CJLC Volume IV

Dear Readers:

We are proud to present you with the fourth issue of the Columbia Journal of Literary Criticism, which represents the culmination a year of discussion, editing workshops, seminars, research and writing. This year saw a remarkable expansion in scope for our Journal, and on behalf of the Executive and Editorial Boards, we thank our contributors, supporters, and friends for making this possible.

The Journal's activities began this year with the creation of our "After Hours" seminars, in which we invited faculty to speak to students about their current writing projects. We are grateful to all the of professors who shared their time, stories, work and dreams with us: Professor Ann Douglas, who inaugurated the series, Professors Nicholas Dames, Neguin Yavari, Jenny Davidson, Amanda Claybaugh, and Professors James Shapiro and Andrew Delbanco, who closed the series for this academic year.

In this issue, we offer four outstanding papers by Columbia undergraduates. Liz Maynes-Aminzade assesses the relationship between history and fiction in E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*. Ashley Cohen examines the role of Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* in the formation of the American literary canon. Jonathan Blitzer gives us a reading of free indirect discourse in Flaubert's *A Sentimental Education* alongside Manet's *Un Bar aux Folies Bergère*. Liesl Yamaguchi examines the problems of "the surface" in Marie NDiaye's "Papa doit manger" and what it means for the translator.

Also included are three discussions with academics and thinkers: Professors Molly Murray and Rebecca Stanton, who came to Columbia as undergraduates, discuss their experiences of returning here to teach; Avi Alpert interviews the philosopher Slavoj Zizek on his thoughts on religion and politics; finally, Noah Block-Harley speaks with Elaine Scarry, an acclaimed Harvard professor and author, about her writings and their implications for the university.

We gratefully acknowledge the hard work put in by our Executive and Editorial Boards in supporting the Journal's activities this year. We would especially like to thank our faculty advisor, Professor Amanda Claybaugh, for her guidance, confidence and support. We are also grateful for the support that we have received from the Department of English and Comparative Literature, the Center for Comparative Literature and Society, and the Columbia University Arts Initiative.

It is our highest hope that the spirit of critical engagement that produced this issue will extend to our readers. We welcome your comments, and invite you to participate in the Journal's ongoing conversation.

Yours,
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CJLC

Columbia Journal of Literary Criticism
Volume IV, Spring 2006

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CJLC

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The 2005-2006 CJLC After Hours Discussion Series

The After Hours Discussion Series was started in Fall 2005 by the CJLC to encourage dialogue between students and faculty outside of the classroom on topics such as intellectual research, higher education, and academic pedagogy. The sessions are informal conversations in small groups that the CJLC hopes will become a fixture for discourse on issues regarding to the teaching and research in the liberal highlights at Columbia.

November 17, 2005 **Ann Douglas**
Parr Professor of Comparative Literature

Professor Douglas described her academic trajectory as one of the first female academics in the country, and discussed her recent research into American Cold War culture and her focus on film noir.

December 1, 2005 **Nicholas Dames**
Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature

Reflecting on the way we read Victorian novels today, Professor Dames explained his inspiration for his recent investigation into Victorian reading practices and shared with us chapters from his recent manuscript.

January 26, 2006 **Neguin Yavari**
Assistant Professor of Religion

Professor Yavari shared with us her experiences in coming to academia as an Iranian woman, and described how Columbia has changed since her arrival.

February 9, 2006 **Jenny Davidson**
Assistant Professor of English and Comparative Literature

Working as a book critic and a novelist in addition to her academic position, Professor Davidson described the ways in which her various writing projects intersect, and the pleasures and perils of academia.

February 16, 2006 **Amanda Claybaugh**
Assistant Professor of English and Comparative Literature

Professor Claybaugh described the inception of her current book project, which focuses on United States Reconstruction, and discussed her writing and research methodologies.

April 5, 2006 **Andrew Delbanco**
Director of American Studies
Julian Clarence Levi Professor of the Humanities

James Shapiro
Larry Miller Professor of English and Comparative Literature

Professors Delbanco and Shapiro discussed their recent biographies of Herman Melville and William Shakespeare respectively, and the challenges and rewards in writing these unconventional projects.

Rescuing the Past from History: E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*

Liz Maynes-Aminzade

"To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was.' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger." Among all of today's novelists, perhaps no one has taken Walter Benjamin's maxim more to heart than E.L. Doctorow. Certainly, it was during what the American Left regarded as a moment of danger that Doctorow chose to write his now-classic historical novel, *Ragtime*. To many who had participated in the cultural revolutions of the 1960s, 1975 felt post-utopian. The civil rights movement had broken down into militant, racially-divided factions; administration-friendly labor unions had become alienated from the anti-War intellectuals of the New Left; "socialism with a human face" had widely failed abroad. Given that all of these political themes found their way into Doctorow's historical novel, set 70 years earlier, Doctorow seems to have followed Benjamin's urging: the keyword of the New York Times' 1975 review of *Ragtime* was "resonance."[1] To many critics, *Ragtime* was a historical novel in guise only. In essence, it was a novel about the dangers of the present.

But there is a problem with this opposition. The history depicted in *Ragtime* was also (and is still) fascinating to audiences because of its *difference* from their present times. The novel owes its popular success, in no small part, to its appeal to a mythologized past – to our belief that the dawn of the American Century was a "unique" time, an exceptionally dynamic and exciting moment in world history. Yes, we still have racial strife and exploitation of labor, but gone are the days of Model-Ts, player pianos, and magic lantern movie books. In setting his novel in a different historical era, Doctorow capitalizes on two opposing impulses in our relationship to history: to identify, and to fetishize. *Ragtime*'s historical moment may possess striking resonance, but it also boasts fascinating alterity.

Ragtime's concern with how we relate to history in the present has led many critics, notably Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon, to emphasize the novel as a work of "historiographic metafiction" which takes as its premise the belief that the past can never be accessed *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. For these critics, *Ragtime* stands out as a liter-

ary response to the postmodern "crisis of representation": a novel documenting the mimetic attempt gone awry, whether driven there by an increasing alienation from the "real" in a culture of simulacra, the representational limits inherent to any linguistic system, or the ideological nature of narrative. Jameson and Hutcheon focus on *Ragtime*'s concern with this epistemological situation, and what it implies, specifically, about attempts to represent the *past*.[2] The novel certainly undertakes to explore the tenuous relationship between historical reconstruction, based on documentary traces, and social memory – the non-documented past that nonetheless stays with us. But the Doctorow criticism in this vein often gives the impression that *Ragtime* is simply post-structuralist theory translated into novel form. What is overlooked by this approach is the two-fold nature of *Ragtime*'s project as a historical novel. Beyond pointing to the limits of historical knowledge, and thus making us question the accuracy of popular accounts of that era, *Ragtime* attempts to put forth its own account: to rewrite history. Perhaps there is no form better suited to this revisionist project – the simultaneous historical and the metahistorical, the constructive and the deconstructive – than the historical novel.

"I don't think I write historical novels," Doctorow once claimed. "All novels are set in the past, if you think about it."[3] True enough (except for those set in the future), but a bit disingenuous; clearly, there are important differences between setting a novel in the recent past, a few years earlier, and setting it in a distant past like 1905. What are these differences, and how did they allow Doctorow to communicate ideas that he otherwise could not have? In short, if he wanted to address the dangers of the present, then why did Doctorow write a historical novel?

I. "To blast open the continuum of history..."

The postmodern historical novel finds itself caught in a paradox. In the words of Linda Hutcheon, "It puts into question, at the same time as it exploits, the grounding of historical knowledge in the past real."[4] *Ragtime* is no exception: while its back cover instructs us to "Dance to the intoxicating beat of time past," its first page brashly calls into question the reality of this past. The novel opens with a series of dubious assertions made in a strange voice (clipped sentences, no dialogue markers) by an unidentifiable narrator. We are with this narrator when he or she tells us that "Teddy Roosevelt was President"; when the narrator continues, "There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants," we start to wonder.

Who is this narrator? Some critics have suggested he is the grown-up version of the Little Boy character, one of the members of the middle-class WASP family that *Ragtime* follows.[5] The narrator's naïve ignorance of social reality ("There were no Negroes") and slips into nostalgia ("Everyone wore white in the summer") would suggest, in this reading, the irony of an adult taking on a child's perspective. This notion is alternately supported by the fact that the Little Boy seems to have telepathic abilities to manipulate space and predict the future, something like the omniscience of a novelistic narrator. The events of *Ragtime*'s plot are not disclosed in a strictly linear fashion; for instance, the dramatic outcome of the Coalhouse Walker story – the fact

that he will go down in history – is often alluded to before the events themselves have been narrated: "Here, given subsequent events, it is important to mention what little is known about Coalhouse Walker, Jr." (15). The narrator's relationship to the events of the narrative suggest either someone with the privilege of historical hindsight, or, like the Little Boy, a clairvoyant positioned in the past.

But *Ragtime*'s narration, considered in entirety, involves something far more complicated than the voice of an individual human character could account for – even granting a character with superhuman powers. Identifying the Little Boy as narrator, for instance, fails to explain one of the most defining aspects of the narration: its terseness. *Ragtime*'s narrator generally rejects literary flourish in favor of concise, list-form statements:

> The Archduke held his plumed helmet in the crook of his arm. All at once there was a loud noise and a good deal of smoke and shouting. Archduke Franz Ferdinand and Countess Sophie found themselves covered with chalk dust. Dust coated their faces, it was in their mouths and eyes and all over their clothing. Someone had thrown a bomb. The Mayor was aghast. The Archduke was furious. (264)

In Jameson's analysis, this terseness does not serve as a clue to the narrator's identity. Jameson interprets it as Doctorow's forging of a certain literary *style*, or rather a non-style: a "new kind of linguistic innovation, which is no longer personal at all."[6] For Jameson, this strange quality of *Ragtime*'s narrative voice can be attributed to the novel's situated-ness in literary postmodernity. It signals Doctorow's rejection of the "the moderns' elaboration of a personal style," his attempt to distance himself from the self-conscious avant-gardism of his literary forebears.

There is, however, another way to interpret this aspect of *Ragtime*'s narration, less as Harold Bloom-type aesthetic rebellion than as directed political critique. There is something uncanny about this narrator, and the historical images he or she invokes, to anyone who has been subject to a K-12 education in the United States: it is a parody of the American History textbook narrator. *Ragtime*'s rejection of the literary, its stylized anti-style, is then explained by Hayden White's observation that "Most historians' concern with language extends only to the effort to speak plainly, to avoid florid figures of speech, to assure that the persona of the author appears nowhere identifiable in the text."[7] *Ragtime*'s narrator mimics the voice that tries to suppress its own person-ness in order to emphasize that we are reading "just the facts," while, in fact, giving us a limited, slanted, and whitewashed account of history. Along the same lines, Ragtime's narrator is given to platitudes and absolute declarations ("That was the style. That was the way people lived." (3)), and presupposes an American audience ("This was the time in our history when Winslow Homer was doing his painting" (4)) – or maybe just that American history is all the history there is. And it is not only this narrator's voice that points to a parody of the history textbook; it is also the strange, yet familiar, images the narrator conjures up of an America devoid of Negroes and immigrants, but abundant in Vaudeville theatre crowds and patriotic fish fries. On the

first page, we are informed, "Women were stouter then. They visited the fleet carrying white parasols. Everyone wore white in the summer." What can this passage be alluding to, if not to the photograph of elite women required to accompany every American History textbook's chapter on the turn-of-the-century?

Still, this omniscient, positivist, and overtly-biased textbook voice does not remain the consistent narrative voice throughout all of *Ragtime*. When the narration pauses to relate world-historical events, for instance, it does not always do so through the textbook-like voice of a removed, retrospective observer who has had time to assimilate them. Instead, it often takes on the shocked or uncomprehending perspective of a contemporary experiencing the event as news. So rather than "the Cubist movement was beginning at this time," the narrator tells us, "The painters in Paris were doing portraits with two eyes on one side of the head" (259). Rather than "Einstein published his 'Theory of Relativity,'" we are told, "A Jewish professor in Zurich had published a paper proving that the universe was curved" (259). But instead of bringing us closer to the historical period, by helping us feel we are experiencing these events from a contemporary perspective, this narrative voice seems to broaden the gap between reader and read: we know what happens with those Cubists, we smile. In place of Austenian narrative irony, in which the differential of knowledge between reader and characters comes from our privileged access to their psychological interiority, we have with *Ragtime historical* irony: the privileged knowledge of hindsight.

Given these interwoven and competing voices, it becomes impossible to locate in *Ragtime* a consistent figure of narrative authority. Our narrator seems to be, at turns, the Little Boy, the history textbook, the omniscient Realist narrator, the naïve contemporary witness, and the smug retrospective observer winking at the reader. *Ragtime* takes discursive narration to an extreme, and in so doing denies the possibility of a universal account of history. Single-perspective, authoritative historical narratives, Doctorow suggests, result in a disturbing phenomenon. Not only do they necessarily exclude from their content the stories of the socially marginalized; such narratives also reify the past into a static, distant, and uncontentious object. They turn the past into History.

A critique of this phenomenon – the reification of history into History – underpins the entire novel. It is latent in Doctorow's repetition of "the Twentieth Century," a jab at historical periodization and its attempt to capture and close off the past under definitive headings: "America was in the dawn of the Twentieth Century, a nation of steam shovels, locomotives, airships, combustion engines, telephones and twenty-five story buildings" (168); or, "The great Edison himself, the man who invented the Twentieth Century" (168). The last page of *Ragtime* ironically invokes this historical attitude that results in history as fetish commodity: "And by that time the era of Ragtime had run out, with the heavy breath of the machine, as if history were no more than a tune on a player piano" (270).

Ragtime's concern with the fetishization of history is also a self-critique, rendered most explicitly in one scene. Doctorow, cashing in all our suspension of disbelief in one grand gesture, choreographs a meeting between Emma Goldman and Evelyn Nesbit that results in Goldman stripping and performing an oily rubdown on the

young model (53). This entire scene is subject to the voyeurism of Younger Brother, who happens to be hiding in the closet, and whose position mirrors the reader's own as historical voyeur. Historical fantasy thus becomes sexual fantasy. Here, perhaps one can see what John Updike meant when he objected that *Ragtime* "smacked of playing with helpless dead puppets, and turned the historical novel into a gravity-free, faintly sadistic game."[8] But this, in a way, is precisely Doctorow's point: the "historical imagination" is shaped as much by our desire for the exotic – resulting in distortion, projection, and whimsy – as by any puritanical relationship to the "past real."

In this context, aspiring filmmaker Tateh's remark that "In the movie films...we only look at what is there already" takes on a tone of wistful idealism (215). For *Ragtime*'s struggle with historical representation suggests precisely the opposite: far from looking at what is there already, we can only look at what has been superimposed by a modern-day lens. The postmodern historical novel, as Jameson sees it, "can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only 'represent' our ideas and stereotypes about that past (which thereby at once becomes 'pop history')."[9] What all this adds up to, as Jameson and Hutcheon have identified in their writings on *Ragtime*, is a sustained critique of the positivist mentality that presumes a transparent, unproblematic relationship between historical reality and its after-the-fact literary representation.

But here the interpretation seems to hit a wall. True as it may be that *Ragtime*, by delineating these processes of distortion and reification, raises awareness as to the limits of historical understanding, the initial paradox remains. If *Ragtime* wants to respond to this threat of reification – the mutation of the past into History, into a self-enclosed object for detached, or at best fetishizing, study – what does the novel achieve by simply reproducing this reification, or, moreover, by elevating it to the level of the grotesque? Jameson denies any attempt on Doctorow's part to convey to his readers something about the "reality of the past"; for him, the novel arrives at a fatalistic acceptance that the era of Ragtime, and for that matter all of history, "itself remains forever out of reach."[10] But *Ragtime* wants to move beyond this. If Doctorow's novel hits upon all the themes that were most relevant to his own historical moment, it is not because of epistemological barriers that make the past unknowable, rendering it nothing more than a screen onto which the present projects its own identity. It is because problems that existed in 1905 had not gone away in 1975. Doctorow understands the present to be an inheritor of a specific historical legacy, a legacy which he feels has been inadequately confronted in his own times. And so the flipside of *Ragtime*'s critique is its project of recovery.

II.

> "What matters therefore in the historical novel is not the re-telling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events."
>
> – Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*

To Doctorow, in fact, both of these factors matter: he attempts to retell historical events, and also to imagine how these events would have been experienced by a

contemporary subject. How he undertakes the former is more straightforward. For instance, *Ragtime* gives us the story of the 1912 Lawrence textile strike from the perspective of Tateh, the working-class socialist who participates in the uprising and is violently beaten by strike-breaking police (106). Or, with the narrative of Coalhouse Walker, a black man whose life is destroyed by institutionalized racism, American justice is retold as tragedy (in an instance of both historical and literary rewriting, which I will later discuss). In the opening of Part II of the novel, the Little Boy "recovers" the collection of silhouette portraits that Younger Brother has just thrown away (95). When the narrator tells us, "In [the boy's] mind the meaning of something was perceived through its neglect," and that he treasures "anything discarded" (96), the self-reflexivity is hard to miss. Stories like Tateh's, for which documentation has been lost or discarded, may be absent from official history, but they remain a part of social memory so long as their consequences are felt in the present. Part of *Ragtime*'s aim as a historical novel, to be sure, is to retrieve these neglected stories and bring social memory into the realm of American History.

What is less obvious, however, is the way *Ragtime* approaches the second half of Lukács' formula: the "poetic awakening" of historical figures. *Ragtime*'s plot follows fictional characters from a number of marginalized groups; there are representatives of blacks, Jews, women, the working class. But in addition to this, the novel includes a large cast of historical celebrities. Every textbook celebrity of the era seems to walk into *Ragtime* at one point or another; Sigmund Freud, Harry Houdini, Henry Ford, J.P. Morgan, Stanford White, Emma Goldman, and the Archduke Franz Ferdinand all make appearances, among others. If Doctorow is interested in recovering discarded histories, it seems strange that his novel features so prominently, alongside *Ragtime*'s fictional and "underrepresented" characters, this other class of characters – who can be deemed, if anything, History's overexposed.

One effect of *Ragtime*'s portrayal of these historical celebrities is to challenge the "great men" style of history. By the novel's end, all of *Ragtime*'s great men have been exposed as pathetic figures, just as human as everyone else, if not more so. Houdini, we learn, is a pathological momma's boy; J.P. Morgan, a lonely crackpot; Nesbit develops an obsession with a preadolescent street girl; "Freud had to relieve himself and nobody seemed to be able to tell him where a public facility could be found" (32). We see these great men and women undergoing identity crises, dabbling amateurishly in hobbies, or turning desperately to mythology to make sense of their lives. If in the historical novels of Walter Scott, as Lukács argues, the function of the world-historical individual is to "tell men what they want" – to differentiate between "leader" and "led" – *Ragtime* turns this distinction on its head.[11] Doctorow's world-historical individuals cannot figure out what they themselves want, whereas it is the other class of characters – the Coalhouse Walkers and Tatehs – that contains the great movers of history.

At the same time, the pathos of *Ragtime*'s oddball celebrities functions to make them more than a little sympathetic. And the novel prompts readerly identification with them in other ways. The narration often provides access (sometimes free-indirect)

into their thoughts and unarticulated perceptions; for instance, when Ragtime tracks Freud's visit to America, we are told that "What oppressed him about the New World was its noise. The terrible clatter of horses and wagons, the clanking and screeching of streetcars, the horns of automobiles" (31). Later, after Freud has returned to Europe, we learn that "He sat in his quiet cozy study in Vienna, glad to be back. He said to Ernest Jones, America is a mistake, a gigantic mistake" (33). The information that Freud felt oppressed by America's noise works both to establish *Ragtime*'s historical setting and to develop Freud as a character.

