s. Insofar as there is something to be said about the relation between games and the novel, it will have to take place in a larger cultural context in which both genres reacted to and were shaped by a set of common forces.

And this is true not just for the 1960s, but for any larger sense of the relation between interaction and storytelling. Think of folk stories or popular theater – like Punch and Judy shows – in which shouting at the stage is not only accepted but encouraged, or Shakespearean asides, or, at the limit, of the implied addressee of so much lyric poetry, in which the line between story-world and audience be-

comes, at times, blurry indeed. Interaction was a story-mode for centuries, if not millennia, before the arrival of the microprocessor. Whatever video games are doing with interaction, they are doing in a context that emerges from a long history of interactions actual and represented, in a world in which the capacity to act, or to interact (or the inability to do so), has in fact constituted a major concern of all aesthetic making, from the most popular to the most highbrow.

What this means is that any understanding of video games that does not include the novel – or that treats them as a radically new form of culture untouched by the vast histories of storytelling and play that precede it – will necessarily be incomplete. But the reverse is also true, since both games and novels 1) participate in the larger cultural context of which I have been writing, but also 2) because the novel today is unquestionably being shaped by the cultural presence of video games, just as it has been shaped by the history of television and film. We can talk easily about the transfer of the cinematic gaze to fiction; we can recognize clearly enough the ways in which certain novels are written in order to become movies. Can we see the same, or say the same, for video games?

Undoubtedly, yes. In the early days of video games, the structures of influence go almost entirely in one direction. This movement from the culture-at-large to the nascent form is a law of aesthetic novelty: early films copy novels and plays, for instance, and the early novel draws on the structures and patterns of romance and the picaresque, before each medium finds its “own” form. But as time passes, the traffic in culture flows both ways.

Consider, for instance, the near-simultaneous appearance of the most important early text-based adventure game, *Colossal Cave Adventure*, developed by Will Crowther for the PDP-1 mainframe computer between 1975 and 1977, and the “choose your own adventure” genre of children’s fiction, the first of which, *Sugarcane Island*, was written by Edward Packard in 1969. Published in 1976 in a series initially called *Adventures of You*, *Sugarcane Island* became in 1979 part of Bantam Books’ *Choose Your Own Adventure* line, which sold more than 250 million books between 1979 and 1998. Today, the genre has been remediated once again, as a board game, which sells at your local Target. (If you are eager to find a highbrow predecessor for this kind of second-person storytelling in the novel, look no further than Michel Butor’s 1957 *La modification*). Something similarly remediative has happened to the Tom Clancy franchise, which began as a series of single-authored books before ending up as an empire that includes films, television series, ghost-written airport novels, and some forty or fifty different video games. We see similar transference effects in the vast number of rethinkings and remakings of Tolkien and his fantasy world, most directly in the games and films based directly on *Lord of the Rings* and, more generally, in the tens of thousands of novels, games, films, and television shows that take the dwarves and elves, swords and dragons of Tolkien’s invention and make them the basis for new stories.

Recent years have seen the rise of an entire subgenre of fantasy fiction known as LitRPG, in which the basic mechanics of tabletop role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), these days almost entirely remediated through their video game versions, return to novelistic fiction, which then organizes its narratives around the scaling of levels and abilities, the acquisition of weapons and characteristics, and so on, that define those game modes. The most successful instances of the LitRPG genre, like Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2012), have topped the *New York Times* bestsellers list and been made into major Hollywood movies. But the vast majority of them – thousands and thousands – exist as digital-only objects sold via Amazon's direct publishing platforms.

Scholars have with few exceptions ignored this vast creative output, which is of dubious literary value in the usual sense. And indeed, anyone trying to understand “the novel” today can probably afford to ignore the actual texts in question. But it would be foolish, I think, not to recognize the ways in which the field of the novel has been altered by online publishing platforms, and by the kinds of fiction they sell, which tend to be – unlike highbrow fiction – intensely generic and serial. Their success suggests something important about the current appetite for the consumption of culture, namely its new, or seemingly new, emphasis on binging: binge-reading, binge-watching, binge-playing, what amounts to a desire for the total absorption into a storytelling universe, from one perspective, or a radically frenzied and consumerist fall into a fully capitalist aesthetic, a kind of storytelling shopaholism, from another.

Whatever the novel is today, then, it is that by virtue of its location within a more general system of narrative media, one that has been profoundly influenced by both the mechanical (interactive) structures that video games afford, and by the story-worlds that video games have helped to make so culturally prominent. Understanding that system is not a matter of grasping any single instance of influence or interference, but rather of seeing the patterns and structures of the system as a whole, and of recognizing that even those parts of the system that seem to have withheld themselves from it – here I am thinking specifically of the highbrow or literary novel, with all of its rejections of the popular narrative genres and modes – nonetheless operate with, and only make sense within, the very media system that they are so often invested in resisting.

If that is so, then, rather than begin with the question about what makes video games different from novels, we might do well to ask what makes them similar. I have already given you some answers: games, like novels, belong to a system of intertextuality and remediation that characterizes all media environments, not only the ones of the twentieth century and beyond; games, like novels, belong to a longer history of storytelling from which they emerge, themes and narrative strategies already in hand; and games appear at a historical moment when audience interaction in a number of other art forms – including fiction, yes, but also,

of course, drama! – constitutes a major source of aesthetic interest. All this suggests not so much that we need to “apply” what we learn from video games to our understanding of the novel, or the reverse, but rather that we ought to think them together, to see how aspects of each illuminate a larger cultural picture in which both participate.

To say the obvious and very simple thing first: the rise of interactive aesthetic activity in the twentieth century responds to a far longer unit of human concern than anything local to that period. *Choosing* as a theme predates both the novel and the video game. Abraham hearing the angel, Antigone before Creon, the miller’s daughter and Rumpelstiltskin: each of these scenes testifies to the narrative potency of the moment of choosing, and to its vast importance to the very idea of human life as it confronts the face of power and the possibility of its own impotence. The arrival of video games as a new cultural form in the last sixty years must therefore be understood as an event inside this larger context, one of whose other major events is, of course, the novel, which has been the matizing choice for as long as it has been in existence. (Think of Defoe’s *Crusoe*, who shows us choosing in its most triumphant, individualistic mode; or of Anna Karenina; or of that great refuser-to-choose, Melville’s *Bartleby*.)

What remains, then, is to think of the specific meanings that the various cultural modes – here the novel and the video game – codify in their general representation of choosing, and to ask what these codifications tell us about the cultures that produce them. In a famous example of this kind of reading, Erich Auerbach, in *Mimesis*, points out that the Arthurian knight Calogrenant, in one version of his tale, turns “right” into a forest while on a journey. But Calogrenant does not really turn right, Auerbach says. He makes the “right” turn, whether or not there was a right turn in that forest on that day, whether in fact there was a forest at all, makes no difference. What looks like a choice in the story is in fact the mechanism of rightness, of justice, making there be turns where turning is needed. In this sense, all turns in the Arthurian romance, even the wrong turns, are the “right” ones, since the decision-making process that drives them stems not from the individual choice made in the present of the narrative, but rather in the fact that the major characters – the knight, the monster – are the *kind of person they are*: that is, the kind of person who turns right at the right time, or who tricks others into making the wrong (but therefore also right) turn.