On the other hand, this psychological information develops Freud as a character who might bear little relationship to the historical Freud. Both of the above passages, representative of Doctorow's approach to celebrity characterization, blend biographical fact with imagined interiority. Though the first claim could be based on some documentation (we know Freud was not fond of America, and maybe he did indeed comment somewhere on its noisiness), it could also be completely made up. Likewise, the remark to Ernest Jones is a historical fact (even though Doctorow does not put it in quotation marks), but the details of Freud's interiority – how he was feeling at that particular moment – can only be speculation. Thus, if the reader does begin to identify with these celebrity characters, it is never clear whether this sympathy goes out to the historical Freud, or to a novel character who bears an indeterminate relationship to historical or political reality. This lurking uncertainty curbs our impulse to identify, and we keep these celebrity characters at arm's length.

It is not just *Ragtime*'s celebrity characters who confound our sympathies. In developing its fictional characters, not only does the novel tend to withhold, for instance, the details of their upbringing, or examples of their personal decisions that speak to their moral character, or clear insight into their desires; often, we are not even given their names. One of *Ragtime*'s more peculiar aspects is its use of generic or social categories to demarcate characters: instead of proper names, we have Mother, Younger Brother, Tateh, the Little Boy. As Jameson notes:

> ...the designation of both types of characters – historical names and capitalized family roles – operates powerfully and systematically to reify all these characters and to make it impossible for us to receive their representation without the prior interception of already acquired knowledge or doxa. [11]

In addition to the two categories of characterization mentioned by Jameson – the "historical names" like Freud or Houdini, and the "capitalized family roles" like Mother or Tateh – there is one fictional character in *Ragtime* who is given a full name: Coalhouse Walker Jr. But rather than contradicting Jameson's point, this name choice supports it. Coalhouse is a literary allusion to the hero of Heinrich Von Kleist's "Michael Kohlhaas" – another work of historical fiction, published in 1810 and set during the time of Martin Luther. The "Jr." suffix, then, resonates of a name that would no doubt loom large in the "already acquired knowledge" of his 1970s readership: Martin Luther King, Jr.[13] With *Ragtime*, it seems, Doctorow has created a universe of intertex-

tuality in which unprecedented existence is categorically denied. In Jameson's terms, these are not characters so much as simulacra.

Perhaps the greatest reason Doctorow's celebrity characters resist our identification is that, in the narrative dynamics of *Ragtime*, they must serve double duty: more than just a character, each one of them is also quite explicitly a historical force. Every major idea or movement from the Ragtime Era, every textbook "ism," corresponds to one of these characters. Freud, for instance, is the historical force responsible for the death of "the last of the great shameless mother lovers" eulogized in the novel (30). In *Ragtime*'s scheme of human metonymy, Freud=Psychoanalysis, just as Goldman=Socialism, Morgan=Capitalism, Ford=Fordism, Houdini=mass entertainment, and so on.

These characters are not just icons, but specifically icons for historical forces that bridge the novel's 1905 setting and its 1975 audience. Freud allows *Ragtime* to establish its parallel between the Oedipal motif and the postmodern historical attitude that Jameson has called "libidinal historicism" – the neurotic desire for that which has come before and produced us, a desire that moves in the wrong direction.[14] Even more suggestive is the novel's incorporation of Henry Ford. When J.P. Morgan, highly impressed by Ford's "use of men" (119), finally meets the great industrialist, Morgan asks him,

> Has it not occurred to you that your assembly line is not merely a stroke of industrial genius but a projection of organic truth?...And within a species – man, for example – the rules of nature operate so that our individual differences occur on the basis of our similarity. (122)

In *Ragtime*, ironically, it is Henry Ford who loses his "individual differences" to become a figure for the onslaught of mechanization, de-individuation, and loss of agency that emerged in the Age of Industry and that had reached a new extreme in the author's own present. However skeptical one may be of what Jameson describes as the "death of the subject" in the postmodern era – that "a once-existing centered subject, in the period of classical capitalism and the nuclear family, has today in the world of organizational bureaucracy dissolved" – there is no question that in *Ragtime* Henry Ford functions, conveniently, as the icon of a still-resonant historical legacy.[15]

Doctorow would not be among those defenders of the Novel who credit to their form a unique ethics of sympathy, purportedly arising from the relationship between reader and imagined character. *Ragtime*'s suspicion of this claim is voiced through the character of Emma Goldman: "I am often asked the question How can the masses permit themselves to be exploited by the few. The answer is By being persuaded to identify with them" (71). *Ragtime* faces the dilemma that, while its historical narrative may encourage us to condemn everything that Henry Ford and J.P. Morgan represent, its novelistic mechanics – in turning these cutthroat industry barons into characters and allowing us access into their psychological interiorities – might "persuade us to identify" with them. Perhaps it is to counter this threat that *Ragtime* turns to the techniques I have been describing, a poetics of disidentification that prevents us from

getting close enough to be exploited.

This elaborate narrative balancing act – between identification and distancing, sympathetic character and representative type, celebrity icon and fictional nobody – is one of Doctorow's most distinctive contributions to the historical novel genre. *Ragtime*'s approach to characterization attempts to capture the dialectic between history and the individual, between the rule and the exception. In order for a story to become properly history, we assume, it must gesture toward the general; to move beyond the territory of the novel, it must move beyond the life story of an individual. Musing about the historical moment, *Ragtime*'s narrator remarks, "One hundred Negroes a year were lynched. One hundred miners were burned alive. One hundred children were mutilated. There seemed to be quotas for these things" (34). And indeed there are: an event becomes a *historical event* only when it affects a certain number of people. Death becomes historical death only by the numbers, or as metonymy: the death of a martyr, a celebrity, an icon.

III.

> "The poet never maketh any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe for true what he writes. He citeth not authorities of other histories..."
>
> – Sir Philip Sidney, "An Apology for Poetry"

One of the most distinctive qualities of *Ragtime*'s prose is that it contains absolutely no quotation marks as indicators of dialogue. Orthographically, then, it is one of the most honest novels ever written: it makes no claim that any of what we read has actually been uttered. In another sense, *Ragtime* is one of the most deceitful novels ever written. By omitting quotation marks, in a gesture of categorical disavowal, it feigns candor – knowing perfectly well that it will leave its readers stamped with that brand of insinuative truth so particular to the historical novel. "Playing with dead puppets," to return to John Updike's phrase, is rendered no less disturbing by the admission that one is just playing.

What makes *Ragtime* especially unsettling is that it rides the line between history and fiction so adroitly that, by the novel's end, this line seems to have disappeared. In the first section, I discussed the impossibility of identifying a stable narrator of *Ragtime* because of the multiple voices in play. But it is not just voice, per se, from which the confusion over *Ragtime*'s narrator arises; it also the narrator's habit of appealing to different methodologies. The majority of *Ragtime*'s narration operates, with respect to methodology, as one would expect a novel to: it tells us "what happened" without explaining where this knowledge is coming from. But there are a few moments where some other kind of narration seems to be in effect. After describing one of Houdini's public stunts, during which Houdini suddenly recalls the Little Boy's prophecy about the Archduke, the narrator tells us:

> We have the account of this odd event from the magician's private, unpublished papers. Harry Houdini's career in show business gave him to

> overstatement, so we must not relinquish our own judgment in considering his claim that it was the one genuine mystical experience of his life. Be that as it may, the family archives show a calling card from Mr. Houdini dated just a week later. (267)

Here, for some reason, the narrator is concerned with giving us "evidence" – documentation which is of course ultimately meaningless as evidence, since it is situated within the context of novelistic fiction. As Hayden White points out in "The Fictions of Factual Representation," every discipline, like that of fictional literature or that of History, is "constituted by what it *forbids* its practitioners to do."[16] Not only is providing documentary evidence for your claims not demanded by the discipline of fiction; it is expressly prohibited. How, then, are we to understand this "family archive" for a family that never existed?

For White, the discipline of history cannot be distinguished from the discipline of fiction by appealing to "relationship to reality." While he recognizes that historiography is based on events that actually occurred, whereas fiction is not necessarily, he argues:

> ...the aim of the writer of a novel must be the same as that of the writer of a history [...] the image of reality which the novelist thus constructs is meant to correspond in its general outline to some domain of human experience which is no less 'real' than that referred to by the historian.[17]

White's point is that even if the events and people a novelist describes are figments, the work of fiction still reflects the truth of some kind of internal reality – the reality of experience. Since both history and fiction share the goal of addressing "reality," White argues, post-Enlightenment historiography had to distinguish itself from fiction, and legitimate itself as a discipline, through its form. Or rather, through its lack of form. "The empiricist prejudice," White asserts, "is attended by a conviction that 'reality' is not only perceivable but also coherent in its structure."[18] Traditional historical writing, partaking in this "empiricist prejudice," would like to believe that it lies outside of discourse.

One function of *Ragtime*'s methodological caprice, then, is to demystify the belief that empirical historiography has no representational strategy of its own. "Our knowledge of this clandestine history comes to us by Younger Brother's own hand. He kept a diary from the day of his arrival in Harlem to the day of his death in Mexico a little more than a year later" (205): these appeals to documentary evidence, interspersed throughout *Ragtime*, shake our confidence that what we are reading is a novel. By suddenly adopting (and parodying) the historian's discourse, *Ragtime* reminds us that both the novel and historiography have distinctive forms of narration, and that the historiographic mode is no more organic than the fictional one.

When it departs from the discourse of the novel, *Ragtime* adopts not only the historian's discourse and method, but also the historian's obstacles. Every now and then, our narrator will remark that "it still is not known how [Coalhouse] acquired his

vocabulary and his manner of speaking" (153) or "Apparently [Younger Brother] had some money although it is not known how or where he got it" (256). In the world of a novel, where all the narrative "facts" have been created by someone, omniscience is never too far off – even if the narrator doesn't possess it, one presumes that the author does. The "it is not known" of *Ragtime*'s narrator, then, is much more disorienting than an "I do not know"; the limit becomes an ontological rather than a perspectival one. With lines like this, Doctorow includes exclusion, building into his fictional universe the impasse of historiographic indeterminacy. In *Ragtime*, when it comes to the problem of absent documentation, not even the omniscient novelist is exempt.

The lost document is at the core of *Ragtime*'s imagery, emblem of the failed project of historical reconstruction. *Ragtime* returns to the lost document not, as Jameson would have it, to expose the futility of grasping for a past "forever out of reach," but rather to emphasize the necessity of the attempt. Doctorow's novel, yet another supplement to this always inadequate historical accounting, reminds us of the kinds of truths that fiction can offer and the historical method cannot. These truths are not just metahistorical ones, for upon finishing the novel, one finds that a whole new set of images have replaced that mental store of textbook photographs. But *Ragtime* only succeeds in this effect because Doctorow understands that, freed from the grips of the archive, the historical novel can turn instead to the immaterial traces of the past. •

Notes

[1] Gussow, Mel. "Novelist Syncopates History in 'Ragtime.'" *New York Times*, July 11, 1975. Accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers, <http://www.il.proquest.com/proquest> (2/20/2006).
[2] Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991; Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 1988. "Historiographic metafiction" is Hutcheon's term.
[3] E.L. Doctorow, Interview by Diane Osen, National Book Foundation Archives. Available online, <http://www.nationalbook.org/authorsguide_edoctorow2.html> (3/20/2006).
[4] Hutcheon, 92.
[5] See, for instance, Barbara Foley, "From *USA* to *Ragtime*: Notes on the Forms of Historical Consciousness in Modern Fiction." *American Literature* 50 (March 1978): 85-105. Doctorow himself has claimed that "the hidden narrator of *Ragtime* is probably the little boy in later times": Wutz, Michael. "An Interview with E.L. Doctorow." *Interview* 11.1 (Winter 1994).
[6] Jameson, 24.
[7] White, Hayden. *Tropics of Discourse*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1978. 127.
[8] Updike, John. "A Cloud of Dust: E.L. Doctorow's *The March*." *The New Yorker*, 12 September 2005.
[9] Jameson, 25.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Lukács, Georg. *The Historical Novel*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983. 39.
[12] Jameson, 24.
[13] This idea was suggested in a lecture by David Damrosch.
[14] Jameson, 18.
[15] Jameson, 15.
[16] White, 126.
[17] White, 122.
[18] Ibid.

Creating a Renaissance: Matthiessen, Fiedler, and an American Literary History

Ashley L. Cohen

No matter how many books, articles, and conferences adopt titles declaring their readiness to reexamine, call into question, or even move beyond *American Renaissance*, this text and its title continue to provide the dominant framework for our conceptualization of nineteenth-century American literature.[1] First appearing in 1941, F.O. Matthiessen's seminal work created and named a literary moment as well as a canon commemorating it: the years 1850-1855, and the books published by Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Whitman during them, marked America's literary "renaissance." While the field of literary criticism has undergone multiple waves of upheaval, changing its focus, mission, and methods several times in the decades since the publication of *American Renaissance*, the influence of this book has never been lost.[2]

Its influence, moreover, has never been adequately defined. While scholars have dedicated numerous articles and even whole books to detailing the legacy of *American Renaissance*, those who assail the text have too exclusively focused their criticism on the content of its canon – on what authors or groups of authors Matthiessen left out of his study and at whose expense.[3] Much of this work has been done by feminist critics, who have rightly protested that although the majority of best selling writers during the 1850s were women, Matthiessen's study is "remarkably, monolithically masculinist."[4] Canonizing a select group of authors and books was surely the primary aim of *American Renaissance*. But the text has served another, more subtle, and unintended purpose. Besides dictating *what* books should be read, it has profoundly influenced *how* all nineteenth-century American books are read. That is, it has constructed the frame through which we read them.

American Renaissance founded the field of American literary criticism almost singlehandedly. Successive critics, even those who disagree with Matthiessen, have found it difficult to escape some inconspicuous, but nevertheless highly significant, elements of his critical account. This becomes especially evident when one examines the first volume of literary criticism that passionately contested the shape of Matthiessen's

canon. Published in 1960, Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* incorporated many of the 1850's forgotten women writers. Fiedler's account is oppositional to Matthiessen's in a number of important respects, but finally falls short of fashioning a new literary history. This is because Fiedler neglects to problematize the idea of a "renaissance," which is so fundamental to Matthiessen's text. Seemingly without question, he adopts the "renaissance" frame, and, with it, embraces the very influence he meant to escape.

This essay explores the ways in which "American Renaissance" has functioned as an interpretive lens. It takes as its starting point the assumption that the most compelling literary criticism employs narrative techniques for the same end that fiction does – to disarm the reader and elicit assent. In *American Renaissance*, Matthiessen postulated more than a new name for the study of a newly compiled set of books; he also developed an organizing principle for the history of American literature. The phrase "American Renaissance" suggests a theoretical structure: a lexicon of supporting vocabulary and a controlling idea that directs attempts at illustration through metaphors and descriptive language.[5] Sacvan Bercovitch has said, "*American Renaissance* reset the terms for the study of American literary history."[6] I would like to take this statement literally. It is my contention that the set of terms habitually used to name, frame, and describe this literary historical moment has exerted an enormous and largely unrecognized influence over the way in which scholars have read, thought, and written about nineteenth-century America's books.

In part, this is because Matthiessen endowed his literary-historical paradigm with a powerful kind of rhetorical authority. By consistently denying that his most important interpretations are in fact interpretations, Matthiessen plays the part of the critic behind the curtain. Continually admonishing the reader to ignore his presence, Matthiessen simultaneously creates a literary tradition and disavows his part in its creation. My aim in the first part of this essay is to identify the construction of these interdependent theoretical and authoritative structures as it occurs in the introduction to *American Renaissance*. In the second part, I will examine how and where they appear in Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death* and to what effect. I will look for the ways in which Matthiessen's formulation of the mid-nineteenth century as a "renaissance" indelibly and, almost against Fiedler's will, shapes the latter's interpretations to the point of distortion.

I.

One of the reasons the "American Renaissance" has come to seem, as Michael J. Colarcurcio has described it, "a fact of intellectual nature rather than a convenience of literary study," is that Matthiessen labored to develop a powerful rationale for the propriety and, more importantly, the organicism of his account.[7] This begins in the very first paragraph of Matthiessen's introduction, entitled "Method and Scope," where he preempts any objections to the accuracy of his book's title by claiming that it reflects not his own feelings, but those of the authors in his study. "It may not seem precisely accurate to refer to our mid-nineteenth century as a *re-birth*," Matthiessen acknowledges in only his second sentence, "but that was how the writers themselves judged it."[8]

Defending his title even further, Matthiessen suggests that the idea of an "American Renaissance" was constructed not so much by himself or his writers as it was by the nation itself: "Our mid-nineteenth century" was "*America's* way of producing a renaissance" (vii; emphasis added). By crediting first his authors and then the nation with his own invention, Matthiessen endows his text with an impenetrable shield of authority. His justification of "American Renaissance" is so efficacious because it displaces responsibility for the title onto parties who cannot, and thus need not, offer a defense.

After defending the title of his book, Matthiessen moves to the equally important task of defining its scope. Although the majority of commercially successful writers during the "renaissance" were women, *American Renaissance* dedicates itself exclusively to a group of men who struggled throughout their careers to win the interest and loyalty of the reading public.[9] Matthiessen admits as much, informing his readers with evident amusement of exactly how few books Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman sold in comparison to Susan Warner, Maria Cummins, and Mrs. E.D.E.N. Southworth. Then he justifies his critical decisions by once again invoking the authority of his authors. After quoting in full Hawthorne's infamous remarks about the "damned mob of scribbling women" who captured the literary marketplace of the 1850s, Matthiessen endorses Hawthorne's opinion that the literature they produced was "trash" – a "fertile field for the sociologist" or the "historian," but unworthy of the attention of the literary critic (x-xi). Perhaps because he was aware of the enormity of this assertion, Matthiessen then cites the opinion of yet another one of his authors: "But I agree with Thoreau: read the best books first, or you may not have a chance to read them at all" (xi). Since such reasoning assumes that the "best books" are by no means the best selling books, it is ironic – or rather inconsistent – that Matthiessen goes on to justify his choice for the final time by invoking the popular opinion of twentieth-century readers, who "seem finally to have agreed that the authors of the pre-Civil War era who bulk the largest in stature are the five who are my subject" (xi). That readers have "finally" agreed on this point suggests that this conclusion was inevitable. And in this wholly masculine literary universe, to "bulk the largest," has become the criterion for artistic merit.

The five authors whom Matthiessen chooses as his "subject" undoubtedly represent some of America's brightest literary talents. This essay seeks to problematize not Matthiessen's choice of authors, but the narrative frame within which he writes about them. Matthiessen establishes this frame in the very first paragraph of his book when he explains exactly what meaning his authors attributed to "renaissance." Making no reference to the Italian renaissance – with which it is undoubtedly meant to resonate – Matthiessen instead uses the literal translation of the term, "re-birth":

> It may not seem precisely accurate to refer to our mid-nineteenth century as a *re-birth*; but that was how the writers themselves judged it. Not as a rebirth of values that had existed previously in America, but as America's way of producing a renaissance, by coming to its first maturity and affirming its rightful heritage in the whole expanse of art and culture. (vii)

And thus "birth," or "re-birth," as Matthiessen preferred to view it, becomes the defin-

ing theme of *American Renaissance*. The influence it wields over the text is evident as soon as the term is brought into play. That America's "renaissance" was procreative in nature is suggested by the fact that America was only able to produce "by coming to its first maturity." "Maturity" is, after all, defined biologically and socially as the ability to reproduce. However, there is another requirement for sexual reproduction of this sort – female bodies; and these are conspicuously absent from *American Renaissance*. So although "re-birth" generates an entire imaginative palette with which to narrate American literary history, most of the metaphors and imagery it suggests are dubiously applicable, at best, to an account of a literary group remarkable for its overwhelming masculinity. Matthiessen's greatest task and greatest triumph was to make this theme seem not preposterous, but fitting.

Matthiessen accomplishes this in several ways. Since the absence of female bodies prevents him from describing the "renaissance" in terms of human gestation, he instead relies on botanical imagery: he chronicles the birds and the bees of literary procreation. Thus, the "renaissance" was a "flowering," and the literature it produced a "fertile field" from which Matthiessen's own analyses "grow organically" (vii, xiii). Literary "re-birth" becomes a solo affair, carried out by lone writers who independently "flower" and leave behind the seeds of the next generation of literary masters. Botanical imagery helps a constructed canon seem "organic," and so legitimate — a natural rather than a man-made phenomenon. Repeating an earlier rhetorical strategy, Matthiessen removes himself as a creative force when he says: "My aim has been to follow these books through their implications, to observe them as the culmination of their authors' talents" (xi). Like a naturalist watching the behavior of undisturbed creatures in their natural environment, Matthiessen will merely "observe" the books he studies. Erasing his own agency as a literary critic, he will simply "follow" through the "implications" of these books, as if their "implications" were already obvious and apparent.

Procreation more characteristic of the animal kingdom is not entirely missing from *American Renaissance*. The subtle rhetorical presence of the male orgasm throughout the text is another logical outgrowth of applying a frame of "re-birth" to a group of men whose only direct involvement in this process occurs during the brief moments of conception. Describing the 1850s as an "extraordinarily concentrated moment of expression," and later extolling "the concentrated abundance of our mid-nineteenth century," Matthiessen repeatedly focuses on the potent quality of the Renaissance (vii, viii). The books that constitute this fleeting "moment" of "concentrated abundance" are "the culmination of their author's talents" (xi). This "culmination" reflects the powerful "vitality" that enabled these writers to become twentieth-century America's literary and intellectual "fathers" (ix). The sexual undertones introduced by this vocabulary help make the 1850s seem to be exactly what Matthiessen is trying to prove they were – the climax of American literary history.

As the agents of America's literary "re-birth," Matthiessen's writers become "fathers" (ix). This term introduces the major narrative sub-theme of genealogy, or descent, to *American Renaissance*. This theme is especially influential because it dictates the organization of the text. *American Renaissance* is divided into four sections, each of

which is dedicated to a specific author (Emerson and Thoreau share the first). This structure rests on the assumption that Matthiessen's chosen authors represent progressive generations in a literary lineage. Both in chapter organization and in general thought, Emerson always leads to Thoreau, Hawthorne to Melville, while Whitman, by far the youngest of these writers, represents the convergence of these two lines. As Matthiessen explains: "The types of interrelation that have seemed most productive to understanding the literature itself were first of all the obvious debts, of Thoreau to Emerson, Melville to Hawthorne" (xii). Describing this type of "interrelation" is not unwarranted; indeed, Thoreau was most definitely influenced by Emerson, as was Melville by Hawthorne. But what makes these "debts" "obvious" is the organization of Matthiessen's study. The structure of *American Renaissance* performs, and so reinforces, the content.

The word "debt" also invokes a system of inheritance. As a feature of the world of finance, property, and patrilineage – from which women were legally excluded in the 1850s[10] – "debt" represents a form of cultural transmission. Reference to inherited rather than biological connection obfuscates the abnormality of a wholly male line of descent. Missing literary mothers and sisters are irrelevant because, although they would have been involved in the birth of these descendants, they were excluded from any legal "interrelation." Viewing these "debts" as "obvious" is also problematic to the extent that it precludes other insightful connections. If any female writers had been included in Matthiessen's study, other "interrelation[s]" might have emerged.

Although he does not acknowledge it explicitly, implicit in the identification of his writers as "fathers" is the "intimate kinship" that Matthiessen feels for them (ix, xiii). That Matthiessen wishes to posit himself as the last descendent in the genealogy his book chronicles becomes evident when he declares that, rather than judge his subjects' work by his standards, Matthiessen will judge his own book by theirs. After quoting at length Louis Sullivan's definition of "true scholarship," Matthiessen ends his introduction in the following manner: "These standards are the inevitable and right extension of Emerson's demands in *The American Scholar*. The ensuing volume has value only to the extent that it comes anywhere near measuring up to them" (xv-xvi). This statement represents the final step in Matthiessen's wholehearted adoption of the values and aspirations of the authors he canonizes.

Matthiessen consolidates his sympathetic relationship with these men by taking on their project: loosening the grip of Hawthorne's "damned mob of scribbling women" on the reading public in order to make room for the commercial success of their own work.[11] These authors often judged their commercial failures as resulting from the disinterest of a reading public that was routinely characterized as female.[12] In reclaiming the nineteenth century for his authors, Matthiessen revises the nature of the American reading public. By repeatedly using the pronoun "our," such as when he calls the books in his study "our past masterpieces," and their authors "our great authors," Matthiessen assumes a readership in agreement with himself (vii, viii). Deceptively inclusive, "our" invokes a reading public that presumably shares some preoccupations with Matthiessen that would lead them to identify the same legacy of books as "past masterpieces."[13]

This imagined readership would be American first and foremost, but it would also be male. And it would be comprised, if not of scholars, at least of intellectuals capable of appreciating a dose of literary elitism. When Matthiessen radically limits the gender of his implied audience, he exchanges the supposedly domestic feminine readership that so devastated his authors – emotionally as well as economically – for a male intellectual readership capable of appreciating his writers' texts as well as his own.

Matthiessen not only takes on the literary project of his authors, but also confuses his own literary project with theirs. The term "re-birth" finally only makes sense as a descriptor of Matthiessen's own project, which was to give new life to America's nineteenth-century "masterpieces" by placing them "in their age and in ours" (viii). By "evaluating their fusions of form and content," Matthiessen "re-birth[s]" these nineteenth-century texts into the modern age, conferring masterpiece status on them in accordance with modernism's new elitist criteria. *American Renaissance* must finally be seen within its own historical context, as an attempt to legitimize the study of American literature at a time when the discipline was afforded only scant respect in university English departments.[14] In this context, the term "renaissance" should be seen as a claim staked for America on Europe's most celebrated moment in its long and distinguished artistic past.[15]

Matthiessen's efforts were overwhelmingly successful. In helping to find American literature's place in the academy, he generated a new body of literary criticism dedicated to studying the period he identified as a "renaissance." One of the most interesting volumes in this genre, and surely the most eccentric, is Leslie A. Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel*.

II.

Leslie Fiedler wrote *Love and Death* with the express purpose of contesting Matthiessen's vision. In various writings, Fiedler acknowledges Matthiessen's importance and "immense" centrality as a critic of American literature, but also harshly criticizes him for writing about this literature without passion, "at the temperature of absolute boredom."[16] In his introduction to *Love and Death*, Fiedler casts his book as an attempt to rectify the "state of torpor" that American literature has been relegated to by scholars such as Matthiessen. "To redeem our great books from the commentaries on them," Fiedler writes, "is one of the chief functions of this study."[17] Confident of his own powers, Fiedler was sure that his book would "make more established ways of understanding our fiction seem pat and inadequate" (10). In order to do this, Fiedler renounces Matthiessen's scholarly style (*Love and Death* contains not a single citation) and tone in favor of a more eccentric approach highly reminiscent of D.H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*. Most importantly, he includes writers excluded by Matthiessen. By interpreting these writers' work using Marxist and sociologically-oriented psychological analysis, Fiedler adds a dark dimension to his literary history that sharply distinguishes it from Matthiessen's. However, notwithstanding these changes, Fiedler fails to address the fundamental structure of American literature as it is represented in *American Renaissance*. Without doing so, he cannot escape Matthiessen's legacy.

This legacy penetrates to the very core of *Love and Death*. Despite his many complaints about Matthiessen's methods, Fiedler adopts the pointed project of his predecessor with no apparent reservations. To identify America's literary masterpieces, which Matthiessen refers to as "our past masterpieces" and Fiedler calls "our great books," is the aim of *Love and Death* just as it was that of *American Renaissance* (11). Minus the word "renaissance," Fiedler's object is "to show how our three greatest novelists, each once and once only, made [...] literature of the first excellence" (13).[18] Without disputing the assumption of American exceptionalism, Fiedler simply contests the criteria Matthiessen uses to determine native literary "excellence," arguing that American literature is "distinguished" above all else "by the number of dangerous and disturbing books in our canon." Taking another jab at his predecessor, he adds that "American scholarship" is distinguished "by its ability to conceal this fact" (11). *Love and Death*, of course, intends to reverse this troubling trend.

Besides taking on Matthiessen's explicit project, Fiedler also adopts his predecessor's primary narrative themes of procreation, birth, and genealogy. Although he never uses the term "American Renaissance," *Love and Death* nonetheless insists on a similar moment of literary procreative climax. Rather than focusing on the intricacies of one "renaissance" period, however, Fiedler searches the transcontinental annals of literary history for originating events besides those Matthiessen had already identified. He finds several. First, "the birth of the American imagination" as an entity distinct from that of Europe made a truly American literature possible (25-6). Then, at the turn of the nineteenth century, one author's invention of a particularly American genre finally "proved capable of bringing the American novel to birth" (146). This author, Charles Brockden Brown, is described by Fiedler as a sort of midwife, charged with bringing into being the "American novel," an entity so anthropomorphized with the vocabulary of patrilineage that it is even said to have its own "birthright" (73). Besides aiding in the "birth" of the American novel, Brown also fathers one particular lineage of American authors. He was "the father of American gothic," writes Fiedler, "and the initiator... of a truly fertile line of development for the serious novel in the United States" (104). After it is initiated by Brown, this "line of development," or genealogical descent, becomes of central importance to the American literary history posited by *Love and Death*. Similar to Matthiessen's group of five, the "serious writers" who constitute this "line" represent the canonized core of Fiedler's text.

In *American Renaissance*, Matthiessen uses the same adjective – "fertile" – that appears above in relation to Brown's "line" when he describes the nineteenth-century literature written by women as failing to provide a "fertile field" of inquiry for the literary critic. Just as *American Renaissance* does, *Love and Death* locates a presumptively sterile line of literary development in the sentimental, domestic novels written by Hawthorne's "damned mob of scribbling women," recast by Fiedler with the more economical designation, "female scribblers" (91 and passim). The names for the two groups most central to *Love and Death* – the "female scribblers" and the "serious writers" – tell the reader much about Fiedler's account. Implicit in "serious writers" are assumptions about the relationship between male writing and literary elitism. Unlike its counterpart, this term

(positively) judges the authors it names according to the quality of their work rather than the fact of their sex.

While "serious writers" appears unmarked by any special punctuation throughout *Love and Death*, "female scribblers" is invariably contained within quotation marks. These falsely suggest that the term is not Fiedler's own. In fact, many unsuspecting readers of *Love and Death* mistakenly attribute "female scribblers" to one of Fiedler's subjects, Nathaniel Hawthorne. But Hawthorne never derided "female scribblers" – only a "damned mob of scribbling women."[19] The quotation marks thus mislead the reader at the same time that they correctly signify the original source of the term's hostility. They also replicate a strategy used by Matthiessen. Just as Matthiessen quotes Hawthorne and Thoreau to justify his decision to canonize them while excluding women writers, Fiedler evades responsibility for the critical judgment implicit in "female scribblers" by attributing it to Hawthorne.

According to Fiedler, the books written by "female scribblers" constitute an "*anti-literature*" or "*ersatz* art" that grew up in conversation with but in opposition to canonical, "serious" American novels (92). Although genre purportedly separates American literature from its "*anti-literature*," with the former written in the gothic mode and the latter in the sentimental, the true dividing line between these groups lies in the gender of their constituents. Not a single nineteenth-century woman writer is regarded by Fiedler as "serious," while not a single male writer is dismissed as a "scribbler." Yet even genre divisions fail to hold up to scrutiny. There is nothing inherently "serious" about the gothic in comparison to sentimentalism.[20] These genres have proven equally susceptible to satire and ridicule, and from this perspective can be said to share farcical conventions at the level of plot (seduction, insanity, evil), tone (exaggerated, thrilling, melodramatic), and form (epistolary) that make the privileging of one over the other a dubious proposition.

Even if it may be essentially untenable, the segregation of male and female writers into separate, antagonistic realms becomes the central theme of *Love and Death* and the distinguishing feature of the literary history it posits. "*Against*," Fiedler writes, and "in competition with" the writers and readers of sentimental fiction, "our best fictionists... felt it necessary to struggle for their integrity and their livelihoods" (93). As is the case with Matthiessen's "our," Fiedler's use of the word to describe "our best fictionists" leaves no doubt as to where his sympathies, and those of his imagined reader, lie. And just as Matthiessen pretends to discover, rather than invent, the "American Renaissance," Fiedler cloaks his most enduring critical invention in the garbs of historical fact: "[T]his profound split," Fiedler writes of the gender division he has just conjured into being, "has always influenced the shape of our literature" (93). A more accurate assessment would be that this "profound split" has always influenced the shape of our literary criticism.

Love and Death hinges on this "split" in part because it turns out to be the source of American exceptionalism, or "what is peculiarly American in our books" (11). According to Fiedler, because the theme of "passion" was so central to sentimentalism, "Only by bypassing normal heterosexual love as a subject could ["serious"] writers preserve

themselves from sentimentality and falsehood" (104). Finding themselves unable to write about "normal heterosexual love," America's "serious novelists" turned to homosocial themes, eventually developing an "obsession with," among other things, "innocent homosexuality" (12). This then, is the most infamous claim of *Love and Death*: America's women writers drove their male counterparts into each other's arms.

It is entirely possible that strong homosocial themes characterize much American literature. But it is also possible that this theme was amplified by Mathiessen's original formulation of the American Renaissance as a period of "re-birth" engineered entirely by male authors without female aid. What choice is left but "innocent homosexuality" for a group of isolated men who must figuratively procreate among themselves?[21] In a powerful rhetorical move, Fiedler does not confine the "failure [...] to deal with adult heterosexual love" to writers of or characters in America's "serious novels": These subjects are "not merely matters of historical interest or literary relevance. They affect the lives we lead from day to day" (12). This critical account is so compelling because of what it tells readers about themselves. When Fiedler calls an obsession with homosexuality "our plight," he reveals to his readers the central theme not just of their country's literature, but also of their own lives. Moreover, in creating sympathy among Fiedler, his subjects, and his readers – all presumably American males – the "we" and "our" in these passages recreate the "innocent homosexuality" Fiedler identifies as so central to American fiction.

As I have previously demonstrated, Fiedler vehemently denied any scholarly debt to Matthiessen. In acknowledging those most helpful to him in writing *Love and Death*, he names only two critics of American literature – D.H. Lawrence and Herman Melville (14-5). Fiedler's denial of more recent influences represents an attempt to evade his American academic heritage. This project is underscored when Fiedler traces his strongest critical roots directly back to the authors he studies. In a touchingly recounted birth myth about *Love and Death*, Fiedler suggests that one nineteenth-century author in particular helped to bring his book into being:

> Though this is finally a very personal book, ... it does not spring to life unbegotten, unaffiliated, and unsponsered. In one sense, it has been essentially present from the moment that I read aloud to two of my sons ... for their first time *Huckleberry Finn* .... My first obligation, then is to Mark Twain and to my children. (13)

Love and Death was thus conceived with the joint help of Mark Twain (a literary father) and Fiedler's own sons. The text has been "essentially present" since the first moment of tri-generational American male collaboration. The enormity of this assertion becomes even clearer when the negatives in which it is couched are changed to positives. *Love and Death* is not illegitimate, Fiedler claims, but rather "begotten" and "sponsored" by, as well as "affiliated" with, one of "our great fictionists" – Mark Twain. By locating his own authority in a special relationship with his subjects, Fiedler undermines his attempts to distance himself from Matthiessen, and in fact consolidates his relationship with his predecessor.

Even more than denying recent critical influence, Fiedler at one point denies any critical influence. Entrenching himself in the genealogical line his book chronicles, he suggests that *Love and Death* is best read not as criticism, but as a work of gothic fiction:

> *Love and Death* can be read not as a conventional scholarly book – or an eccentric one—but a kind of gothic novel.... Our most serious as well as our funniest writers have found the gothic mode an apt one for telling the truth about the quality of our life; and I should, therefore, have been ashamed not to try to use it for my own purposes. (8)

Once again, Fiedler's overwhelming desire to become a peer of the authors he studies makes him the true inheritor of Mathiessen's mantle. Fiedler's insistence that the reader judge his book according to the conventions of gothic fiction is equivalent to Matthiessen's instruction to judge American Renaissance in light of Emerson's demands in the "The American Scholar."

The same qualities that make *American Renaissance* and *Love and Death in the American Novel* powerful critical texts also compromise their accuracy. The effect of this conundrum has proved especially devastating, since these books are not so much neat exercises in literary criticism as they are sprawling experiments in literary history. And whether we are conscious of it or not, literary history provides the most powerful and compelling lens through which we read American literature. Despite their shortcomings, there is no moving beyond *American Renaissance* and *Love and Death*. These books have been too influential in dictating the direction of American literary criticism. The best that we can do is dismantle the structure of these critics' authority, and try to understand precisely what their legacy has been. •

Notes

This essay is based on a paper written for Professor Ezra Tawil. I thank him, as well as Lynn Garafola, for helping me to prepare this essay for publication.

[1] A recent special issue of *ESQ, "A Journal of the American Renaissance,"* was entitled "Reexamining the American Renaissance." It included "Death to the American Renaissance" and "Whose Renaissance?" Other works in this vein include "What American Renaissance?" and *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*. Russ Castronovo, "Death to the American Renaissance: History, Heidegger, Poe," *ESQ, A Journal of the American Renaissance* 49, no. 1 (2003). Sharon M. Harris, "Whose Renaissance? Women Writers in the Era of the American Renaissance," *ESQ, A Journal of the American Renaissance* 49, no. 1 (2003). Charlene Avallone, "What American Renaissance? The Gendered Genealogy of a Critical Discourse," PMLA 112, no. 5 (1997). Walter Benn Michaels and Donald E. Pease. *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985.

[2] Colacurcio, Michael J. "The American-Renaissance Renaissance." *The New England Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (1991): 445-6.

[3] See for example, Jane Tompkins, "The Other American Renaissance." *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*. Ed. Walter Benn Michaels and Donald E. Pease. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1985.

[4] Davidson, Cathy N. and Hatcher, Jessamyn. *No More Separate Spheres! A Next Wave American Studies Reader*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002. 15.

[5] Linda K. Kerber has described this process as "the ways in which figures of speech delimit the range of

thought that is possible—that is, the hegemonic functions of the metaphor." Kerber, Linda K., "Beyond Roles, Beyond Spheres: Thinking About Gender in the Early Republic." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (1989): 566.

[6] Qtd. in William E. Cain, *F.O. Matthiessen and the Politics of Criticism*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988. 132.

[7] Colacurcio 446.

[8] Matthiessen, F. O. *American Renaissance; Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. London, New York etc.: Oxford University Press, 1941. vii. All further citations will appear parenthetically in text.

[9] Bell, Michael Davitt "Conditions of Literary Vocation." *Culture, Genre, and Literary Vocation: Selected Essays on American Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. 141. Matthiessen also displaced a group of relatively commercially successful male writers. Before the "American Renaissance" canon, American literary study focused on a group of Brahmin, genteel, New England poets and prose writers: Whittier, Longfellow, Lowell, and Holmes. Cheyfitz, Eric. "Matthiessen's American Renaissance: Circumscribing the Revolution." *American Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (1989): 342. Cain, *F.O. Matthiessen and the Politics of Criticism*, 133-34.

[10] Throughout the Jacksonian age of universal white male suffrage, a "married woman had no legal existence apart from her husband's." Nor could she own property apart from her husband. Cott, Nancy F. *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" In New England, 1780-1835*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977. 5, 21.