One might contrast this with the agonies of choice we see in the modern novel to begin to grasp some difference this newer genre makes. For the modern novel means for its readers, I believe, to grasp its protagonists’ choices – again, think of Anna Karenina, or of Woolf’s *Clarissa Dalloway*, choosing to get the flowers herself – as decisions that could just as well not have been made, as decisions made within a framework that is fundamentally rational, even if it is also constrained.

Indeed, the tension between constraint and freedom – the cultural mores that make Emma Bovary or Anna an adulteress, the ones that turn Lucien de Rubempré toward his amoral triumph – constitutes one of the major plot points of modern fiction. This secular, rational orientation toward the possibility of choice-making explains both why the real alternatives to characters' final choices must be made so vivid as possibilities in the text – Crusoe's success on the island depends, as a matter of narrative interest, entirely on the idea that he might at any moment fail in his endeavor – and why, also, the collapse of the possibility of meaningful choice so often appears, in the modern novel, as a matter of madness (Gilman's *Yellow Wallpaper*), trauma (Faulkner), or bureaucracy (Kafka).

Against this more general backdrop, we encounter something fairly remarkable about the video game as a cultural genre, something that may help us understand the larger cultural forces that are shaping the contemporary interaction aesthetic, and also why the video game industry has gone from literally nothing, sixty years ago, to an economic force larger than either the television or film industries today. It is this: that players of games must be able to *win*. Any obstacle faced by their protagonist, any blockage in forward progress, whether its agent is the environment or a villain, *must* be able to be overcome through the player's effort. The game does not end until all such obstacles are overcome. As with genre fiction, it is the final overcoming of the final obstacle that closes off the story and frames the happy ending of the diegesis. This is, finally, as true for phone games like *Candy Crush* (even if there will always be another level to play) as it is for narratively elaborate, multimillion-dollar titles only playable on personal computers or game consoles.

The ideological implications of this winning constraint offer gamers a fundamentally libertarian worldview. In a world in which everyone has the same chance at complete success, and access to absolutely the same computational and diegetic resources, any failure can only be the result of an individual lack, of "user error." The moral outcomes of the vast majority of video game universes thus express – and allow players to practice and play with – a version of personal equality that exists nowhere in real life. Video games have a very hard time representing powerless people, or imagining a world in which such people suffer, through no fault of their own, the effects of structural or social violence. As with most modern fantasy fiction, powerlessness in video games exists only as a prelude to its transformation into diegetic omnipotence, weakness only as a prelude to strength.

This predilection for the happy ending makes games little different from the vast majority of the modes of genre fiction from which they most frequently draw: namely, science fiction and fantasy. There, the trials suffered by novelistic heroes exist – speaking here of their narrative function – mainly to *extend* the time of the story, since without them there would be quite literally nothing to tell. (Imagine: "In a town there was born a child. She lived happily ever after.") Nonetheless, we

may want to note that the general lack of unhappy endings provides an interesting brake on the overall capacity of video games to represent culture and, particularly, to enter into the consideration of those of us whose tastes and modes of interpretation have been weaned on tragedy, pathos, and trauma, for whom something like “realism” is usually associated with emotional difficulty and devastation: Pecola Breedlove, Hamlet, the man without qualities, and so on. It seems unlikely that video games could become a fully mature cultural formation – mature in the sense of having the capacity to represent the entire range of emotions and outcomes that we associate with all the developed aesthetic forms – without being able to access the unhappy endings of the tragic mode. (Or even, more minimally, to ironize them: to taint the happy ending, as so often happens in Dickens, with a sense of loss or anxiety that undercuts the very finality of the story.)

In other words, the structural constraint created by the need to win makes it difficult for video games to break out of the basic comedic structures that characterize genre and popular culture more generally. And this in turn makes it difficult for games to fully represent, as can novels and films, the full emotional and social range of human life.

But the situation is changing. Consider Toby Fox’s *Undertale* (2015). The game presents itself as a role-playing dungeon crawler, a genre in which the player moves through underground spaces encountering various creatures and killing them for their gear, progressing toward a final encounter with the main villain, whose defeat ends the game. In an echo of the genre’s origins in the 1980s, *Undertale* presents this generic structure in a deliberately anachronistic design language, the visual equivalent of a film shot entirely in sepia tones. The resulting nostalgia, and the fact that the game’s protagonist is a young child, vibrates against the major traditional constraint of the genre, which is that any movement forward through the story traditionally relies on killing any creature that gets in your way.

What is odd about *Undertale* is that, as it turns out, every single encounter in the game can be won by subduing or otherwise pacifying – but not killing – your enemies. This, in effect, reveals the traditional constraint of such games as a *form of mass murder*, and opens a dark window onto our contemporary fascination with child killers (consider *La Femme Nikita*, *The Hunger Games*, or Tana French’s *In the Woods*). Players can, of course, play the game any way they would like, but the game’s endings differ substantially depending on what the player chooses to do. Indeed, the decision to kill everyone the player encounters produces the game’s only decidedly tragic ending, in which a traumatized and angry opponent destroys the entire universe, essentially deciding that, if genocide is the only way to move through the story, neither the player nor anyone in it are worthy of continued existence.

For the ordinary player who enters the game-world with no knowledge that mass murder can be refused – for whom killing has not yet become mass murder – the fundamental moral logic and surprise of the game will come, then, somewhere in the middle of the game itself, when she realizes that it has been possible all along to avoid killing anything at all. At that point, of course, it is *already too late* to go back. The game’s creatures, who have been until then, in the nature of all video game obstacles, eminently killable – who have seemed in fact to *invite* being killed – suddenly become endowed with the possibility of further life, and enter thereby into a field of moral consideration and legitimacy that has the effect of turning the game completely upside down (an under-tale, indeed). What players do next is, of course, up to them: one can finish the game more pacifistically, and then replay the entire game (whose diegesis will recognize that this is a second playthrough, and respond to the results of the first one) in that mode, in order to achieve the game’s “happiest” ending. Or one can shrug one’s shoulders and go on killing.

Something like that, minus the shoulder-shrugging, characterizes another recent game, *The Last of Us* (2013). Published by a major studio, Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us* tells the story of a postapocalyptic United States on a planet that has been devastated by a zombie-creating fungus. Part of the game’s pathos involves walking through the devastated ruins of our contemporary civilization, witnessing the fall of buildings and the fall of the political and legal institutions that support our (relatively) safe, healthy lives, and witnessing, therefore, the return of the forms of inhuman brutality, including cannibalism, that we today imagine would characterize the loss of technological modernity. In this way, the emotional structure of the game takes part in the larger postapocalyptic imaginary characterized by films like *Mad Max* or *The Day After*, and by any number of novels, graphic novels, or television shows that fantasize the zombified future of ordinary life.