[11] Bell 137.

[12] Most literary historians seem to believe that the nineteenth-century reading public was in fact overwhelmingly female, even if they lack sufficient evidence to prove this point. Michael Davitt Bell, for example, begins by calling this idea into question when he writes that James Fenimore Cooper "was aware (or assumed) that women constituted the bulk of his potential audience." He remains circumspect on this point when he later describes "a national, middle-class audience, *apparently* consisting mainly of women" (emphasis added). However, he soon abandons this caution and embraces the notion that "the overwhelming majority of readers" were women. Ibid., 101, 33, 41.

[13] Nina Baym makes this observation in regards to the "rhetorical 'us'" employed by Fiedler in *Love and Death*. Baym 134.

[14] Cheyfitz 342.

[15] William E. Cain claims that Matthiessen consciously intended "renaissance" to reference T.S. Eliot's efforts to recover and revitalize the British national past. Furthermore, "*American Renaissance* [...] is meant to situate its authors and their texts within the 'simultaneous'—'timeless and temporal'—that Eliot describes in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent.'" Cain 149.

[16] Qtd. in Cheyfitz 341.

[17] Fiedler, Leslie A. *Love and Death in the American Novel*. 1st Dalkey Archive ed. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1997. 11. All further citations will appear parenthetically in text.

[18] Here Fiedler's "three" great novelists obviously differ from Matthiessen's five. Keeping Hawthorne and Melville, Fiedler trades the transcendental essayists, Emerson and Thoreau, as well as the poet, Whitman, for another novelist, Mark Twain. America's best books are thus *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby Dick*, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

[19] Hawthorne, Nathaniel et al. *The Letters*, 4 vols. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1984. 304.

[20] Baym 130.

[21] In recent years, many scholars have turned their attention to one particular aspect of F.O. Matthiessen's private life: He was a closeted homosexual. Critical reactions to this fact have varied. Jay Grossman, among others, laments Matthiessen's failure to incorporate his homosexuality into his criticism, while Michael Cadden suggests that "it is clearly Matthiessen's own fluidity of (homo)sexual sympathy that in part determines the womanless world of canonical greatness." While I do not attribute the masculine exclusivity of *American Renaissance* to Matthiessen's own homosexuality, I do disagree with critics who find little evidence of Matthiessen's own sensibilities in *American Renaissance*. Homosociality, if not sexuality, pervades the text. Grossman, Jay. "The Canon in the Closet: Matthiessen's Whitman, Whitman's Matthiessen." *American Literature* 70, no. 4 (1998): 799-800. Cadden, Michael. "Engendering F.O.M: The Private Life of *American Renaissance*." *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism*. ed. Joseph Allen Boone and Michael Cadden. New York: Routledge, 1990. 31.

Flaubert and the Mirror: Character and Style in *A Sentimental Education*

Jonathan Blitzer

I. Manet's Mirror – Flaubert's Mirror

To read Flaubert's *A Sentimental Education* is to gaze into a mirror which invites one to watch himself as though he were two separate people at once – the onlooker and the reflection. Standing before Manet's *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère*, it seems that the person looking into the mirror is not the person staring back, even though the reflection could be of no one else. And yet, this is not a mirror that simply reflects. It complicates, multiplies, deepens – a mirror that distorts the images cast its way, one that provokes its viewers into a double vision.‡

In the painting, a barmaid looks out at us with a curious expression. Is her look hostile? Inviting? As we try to parse the expression which dominates our first glances at the scene, Manet cleverly places his mirror behind her, revealing the scene as the barmaid might see it. Looking into the mirror ourselves, we see a man – presumably a customer – standing before the barmaid. If we can trust the images reflected in the mirror, then we must concede that we stand in the position of the customer, that our reflection is, as it were, of another man (someone we've never met: mustachioed and top-hat-clad). We stand outside the painted scene as viewers looking in, though the mirror posits a continuation of space in the form of a reflection: the scene as it would appear behind us, the scene we would not be able to see without the mirror's reflective surface. The suggestion that the scene unfolds behind us, even as we stand outside the canvas, locates us within the spatial continuum of the painting.[1] We are the viewer from the outside and a character on the inside at the same time.[2]

But perhaps such a concession is problematic. Where exactly are we standing if the man's reflection appears in the upper-right corner of the painting? Either the mirror is split in some way or there are two mirrors behind the bar because the perspectives do not line up. To begin with, we cannot be standing where we think we are if the customer's reflection is to be our own, though whose could it be but ours? And the mirror itself hardly does an adequate job of reflecting: some of the bottles on the

‡ *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère* is reproduced at the end of this essay.

counter beside the bar-maid's right hand disappear from view in the mirror; the bar-maid's figure, slim in the foreground, appears plumper, fuller in the reflection, and Manet has depicted the crowd in the background with a curious combination of detail and abstraction. We can make out the details of individual people in the crowd (a mustache here, a collar there), and still, the crowd scene appears generally blurred.

This mirror hints at a manipulation; we are not merely getting a scene and its reflection in this painting, but instead, we have a carefully constructed moment orchestrated to orient our gaze in a particular way. And to an extent, we are powerless to overcome or resist the invitations of the painting and its mirror. We look immediately at the barmaid – her look, as before, is halting – and our eyes come upon the image of the customer, who appears in the same tableau as the barmaid's reflection: almost as if barmaid and customer make up one composite image, one piece of decipherable evidence.

Manet's painting is famously enigmatic, but the complexities it creates reinforce the so-called focalization[3] taking place as we read of Flaubert's Frédéric through the free indirect discourse – the equivalent of Manet's mirror, I'll argue – of *A Sentimental Education*. Just as we experience a disorientation looking into the painting, we encounter all sorts of questions while reading. Whose perspective are we getting, Frédéric's view of himself during moments of free indirect discourse, or the narrator's own account of Frédéric? Who exactly is talking? The brilliance of Manet's painting is that it visually enacts each character's field of vision in the scene, reflecting back the images of its onlookers and simultaneously deepening our sense of each person's subjectivity. The bar-maid, for instance, at whom we stare directly, looks out at us but hardly engages us at all; she looks beyond us, sees through us. To use T.J. Clark's description: "[her alienation] is felt as a kind of fierceness and flawlessness with which she seals herself against her surroundings," and (I would add) against us. She is utterly detached[4], and Manet is responsible for her mysteriousness. He paints the bar-maid in two separate spaces within the painting: inside and outside the mirror. He animates her from head-on (we stare directly at her with the mirror in the background) and he also captures her image in reflection (the mirror reveals that the bar-maid is at work, leaning towards a customer). That Manet affords us two glimpses of the bar-maid does not clarify matters as we seek to understand what the bar-maid's expression means. Far from it: "[The painting] denies a coherent, legible authorial position, by denying empathetic access to the image of the barmaid and yet juxtaposing it with a provocatively engaged image in the reflection, and furthermore, in the most basic terms, by denying the author/viewer any secure foothold within the pictorial space"[5]. The bar-maid appears so detached because her posture raises questions about both how Manet has painted her and where we stand as viewers in relation to the painted subject. So we gaze at the bar-maid and must sort out several things at once: her expression, the hand that painted the expression (that put it on her face in the first place), and, finally, ourselves – how we are to read what goes on before our eyes.

Manet's *Bar* invites (and resists) limitless interpretation, and a comprehensive look

at the various successes and shortcomings of past interpretations of the painting belongs to the realm of art historical criticism – not, as is the case here, to literary analysis. For our purposes, there are three possible avenues into the painting that are particularly valuable for studying Manet's work with a view towards *A Sentimental Education* – possibilities which correspond to the range of meanings and viewpoints Flaubert will entertain in his novel.

Our first use of the painting will allow us to examine the position of the narrator in Flaubert's free indirect discourse, since it is the narrator's relation to the characters and to the narrative itself that creates the manipulations of perspective Flaubert achieves throughout the novel. In the painting, we share the eyes of the customer, standing where he stands and seeing what he sees, and at the same time (simultaneity is important here) we can almost empathize more with the barmaid herself than with the customer. Behind her head is the image of the scene she glimpses as she leans toward her customer, and we too are in this sort of position, for the mirror shows us what is, in effect, behind us. We have these various avenues into the painted scene – the bar-maid, the customer, the reflections of the mirror, the bar as it exists outside the mirror – and the result is not enhanced clarity, as we might expect, but rather intense ambiguity. The painting seems to have multiple meanings, a shifting arc of legibility, because we get more perspectives rather than less of the scene itself. In particular, two axes emerge as "ways into" the painting, the scene captured inside the mirror and the scene outside it, and it is the interplay between these two registers or tableaux that will govern our look at how narration operates in Flaubert's novel. Manet's mirror visually represents the mechanism of Flaubert's narration; put simply, free indirect discourse is Flaubert's mirror.

Our second application of Manet's *Bar* will allow us to move the study of free indirect discourse from the analysis of narrator to a study of novelistic character. Here, Manet's bar-maid serves as the guiding principle in our study. The reflection we see of her as she works complicates rather than clarifies her expression in the painting. In fact, that the mirror shows her leaning invitingly towards her customer appears to contradict the hauteur she exudes staring past us in the foreground. Her posture in the foreground and her posture in the reflection almost suggest two different people, not one person – and certainly not one person depicted at a single moment in time. By looking at the bar-maid as a representation of character (generally) in Flaubert's novel, we will begin to see that Flaubert's Frederic, like Manet's bar-maid, is not merely detached from his surroundings; he is fortified against his surroundings, his thoughts and intentions obscured by the narrator.

One last possibility remains, for we might say, finally, that this painting is not about any individual character at all but rather, the entire scene: a painting about the mirror in which the bar is the central character. What makes this final possibility so stirring, particularly as we consider *A Sentimental Education*, is that it posits the mirror as a mechanism for a certain self-reflexivity. If the totality of the scene represents for Manet an occasion to develop the uses of his mirror, then he is creating a painting about his own process, a commentary in which he explores just what mirroring

means within the world of his work. The bar at Folies Bergere largely exists in the mirrored images we see of it; we hardly gaze at the scene directly – save our glimpse of the barmaid – and everything we come to know (or think we know) about the goings-on within the painting originate with the mirror. So the mirror reflects *and* distorts: in short, it creates.

Maybe this is the kind of suggestion Flaubert was making when he once remarked of *A Sentimental Education*: "It is too real, and... it is lacking the distortion of perspective."[6] Manet's painting enunciates with uncanny precision the animating principle of Flaubert's program generally, and his realization of that program in his 1861 novel: the "distortion of perspective" achieved through free indirect discourse. The defining feature of this narrative technique is the blending of perspectives of character and narrator (more on this later) – a blending, or melding, that grants readers a sense of intimacy with Frédéric just as it precipitates our fundamental detachment from him. We have all the resources we need to empathize with Frédéric – our narrator, after all, is omniscient – and yet, Flaubert manages to provide Frédéric with a life entirely his own, a life independent of its creator and therefore, inaccessible to us as readers. In a letter to the novelist George Sand, Flaubert describes the premises of his method: "...high Art is scientific and impersonal. One must, by an effort of the imagination, transfer oneself into one's characters, and not draw them to oneself."[7] But to call this all "impersonal" seems incomplete. The great mystery (which is to say, success) of free indirect discourse is that as the narrator "transfers himself" into his characters, he *speaks with them but never for them*. In this respect, narrator and character are mutually dependent; one lives through the other and thus, both narrator and character are brought to life simultaneously – the narrator because he can exist within his characters,[8] and the characters, because they acquire a depth and fullness during narration.

Flaubert maps a new sort of consciousness onto his characters, *the consciousness of the mirror*, and he thereby redefines the spheres in which these characters operate interpersonally (that is, among themselves) and literarily (with us, their readers). This notion – the consciousness of the mirror – is my theory of Flaubert's free indirect discourse as it affects the characters in his work. Since it is the mirror that allows Manet and Flaubert to manipulate perspective and deepen and multiply meaning, it is only fair to think of their 'characters' in relation to the very mirror which brought them into being in the first place. These characters have a peculiar distance from us (and from each other) because their inner thoughts are encrypted by Flaubert's mirror. When we move to *A Sentimental Education*, it will become increasingly clear that Flaubert's characters are, to some extent, unknowable. However hard we pry, we will never uncover their interior thoughts, and as we observed in the painting, this is largely the case because Flaubert has denied us, as he has denied his narrator, any singular, secure "foothold" in the work. So as Manet's mirror takes us from narrator to character in free indirect discourse, we can now ask outright: what does free indirect style look like between characters? How does a literary technique employed by an author (outside a text) become a mode of discourse among characters (inside a text)?

What happens (and how are we to read what happens) when an author's literary strategy becomes a character's "equipment for living"[9] within the world of the novel?

II. Looking In...Or Out

"...what I like most about your book," Flaubert concluded in his 1857 laudatory letter to the poet Charles Baudelaire, "is that Art comes first. You sing of the flesh without love of it, in a sad and detached way that appeals to me. You are as hard as marble and as penetrating as an English fog."[10] Praising the poet and describing himself: Flaubert arrives at a metaphor for his own prose. He aspires to write a novel that apotheosizes style – a novel about nothing, held together by the power of its structure, its form[11] – and that, at the same time, can achieve a depth and an intimacy as penetrating as its form is hard and discernable. We may even detect traces, in this penetrating fog, of Flaubert's famous intuition about the status of the author: "the author in his book must be like a God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere."[12] So Flaubert envisions a novel so carefully constructed that the author orchestrates every moment without ever readily appearing in the work. But of course, our inability to catch Flaubert in the act only reinforces the expertness of the form. When Flaubert invokes that penetrating fog, we might think of the hard-marble that makes it possible: the structure which helps govern his prose but which can never fully account for the mystery of its literary effects. Free indirect discourse constitutes such structure in *A Sentimental Education.* As Flaubert praised Baudelaire, he may not have known it, but he was admiring and, in turn, describing the operation of a mirror.

So how does this mirror work? We must begin by discussing the narrator himself – where his voice originates and how Flaubert complicates traditional omniscient narration. The merging of character and narrator in free indirect discourse is the effect of two distinct and familiar literary postures. On the one hand is direct discourse – when characters speak for themselves – and on the other is so-called diegetic narrative (or indirect discourse), when a narrator describes the thoughts and feelings of the novel's characters. William Paulson, in his book *The Complexity of Disenchantment*, traces these modes of discourse back to Plato, who first theorized about genre and narration in terms of *mimesis* and *diegesis*. Paulson synthesizes:

> Imitation (direct discourse of characters) places the listener or reader as if in the immediate presence of the character, whereas narrative (diegesis) implies the mediating presence of a narrator who decides how to summarize, describe, and relate what was said.[13]

These remarks emphasize a crucial feature of free indirect discourse – namely, how Flaubert's fusion of direct and indirect discourse creates a particular expectation among readers that Flaubert will brilliantly undercut. Paulson is right in pointing out that direct discourse places the reader "in the immediate presence of a character," whereas narrative (or indirect discourse) suggests the "mediating presence of a narrator," the existence of some voice relating a character's thoughts *to* us (hence

discourse which is indirect). What creates the strange effect of free indirect discourse is that Flaubert has manipulated the nature of this mediating presence; he offers us the rudiments of direct dialogue, as though we are in the immediate presence of a character, and he abruptly shifts to narrative diegesis, a posture which bespeaks the mediation of a narrator. The interplay we spoke of earlier in the painting, Manet's depiction of the scene inside and outside the mirror, is precisely the tension at stake as Flaubert moves between direct and indirect discourse.

In *A Sentimental Education*, we encounter an omniscient narrator who frequently imposes himself in the narrative even while it remains unclear if his voice is a paraphrase of the characters' or a viewpoint entirely his own. In response to a question put to him by Rosanette, Frédéric admits at dinner that he "has something on his mind."[14] What follows is both Rosanette's reply and a case of Flaubertian manipulation. "'Don't worry, you're not the only one!' meaning: 'Let's both forget about it and enjoy ourselves now we're here together!"[15.] It is unclear whether both characters understand this translation of Rosanette's oblique reply – the "meaning" which floats between direct quotations – or if our narrator, unbeknownst to the characters themselves, is supplying his own independent commentary. In short, we cannot tell exactly who is supplying the "meaning" here, for when Flaubert inserts the word, he enjoins a form of diegesis (commentary outside the quotation marks) with Rosanette's own discourse: "Let's both forget about it..." The presence of that single word ("meaning"), a word that remains unclaimed in the text by either narrator or character, opens the passage up to a range of possible interpretations, none of them entirely satisfying or adequately comprehensive. When we encounter the second clause, the reformulation of Rosanette's comment, we cannot easily say who is speaking. Does Rosanette recognize the underlying meaning of what she says? (If so, is she trying to obscure her meaning here?) Is it an unconscious meaning? Insofar as Flaubert has made this moment ambiguous, the second set of quotation marks encloses both Rosanette *and the narrator* who makes her speak a second time. The narrator qualifies Rosanette's remark to Frédéric by suggesting that her comment has an alternative or deeper "meaning," and yet, when it comes to supplying such meaning, the narrator resorts to direct discourse. He has enough distance as a narrator to identify that Rosanette has somehow not fully communicated her thought to Frédéric, but at the very moment when we would expect the narrator to intervene – to carry his omniscience to its logical conclusion – he chooses to speak, as it were, in the voice of a character. And so a portion of the text goes unclaimed. The remark, "Let's both forget about it," like the word "meaning," which precipitates our uncertainty in the first place, seems to belong both to character and to narrator: to character in that this clause refers to what Rosanette actually means (hence the quotation marks) and to narrator by virtue of Flaubert's attempt at clarification.[16]

The mechanism by which Flaubert orchestrates this moment finds expression in Manet's painting, particularly in its upper-right corner where we glimpse the reflection of a customer standing before the bar. Until we read the mirror through that reflection, the painting exists in dimensions that are clear and identifiable. The bar-

maid's expression, the scene around her, everything, in short, has its place; however compelling we may find the bar-maid's expression, the scene remains a painted one, something that exists only on the canvas and extends no further. The image depicting the bar-maid's exchange with the customer adds another dimension to the painting. It allows Manet to speak through the mirror so he can orchestrate the moment from two places at once: from outside the painting (literally the case if he is painting it) and from inside the painting, where the mirror affords him another voice with which to deepen and complicate the scene.

The bar-maid's expression, with the added context Manet provides in the painting's upper-right corner, eludes us in an altogether more profound way than if we were looking only at her face. It is as though Manet does exactly what Flaubert has done by adding the "meaning" to Rosanette's and Frédéric's conversation. In the painting, the mirror tells us where we stand and what we look like. "Here is how the scene makes sense" – we might hear the mirror say – "this is the reflection of a scene you cannot fully see." But importantly, the insertion of such "meaning" raises complex and ultimately irresolvable questions about who delivers our information in the work and how reliable such a delivery may be. In the novel – just as we realize looking at the painting – we are not dealing with a form of omniscient narration in which we find answers in the various details a narrator divulges to us; instead we find only more questions. What characterizes free indirect discourse in Flaubert's novel – and what characterizes Manet's mirror – is that it operates by the distortion of perspective (recall Flaubert's criticism of his novel). We acquire more information about the character than we could in direct discourse, and yet the indistinctness of the narrator's mediating presence grants the character a degree of space, an interiority just out of reach. Because the narrator situates himself so closely (more on this in a moment) to his characters, it is virtually impossible to determine (with any kind of certainty) where the narrator's insights begin and where the character's thoughts end. We find ourselves asking the same questions of Frédéric, Rosanette, and others – do these characters know what they are doing/thinking?

As we move from direct to indirect discourse, we linger somewhere between the two modes of narration. When the narrator intercedes, he speaks in a voice whose origins are nearly impossible to trace. He operates in diagetic space (outside the realm of direct discourse) even as he penetrates the quotation marks that demarcate the boundary between the narrator and character. Once we entertain questions about whether or not Rosanette is the one speaking within quotation marks – quotation marks that, we would expect, all but confirm that a character is talking – we begin to acknowledge both how ubiquitous the narrator is within Flaubert's free indirect discourse and, strangely, how inaccessible characters' thoughts and feelings have become. That our narrator is so elusive, that he seems to be everywhere (inside and outside the quotation marks) at once, grants the characters space in which they can think and feel without our ever knowing what belongs to them and what comes from the narrator.

Even moments of conventional narration are thrown into question, like when, for

instance, Frédéric abruptly chides his mistress: "'Why are you so unkind to me?' he asked; he was thinking of Madame Arnoux."[17] Frédéric's question (Why are you so unkind) is so abrupt that it is almost inexplicable unless we treat the ensuing line as an explanatory, narratorial aside. Rosanette, for one, is confused. And to an extent, we have the right to be as well: Does Frédéric know that he is thinking of Madame Arnoux? Is that why he says what he does? Is the narrator narrating Frédéric's internal thoughts or scripting them from the outside? These questions bring us back to our most basic expectations. In one sense, that "he was thinking of Madame Arnoux" suggests the presence of a narrator who knows enough to explain, in objective terms, what is going on in Frédéric's head. And so, to ventriloquize Paulson, we have a mediating narrator deciding to synthesize and thereby expose Frédéric's (unconscious) thoughts. But there was more to our initial questions. To ask if the narrator is scripting these thoughts from the outside is to say, in effect, something paradoxical. Our confusion arises *not* because we have any reservations about a narrator who knows Frédéric better than Frédéric knows himself (this reality is commonplace in the world of omniscient narration). Instead, our confusion stems from questions about whether or not the narrator is *inside* Frédéric's head – if he is talking *for* Frédéric or if he is talking *with* him. We cannot really say whether or not we are in the immediate presence of the character, and our uncertainty is the function of our long-standing questions about the narrator. To the extent that the narrator might be talking with Frédéric here, it appears as though the narrator is flirting with the idea of participating in the scene like a character. Again, we recall Manet's mirror, for the painting actually allows us to experience (to engage in) the phenomenon we are beginning to witness with the narrator. We are the viewer from the outside and a character from the inside at once in the painting; we stand outside the canvas, and yet, Manet's mirror implicates us – viewers capable of seeing the scene with the distance of a narrator – as characters interacting within the scene. That we stand inside and outside the painting simultaneously is exactly the metaphor for where the narrator stands (in relation to character) in free indirect discourse.

One theory has been particularly compelling concerning the relationship between narrator and character in free indirect discourse. D.A. Miller has argued about Jane Austen that her practice of free indirect discourse represents, in one sense, the extent to which Austen (and the narrator in her novels, whom Miller calls Austen Style) seeks to participate in her own work as though an actual character, and in another sense, that free indirect discourse still somehow reasserts the distinction between character and narrator, a distinction (as we will see) that strikes at the core of novelistic style.[18] The latter distinction, for Miller, is made more compelling by the fact that Austen, through free indirect discourse, comes into close (though never entirely direct) contact with her characters. Character and narrator, in Miller's eyes, are antithetical terms, for the narrator possesses what no single character can acquire in any novel; namely, pure or absolute style:

> The significance of free indirect style for Austen Style ... is that it performs the opposition [between character and narrator] at ostentatiously

> close quarters. In free indirect style, the two antithetical terms stand, so to speak, as close as possible to the bar that separates them. Narration comes as near to a character's psychic and linguistic reality as it can get without collapsing into it, and the character does as much of the work of narration as she may without acquiring its authority.[19]

Miller's formulation, while well-taken, is not supportable within the context of *A Sentimental Education*. If Manet's and Flaubert's mirrors have shown us anything, it is that such a bar hardly exists in the first place, that narrator "collapses into" character and lives a double life: the traditional life of the narrator, the life of narratorial asides and general omniscience, and a separate life lived alongside the character. Still, Miller's intuition is a crucial one to identify since it marks the general direction in which theories of free indirect discourse tend to move – towards theories of narration, or theories of novelistic style: in short, towards theories that will all, in some form or another, presume that a bar exists between narrator and character.

The persistence of this bar, as it were, has precluded readings of free indirect discourse that take into account the characters' place in such novels. Miller argues persuasively that Austen entertains a "hidden wish" to renounce her authority as narrator-writer in order to participate more fully in her work on the level of character. "The close quarters" of free indirect discourse allows her to get as close as she can to her characters without ever giving up her status as narrator. For Miller free indirect discourse is the triumph of Austen Style because it demonstrates how closely Austen can come to her characters without losing her narratorial control or presence of mind. We may recall Flaubert's praise of Baudelaire, his admiration that the poet could "sing of the flesh without love of it," and this seems precisely the feat of free indirect discourse as Miller defines it through Austen. Free indirect discourse is the triumph of style, as a reflection of the author and his/her mastery over novelistic construction.

III. Reading and Knowing Character

> "If speaking for someone else seems to be a mysterious process, that may be because speaking to someone does not seem mysterious enough"
>
> – Stanley Cavell[20]

As we have said, one of the greatest ambiguities in free indirect discourse is the question of whether or not a character knows what he is doing/thinking. When we catch Frédéric scolding his mistress and are told that he is thinking of Madame Arnoux, we ask (since free indirect discourse invites us to) if he can process his own confusion or if it is the narrator's explanation of an otherwise inscrutable moment. At other points throughout the novel, we question Frédéric's sincerity as we witness him speak and think in stock clichés. Could he really mean or believe in the paradise he imagines for himself and Madame Arnoux? Is Madame Arnoux specific to that vision at all?

Ultimately, the novel's free indirect discourse creates a sense of indeterminacy as we read. A defining moment of Frédéric's relationship with Madame Arnoux is his gesture of kissing her on the hand, "between her cuff and her glove."[21] He seems to believe whole-heartedly in the gesture, but we know, because the narrator has pointed us to a similar moment before, that he has done the same thing to his mistress. Does this invalidate the gesture as insincere or strategic? Or is it possible that the moment with Madame Arnoux retains a certain degree of meaning for Frédéric even though he expresses his love with what amounts to a recycled cliché? The remarkable thing, especially in a novel with an omniscient narrator, is the irresolvable uncertainty attendant here and elsewhere as to Frédéric's thoughts. His motives and sentiments remain, for the most part, inaccessible – in a sense fortified by Flaubert. Like Manet, Flaubert paints an expression that eludes immediate explanation, and he does so by multiplying and deepening the possibilities for his character's consciousness.

Since Flaubert has drifted into and out of Frédéric's thoughts all along, there is a sense in which Frédéric's consciousness transcends the bounds of character and takes on an added dimension that accommodates and necessarily includes the author. Frédéric acquires what we might call the *consciousness of the mirror*, a consciousness that emerges from a melding of character and style (Flaubert, after all, had always avowed to be "transparent"). It is as though we look through Flaubert into Frédéric, and, in turn, through Frédéric back to Flaubert. The process is akin to a kind of mutual shielding that conceals both character (Frédéric) and narrator (Flaubert) from our penetrating gaze. *Free indirect discourse prevents us from penetrating Frédéric's interior because his interior shelters Flaubert too. At the core of character is style, and for that reason, we can never "get too close."* To borrow Miller's phrase, we might even say that this is precisely the "secret of style": not, as Miller argues, the severance of character and narrator, but rather their inescapable union. The *consciousness of the mirror* which Flaubert grants Frédéric, in the end, serves to grant Flaubert a certain degree of characterhood himself.

The matter becomes infinitely more complicated, however, when we watch Frédéric function with Rosanette as though he were a practitioner of free indirect style himself. So while Flaubert tastes personhood (or characterhood) through Frédéric, Frédéric in turn acquires authorship ("narrator-hood") through Flaubert. Before we turn to a moment in which the fusion of narrator and character is complete – a moment when Frédéric performs the function of our narrator in free indirect discourse – it is worth pointing out once more what free indirect discourse allows us to see with respect to Frédéric and the characters with whom he interacts. Struggling to discern Frédéric's internal thoughts even with the aid of an omniscient narrator, we are particularly attuned to the lapses that occur between characters, the misunderstandings and miscommunications which inevitably result because (to quote Bakhtin in his philosophizings on Dostoevsky) "[...]there is always something only a character, himself, can reveal."[22]

This is not only true in terms of the relationship between a novel's readers and its characters, but it is also the case among the characters themselves in their own inter-

personal dealings within the world of the novel. Frédéric cannot probe the interiority of Rosanette, nor can he of Madame Arnoux, however intimate his relationships with either woman may be. Put simply, he will *never* know what they are thinking. There is perhaps no better illustration of the impenetrability of a character's interior than the visual representation we have of free indirect discourse as it appears in Manet's painting. Again, the painting serves an instrumental role for us here; it will help us understand in actual, visual images what such impenetrability looks and feels like. Our view of the bar-maid is direct; we stare straight at her. And yet, although we would judge our position to be directly in front of her (hardly more than a couple of meters away), there also seems to be, by the mirror's reflection, no floor space before the bar. For us to see the bar-maid, we must, somehow, be standing in mid-air because there is no physical space within the painted scene where we could stand.[23] Manet's manipulation of this detail accounts for the strange effect we feel standing at the bar – our sense, on the one hand, of closeness, proximity, and on the other, of distance. The manipulation is Manet's attempt, through the distortion of perspective, to put us as close to the bar-maid as he can visually, even as the mirror reveals to us that our closeness – which still leaves us speculating about the woman's expression – is a physical impossibility within the scene. We might move now to an image in Flaubert's novel that deals with this notion of proximity and distance in an altogether different way – when Frédéric and Rosanette, sobbing together in an embrace, cry over two entirely different events: Frédéric, the departure of Madame Arnoux, and Rosanette, the death of her child.

The scene is tragic in two different registers. On the first and more obvious level, their embrace is especially sad because it seems that Rosanette has mistook her lover's tears, thinking them shed over the loss of their child. In this sense, the moment of apparent conciliation and connection is, in fact, one of misunderstanding. The two are arm-in-arm, and yet are worlds apart, crying for entirely different reasons. There is, however, another – deeper – reading of the scene for which the novel's free indirect discourse prepares us. When Rosanette notices Frédéric's tears, a curious dialogue ensues:

> "'Ah, you're crying too! It's frightful, isn't it?'
> 'Yes, it's frightful!'
> He hugged her tight and they sobbed together.[24]

What is frightful? The departure of Madame Arnoux? The dead baby? The misunderstanding? And finally, a more familiar question: does Frédéric know what he is doing?

At the climactic moment of the novel we have, importantly, a kind of mirroring: "It's frightful, isn't it? Yes, it's frightful." By repeating (mirroring, reflecting) his lover's words back to her, he is stepping closer to her in one sense (he appears to be consoling her) and further from her in another (his words are utterly ambiguous). That Frédéric's mode of response here is to repeat – to mirror – attests to a certain artfulness on his part with profoundly Flaubertian origins. He is exercising free in-

direct style, and consequently is resisting meaning – literally making himself misunderstood. The narrative mode of free indirect discourse (as Flaubert has employed it in relation to his characters) becomes a model by which Frédéric speaks here, a model of narration that morphs into a strategy for character. Let us return, for a moment, to our example of Flaubert's free indirect discourse: Flaubert inserts the word 'meaning' between two quotations and thereby speaks *with* Rosanette as the two, together somehow, divulge the "meaning" of her first remarks. First Flaubert and now Frédéric. When Frédéric replies, "Yes it's frightful," he is speaking in his own voice (meaning) and, at the same time, is restating Rosanette's words. Like Manet's mirror (as we first defined it), Frédéric, in repeating Rosanette's words, reflects *and* distorts. He generates a meaning of his own but one which will throw into question exactly what his and Rosanette's shared moment means and implies. This generative moment is also, crucially, a moment of occlusion.

What may be most striking about this scene – and especially the free indirect discourse occurring in it – is that Flaubert has written this moment in direct discourse, as a dialogue between two characters. That someone, namely Frédéric, is practicing free indirect discourse almost seems to be enough here; even the narrator cannot pry the two characters from their embrace. We are entirely in the realm of character – the narrator narrates only after the two exchange their words – and the mechanism of free indirect discourse still governs the interaction. In fact, this is free indirect discourse of the highest order, for Frédéric not only employs the mirror, but he is also the beneficiary of the *consciousness of the mirror*. Frédéric deceives Rosanette for the same reason that he deceives us: no one but he can ever know what he is thinking. But to return to the world Frédéric inhabits – the realm of character, that is – there is something left to be said. In his exchange with Rosanette, the unclaimed text characteristic of free indirect discourse forms the substance/core of Frédéric's and Rosanette's dialogue, the basis for their seeming connection (though we know better). *This is what free indirect discourse looks like in real life, in the relationship between characters.* What makes free indirect discourse *free* – that a portion of the novel floats in a kind of liminal space between narrator and character – is exactly the ambiguity that makes Frédéric's and Rosanette's interaction so poignant. The two never fully connect.[25]

We may return, finally, to Manet's mirror – to end, more or less, where we began. As Clark points out: "A mirror is a surface on which a segment of the surrounding world appears, directly it seems, in two dimensions; as such it has often been taken as a good metaphor for painting."[26] Clark says this with a degree of concealed irony, for Manet's mirror is anything but one that functions in conventional ways. In fact, part of the brilliance of Manet's painting is that it actively subverts the traditional mimetic operations of the mirror. Standing before the bar, we do not glimpse mere reflections or recreations of reality; we lose ourselves in distortions and measured manipulations. The mirror implies a world of its own.[27] As such, Manet's mirror is as eloquent an expression of Flaubert's literary sensibilities as we have – save the author's own words on his work. And when Flaubert invokes style as the governing ethos of his writing, he speaks as though style were a kind of mirror to which he

submits everyday realities in order to reflect back something different, something more: style, after all, "being an absolute manner of seeing things."[28] Consider, in conclusion, Erich Auerbach's words on Flaubert: "Flaubert wanted to transform reality through style; transform it so that it would appear as God sees it, so that the divine order...would perforce be incarnated in the author's style."[29]

We cannot help but wonder, then, about Frédéric and Rosanette's chilling embrace. What for Flaubert is a stylistic decision (to write in free indirect discourse) is a "real-life" decision for Frédéric and other characters who live out, as it were, the consequences of Flaubert's authorial move. And of course, that begs the question of transformations, that is – whether Flaubert sought to submit the world of everyday reality to his style (and thereby become "as a God in the universe") or if, perhaps, he avowed to write in a style designed to capture the everyday, to capture exactly what is most real – realer than real – about it. The failed connections, the miscommunications, the impossibility of ever really knowing what a loved one is thinking. Maybe style is an artist's response to live by the *consciousness of the mirror*. "It's frightful, isn't it?" •

Notes

[1] Flam, Jack. "Looking into the Abyss: The Poetics of Manet's *A Bar at Folies-Bergère*." *12 Views of Manet's Bar*. Ed. Bradford R. Collins. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996. 181.

[2] I will use the term 'character' synonymously with the more familiar 'subject' to describe the people in the painting. I do so because I would like to begin reading the painting on the same general terms as the novel.

[3] We might define focalization simply as the focus of narration. See Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980.

[4] Clark, T.J. *The Painting of Modern Life*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984. 254. Granted, Clark is interested in a completely different matter vis-à-vis the painting than I am. He observes the bar-maid's detachment en route to the claim that "What is visible in modern life...is not character but class." (258) His interest in her detachment is something of an ideological or socio-cultural concern.

[5] House, John. "In Front of Manet's Bar: Subverting the 'Natural.'" *12 Views of Manet's Bar*. Ed. Bradford R. Collins. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996. 246.

[6] Flaubert, Gustave. *Selected Letters*. Trans. J.M. Cohen. New York: The Philosophical Library, 1951. 199.

[7] Ibid.

[8] The intuition here comes from D.A. Miller, who writes on free indirect discourse within the context of Jane Austen. See note 18.

[9] The phrase is originally from Kenneth Burke – "language is equipment for living." But I prefer Ralph Ellison, co-opting the phrase to speak of jazz: *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings*. Ed. Robert O'Meally. New York: Modern Library 2001.

[10] *Selected Letters*, 117.

[11] Brombert, Victor. "Flaubert and the Status of the Subject." *Flaubert and Postmodernism*. Ed. Naomi Schor and Henry F. Majewski. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1984. 100.

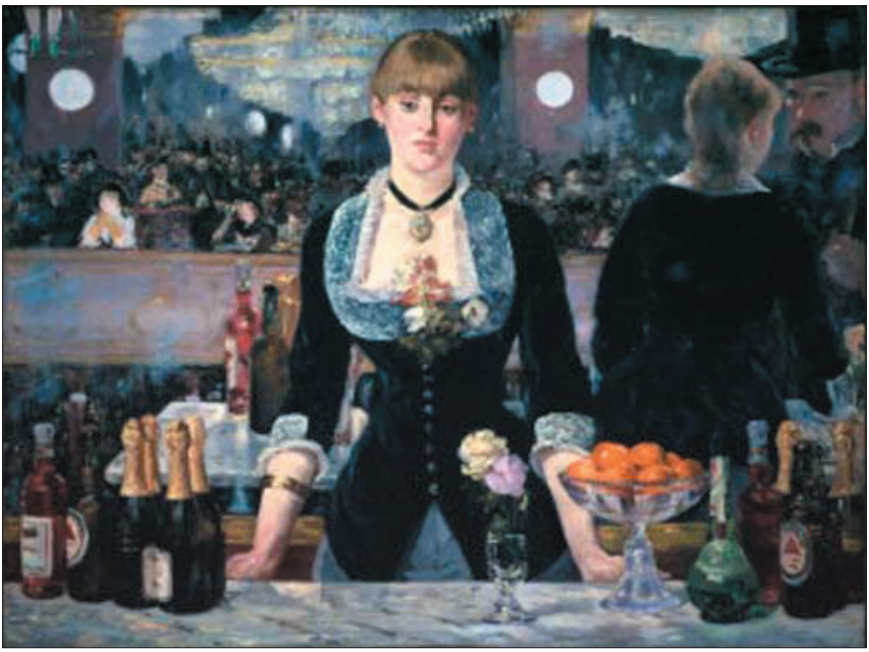
[12] Flaubert, Gustave. *Correspondance*. Trans. Jean Bruneau. Paris: Gallimard, 3 vols., 1973-91. 2, 294.

[13] Paulson, William. *Sentimental Education: The Complexity of Disenchantment*. New York: Twayne, 1992. 71.

[14] Flaubert, Gustave. *A Sentimental Education*. Trans. Douglas Parmee. New York: Oxford World Classics, 1989. 228.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Of course, it is dangerous to conflate the narrator and author. For the sake of simplicity and concision, I will be calling the narrator 'Flaubert' throughout the paper. When I do so, I do not mean Flaubert, the actual historical figure, but rather, Flaubert the author who orchestrates the novel and animates the narrator.



Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère (A Bar at the Folies-Bergère) Édouard Manet
Oil on Canvas 1881

Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery, London

[17] *A Sentimental Education*, 228.
[18] Miller, D.A. *Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003.
[19] Ibid, 59.
[20] qtd. in Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973. 13.
[21] *A Sentimental Education*, 458.
[22] Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. 58.
[23] Flam, 165.
[24] *A Sentimental Education*, 443.
[25] The impossibility of connection need not be explained in terms of the consciousness of the mirror; my term is only one way of framing the matter to link character and author by the strategies both employ. Eight years after Flaubert wrote his novel and about four years before Manet painted his *Bar*, Tolstoy's Levin, thinking of his new bride: "No, I won't tell her [how I feel]...it's a secret that's necessary and important for me alone, and it's inexpressible in words" (*Anna Karenina*). For Tolstoy, the failure of language is at the root of disconnection.
[26] Clark, 252.
[27] Flam, 165, 171.
[28] Flaubert, Corr. 2, 346.
[29] Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis.* Trans. Willard R. Trask. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953. 357-358.