The plot of the game is simple enough. The protagonists are Ellie, a thirteen-year-old girl who seems to be the first person to be immune to the virus, and Joel, an embittered forty-something whose daughter was killed during the first days of the apocalypse, twenty years earlier. Joel reluctantly agrees to accompany Ellie from Boston to Salt Lake City, where a team of doctors will examine her in order to begin researching a cure. Over the course of this journey, Joel’s hard-bitten interior gradually crumbles, and he begins to love Ellie as a daughter and imagines that they could live a life together as parent and (replacement) child.

This growing emotional intensity causes what happens next. As the two reach Salt Lake City, it becomes clear that the only way for the doctors to create an antidote or vaccine will be to destroy Ellie’s brain. She willingly steps into the operating room, confident that her sacrifice will save humanity. But Joel cannot stand it. Under the player’s control, he rushes through the hospital, killing doctors and security guards along the way, to reach an unconscious Ellie, and pulls her from the

operating table. The game ends as she wakes up in a car, with Joel driving, taking them to an encampment in the wilderness. What happened? she asks. Oh, Joel says, the doctors took a look, and realized they didn't need you – you were just like a number of other patients they'd already seen.

I need to explain what it feels like to play the game in these moments. I did not *want* to kill the doctors, who, as far as I knew, are literally the only experienced medical professionals left on the planet. I did not want to rescue Ellie, and I did not want to remove her from the operating room. But the game treats any refusal to pursue *Joel's* course of action as a refusal to play and sends the player back to the game's opening screen. The player therefore must choose either 1) to refuse to continue playing the game, or 2) to become directly complicit in Joel's love for Ellie, to pull the trigger on the diegetic gun that kills the doctors, to move to pull her from the table, and so on. In short: the player participates actively in the creation of a tragedy or must cease to play entirely.

One has of course felt, watching *Othello* or *Hamlet*, the desire to reach out and stop the madness, to throw oneself athwart the inevitable and often stupid march to disaster. But one was not, at the time, actually playing the characters involved. Here, part of the emotional force of the tragedy happens because one is so accustomed, in video games, to the possibility of a happy ending, that one cannot, at first, accept that the game is going to force one to participate in its opposite. What makes *The Last of Us* interesting, then, is how it takes away the possibility of interactivity; in order to produce its tragic ending, it must keep the player from choosing any other ending. This makes it more like a novel, to be sure, but not entirely like a novel. For in *The Last of Us*, the work of art gambles that we will care more about reaching the end of the story than we will about losing the chance to save the planet, that we will, correctly prompted, like Joel, love the end of the world more than we love the possibility of its redemption.

With *The Last of Us* and *Undertale*, then, we have two games that, if they appeared in another cultural genre, one accustomed to the kinds of interpretive force I am putting on it here, would minimally be recognized as significant works of art.

That they are not, and probably will not be, reflects the strangely narrow social band within which video games operate today. Everyone has seen some television, watched a few movies, read a novel or two. But many, many people have never played a video game. And the group of those who do – the stereotypical gamers – are young, White, and male, though less and less so each year. My argument here is not that, if these things were to change – if, for instance, video games achieved the kind of cultural penetration that characterizes the other genres, or if they were regularly able to “equal” (whatever that would mean) the aesthetic achievements of the best novels or films – then video games would finally somehow deserve the right to be included alongside those more prestigious genres in the pantheons of the university or the magazines and cultural reviews of the elite. The point is rath-

er that any consideration of what the novel is today, and any true understanding of what narrative aesthetics are doing in general, is impossible if we do not also understand the work video games are doing on that front, or how, or why, or for whom they are doing it. If, as I have been arguing, one of the things video games reveal is the centrality of libertarian choice to a certain fantasy of modern life – and if some recent video games themselves are engaged in a critique of that fantasy, in precisely the represented practices of world-saving and mass killing that have been its bedrock – then anyone trying to understand the combination of neoliberal individualism and righteous murderousness that characterizes our world today will do well to pay attention.

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Losing Track of Time

Jonathan Greenberg

Otessa Moshfegh's My Year of Rest and Relaxation tells a story of doing nothing; it is an antinovel whose heroine attempts to sleep for a year in order to lose track of time. This desire to lose track of time constitutes a refusal of plot, a satiric and passive-aggressive rejection of the kinds of narrative sequences that novels typically employ but that, Moshfegh implies, offer nothing but accommodation to an unhealthy late capitalist society. Yet the effort to stifle plot is revealed, paradoxically, as an ambition to be achieved through plot, and so in resisting what novels do, My Year of Rest and Relaxation ends up showing us what novels do. Being an antinovel turns out to be just another way of being a novel; in seeking to lose track of time, the novel attunes us to our being in time.

Whenever I woke up, night or day, I'd shuffle through the bright marble foyer of my building and go up the block and around the corner where there was a bodega that never closed.¹

For a long time I used to go to bed early.²

The first of these sentences begins Otessa Moshfegh's 2018 novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*; the second, Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. More accurately, the second sentence begins C. K. Scott Moncrieff's translation of Proust, whose French reads, "Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure." D. J. Enright emends the translation to "I would go to bed"; Lydia Davis and Google Translate opt for "I went to bed." What the translators famously wrestle with is how to render Proust's ungrammatical combination of the completed action of the *passé composé* ("went to bed") with a modifier ("long time") that implies a repeated, habitual, or everyday action. Gerard Genette calls this a problem of "frequency," since it linguistically blends a *singulative* narrative event (something that happens once) with an *iterative* one (something that happens repeatedly).³ According to Genette, in fact, Proust does not merely employ the iterative; he displays an "intoxication" with it.⁴ You might even say that the iterative becomes, for Proust, the very substance of the novel.⁵

Moshfegh's sentence owes a considerable debt to Proust. It doesn't bend the rules of grammar, but it induces the same kind of temporal wobble. The opening conjunction *whenever* possesses the same built-in iterativity as Proust's adverb

longtemps, immediately placing us in the cyclical time of daily practices; Moshfegh underscores the habitual nature of the action with the contraction *I'd* and the qualifier *night or day*. As in the Proust, the layering of timeframes – a singular action takes place as part of a daily routine that is repeated over an unspecified duration of days, weeks, or months – disorients us. Proust's narrator repeatedly goes to bed; Moshfegh's repeatedly wakes up. Meanwhile, the bodega, the endpoint of the narrator's habitual excursions, is seemingly immune from time. Open twenty-four seven, it is a small miracle of capitalism, unaffected by the diurnal cycles of waking and sleeping, as is the marble foyer that appears to shine just as bright in the night as in the day. And like Proust's unnamed first-person narrator (who, after going to bed early, soon wakes again, roused by "the thought that it was time to go to sleep"),⁶ Moshfegh's narrator is herself disoriented. She passes in and out of sleep, scrutinizing the state of her own puzzled consciousness, losing and reconstituting her very relations to the physical world. On each trip to the bodega, she buys herself "two large coffees," as though she wants to wake herself up (no lime-blossom tea, alas); she then loads up on sedatives and antidepressants to hasten her slumbers. And so, she tells us, "I lost track of time in this way" (1).