Edited by Noah Block-Harley, Kate Meng Brassel, Gautam Hans, Ling Tiong, Liz Vastola, and Tamar Zeffren

Marie NDiaye: Translating the Surface

Liesl Yamaguchi

"Where a text has its felicities (accidental or not), its cruxes, its destiny – its unconscious – the translation must stick to the surface, even if its own cruxes pop up elsewhere..."

–Yves Bonnefoy, *Translating Poetry*

Marie NDiaye's *Papa Has to Eat* is a play about the surface. The story of an African man's homecoming to his French wife and children after an absence of ten years, *Papa Has to Eat* exposes the importance of appearances, making every *sous-entendu*[1] of French racism *entendu*[2]. It is a task Marie NDiaye, a French national whose name and skintone are the inheritance of a Senegalese father, has assumed simply by stepping into the French literary scene. Born and raised in Pithiviers, France, NDiaye published her first novel at seventeen. She has since produced eight novels and three plays; among them *Rosie Carpe*, which garnered her France's prestigious *Prix Femina* in 2001, and *Papa Has to Eat*, whose historic opening in 2003 made NDiaye the second woman writer (after Marguerite Duras) to be admitted into the repertoire of the Comédie Française.

Yet, despite her swift admittance into the prestigious French world of letters, NDiaye remains something of an outsider. Her foreign name and skin color still lead critics and scholars to miscategorize her frequently as "francophone," a designator normally reserved for authors from France's former colonies. This error, symptomatic of a literary sensibility unaccustomed to French, black authors, gives an indication of the complexities of race, nationality, and history NDiaye raises through her very existence.

These complexities, which permeate much, if not all, of NDiaye's work, are captured with particular clarity and economy in *Papa Has to Eat*, a play she has acknowledged to be "*plus ou moins autobiographique*."[3] While translating the play from French into English as an American exchange student in Paris, I found that the confusion surrounding NDiaye's race and nationality is precisely the type of confusion the play seeks to address. Through relentlessly bold dialogue, *Papa Has to Eat* forces its audience to recognize the taboo power of appearances in racial discourse; through subtly nuanced language, it eloquently demonstrates this power. The play's genius does not lie in a complex under-

lying structure or in a strong political stance on French racism; rather, the genius of this play that honors the surface lies, quite appropriately, in the surface.

Written in rich, strange, deceptively simple language (dubbed "le NDiaye" by Comédie Française director André Engel), *Papa Has to Eat* forges new relationships between race and language. Unlike American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, whose work plays with and arguably vindicates American street language, NDiaye writes strictly in impeccable, if stylized, French. Her characters are not defined by their speech: everyone, black and white, speaks the same "NDiaye."[4] In addition to the sparse beauty this language lends to the play, it has the advantage of being accessible and translatable.

For a translator, then, *Papa Has to Eat* is an ideal vehicle: if its "felicities, cruxes, destiny and unconscious"[5] lie on its accessible surface, the translator, who is obliged to "stick to the surface,"[6] is working in the right place. The cruxes should match up. And indeed, they do. In Scene III, when Papa boasts of his new, glittering station in life, declaring, "Car, à présent, rien ne m'atteint,"[7] NDiaye's verb "atteint" functions on two levels: literally, to say "Nothing attains me," nothing can strip me of my power; more subtly, to say "Nothing can strip me of my skin color," using "atteint" to suggest through aural association an /a/ negation of "teint." This second reading is supported by a preceding line Papa delivers at the beginning of the play, in which he tells his daughter, "this absolute, imperious tint of my skin gives me the advantage over dull skin like yours."[8] In order to keep as much proximity to the surface as possible, I translated the line "Car, à présent, rien ne m'atteint" into "For, at present, nothing taints me." "Taint," with its very physical connotations of discoloration, conveys the second reading of "atteint" and implies the first. The fusion of *entendu* ('nothing can strip me of my power') and *sous-entendu* ('nothing can strip me of my skin color') is inverted, but preserved.

This skillful use of "atteint" offers a perfect illustration of NDiaye's method of honoring the surface of things – skin color, appearance – through the surface of her language. It is indeed Papa's tint that gives him his power, and NDiaye captures that synthesis of abstract power and surface skin color in one verb. Simply dealing with the word itself, chopping it in a superficial way, provides the key to a central theme of the play: the surface is the thing. Skin color is not a symbol of power, it is power; the word is not suggesting an idea, it is demonstrating it.

In order to preserve the perfect fusion NDiaye achieves between *entendu* and *sous-entendu*, I tended to choose more explicit translations when confronted with multiple options. In Scene VIII, Aunt Josie describes Papa as "poli," which translates literally into "polite," with a *sous-entendu* of "polished."[9] In order to maintain NDiaye's pointed emphasis on Papa's physical superficiality, I opted for "polished." In Scene II, Papa expresses his wish to be seduced by his daughters, "deux belles chattes;" here again, I sidestepped the literal "two beautiful cats" in favor of the more explicit "two beautiful pussy cats."[10] At times, I found that simply translating from French into English did this work for me: the ambiguously elegant, French "pâtes de fruits" and "choucroute" became the plain, naked "gumdrops"[11] and "sauerkraut"[12] that they, in fact, are.

NDiaye's relentless determination to expose *sous-entendus* explains a great deal about both the play's structure and its characters. The focus on physicality and appearance is

striking, yet one senses that it is only an articulation of the unspoken judgments underscoring everyday conversation. Upon meeting Mr. Zelner, his wife's new boyfriend, Papa simply states aloud what most would only think: "So, very coolly, Mr. Zelner, I am looking at you and I wonder how my wife can endure such a complete absence of elegance, those glasses with dirty lenses, that pudge, that woolly beard...."[13] NDiaye focuses on the superficial in order to show just how prevalent superficiality is, though unspoken in daily conversation. Everyone focuses on the superficial, NDiaye suggests; the play simply pulls that focus from subtext into text.

Yet the surface – superficial appearance – possesses real power not to be summarily dismissed. NDiaye plays with this surface, not only exposing it and manipulating it, but also honoring it. NDiaye's respect for the surface is evident in the play's structure, which often hinges on superficial connections. Throughout the play, when her characters confront one another, the accused evade hanging accusations by slipping into other topics, a tactic which results in simultaneous split-scenes. These split-scenes, however, remain superficially linked. In Scene III Mina, Papa's twelve-year-old daughter, is embarrassed that her younger sister Ami "turns her back"[14] on Papa; so she changes the subject to the seemingly unrelated sofa-bed. The shift to the sofa-bed, however, is not as random as it appears. In her frantic effort to escape embarrassment, Mina begins to explain how "Mom has to cuddle up on the cushions, and she puts out her back"[15]; Ami's figurative back prompts Mina to think of Mom's literal back. Such subtle, verbal links lend a poetic logic to the play's seemingly disjointed scenes, a logic reminiscent of Virginia Woolf.

Like Woolf, NDiaye creates a narrative logic that slides upon the surface, and mocks those who overlook this logic in search of an abstract, underlying structure. Mr. Zelner, an upstanding literature teacher from Courbevoie High School, refuses to accept the validity of appearances. When Papa returns, dazzling in his riches, Mr. Zelner immediately denies his appearance, saying, "It's an illusion. None of us here believes any of it."[16] He is, of course, correct: Papa's success is a fraud. But Papa's fraudulent façade is not completely imaginary. At the end of the play, Mina tells us that "Mr. Zelner figures my father has been reduced to his true personality. He figures the truth about my father is all contained in the insignificant, drab, taciturn, and mannerless being who takes his place beside him on the orange sofa."[17] In so phrasing Mr. Zelner's position, NDiaye implies its error: all of Papa is not encapsulated in this insignificant being, and his splendor of times past was not entirely "an illusion." Papa may have fabricated a character wildly more successful than he actually was, but the power his black skin and expensive costume exercised was real.

Misguided in his attempts to find deep, abstract meaning independent of superficiality, Mr. Zelner subscribes to a logic reminiscent of that of Mr. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. A celebrated Oxbridge philosopher, Mr. Ramsay is repeatedly frustrated in his quest to progress linearly through the alphabet which is, of course, meant to be synthesized. A literature teacher at the local high school, Mr. Zelner is unable to decipher Papa's words: confronted with Papa, Mr. Zelner declares, "I understand each of the words you use, but the sense of the whole escapes me."[18] Intent on

finding a deeper structure, an underlying principle with which to make sense of Papa, Mr. Zelner completely misses the fact that Papa's surface, "each of the words," are, themselves, Papa. Like Mr. Ramsay, Mr. Zelner is unable to see the trees for the forest. This mockery of Mr. Zelner, a grammar-obsessed teacher of literature, and NDiaye's implicit criticism of the French approach to literary education, resonate with Woolf's bemused critique of the linear, British, academic thought of her time.

Few characters escape NDiaye's biting mockery, but those who confront and accept the surface derive a certain protection and strength from their ability to do so. In this department, as Mina tells us at the end of the play, "Alone, Mom shines."[19] Mom, a French shampoo girl in a Courbevoie hair salon, understands the power of appearance implicitly. When Papa returns, she is overwhelmed, but she assesses the situation with brutal honesty and accuracy: "My husband is back. I look at him and I love him! How humiliating!"[20] It is the look that induces the love: it is, admittedly, a superficial love. But, it is a love that owns and embraces its illusions, and it is a love that lasts. In keeping with NDiaye's respect for the surface, this love proves to be the only true love in the play. Mom recognizes that Papa is two-faced (shown throughout the play through his constant oscillation between the first and third person), that he is "made up entirely of lies and deception,"[21] and that he does not love her, but erroneously perceives her as "the entirety of France."[22] Knowing all this, however, she accepts and embraces her unreasonable, inexplicable love for him. Mom is the only character who manages to recognize the surface, and its very real power, at their exact worth.

While NDiaye mocks all attempts at ignoring superficiality, so too does she frustrate attempts at endowing it with more significance than it actually possesses, as in Papa's perception of Mom as "not a being... [but] all of France."[23] At various points in the play, individuals assign immense political histories to one other (or even to themselves), but these conjunctions inevitably fail. Mr. Zelner's attempts to judge Papa provide an excellent illustration of this phenomenon. From his "illuminated" leftist position, Mr. Zelner at first refuses to blame Papa for his misconduct, thinking that "a Black person... is not responsible for his actions because a Black is above all, and essentially, a victim... There is no such thing as a black man. There is only an affliction... Only a sad song, a shameful enslavement."[24] NDiaye makes a mockery out of such a position, showing that assuming Papa to be innocent because of his skin color is as ridiculous as assuming him to be guilty because of it. This latter position is quickly disposed of, as well, through Papa's new girlfriend Anna's brother, who "loves Baby [their illegitimate child] because Baby reinforces his idea that all alliance with a dirty old Black man can result only in disaster."[25] Papa is black, and his black skin has very real effects. But Papa's skin does not make him innocent or guilty: any attempts to conjoin skin color and historical innocence or guilt is doomed to failure.

Like Mr. Zelner and Anna's brother, Papa also attempts to assign too broad a significance to individual people. A comical response to Mustafa Sa'eed of Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, Papa sets out to avenge colonial injustices through his personal life. He admits that his motivation for abandoning Mom was "to get my revenge on France.... For all this contained fury, this bitterness and this kind of indefinable shame,

[to be] repaid."[26] But, like Mr. Zelner and the others, Papa, is foiled in his attempt: he explains, " I arrived and forgot the necessity and the logic of my vengeance. Here was this poor, little woman, adorable and distraught – Mom. Avenge myself, on her? I wasn't sure any more."[27] In the end, Papa's determination to avenge political wrongs only leads him to discover his personal inadequacies: he leaves Mom "with satisfaction and the feeling of severe and implacable justice finally being done" only to discover, "[T]hat man, incapable of glorious solitude, that's me!"[28] All attempts at representing a larger nation fail in NDiaye, leading characters only to discover their own illusions of reality.

As her characters repeatedly fail in their efforts to represent larger entities, NDiaye leads us to re-examine the idea of "representation" itself. In *Les Nègres*, another play addressing French racism, Jean Genet plays with the theatricality of racial role-playing and representation in an effort to expose and undermine them. NDiaye takes the opposite approach towards the same end, rejecting all racial role-playing and attempts at representation. *Papa Has to Eat* is not a symbolic play: its characters do not "represent" anything but themselves. Through Mr. Zelner's line to Papa, "Nothing of what you represent should exist for us,"[29] NDiaye shows the error, and ultimate impossibility, of conflating stereotypes and individuals. To this end, NDiaye resists the theatricality Genet embraces, omitting the play's most dramatic scenes. We are invited to neither Papa and Mom's wedding nor the dinner at the Nikko Hotel; we do not see Mom attack Papa. NDiaye puts her characters on stage, but she refuses to let them become the entertainment. Just as she refuses to let them assume immense political roles for one another, so does she refuse to let them represent those roles for the audience.

NDiaye's characters are, quite simply, disenfranchised people. They belong to neither France nor Africa; they are, as many of them recognize at various points in the play, lost. As Mina's final monologue, in which she appeals to the court for help, dramatically shows, the French law is silent. And, as Mina also notes ("We can't assassinate him"[30]), even death will not come to the rescue. NDiaye's characters live in the outskirts of Paris, and in a larger sense, on the outskirts of the world. The French term *banlieue*[31] captures, with characteristic NDiaye economy and complexity, the world of *Papa Has to Eat*: it is a place (*lieu*) of exiles (*être au ban de la société*), but it is also a place of marriages (*les bans*) and the marriage of places. It is the space in which people exiled from different worlds collide and are forced to coexist. NDiaye's characters are simply lost, disenfranchised people on the outskirts, struggling under the weight of an ugly colonial history in the *banlieue*.

Opening with the Papa's homecoming to the *banlieue*, the play upsets, from its very first line, the notion of foreigners as visitors: Papa is back, Papa is home, but home is not Africa. Home is Courbevoie. Thus later in the play, when Papa's father-in-law criticizes his daughter for her propensity to "love foreigners simply because they're foreign,"[32] his words take on another meaning; through them, NDiaye gestures lightly at the idea of loving foreigners for *staying* foreign, for not integrating themselves into one's society.

Yet one must proceed cautiously in reading *Papa Has to Eat* as a condemnation of French exclusionism. The *huis clos*[33] quality pervading the piece, which features not a

single character from the 'inskirts,' leads one to wonder if, for NDiaye, the 'inskirts' have ceased to exist. For even Mr. Zelner of "such a good bourgeois family,"[34] the figure closest to enfranchisement, is given a Jewish name. In light of the recent discussion in French media surrounding the controversial Dieudonné (a discussion which tacitly and conveniently suggests attributing the recent rise of anti-Semitism exclusively to France's black population), this choice demands careful attention. One could easily sweep NDiaye's choice to make Mr. Zelner Jewish into this political current of pitting minority against minority. I would argue, however, that NDiaye's proposal is simply that the 'majority' has ceased to exist. NDiaye does not exonerate the white majority by displacing blame onto Mr. Zelner the Jew; on the contrary, she shows that this enfranchised 'majority' has effectively disappeared. Like Mom, alienated from her family and abandoned by Papa, yet tied to both of them, the majority now inhabits a space between enfranchisement and disenfranchisement.

Ultimately, *Papa Has to Eat* is a play that exposes and upsets conventional understandings of race relations and exclusionism. It forces us to accept ambiguities, unsatisfying resolutions, and compromised ideals. It boldly brings contemporary racial issues, positions, and prejudices to the surface, but it does not necessarily resolve them. Its work is simply to pull the racial discourse out of the abstract, and out of an outdated colonial structure that permitted easy conjunctions between race, class, and geography. NDiaye's work aims to show that these conjunctions no longer apply (and perhaps, never really did). Clear boundaries between black and white, poor and rich, colonized and colonizer, have ceased to exist, and with them all possibility of separation. As Mom explains to the family that asks her to renounce Papa once and for all, "What I suffered because of him tied me to him forever."[35] It is a rare moment for NDiaye in which the personal and the political fall in parallel, and Mom's line lends itself to interpretations of broader historical significance. The intertwined histories of France and its empire have, through suffering, tied separate worlds together forever. For a translator, such lines made the decision to keep the play in France an easy one: the specifically French colonial history is integral to the piece and embedded in its language. To change the geographic location to the outskirts of New York would be to erase untold intricacies of the piece.

Though *Papa Has to Eat* clearly grows out of a colonial legacy, the racial positions and questions it raises are not limited to the outskirts of Paris. They are arguments that crop up hideously, around the world. Like France and its former empire, like Mom and Papa, the races of the United States are inextricably bound together by a history of suffering. As it would be convenient to attribute anti-Semitism exclusively to France's black population, so would it be convenient to relegate racism to the French *banlieue*. But the racial tensions NDiaye exposes are all too translatable: from French into English, from France into the United States, from black and white into black and brown or white and yellow.

NDiaye does not resolve these tensions: *Papa Has to Eat* ends suddenly, surprisingly, and unsatisfyingly on a simple declaration of love. Mom recognizes the absurdity of the Papa's return the day after Mr. Zelner's death, thirty years after his initial departure; but nonetheless, she confesses, "I am in mourning, but... I have always

had for you, yes... an inexplicable love."[36] NDiaye raises far more questions than she answers, but if she offers any resolutions to today's complex racial tensions, it is Mom's: love. And love, too, is translatable. •

Notes

The author would like to thank William Bishop, Heidi Stalla, and Marie NDiaye for their supervision and support of this project.

[1] literally, below being heard; tacit implication, subtext.

[2] heard.

[3] more or less autobiographical. NDiaye, Marie. *Selected Readings and Discussion*, 59E59th St Theaters. New York: The Play Company, 16 November 2005.

[4] Kaprièlian, Nelly. "Papa doit manger." *Les Inrockuptibles*. Paris: 12 février 2003.

[5] Bonnefoy, Yves. "Translating Poetry." Trans. John Alexander and Clive Wilmer. *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*. Ed. Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

[6] Ibid.

[7] NDiaye, Marie. *Papa doit manger*. Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 2003. 31.

[8] Ibid 11.

[9] Ibid 74.

[10] Ibid 26.

[11] Ibid 21.

[12] Ibid 28.

[13] Ibid 25.

[14] Ibid 22.

[15] Ibid 22.

[16] Ibid 34.

[17] Ibid 85.

[18] Ibid 26.

[19] Ibid 81.

[20] Ibid 34.

[21] Ibid 94.

[22] Ibid 34.

[23] Ibid 34.

[24] Ibid 65.

[25] Ibid 45.

[26] Ibid 62-3.

[27] Ibid 63.

[28] Ibid 64.

[29] Ibid 27.

[30] Ibid 89.

[31] Often translated "suburbs," *banlieue* is more appropriately translated "outskirts," as it refers to the peripheral regions surrounding urban centers, but does not carry the American connotation of affluence.

[32] Ibid 50.

[33] Literally, "closed door," also the original title of Jean-Paul Sartre's play *No Exit*, in which three characters condemned to spend eternity confined together discover that "Hell is other people." Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Huis Clos*. Paris: Gallimard, 1945.

[34] Ibid 51.

[35] Ibid 55.

[36] Ibid 95.

Premeds and Puritans: An Interview with Molly Murray and Rebecca Stanton

Conducted by Noah Block-Harley and Isabel Bussarakum

Professor Rebecca Stanton's office sits in a corner of the Barnard Slavic Department on the third floor of Milbank Hall. Inside the large, scarcely-furnished office, we sit across from Professor Stanton, armed with two pens, a list of questions, and a tape recorder. We are waiting for our second interviewee, Professor Molly Murray of the English and Comparative Literature Department at Columbia, who arrives a little late just off a red-eye from San Francisco. Both professors attended Columbia College as undergraduates, and we are curious to hear their views on how Morningside Heights, Columbia, and the city as a whole have changed.

Professor Stanton teaches in the Barnard Slavic department, focusing on Soviet literature and the historical avant-garde. Current projects include a book on Issac Babel and a shorter piece entitled, "Nabokov and Lermontov, or Adventures in Textual Colonization." Professor Murray teaches in the Columbia English department, specializing in poetry and prose of sixteenth- and seventeenth- century England. She is currently working on a study of literature and religious conversion in the English Renaissance.

Columbia Journal of Literary Criticism: *Let's start generally. What were your majors? Were they the same or different from what you ended up studying in graduate school?*
Molly Murray: I didn't have any idea as an undergraduate about whether I wanted to major in English or History.
Rebecca Stanton: That's actually how we first met – outside Professor Tayler's office. You were fretting about whether to declare a History concentration. I thought, "Well...why not?" I didn't realize you already had an English major and a philosophy minor. [*Molly laughs*] Instead Molly was wondering, "What shall I add to my already extensive program?" I didn't even have a major as an undergraduate. I had a double

concentration in French and Russian in that great way that you can at Columbia. I was thinking that Molly just had decided not to major in anything at all and thought, "Well, a history concentration wouldn't be too hard to accomplish."

CJLC: *So was there an overlap in what you studied as undergraduates and what you ended up doing in graduate school?*
MM: There was no radical change.
RS: I radically changed as an undergraduate from being premed to studying languages. I had no idea what to do after graduating from Columbia, in addition to which I was a foreign student without a work visa. So I had to go to graduate school in order to...
MM: Come on...
RS: No, no really. I decided I wanted to stay in New York after graduation, and I realized that to do that I would have to stay in school. That was by far the easiest way, as I could just renew my student visa. So belatedly I put together some applications to graduate school, and I almost tossed a coin between French and Russian. I picked Russian because it was more fascinating to me and also because the Slavic department was great. The Slavic department had sort of swept me in and the French department had...
MM: ...had spat you out...
RS: The French department during my time happened to be offering exclusively 17th century courses, which is the most boring period except for the 18th century. Now I'm in trouble with Jenny Davidson. But seriously, the French 17th century is boring. It's full of these people writing encyclopedias, wringing their hands over the existence of God, et cetera.
MM: Yes, so boring. [*Professor Murray specializes in 16th and 17th English literature*]
RS: Well, it was boring to me as an undergraduate. I was raw and callow at the time, and I didn't know anything. I wasn't sophisticated enough to take an interest in those things, whereas Russian literature was about the Big Questions. [*Pause*] And I had great professors. So I went straight into graduate school completely by accident. I didn't even apply for a fellowship because I didn't know about them at the time. I happened to run into Robert Belknap who was the chair of the department, and he said, "Rebecca, I noticed you didn't check this box on your application. Would you like me to check it for you?" And I said, "Oh, ok." And then suddenly they were ringing and were giving me money. My parents were happy and the rest is history.

CJLC: *So you knew you wanted to go to Columbia for graduate work?*
RS: I didn't think of it at first as graduate work. I thought of it as more school (which is terrible), and I wanted to stay in New York. I thought I would leave after the M.A., but by that time I was doing interesting stuff. I got to teach Russian, which was great, and then I got to teach L and R [*Logic and Rhetoric*]. I was still enjoying myself, and they were still paying me. Then I hung on because I wanted to teach Lit Hum, and I realized I really liked being in the academy. Instead of being Dr. Stanton

in the medical sense, I could be Dr. Stanton in the academic sense.

CJLC: *Professor Murray, did you have a similar experience?*
MM: As Rebecca suggested before, I was simultaneously extremely intense and extremely flaky as a student. I got back from Cambridge where I received an M.Phil. in History on a Kellett grant, and I applied to Ph.D programs in History and English. I got into some of both and started my Ph.D at Berkeley in English and hated it. I left after a year, but I didn't know whether I should do a History Ph.D or start another English Ph.D. I decided to reapply to both types of programs, and I actually could have ended up at Columbia to do History. Instead, I ended up doing English at Yale.

CJLC: *How did both of you eventually end up at Columbia?*
RS: In my case, three years ago, I impetuously launched myself onto the job market because a lot of exciting jobs suddenly opened up, which is unusual in my field. Whereas there will always be a demand for, say, Shakespeare professors, there isn't always a demand for professors of Soviet literature. No university is closing their English department. Lots of universities (misguidedly!) are closing or downsizing their Russian departments. In that particular year there were a lot of jobs, including a tenure-track position at Barnard in the 20th century and a 19th century one at Columbia, and everyone said, "Wow. Bonanza." Everyone in the universe applied for those jobs, and through a circuitous set of circumstances, I got the position at Barnard.
MM: How did I end up here? It's very straightforward. I was in my fifth year at Yale, and decided to apply for jobs. Usually, people at Yale begin applying for jobs in their fifth year, but it takes a couple of years to find one. I only applied to jobs in the New York area because that's where I wanted to be, and there happened to be a job at Columbia.
RS: I think it actually helps to be completely sure you're not going to get the job. I was absolutely certain that I wasn't going to get this job, and I'm sure that's why I got it.
MM: I agree. The Columbia job was actually for 16th century non-dramatic literature, a field slightly different from my own. I was convinced I was going to get a job somewhere else, a job that I didn't really want.

CJLC: *Professor Murray, how did you choose to specialize in 17th century literature?*
MM: Two things: I took Andrew Delbanco's "Foundations of American Literature," one of those famous classes you have to take. It was a great class. The first unit was on 17th century American sermons. I was completely obsessed. American religion...
RS: She was really obsessed.
MM: I was obsessed with Puritans. At the time I was also taking Edward Tayler's class on Renaissance literature, and I remember having this moment where I realized, "These things are happening simultaneously! John Donne wrote sermons!" I realized that what I was grasping for was actually a field.

CJLC: *So there were moments in your undergraduate career, wch you remember clearly and from which you still work?*
MM: Yes, especially for teaching. I still look at my notebook from the course I took with Kathy Eden. There's the inspirational moment, and then there's the gradual self-cannibalizing of your own career.

CJLC: *Is it helpful for you in your approach to teaching that you were both students here?*
MM: Lit Hum is one of the courses where having gone to school here makes a huge difference. Junior faculty are warned that teaching Lit Hum will kick your ass. It is hard, but it helps that I had the experience of taking the class, and then, I have Rebecca's amazing notes from when she taught it.
RS: Having been in Lit Hum makes a huge difference because you understand what the students are getting from the course. You remember what you wanted to get and what it was like. It's incredibly satisfying to teach because it's like taking the course a million times more intensely. You actually learn the things you wanted to learn as an undergraduate, but were not put together enough to learn.

CJLC: *Do you find that you approach teaching Lit Hum a little bit differently than your other classes?*
RS: It's funny because it is different. The whole point of Lit Hum is that no one who teaches it is an expert on every thing, and that's the strength of it. There are some texts you are discovering along with the students, and you never get to just grandstand for an entire year. But actually Lit Hum was the first literature course I taught, and in many ways, it shaped the way I teach literature in general. I have the privilege of being in a relatively small field in which classes are never really bigger than about twenty students. So I can always teach them like Lit Hum. I can always have discussion; I can always run online discussion boards much as I did with my Lit Hum class; I can always try to use the Socratic method and do close readings in class. I'm not trapped in a position where I have to lecture and just deliver information, which I think happens to people in popular fields...
MM: Like me!
RS: Like Molly!

CJLC: *And more generally it seems that your experience as students here would influence the way you teach to Columbia and Barnard students specifically.*
MM: I like Columbia students much better than students at Yale, which is the only other place I've taught. I get what their undergraduate experience is like. I have no idea how it would feel to be an undergraduate at a place where you are coddled and treated with great care. At Yale, the students are just as smart, but the culture of undergraduates at Columbia is one that I like more and feel that I have some sort of sympathy with and understanding of.

CJLC: *How specifically is it different from Yale?*
MM: I think there's something about being in the city, something galvanizing about the general chaos and disinterest. Yale takes very good care of their undergraduates, which I think makes them feel like everything they say matters, and so they don't feel the need to justify what they're saying all the time.
RS: Columbia I think is a really sink or swim environment. And for the students who are able to swim it's incredible – it's survival against the odds. I did okay mostly because I was just so clueless as an undergraduate that I kind of just did things. I fell into Tayler's Shakespeare class and it changed my life. I happened to have this thing for Russian, and so I ended up taking really good classes because the Slavic department was so strong there were no bad classes. But I didn't have the kind of drive that I see now among my better Columbia students. They're doing eighty-five different things at the same time and accomplishing extraordinary things that I never accomplished, in part because of what Molly described as an atmosphere of chaos and disinterest. At Barnard, the students are equally creative, but the chaos there is mitigated by an attentive advising network.

CJLC: *In what other ways do Barnard and Columbia students' experiences differ?*
RS: I think it's this: Columbia students have the Core, which is this giant, very centralized and well-policed body of knowledge that dominates their education for the first two years – but otherwise they notoriously receive very little guidance or supervision in their quest for knowledge. Barnard students, on the other hand, have no Core – they have distribution requirements, but these don't produce anything like a monolithic and replicable body of knowledge, as the Core does; rather, they train students to use their minds in a variety of different ways. So there's no common anchor for their education, like the one the Columbia students have, but on the other hand, Barnard students receive constant guidance while planning and executing their work toward the B.A. degree. They meet twice a semester with a faculty adviser who knows them well and has access to all their records. So that the looser, more "liberal" system of requirements, which might otherwise encourage dilettantism and flailing, operates in the context of a very solid advising structure designed to help students make wise choices. These two approaches produce two quite different kinds of thinkers, and the best kind of situation that I've found is to have both Barnard and Columbia students together in the same class; something about the mix makes the overall intellectual experience better for everyone.

CJLC: *Is the Core a framework from which both of you still work? Has it continued to be useful in your more recent work?*
MM: For me, I do so with less ideological qualms because the Renaissance is built on these terms. So, I'm not imposing some sort of white male-itude on 17th century and 16th century literature when they quote the *Aeneid*. The fact that everybody here takes Lit Hum means that I can teach a lecture class, refer to these classical foundational texts, and everybody has a basic idea of what I'm talking about. It's

extraordinary for teaching the Renaissance. It just means you don't have to do a lot of explanation.

RS: It's a huge boon to me as well, because in Soviet literature, Dante is surprisingly a huge intertext, as are the Gospels. There are problems involved in teaching a course that is stacked with dead white men, and which perpetuates an idea of canonicity not without some political burden, but I actually draw on the Core constantly.

CJLC: *To return to a point you had made about Columbia and Barnard students being different by virtue of being in New York, what were each of your relationships to the city like as students? How is that different now that you are professors?*

RS: I have a membership to the MoMA, not that I have darkened its doors lately or anything...

MM: But that's exactly it. There is a weird way in which there are two competing impulses. One is to be in the city all the time and just to be completely open to everything that's here. And then the other is to remember that we're at a university. We're here in a community, and we want to be here and take classes and dig in. I think it's that process of negotiating those two impulses rather than just being in the city all the time, which makes Columbia people who they are. In other words, it's not NYU.

CJLC: *Has that tension played out for you in a similar way as a professor?*

MM: Yeah, it's definitely an amazing temptation being in the city. The great temptation is still to want to hang out and do non-academic stuff all the time, which is possible. As an undergraduate, I remember going downtown and going to a lot of shows. Maybe I had a lot more energy as an undergraduate than I do now. I told my Lit Hum students that I want them all to bring their books with them when they go do stuff in the city. And then they come and tell me, "Yeah, so I was reading the Gospels in Tompkins Square Park and some weird guy came up and talked to me." [*Laughter*]

RS: Both at once: experiencing and reading. That's really great. I'm going to make my "Imagining the Self" students do that next time I teach the class.

CJLC: *How has Columbia changed since your time here as undergraduates?*

MM: Columbia has changed dramatically. When I came here as an undergraduate, there was still a sense of Columbia's countercultural reputation. Ginsberg went here. There were still kids doing crazy, experimental things. We were proud to be grungy. Since then, I think Columbia has gotten more go-getter and pre-professional in the standard Ivy League-vein. Columbia has also gotten bigger. There used to be 720 students per class. But the whole city has changed as well.

RS: The city wasn't then the selling point it is now. Morningside Heights was full of these greasy-spoon diners and mom-and-pop stores.

MM: There was one Starbucks on 86th Street and we would all go down to it because it was still a novelty. Since then, there has been a collective blandification...

RS: Yes, and a mall-ification of Morningside Heights. We've joined the culture of mediocrity. [*Professor Stanton recommends us to read Curtis White's* The Middle Mind]

CJLC: *What does Columbia's status as a research university mean for your role as a professor?*
MM: Academics at a research university have to be three things: a good researcher, an efficient writer, and a good teacher. The idea is that these three things should work together, but sometimes they actively work against each other. Lit Hum is a good example of the latter because work I do for that class doesn't apply directly to my own research or writings.

CJLC: *Is the tension between teaching and research at all indicative of a changing role for the academy within society more generally?*
MM: The academy has always been separate from society, but it has ideally been seen as something worthy of preserving, something valuable anyway. The problem now is that college is seen entirely as a means of getting ahead. It has become a question of accreditation. This is not what the university was created for. Its value has never been economically quantifiable.

CJLC: *Do you think Columbia takes a particular stance against this logic by upholding, for example, the Core Curriculum?*
MM: The Core is ideological at its basis. It was created in between WWI and WWII with the thought that we're going to end war by way of a classical, liberal arts education. And when that failed, the thought was that we would at least win the Cold War. But, yes, in practical terms I think the Core might derail a few people who would otherwise study something more obviously marketable.
RS: The humanities don't make you more marketable; they make you smarter. It is strange to think of a liberal arts education as a commodity and of grades in terms of money. If you read the inscription on Low Library, it suggests a very different set of values. •

Edited by Noah Block-Harley, Kate Meng Brassel, Gautam Hans, and Ling Tiong

Becoming Unbearable: An Interview with Slavoj Žižek

Conducted by Avi Alpert

Slavoj Žižek is one of the most influential and controversial philosophers and cultural critics writing today. Hailing from Slovenia, he has been called "The giant of Ljubljana," as well as "the Elvis of cultural theory." His theoretical work focuses on bringing Lacanian psychoanalysis together with a Marxist critique of economics and society. He has held visiting positions at Columbia, Princeton, the New School, as well at the Institute of Sociology in Slovenia, and the European Graduate School in Switzerland. He is currently International Director at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at Birbeck College in England. He has published some 50 books (translated into over 20 languages) on subjects including Lacan, 9/11, the Iraq war, Kant and Hegel, Lenin, David Lynch, opera and Christian theology. He has just published what he considers to be one of his most important works, *The Parallax View* (MIT Press, 2006), and he is currently working on a study of Hegel's theology. The CJLC conducted this interview with Žižek over e-mail from December 2005-January 2006.

Columbia Journal of Literary Criticism: *Your most recent work addresses the question of fundamentalism as a philosophical issue. How do you feel fundamentalism, and belief more generally, functions in the modern day?*

Slavoj Žižek: A fundamentalist does not believe; he *knows* it directly. To put it in another way, both liberal-skeptical cynicism and fundamentalism thus share a basic underlying feature: the loss of the ability to believe in the proper sense of the term. For both of them, religious statements are quasi-empirical statements of direct knowledge: fundamentalists accept them as such, while skeptical cynics mock them. What is unthinkable for them is the "absurd" act of *decision* which installs every authentic belief, a decision which cannot be grounded in the chain of "reasons," in positive

knowledge. No wonder then that religious fundamentalists are among the most passionate digital hackers, and always prone to combine their religion with the latest results of sciences: for them, religious statements and scientific statements belong to the same modality of positive knowledge. The occurrence of the term "science" in the very name of some of the fundamentalist sects (Christian Science, Scientology) is not just an obscene joke, but signals this reduction of belief to positive knowledge ... One is thus compelled to draw the paradoxical conclusion: in the opposition between traditional secular humanists and religious fundamentalists, it is the humanists who stand for belief, while fundamentalists stand for knowledge – in short, the true danger of fundamentalism does not reside in the fact that it poses a threat to secular scientific knowledge, but in the fact that it poses a threat to authentic belief itself.

CJLC: *In other recent work you've begun to address the theological implications of Hegel's thought, in particular in his opposition to Kant. How does Hegel speak to this problem of "authentic belief"?*

SŽ: It may seem that the opposition of Kant and Hegel is ultimately the one between materialism and idealism: Kant insists on a minimum of materialism (the independence of reality with regard to notional determinations), while Hegel totally dissolves reality in its notional determinations. However, Hegel's true point lies elsewhere: it involves a much more radical materialist claim that a complete notional determination of an entity, to which one would only have to add being in order to arrive at its existence, is in itself an empty abstract possibility. The lack of (a certain mode of) being is always also an inherent lack of some notional determination – for a thing to exist as part of opaque material reality, a whole set of notional conditions-determinations have to be met (and other determinations to lack). With regard to 100 thalers (or any other empirical object), this means that their notional determination is abstract, which is why they posses an opaque empirical being and not full actuality. So when Kant draws a parallel between God and 100 thalers, one should ask a simple and naive question: but does he *really* possess a (fully developed) *concept* of God?

This brings us to the true finesse of Hegel's argumentation which is directed in both ways, against Kant as well as against Anselm's classic version of the ontological proof of God. Hegel's argument against Anselm's proof is not that it is too conceptual, but that it is not conceptual enough: Anselm does not develop the concept of God, he just refers to it as the sum of all perfections which, as such, is precisely beyond the comprehension of our finite human mind – Anselm merely presupposes God as an impenetrable reality beyond our comprehension (i.e., outside the notional domain); his God is precisely not concept, but a purely presupposed pre- or non-conceptual reality. Along the same lines, albeit in the opposite sense, one should mention the irony that Kant talks about thalers, i.e., *money*, whose existence *as money* is not objective, but depends on notional determinations. Money is precisely an object whose status depends on how we think about it: if people no longer treat this piece of metal as money, if they no longer believe in it as money, it no longer is money.

CJLC: *Belief then becomes a question of a certain lack of objectivity, a certain acceptance of incompleteness?*
SŽ: Yes. With regard to material reality, the ontological proof of God's existence should thus be turned around: the existence of material reality bears witness to the fact that the Notion is not fully actualized. Things materially exist not when they meet certain notional requirements, but when they *fail* to meet them – material reality is as such a sign of imperfection. With regard to truth, this means that, for Hegel, the truth of a proposition is inherently notional, determined by the immanent notional content, not a matter of comparison between notion and reality. In Lacanian terms, there is a *pas-tout* (non-All) of truth. It may sound strange to evoke Hegel apropos non-All: is Hegel not the philosopher of All *par excellence*? However, the Hegelian truth is precisely without external limitation/exception that would serve as its measure-standard, which is why its criterion is absolutely immanent: one compares a statement with itself, with its own process of enunciation.

CJLC: *There is a long-standing Western philosophical tradition that traces our understanding of the ontology of God to the understanding of our own being. In other words, theories of theology and theorizations of the subject often intertwine. Is that a position you share?*
SŽ: In some ways, yes. Let us look at digital media. When we want to simulate reality within an artificial (virtual, digital) medium, we do not have to go to the end: we just have to reproduce features which make the image "realistic" for the spectator's/participant's point of view. Say, if there is a house in the background, we do not have to construct through program the house's entire interior, since we expect that the participant will not want to enter the house; or, the construction of a virtual person in this space can be limited to his exterior – no need to bother with inner organs, bones, etc. We just need to install a program which will promptly fill in this gap if the participant's activity will necessitate it (say, if he will cut with a knife deep into the virtual person's body).