Losing track of time is the goal of both narrator and author in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, making the novel a sort of *Recherche* in reverse. To be sure, the narrator does inform us that the year is 2000, that she is twenty-six years old, and that the world of history and politics continues to exist outside her apartment. She glimpses "Bush versus Gore" on the cover of a tabloid in the bodega. But calendar time and current events are, for the most part, shut out. "Things were happening in New York City – they always are – but none of them affected me," she says. "This was the beauty of sleep – reality detached itself and appeared in my mind as casually as a movie or a dream" (4).

It is a commonplace that not only Proust but many of the great modernists – Joyce, Woolf, Mann, Faulkner – made time their subject.⁷ As the medium in which consciousness unfolds, time assumes both thematic and structural importance for the novel's efforts to render human experience from the inside. Even H. G. Wells, one of the old-fashioned Edwardian materialists for whom Woolf had little use, saw the novel as a kind of time machine, or so he comes very close to saying in the first chapter of his book of that name:

You are wrong to say that we cannot move about in Time. For instance, if I am recalling an incident very vividly I go back to the instant of its occurrence: I become absent-minded, as you say. I jump back for a moment. Of course we have no means of staying back for any length of Time, any more than a savage or an animal has of staying six feet above the ground. But a civilised man is better off than the savage in this respect. He can go up against gravitation in a balloon, and why should he not hope that ultimately he may be able to stop or accelerate his drift along the Time-Dimension, or even turn about and travel the other way?⁸

That is Wells's unnamed "Time Traveler," a late-Victorian inventor possessed, however foolishly, of his age's confidence in science and optimism about the future. The Time Traveler, to be sure, is less interested in recapturing evanescent childhood experiences or fugitive epiphanies than in comprehending deep or cosmic time, the vast expanses over which civilizations and species, continents and planets, live and die. But whether on the grand scale of the cosmos, or the humbler scale of the individual life, it was the novelists of the era, not the scientists and engineers, who invented ways "to stop or accelerate" a person's "drift along the Time-Dimension."

No doubt there are many explanations for the modernist novel's interest in time, but any account specific to modernism would by definition accept that our understanding and experience of temporality is itself subject to history and hence time. The critic Fredric Jameson – here in a digression on Georg Lukács, Walter Scott, the historical novel, and the historicity of literary forms – identifies the culprit, unsurprisingly, as the socioeconomic transformations of the West in the nineteenth century:

The definitive establishment of a properly capitalist mode of production as it were re-programs and utterly restructures the values, life rhythms, cultural habits, and temporal sense of its subjects. Capitalism demands in this sense a different experience of temporality from what was appropriate to a feudal or tribal system.⁹

Historian Stephen Kern, meanwhile, reminds us that the implementation of a global standard of time in the years between the Prime Meridian Conference of 1884 and the global broadcast of a time signal from the Eiffel Tower in 1913 – roughly the lifespan of Proust (1871–1922) – led to a "collapse" of "local times." The push to standardization was prompted by the speed of the railroad, Kern notes, and enabled by the even greater speed of the telegraph: "The world was fated to wake up to buzzers and bells triggered by impulses that traveled around the world with the speed of light."¹⁰ It is in response to this standardization of time, and its impact on human "life rhythms" and "cultural habits" (Genette's iterative), that modernism intensifies its exploration of time as an interior psychic phenomenon out of sync with the external standards of modernity, what Jameson elsewhere calls "the semi-autonomous and henceforth compartmentalized spaces of lived time over clock time."¹¹ This "lived time," indeed, becomes a repository of the individual human being's unique value.

The desire of Moshfegh's narrator to lose track of time can thus provisionally be seen as a variation on Proust's project and that of the modernist novel. If Jameson is right that the value of "lived time" emerges in reaction to the triumph of "clock time," it would stand to reason that a novel that seeks to lose track of time should announce the persistence of clock time or calendar time in its very title. Neither as boldly expansive as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* nor as meticulous-

ly compressed as *The Hours*, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* identifies a timespan in the middle ranges. A year is a period over which interest or excitement in a topic or a story can be sustained. The author, I suspect, had in the back of her mind the popular food memoir *Julie and Julia: My Year of Cooking Dangerously* (2009), a title that itself riffs on the Peter Weir film *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982). Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) may be lurking there too, and perhaps another memoir of travel and lifestyle, Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence* (1989). Of course, none of these titles, other than Moshfegh's, actually belongs to a *novel*, yet they still suggest that a year is a timespan fit for a book-length plot. Like a gap year or a junior year abroad, a yearlong novel occupies a duration ample yet finite, one over which you can accomplish something substantial, distinctive, or even dangerous: a vacation, a project, an undertaking, an adventure. We even have the critic Phyllis Rose's *The Year of Reading Proust: A Memoir in Real Time* (1999).

On the other hand, to devote a year to nothing but sleep, especially by doping yourself up on prescription and over-the-counter drugs as Moshfegh's narrator does, is less a project than an antiproject. In fact, it may be significant that the "year of" formula originates with the memoir, not the novel; the novel, in contrast, would then aim to satirize the memoir and its implicit agenda (*Accomplish something! Do something exciting with your life!*) by appropriating this pernicious formula. Moshfegh indeed more or less directs us to take the title of her novel with a double dose of irony and a drink of water. At least that is one way to read this exchange between the narrator and her psychiatrist:

"Do you know what mirth means? M-I-R-T-H?"

"Yeah. Like *The House of Mirth*," I said.

"A sad story," said Dr. Tuttle.

"I haven't read it."

"Better you don't." (22 – 23)

The author, needless to say, has read it, and even lists it on *Goodreads* as one of her five favorite novels "set in the city that never sleeps."¹² Moshfegh, in other words, signals to us that she is no more writing about "rest and relaxation" than Edith Wharton is writing about mirth.

Moshfegh's title in fact deliberately and comically obscures the weighty psychic and existential stakes of her character's daily, yearlong effort to lose track of time. This effort, which the narrator describes as her "hibernation," consists of drug-induced sleep, regular visits to the bodega, and somewhat less regular trips to the drug store and to Dr. Tuttle for the purpose of restocking the Nembutol, trazodone, Ambien, Ativan, Xanax, Zyprexa, lithium, Solofton, Benadryl, Ny-Quil, Robitussin, and other drugs that will constitute what she calls, with a telling metaphor, her "library of psychopharmaceuticals" (26). Her waking hours she spends watching popular movies from the nineties, ideally starring Harrison Ford

or Whoopi Goldberg. An annoyingly devoted best friend, Reva, visits sporadically. Memories of childhood, college, and an ex-boyfriend surface. And so the year slips by: “The speed of time varied, fast or slow, depending on the depth of my sleep. . . . My favorite days were the ones that barely registered” (71).

The year of rest and relaxation thus turns out to be a chronicle of days that barely register. That is to say, in rejecting time, the novel also spurns the very action that the novel would seem to require to sustain itself. This too is, broadly speaking, a modernist ambition. The narrative theorist Dorrit Cohn notes that with Molly Bloom’s monologue in the final chapter of *Ulysses*, James Joyce achieves an unparalleled representation of the real-time unspooling of consciousness. He accomplishes this through a curtailment of the character’s movement in space: “Doubtless the most artful stratagem Joyce employed . . . is to set Molly’s mind into its turbulent motion while setting her body into a state of nearly absolute tranquility.” While her husband has spent the day out and about, his mind stimulated by the buzz and hum of Dublin’s streets and pubs, Molly’s monologue is the thought-stream of “a body at rest,” placed in “calm surroundings,” doing virtually nothing but thinking.¹³ Joyce’s almost perfectly stationary thinker is not even granted a coffee run to the all-night bodega. (She does get up to use the chamber pot.) The conclusion of *Ulysses* allows the inner world to come to the fore precisely because the outer world is allowed to recede.

For the similarly housebound and stationary narrator of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, such a curtailment of action means a disavowal of plot. A plot, literary scholar Peter Brooks tells us, is a temporal and teleological sequence, “a structuring operation elicited by, and made necessary by, those meanings that develop through succession and time.” A plot makes mere events into a story, creating “suspense and uncertainty” and thereby orienting the reader toward a resolution, a “revelation of meaning” reached “when the narrative sentence achieves full predication.”¹⁴ This is consistent too with Georg Lukács’s understanding of the novel’s paradigmatic plot as “the story of the soul that goes to find itself, that seeks adventures in order to be proved and tested by them, and, by proving itself, to find its own essence.”¹⁵ But in Moshfegh’s book, any forward propulsion of events, driven by the promise of meaning, is rigorously halted. Most obviously, the traditional marriage plot, with its “predicate” of happily ever after, is jettisoned. The ex-boyfriend Trevor is unthinkable as a husband, a parody of emotional and sexual selfishness. Indeed, marriage itself seems preposterous: “Reva often spoke about ‘settling down.’ That sounded like death to me” (28). (In her *Goodreads* post, Moshfegh praises the “hilariously radical” premise of *The House of Mirth*, whose “protagonist’s search for a husband is utterly unromantic: She’s going broke.”)¹⁶

If this novel has no interest in finding Mr. Darcy, neither does it take up the plot of the *Künstlerroman*, in which the main character progresses, however fitfully, to-

ward the creation of a work of art. A brief prehibernation job in a Soho gallery, taken on for no other purpose than “to pass the time,” exposes the contemporary art world as shallow, voyeuristic, and gimmicky:

On a low pedestal in the corner, a small sculpture by the Brahams Brothers – a pair of toy monkeys made using human pubic hair. Each monkey had a little erection poking out of its fur. The penises were made of white titanium and had cameras in them positioned to take crotch shots of the viewer. The images were downloaded to a Web site. A specific password to log in to see the crotch shots cost a hundred dollars. The monkeys themselves cost a quarter million for the pair. (39)

Moshfegh’s narrator is no Lily Briscoe, and this book seems unlikely to end with an affirmation that she has had her vision.

And what about social ambition, the “dominant dynamic of plot,” the “force that drives the protagonist forward” in so many nineteenth-century novels?¹⁷ It is reduced to the contemporary discourse of self-care and self-help, which feebly disguises a consumerist agenda. Reva, a viewer of *Sex and the City* and reader of *Cosmo*, speaks like “a Hallmark card” (165) and offers pop-psychology slogans that urge accommodation to a worthless society: “Take some time off and think about your next move. Oprah says we women rush into decisions because we don’t have faith that something better will come along. And that’s how we get stuck in dissatisfying careers and marriages.” To which the narrator responds, “I’m not making a career move” (55). For her, it’s not the move but the whole game that’s the problem. Reva, bound by the norms and narratives of her gender and class, can only counsel a restorative break in the action – rest and relaxation – but cannot envision an end to action itself. At one point Reva leaves a note that reads, “Today is the first day of the rest of your life! xoxo.” The narrator wants none of it:

I had no idea what I’d said to inspire Reva to leave me such a patronizing note of encouragement. Maybe I’d made a pact with her in my blackout: “Let’s be happy! Let’s live every day like it’s our last!” Barf. (240)

The slogans of self-care – and, with them, any larger, memoir-ish plotline of self-realization that they suggest – are dismissed as hollow and commercial. This novel has no more interest in advancing a career than in arranging a marriage.

The critic Robert Douglas-Fairhurst tells us that “a question at the heart of all picaresque fiction” is the one asked by Dickens’s Mr. Pickwick: “Where shall we go to next?”¹⁸ Henry Fielding, in his own picaresque, *Joseph Andrews*, makes explicit the analogy between reading and the adventure of travel, praising the gaps between chapters in his book as a source of cognitive restoration. Chapter breaks are, in his conceit, sites for rest and relaxation: “those little Spaces between our Chapters may be looked upon as an Inn or Resting-Place,

where [the reader] may stop and take a Glass or any other Refreshment as it pleases him.”¹⁹ But a handful of chapter breaks notwithstanding, *My Year* takes no such pleasure in either forward motion or refreshment. It is the very opposite of the Pickwickian picaresque. Shortly before the narrator’s hibernation begins, some interns at the Soho gallery ask her Pickwick’s very question: what to do next. “What next?” she thinks. “I couldn’t imagine” (42). There is in this book no next move, no next episode. The story never gets up from the space between life chapters, never moves on from its comfortable Resting-Place. The gallery job is worthwhile solely because it allows the narrator to take furtive naps in a supply closet, where she experiences the very best kind of sleep, a “black emptiness, an infinite space of nothingness” (39). This is a cognitive obliteration akin to what Proust’s speaker describes in his opening pages as the “abyss of not-being,” the *néant* that Roger Shattuck grandly describes as a state of being “abandoned to the point of elimination from the universe.”²⁰ And like Proust’s narrator emerging from his *néant*, Moshfegh’s finds coming to consciousness to be an agonizing reconstruction of the cosmos. She, however, makes clear that she’d be just as happy not to see the universe restored: “My entire life flashed before my eyes in the worst way possible, my mind refilling itself with all my lame memories, every little thing that had brought me to where I was” (40).

The future appears foreclosed, then, but Moshfegh’s character is still burdened with a past: those lame but deeply rooted memories that, upon waking, spontaneously regenerate to fill her mind. She wants to lose track of these past experiences every bit as much as she wants to fend off the necessity of any action that will bring on the future. Yet much of the novel consists of her recitation of the very memories she scorns. In fact, in the unfolding of these prehibernation memories, the alert reader might notice a slippage or authorial sleight of hand: this narrative is not a present-tense diary or, like Molly Bloom’s interior monologue, a real-time unspooling of thought, and so (if we give the matter much thought) we must conclude that both the prehibernation memories and the actual hibernation time itself are narrated from a temporal point *after* the year of rest and relaxation has concluded. The empty year, as it were, imports these lame memories from the past and their recitation from the future, and in this way both the pages of the novel and the days of the year acquire substance, stealthily piling up the building blocks of backstory, family history, and plot.

Through this recitation, moreover, the narrator provides us enough in the way of a life history for us to discern, on a psychological level, the sources of her desire to lose track of time. The death of both parents seven years ago is the apparent cause of her current malaise, and her seemingly pathological response to these losses surely has something to do with the psychic costs of having been raised in a cold, unloving family. (“None of us had much warmth in our hearts” [49].) She recalls, for example, that as a girl she was not allowed to have a puppy. Notably, this

is a memory first recalled *not* at the time of the novel's composition or utterance, but during the actual narrated events (such as they are) of the year 2000. Just before the hibernation project, while contemplating some pretentious artwork, the narrator experiences an involuntary memory, one whose unprompted surfacing invests it with special meaning and power:

"Pets just make messes. I don't want to have to go around picking dog hairs out of my teeth," I remembered my mother saying.

"Not even a goldfish?"

"Why? Just to watch it swim around and die?" (50)

The modest request for a pet fish becomes a lesson in philosophical nihilism, the confined life of the fish serving as a metaphor for the pointlessness of human existence and plotlessness of this novel. Some hundred and fifty pages later, the narrator thinks again of her mother, whom she watched as a child putting on make-up, "wondering if one day I'd be like her, a beautiful fish in a man-made pool, circling and circling" (212 – 213).

Despite its satire of Dr. Tuttle and Big Pharma, then, the novel invites us to read it as a psychiatric case history of sorts, and it takes no special expertise or insight to diagnose the narrator with depression. Indeed her emotional state seems a textbook case of Freud's melancholia,²¹ which differs from a normal condition of mourning in that for the melancholic, not merely the world but the ego itself "has become poor and empty."²² (One might say that mourning stands to melancholia as rest and relaxation stand to whatever kind of cognitive obliteration or nothingness the narrator seeks.) The narrator tells us quite plainly that she "wanted a mother" because her own mother "was usually passed out in her bed with the door locked" (147), sedated by alcohol and Valium. Freud's melancholic has internalized the lost love object; in this case, although both parents have died, that object is the alcoholic mother, who expressed love to her daughter only in sleep, when they shared the king-sized bed vacated by the unfaithful father. Having internalized the somnolent mother, the narrator has also internalized the mother's unloving cruelty, which she then reproduces, often directing it at Reva and all of the conventional gendered expectations for plot that Reva represents. This internalized cruelty is the source of a lively satiric wit and yields a Swiftian misanthropy that rejects the social world entirely: "I hated talking to people" (1). Among the loopier theories of the incompetent Dr. Tuttle is the belief that "the death gene is passed from mother to child in the birth canal" through "micro-dermabrasions" (80), and for all her unscientific zaniness, the crackpot shrink glances on a truth: the narrator's mother has indeed passed on something akin to Freud's death drive.²³ But of course, in giving life, *all* mothers also bequeath (eventual) death. She not busy being born is busy dying.

The punitive and sadistic mother figure resurfaces in another involuntary memory of humiliation, this one suffered at the hands of a college art history teacher. In the memory, the narrator arrives to class late, having broken the heel of an expensive pair of “black suede stiletto boots.” The instructor punishes her – ostensibly for her tardiness but actually for her beauty – by having her “stand at the front of the classroom” with her “left foot arched like a Barbie’s” to be critiqued by her classmates as “a performance piece.” The well-trained Columbia undergrads determine that the narrator has been “broken by the male gaze” as the narrator passes the time by contemplating time, listening to the clock ticking and observing the cycle of the seasons through the window as yellow leaves fall to the sidewalk (189).

If the feminist art teacher reembodies the unloving mother, Whoopi Goldberg, the narrator’s favorite movie star, provides the nurturing maternal presence that the birth mother failed to offer. Goldberg is a benevolent if uncomfortably racialized mammy figure who, the narrator says, “took care of me after my mother died” (233). Indeed, she tells us, “I spent a lot of time staring at her on screen and picturing her vagina. Solid, honest, magenta” (72). Goldberg’s honest, solid (and Black) way of giving life stands in contrast to the death-bearing birth canal of the narrator’s biological mother. Her movies serve as a lullaby, playing on the VCR as the narrator drifts off to sleep, and her mere presence provides protection against the outside world:

Whenever she appeared on-screen, I sensed she was laughing at the whole production. Her presence made the show completely absurd. . . . Wherever she went, everything about her became a parody of itself, gauche and ridiculous. That was a comfort to see. Thank God for Whoopi. Nothing was sacred. Whoopi was proof. (196)

Goldberg’s parody of the conventions of (White) Hollywood cinema illustrates the value of an artistic self-consciousness that can rip apart illusions, suggesting an analogy to the work of the novel itself. To laugh at “the whole production” is surely a satiric response, but instead of the Swiftian misanthropy of the opening page, it indicates a quasi-Olympian detachment, what Joel Relihan calls, rescuing a term from the ancients, *catascopia*, or looking down.²⁴ The anger and scorn of the punitive mother gives way to the less heated satiric stance of amused detachment.

The importance of the “good mother” Whoopi Goldberg thus also suggests that to interpret the hibernation project as *merely* a manifestation of a neurosis may diminish its larger significance. Moshfegh does not negate the sense of psychological depth that the rehearsal of her narrator’s “lame memories” creates, but she does warn us again explaining away the idiosyncrasy of the novel’s premise by reducing it to a medical symptom. Hibernation may indeed be a symptom of melancholia, but what is melancholia a symptom of? “The modern age has forced us to live unnatural lives” (22), says Dr. Tuttle in another one of her utterances that

hover between wisdom and platitude; this novel certainly gives us grounds to believe that life in the “modern age,” exposed as “gauche and ridiculous” by Whoopi Goldberg and Ottessa Moshfegh alike, is unnatural and unhealthy. What cultural theorist Siane Ngai writes of Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener* applies almost to the letter to Moshfegh’s sleeper: “Should we read his inertness as part of a volitional strategy that anticipates styles of nonviolent political activism to come, or merely as a sign of what we now call depression?”²⁵ Like *Bartleby*’s “I would prefer not to,” the narrator’s refusal of consciousness, time, action, and plot might constitute a “powerful powerlessness” that can be understood as a trait of “literature or art itself, as a relatively autonomous, more or less cordoned-off domain in an increasingly specialized and differentiated society.” Ngai reads *Bartleby*’s “situation of restricted agency” dialectically (she is basically following Adorno), claiming that the very restriction of agency enables the artwork “to theoriz[e] social powerlessness in a manner unrivaled by other forms of cultural praxis.”²⁶ The inertness of Moshfegh’s narrator similarly asks to be understood through the oxymoronic logic of the passive aggressive.²⁷

Thus, what looked like the humanism of the modernists’ experiments with narrative and temporality – resisting standardization through the valorization of the Proustian iterative and other forms of “lived time” – begins to look, one hundred years later, more like an antihumanist project. (That modernist humanism, in fact, with its bid for the redemption of ordinary experience, may now appear to have always been a bit factitious, strained, or desperate.) Moshfegh posits that human life is not an interior trove of precious memories or heightened intensities but rather is just as aimless, just as “poor in world” as goldfish life. In this way, as we noted, Moshfegh seems to reverse Proust’s quest for lost time rather than to recapitulate it. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that her most immediate stylistic influence, at least to my ear, is not any of the great modernists but a more recent postmodernist, Don DeLillo, whose 1985 *White Noise* echoes through the text. The “white noise” in DeLillo’s novel takes the form of a steady stream of verbal fragments, sometimes emanating from the TV, sometimes spoken by blankly ironic teenagers and academics. More generally, the term describes a broader stream: not a stream of consciousness but a stream of data, waves, molecules, and impulses (below the threshold of consciousness) associated with the onset of death. This white noise finds its correlate in *My Year* in the background noise of the ever-active VCR showing bland nineties movies and the cable feed that tosses out meaningless snippets and images of news, weather, and porn. (“Expect road closures, hurricane force gale winds, coastal flooding,” the weatherman was saying” [182].) DeLillo’s mock-prophet, a sportswriter-turned-Elvis studies professor, is reborn as Dr. Tuttle, with her screwball pronouncements on death and brain chemistry, while *Infermiterol*, the sleep aid that the narrator begins taking midnovel, is a repackaging of DeLillo’s *Dylar*, the black market synthetic drug that promises to

rid its users of the fear of death. *White Noise*, finally, memorably suggests (echoing Walter Benjamin) that “all plots tend to move deathward.”²⁸ (The marriage plot, recall, sounds to the narrator “like death.”) Plots move us deathward, to the end of plot; but the attempt to stifle plot, to lose track of time, is also like a death: death’s second self, you might say, “which seals up all in rest.”

Yet the effort to avoid plot proves hard to sustain. I touched on this problem earlier, in noting the way that a more-or-less traditional novelistic backstory creeps into the text in the form of unwanted memories to provide a psychologically credible grounding for character. In fact, it becomes clear that in establishing the narrator’s desire to lose track of time, Moshfegh has also set a trap for her, concealing from her the paradox that annihilating time can from a certain angle look like an ambition to be achieved in time. A reader might admire – even take a rooting interest in – the struggles of a character to succeed in her goal of losing track of time, and might eagerly turn the pages to discover the inventions by which a novelist constructs a story about dispensing with plot. Watching Moshfegh’s narrator traverse a space of nothingness on this high wire holds the reader, like the tightrope walker herself, in suspense.²⁹

This problem – what we might call plot’s inevitability – is one of which the narrator becomes conscious. While chapter two appears to make significant progress toward the erasure of experience – “Sleeping, waking, it all collided into one gray, monotonous plane ride through the clouds” (84) – the following chapter opens bluntly with a reminder of calendar time: “In November, however, an unfortunate shift occurred” (85). The narrator confronts “a subliminal rebellion” (85) in which, under the influence of Infermiterol, she becomes active during her sleep, rearranging furniture and buying colorful ice pops from the bodega. Such activity, she realizes, is “antithetical to [her] hibernation project” (86). Her unconscious is insisting on plot. Plot, born of desire, asserts itself in the form of libido. The unconscious initiates a return to sexual courtship, even if the narrator’s racy online flirtations are a far cry from Jane Austen: “Then one day I woke up to discover that I had dug out my digital camera and sent a bunch of strangers snapshots of my asshole, my nipple, the inside of my mouth” (88). A kind of intrapsychic war erupts between the forces of action and those of inaction: asleep, she orders designer jeans and lingerie; awake, she cancels her credit cards; asleep, she orders new ones; awake, she cuts them up again.

From this flicker of sexual desire, the unconscious plot-making progresses to ethical engagement. We noted that in the early sections of the novel, the rejection of the outside world, especially of Reva, finds expression in a cruel satiric humor that the reader can enjoy: “Reva came and went, blathering about her latest dates and heartaches over her mother” (99). As Reva’s mother’s cancer progresses, however, this coldness becomes ethically troublesome. Yet in her drugged-out

sleep, the narrator manages to travel to Long Island for Reva's mother's funeral and even musters a few weak gestures of concern. After the funeral, she gradually comes to miss her friend, her "whiny, moronic analgesic" (205) who, she realizes, is at least as effective as a pill for muting pain. Satire, whether it takes the stance of misanthropy ("I hated talking to people") or the catascopia of Whoopi Goldberg (laughing at "the whole production"), typically responds to the world with judgment and critique, leaving antagonisms unresolved and concluding with a retreat from the social itself (Swift's Gulliver to his stables, Austen's Mr. Bennet to his library). The broader, more encompassing perspectives of the novel, in contrast, have typically been seen to produce a "comedy of forgiveness," generating plots that reconcile antagonisms and illustrate a character's growth.³⁰ For this reason, the beginnings of the narrator's ethical engagement with Reva also suggests the beginnings of her own psychological healing. During the trip to Long Island, she tries to encounter her grief even as she characterizes it through the (satirized) discourse of pop psychology: "I couldn't cry. None of that penetrated deep enough to press whatever button controlled my 'outpouring of sorrow'" (145).

Thus, the restoration of libido enlivens the plot, the ethical recognition of Reva warms the heart, the effort to confront loss cracks the satirical veneer of the prose. But at the same time, these signs of progress threaten to make this quirky anti-novel into something decidedly more conventional, to resolve a situation we have come to value for being unresolvable. In the paradoxical logic of the novel's premise, the unconscious restarting of the plot also constitutes a reentry into time and an accommodation to "the whole production" of late capitalist social life. It is as though we were seeing *Bartleby* take up his pen and resume his work as a scrivener. The narrator's gestures of compassion and self-reflection, however feeble, undercut her rejection of narratives of healing and the insipid culture from which they spring.

For this reason, the concluding movements of the novel generate a measure of friction, a sense that the reader must suddenly shift gears and accede not simply to a plot but to a comic rather than a tragic or satiric one, accepting a narrative of rebirth, regeneration, and reconciliation. This final phase begins with the narrator's effort to double down on the abolition of plot, to undertake a new, more intensive stage of hibernation that will be exactly one hundred and twenty days long: a "solution to my problems," she says, that "landed in my mind like a hawk on a cliff" (254). The VCR broken, her possessions given away, her cell phone thrown into the East River, the narrator enlists a conceptual artist from the SoHo gallery as a "jailkeeper" (254) to prevent her from interrupting her slumbers by venturing out into the world. Yet this suppression of plot is intended to serve its rebirth: "I could sleep myself into a new life" (260). The doubling down on hibernation only intensifies the paradox of the plotless novel, generating a will-she-or-won't-she suspense worthy of the third act of a Hollywood film. Symptomatically, the nov-

el begins to mark its sections with a rigorous tracking of time, down to dates on the calendar: February 19, February 25, May 28. And the hibernation proves truly therapeutic. The narrator realizes “that this was the end of something” (274), wakes up “on June 1, 2001,” and understands that she is “alive” (276). She even picks up DeLillo’s *Mao II* and reads it “cover to cover” (278).

The intrapsychic resolution enables an existential insight about the nature of time. During a visit to the Met in September, staring at a still life, the narrator grasps that she is now able to contemplate her own future:

The notion of my future suddenly snapped into focus: it didn’t exist yet. I was making it, standing there, breathing, fixing the air around my body with stillness, trying to capture something – a thought, I guess – as though such a thing were possible, as though I believed in the delusion described in those paintings – that time could be contained, held captive. (286)

She reaches out and touches the painting, “simply to prove to myself that there was no God stalking my soul. Time was not immemorial. Things were just *things*” (286 – 287). I read this insight – a revelation of meaning, to use Brooks’s phrase – as an acceptance of her own limited existence in time, an understanding that “still life” is possible only in art. (Even the paintings themselves are “just things, objects, withering toward their own inevitable demise” [285].) The recognition of temporal limitation is also an affirmation of the openness of the future.

Whether this insight resolves or dodges the crisis that launched the year of rest and relaxation is hard to say. It appears that in *resisting* what novels do, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* shows us what novels do. Being an antinovel turns out to be another way of being a novel. In seeking to lose track of time, the novel attunes us to our being in time; in depriving character of action, it reveals each person’s being as continuous with (yet not identical to) her lame memories and her not-yet-existent future.

In any case, no definitive judgment can be rendered without consideration of the final brief chapter, which re-immerses narrator and reader in the larger world of historical time. On September 11, the narrator watches, records, and re-watches the horrifying scene during which she believes she sees Reva leap from the North Tower: “There she is, a human being, diving into the unknown, and she wide awake” (289). An individual act of courage in facing death returns us to the idea from the novel’s opening that “things were always happening in New York.” World events, having crept into the novel only through the white noise of decontextualized news snippets, finally come to the fore. Here Moshfegh seems to borrow not from Proust or Joyce but from Mann, whose *Magic Mountain* ends abruptly when Hans Castorp, after seven years of rest and relaxation, is awakened by the start of World War I: “That historical thunder-peal, of which we speak with bated

breath, made the foundations of the earth to shake; but for us it was the shock that fired the mine beneath the magic mountain and set our sleeper ungently outside the gates.”³¹ The war for Mann is a moment of historical rupture, Genette’s “singularative” writ large. It decisively cleaves the past from the present, sealing Cas-torp’s story hermetically in the past while leaving his future poignantly uncertain.

September 11, 2001, a date on the calendar remembered for its uniquely confused temporality of events watched and rewatched, has come to represent in the popular imagination a similar rupture, the restarting of history after the supposed “end of history” achieved by the Western triumph in the Cold War. This popular narrative – 9/11 as the end of the end of history – took on, as we know, a moralistic and politically reactionary coloring as the attacks became a “wake-up call” to a sleeping and complacent nation. But this novel’s insistence, perhaps in spite of itself, on the inevitability of plot and the continuing antagonisms of world-historical conflict is not itself a reactionary gesture. In fact, as a product of the Trump years, the novel’s recognition of the persistence of historical change might instead be seen as a comment on our current moment’s surge of populist authoritarianisms and the stressing of democratic society, as though it is reminding us that we cannot take liberal progress for granted. Likewise, its almost quaint recall of the early, low-tech years of the Internet creates a temporal double vision in which the absence of now-ubiquitous smartphones, streaming video, and social media remind us that our narrator’s story has now happened. The “now” of the novel is past. A novel about rejecting plot somehow found a plot. But while novels end, history continues. Things were happening in New York City; they always are. In the words of the whiny, moronic, analgesic Reva, “Things are moving forward. I guess time is like that – it just keeps going.”

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Ottessa Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 1. Future references given parenthetically.
- ² Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past, Volume I: Swann's Way; Within a Budding Grove*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terrence Kilmartin (New York: Vintage, 1982), 3.
- ³ Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980), 114, 116.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.
- ⁵ “No novelistic work, apparently, has ever put the iterative to a use comparable—in textual scope, in thematic importance, in degree of technical elaboration—to Proust’s use of it in the *Recherche du temps perdu*.” Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 117.
- ⁶ Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, 3.
- ⁷ For recent efforts to reopen the subject, see Jesse Matz, *Modernist Time Ecology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019); and Martin Hägglund, *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012).
- ⁸ H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (New York: Penguin, 2005 [1895]), 6.
- ⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2007), 284.
- ¹⁰ Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880–1918* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 14.
- ¹¹ Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 14.
- ¹² “Ottessa Moshfegh’s Top Books Set in the City that Never Sleeps,” *Goodreads*, July 2, 2018, https://www.goodreads.com/interviews/show/1374.Ottessa_Moshfegh.
- ¹³ Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Modes for Rendering Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), 222.
- ¹⁴ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Vintage, 1985), 12, 18.
- ¹⁵ Georg Lukács, “From *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*,” in *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 2004.
- ¹⁶ “Ottessa Moshfegh’s Top Books.”
- ¹⁷ Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 39.
- ¹⁸ Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap-Harvard University Press, 2013), 187.
- ¹⁹ Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews and Shamela* (New York: Penguin, 1999 [1742]), 119.
- ²⁰ Roger Shattuck, “Lost and Found: The Structure of Proust’s Novel,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Proust*, ed. Richard Bales (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 76.
- ²¹ Joyce Carol Oates, “Sleeping Beauty,” *The New York Review of Books*, October 11, 2018.

- ²² Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works, Volume 14*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute for Psycho-Analysis, 1957), 246.
- ²³ Freud quotes Schopenhauer in saying that "death is the 'true result and to that extent the purpose of life.'" Elsewhere: "The organism wishes to die only in its own fashion." Endorsing the post-Darwinian biology of August Weismann, Freud speculates on the need for death and its origin in the development of life. Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works, Volume 18*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute for Psycho-Analysis, 1955), 39, 50.
- ²⁴ "Observation from an unusual point of view, typically from on high." Joel Relihan, *Ancient Menippean Satire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 7.
- ²⁵ Siane Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ²⁷ One might also consider here Lee Edelman's critical analysis of the ideology of "reproductive futurism," to which he opposes queerness, which occupies "the place of the social order's death drive" in offering a stubborn "resistance to the viability of the social." Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 3.
- ²⁸ Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Viking, 1985), 26.
- ²⁹ "A narrative without at least a minimal plot would be incomprehensible." Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 5. This might be the place to note that the novel is special among literary genres in the temporal demands it makes on the reader: because even a medium-sized book such as this one engages the reader over an extensive duration of time, the problem of "what's next" is uniquely foregrounded in the novel.
- ³⁰ On a satiric "comedy of correction" versus a novelistic "comedy of forgiveness," see James Wood, *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2004), 3–19; on satire's refusal to resolve antagonisms, Frank Palmeri, *Satire in Narrative: Petronius, Swift, Gibbon, Melville, and Pynchon* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 13; on the distinctions between satire and comedy, and the relations of satire and the novel, Jonathan Greenberg, ed., *Cambridge Introduction to Satire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 27–30, 159–163.
- ³¹ Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Vintage, 1969 [1927]), 709.

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