The idea here is that the quantum indeterminacy which we encounter when we inquire into the tiniest components of our universe is to be read in exactly the same way, as a feature of the limited resolution of our simulated world, i.e., as the sign of the ontological incompleteness of (what we experience as) reality itself. The big dilemma here is: how are we to read this fact? As a sign that we already live in a simulated universe, or as a direct proof of the ontological incompleteness of reality itself? In the first case, the ontological incompleteness is transposed into an epistemological one, i.e., the incompleteness is perceived as the effect of the fact that another (secret, but fully real) agency constructed our reality as a simulated universe. The truly difficult thing is to accept the ontological incompleteness of reality itself.

And it is only within such an incompleteness that the notion (and actuality) of the Self is thinkable. That is to say, what is Self? When we see a table, we accept that there is nothing behind its components, no secret X that stands for the core of its identity beyond and independently of all its properties, while, when dealing with a Self, we spontaneously assume that the Self is not simply a combination of its prop-

erties and of things that happens to and in it – there has to be some X beneath all this wealth that gives the Self its uniqueness ... The problem is that, after we abstract all determinate qualities from the Self, what remains is just plain nothing, a void. So we should accept that our Self is, like a table, nothing but the network of its properties, of its contents – as Nietzsche put it, there is no mysterious doer behind the multitude of deeds. There is, however, one option that this account leaves out of consideration: what if our Self is *this void itself*, what if its core is not some positive content, but the very "self-relating negativity" (Hegel), the ability to negate every determinate content?

CJLC: *In some ways this sounds close to a Buddhist theory of the subject, and, moreover, as if you are using science to prove Hegel just as you claim religious sects use science to prove their philosophy.*
SŽ: No. In fact, precisely this is why of all those who try to demonstrate some deeper affinity between, for example, Heidegger and Oriental thought, mostly Buddhism, miss the point. When Heidegger speaks about the "appropriating event *Ereignis*," he thereby introduces a dimension which is missing in Buddhism: that of the fundamental historicity of Being. Although the (wrongly) so-called "Buddhist ontology" desubstantializes reality into a pure flow of singular events, what it cannot think is the "eventuality" of the Void of Being itself.

The goal of Buddhism is to enable a man to achieve Enlightenment through "traversing" the illusion of the Self and rejoining the Void. What is unthinkable within this space is Heidegger's notion of the human being as *Da-Sein*, as the "being-there" of the Being itself, as the site of the event-arrival of Being, so that it is Being itself that "needs" *Dasein* – with the disappearance of *Dasein*, there is also no Being, no place where Being can, precisely, take place. Can one imagine a Buddhist claiming that the Void *sunyata* itself needs humans as the site of its arrival? One can, but in a conditional way which totally differs from Heidegger's: in the sense that, of all sentient beings, only humans are able to achieve Enlightenment and thus break the circle of suffering.

CJLC: *This seems like a rather reductive and superficial look at Buddhism...*
SŽ: Well, I am only speaking of "Western Buddhism." But, if we go further, there is still this gap. Perhaps the clearest indication of the gap that separates Christianity from Buddhism is the difference in their respective triads. In its history, each of them divided itself into three main strands; in the case of Christianity, it is, of course, the triad of Orthodoxy-Catholicism-Protestantism, which neatly fits the logic of Universal-Particular-Individual. In the case of Buddhism, on the contrary, we get a case of what, in Hegel, occurs as the "downward synthesis," in which the third term, which mediates between the opposition of the first two, does it in a disappointing-regressive way ... The main split of Buddhism is the one between Hinayana ("the small wheel") and Mahayana ("the great wheel"). The first tries to maintain fidelity to Buddha's teaching, focusing on the individual's effort to get rid of the illusion of

the Self and attain Enlightenment. The second one shifts the accent onto compassion with others: its central figure is Bodhisattva, the individual who, after achieving Enlightenment, decides, out of compassion, to return to the world and its material illusions in order to help others to achieve Enlightenment, i.e., to work for the end of suffering of all sentient beings. The split is here irreducible: working for one's own Enlightenment reasserts the centrality of the Self in the very striving for its overcoming, while the "great wheel" way out of this predicament repeats the deadlock in a displaced way: egotism is overcome, but the price is that universal Enlightenment itself turns into an object of the instrumental activity of the Self. So how to bring these two orientations together? The third big school, Vajrayana, which predominates in Tibet and Mongolia, is clearly regressive, a reinscription of Buddhism into traditional ritualistic and magic practices: the opposition between Self and others is overcome, but through its "reification" in ritualized practices which are indifferent to this distinction. It is an interesting fact of historical dialectic that Buddhism, which originally dispensed with all institutional ritual and focused solely on the individual's enlightenment and end of suffering, ended up clinging to the most firmly entrenched institutional hierarchic frame...

CJLC: *But doesn't it seem strange to talk about Buddhism's failure to live up to its philosophy, especially in the context of the politics of Martin Heidegger?*
SŽ: That is a very complicated topic. There are two of Heidegger's seminars which clearly disturb the official picture of Heidegger who only externally accommodated himself to the Nazi regime in order to save whatever could be saved of the university's autonomy: *Ueber Wesen und Begriff von Natur, Geschichte und Staat* (*On the Essence and Notion of Nature, History, and State*, Winter 1933-34, protocol conserved in Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach am Neckar); *Hegel, ueber den Staat* (*Hegel, on the State*, Winter 1934-35, protocol also conserved in DLA). Significantly, the first of the two is not included in the official *Gesamtausgabe* by Klostermann Verlag, which renders problematic its designation as "complete edition." These two seminars are the closest one can get to the proverbial smoking gun, since they enact precisely what, according to the official Heideggerian *doxa*, did not, could not, and should not have taken place: the full-pledged support of Nazism formulated and grounded in Heidegger's innermost philosophical project.

CJLC: *What problem does this thus pose for Heidegger's project?*
SŽ: The question is: does, in Heideggerian terms, the concept of trauma not designate precisely the unthinkable point at which an ontic intrusion gets so excessively powerful that it shatters the very ontological horizon which provides the coordinates within which reality is disclosed to us? This is why a traumatic encounter entails a "loss of reality" which has to be understood in the strong philosophical sense of the loss of ontological horizon—in trauma, we are momentarily exposed to the "raw" ontic thing not yet covered/screened by the ontological horizon.

This limitation of Heidegger – his inability to think of traumatic encounters – has

a series of philosophical and ethico-political consequences. Philosophically, it follows from Heidegger's notion of historical destiny which delivers different horizons of the disclosure of being, destiny which cannot and should not be in any way influenced by or dependent on ontic occurrences. Ethico-politically, it accounts for Heidegger's (not simply ethical, but properly ontological) indifference towards holocaust, its leveling to just another case of the technological disposal of life. To acknowledge holocaust's extraordinary/exceptional status would equal recognizing in it a trauma that shatters the very ontological coordinates of being.

CJLC: *Does this limitation render Heidegger irrelevant for how we act in the modern world?*
SŽ: No. Although Heidegger's oversensitivity to morality can be easily accounted for as an implicit admission of his own ethically repulsive behaviour and lack of elementary ethical attitudes, his opponent's insistence on these same features of Heidegger as a person is also false – as if, by demonstrating Heidegger's personal lack of elementary ethical standards, one can avoid the task of confronting the issues posed by Heidegger's thought.

When, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes the ex-static structure of *Da-sein*'s temporality as the circular movement which goes from future through the past to the present, it is not enough to understand this as a movement in which I, starting from the future (the possibilities opened to me, my projects, etc.), go back to the past (analyze the texture of the historical situation into which I was "thrown," in which I find myself), and, from it, engage in my present in order to realize my projects. When Heidegger characterizes future itself as "*gewesene* (having-been)" or, more precisely, something that "*gewesende* (is as having-been)", he locates future itself in the past – not in the sense that we live in a closed universe in which every future possibility is already contained in the past, so that we can only repeat, realize what already is there in the inherited texture – but in the much more radical sense of the "openness" of the past itself. The past itself is not simply "what there was," it contains hidden, non-realized potentials, and the authentic future is the repetition/retrieval of this past, not of the past as it was, but of that in the past which the past itself, in its reality, betrayed, stifled, failed to realize. It is in this sense that one should today "repeat Lenin": choosing Lenin as one's hero not in order to follow him and do the same today, but to repeat/retrieve him in the precise sense of bringing out the non-realized potentials of Leninism.

CJLC: *We seem to be returning to the question of politics and bringing out the potential of political forms. While the recent Paris suburb riots (in Fall 2005) have been viewed cautiously, some wonder if they point towards some sort of shift in political scale, an increasing refusal to accept the terms of the modern world. Do you find any potential in these outbursts?*
SŽ: The true stakes of the Paris outbursts were not in any kind of concrete social-economic protest; they were even less any kind of the assertion of Islamic fundamentalism ... They rather stand for a direct effort to simply gain *visibility*: a social group which, although composed of French citizens, experienced itself as excluded

from the political and social space, and wanted to render their presence palpable to the general public: if you want it or not, we are here, no matter how much you pretend not to see us ... Commentators failed to note the crucial fact that the protesters did not claim for themselves any special status of a (religious or ethnic) community who strives for its self-enclosed way of life; on the contrary, their main premise was that they want to be and *are* French citizens, but are not fully recognized as such ... They were neither offering a solution nor constituting a movement for providing a solution; their aim was, on the contrary, to create a problem, to signal that they are a problem that cannot any longer be ignored. This is why violence was necessary: if they were to organize a non-violent march, all they would get would be a small note on the bottom of a page ... There is no potential in these outbursts for the rise of a properly political agent – all that one can hope is that they will survive in some kind of cultural registration, like the rise of a new suburban punk culture ...

Analysts were searching for the meaning behind the violence, missing the obvious, i.e., that, as Marshall McLuhan would have put it, the medium itself was the message: we were dealing with the case of what, long ago, Roman Jakobson called "phatic communication," in which the meaning of the act is the act of communication as such, establishing a link, creating the visibility of the speaker. One is even tempted to speculate on how a Fascist gesture *a la* Hitler would satisfy the protesters: what one should not forget is that Hitler's (Fascism's in general) first pacifying gesture is to guarantee to each social group that their specific place within the social edifice and thus their dignity are recognized, that they should be proud of their contribution to the smooth functioning of the social Whole, and thus to counteract the threat of those who experience themselves as the "part of no-part." This, perhaps, was the hidden meaning of the President Chirac's proposition that the crisis was effectively "*une crise du sens*" ("a crisis of sense")... (This, of course, in no way implies that the protests were "proto-Fascist": the point is just that Fascism is ultimately always a reaction to a potential emancipatory event, a "failed revolution.")

CJLC: *What sort of politics, then, in the modern age, might create something other than a "failed revolution"?*

SŽ: In every authentic revolutionary explosion, there is an element of "pure" violence, i.e., an authentic political revolution cannot be measured by the standard of servicing the goods (to what extent "life got better for the majority" afterwards) – it is a goal-in-itself, an act which changes the very standards of what "good life" is, and a different (higher, eventually) standard of living is a by-product of a revolutionary process, not its goal.

Usually, revolutionary violence is defended by way of evoking proverb platitudes like "you cannot make an omelet without breaking some eggs" – a "wisdom" which, of course, can easily be rendered problematic through boring "ethical" considerations about how even the noblest goals cannot justify murderous means to achieve them. Against such compromising attitudes, one should directly admit revolutionary violence as a liberating end-in-itself, so that the proverb should rather be turned

around: "You cannot break the eggs (and what is revolutionary politics if not an activity in the course of which many eggs are broken), especially if you are doing it in big heat (of a revolutionary passion), without making some omelets!" ...

This, of course, in no way implies that we should dismiss violence as such. Violence is needed – but *which* violence? There is violence and violence: there are violent *passages a l'acte* which merely bear witness to the agent's impotence; there is a violence the true aim of which is to prevent that something will effectively change – in a Fascist display of violence, something spectacular should happen all the time so that, precisely, nothing would really happen; and there is the violent act of effectively changing the basic coordinates of a constellation. In order for the last kind of violence to take place, this very place should be opened up through a gesture which is thoroughly violent in its impassive refusal itself, through a gesture of pure withdrawal in which, to quote Mallarme, *rien n'aura eu lieu que le lieu*, nothing takes place but the place itself.

And this brings us to Melville's Bartleby. His "I would prefer not to" is to be taken literally: it says "I would prefer not to" and not "I don't prefer (or care) to do it." We are thereby back at Kant's distinction between negative and infinite judgment. In his refusal of the Master's order, Bartleby does not negate the predicate. He rather affirms a non-predicate: what he says is not that he doesn't want to do it; he says that he prefers (wants) not to do it. This is how we pass from the politics of "resistance" or "protestation" which parasitizes upon what it negates, to a politics which opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position and its negation. We can imagine the varieties of such a gesture in today's public space: not only the obvious "There are great changes for a new career here! Join us!" – "I would prefer not to"; but also "Discover the depth of your true self, find inner peace!" – "I would prefer not to"; or "Are you aware how our environment is endangered! Do something for ecology!" – "I would prefer not to"; or "What about all the racial and sexual injustices that we witness all around us? Isn't it time to do more?" – "I would prefer not to." This is the gesture of subtraction at its purest, the reduction of all qualitative differences to a purely formal minimal difference.

There is no violent quality in it; violence pertains to its very immobile, inert, insistent, impassive being. Bartleby couldn't even hurt a fly – that's what makes his presence so unbearable.

CJLC: So we must all then become so unbearable?
SŽ: Precisely. •

Edited by Jason Allegrante, Ling Tiong, and Patrick Jarenwattananon

The Consolation of Philosophy: An Interview with Elaine Scarry

Conducted by Noah Block-Harley

Elaine Scarry is the Walter M. Cabot Professor of Aesthetics and the General Theory of Value at Harvard University. Previously, she was the William T. Fitts, Jr., Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania. Her work engages fields as diverse as literary criticism and politics, as well as aesthetic and moral philosophy, and has been described as "powerful," "inspiring," "extraordinary," and "heroically truthful." In particular, she has been lauded for her ability to render difficult concepts accessible with her clear, incisive analyses. She is the author of *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999); *Dreaming by the Book* (1999); *Resisting Representation* (1994) and *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985), and edited *Memory, Brain, and Belief* (2002) and *Literature and the Body* (1988). In 2000, she won the Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism for *Dreaming by the Book*. She is currently working on a project focusing on nuclear weapons and the social contract. The CJLC spoke to her over the phone in April.

Columbia Journal of Literary Criticism: *To begin with your most recent project,* On Beauty*: what did you intend for the book's reception? Did you write the book for a specific audience?*

Elaine Scarry: That's an interesting question; no one has posed it in that way before. The book *On Beauty* really was intended as an intervention in the world, within the very concrete context of universities. The book also addressed a very concrete problem which was the inaudibility of aesthetic categories and the word "beauty." As I say in the book, universities are still full of beautiful objects, such as books, poems, plays, and so forth. But they weren't being talked about at all; there was even a taboo about talking about them. I meant to address that problem and what I saw as the terrible costs of that deprivation for education. When I was writing the book

I was really thinking just of the educational context of the university, but when it came out it became clear to me that there were other institutions which had also suffered that same erasure of aesthetic categories. When I was invited to talk at museums or architectural schools, people would very candidly talk about the sense they had that beauty had been utterly taboo in their respective circles. Similarly, I had thought of this problem in the context of the United States, and quickly learned that people from other countries would say that they also felt they had been suffering from the same taboo.

CJLC: *Much of* On Beauty*, but also your previous work, such as* The Body in Pain*, focuses on a concrete and prolonged description of certain experiences you hold to be common. Is it that commonality which prompted you to write about these experiences?*
ES: It's a very provoking way of saying it. In the case of *The Body in Pain*, it seemed to me that the simple fact of pain itself was not perceived or articulated, and that certain problems followed from that. If one saw that, then one had the obligation to try and say what the truth of the matter was. In the case of *On Beauty* it was prompted by the idea that beauty is all around us, it is in front of us, so we should talk about it. The fact of the matter is that if universities, museums, and other groups vacate the field, then the only people left talking about beauty are the advertisers, against whom I have nothing, but in isolation would give an incredibly misleading account of beauty. Advertising gives the impression that the only thing to do when you see something beautiful is to buy it, to own it, to become it. That is far afield from the traditional call to beauty, from Plato onwards, for whom it was very much the call to educate oneself, to attend to the injuries of the world. It seemed crucial to say that. It's funny – it turned out to be a very good thing to write *On Beauty*. Originally I thought the way to do this was by teaching a seminar, but when I had the chance to write up a series of extended lectures, it reached so many more people, fantastically more people than if I had simply taught the material.

CJLC: *Tolstoy once asked whether the point of philosophy and literature is to recover and recall truths about ourselves which we had merely forgotten long ago. Is this your aim in reflecting on what you hold to be a set of common experiences?*
ES: I would agree with Tolstoy. If you try to articulate something that is intuitively right (whether someone agrees is a different question), the feeling is that you had to have known it already. I often do feel as though I'm saying what is straightforwardly the case, as though I'm merely putting a name to what is in front of our eyes. I remember a doctor from the Hastings Institute for Ethics and Medicine explaining his thoughts at witnessing a radically new way of describing and solving a specific medical problem. He said that a second after hearing the explanation it was as if he had always known that specific explanation to be true, that it had been right in front of his eyes the entire time. So often, once something is recognized as right, it becomes obvious.

CJLC: *And then we become cynical and begin to take those truths for granted...*
ES: Right. And I am no enemy of the obvious, as Dante says.

CJLC: *What is important to you in writing? In* The Body in Pain *there is an explicit renunciation of technical terms – is the task to make large and abstract topics such as pain or beauty somewhat more approachable and graspable?*
ES: Yes – I think they have a vocabulary inside themselves. The way I would think of it is that the categories come from inside the subject itself. Now, we have to differentiate here between the case of beauty and the case of pain. In the case of beauty, the vocabulary for understanding what happens to us when we are in the presence of something or someone beautiful is present for us in wonderful writers. In the case of pain, it is embedded inside the phenomenon of pain itself insofar as I could comprehend what was at stake from reading torture documents.

To take the account of pain in the chapter on torture as an example, the discussion was necessitated by the subject itself. It insisted that it be described in that language. I suppose the big problem for me in writing is getting the thing that is in my head to be exactly right on paper, rather than thinking about what's there on paper and what's in the mind of the next person. Traditionally, fiction writers or poets have talked about this in terms of the muse and the many different forms which the muse can take. The muse in this case is not the listener, but the one who dictates, and the writer is merely trying to get the words right.

CJLC: *In thinking more about your muse, or your writing as a creative act, it seems to both reflect on and bear a strong relation to your topic of choice. The quality and style of writing in* On Beauty*, for example, is a case in point for your more general argument about beauty itself. Similarly, a central point for* The Body in Pain *is the very lack of writing about pain, a problem which your writing addresses. You seem to be working through a relationship between form and content.*
ES: One thing I often talk about in the courses I teach is the importance of form re-enacting content. In Plato's *Theaetetus*, he argues that what differentiates truth from opinion is precisely the ability of the content to be re-enacted by the form; that there is a way to articulate it so that the two are consonant. You can see this with Plato in a number of different dialogues. I spent almost a year of my life inside Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, at the end of which he proposes a model of four different kinds of cognition: sensation, imagination, reason, and insight. He has a very clear idea of what types of mental objects each of those forms take, and what kind of prose or poetic form would accommodate each. He then writes the *Consolation of Philosophy* according to the poetic forms which he outlines. This also shows up in more recent writers, as in John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*. I thought that maybe by attending to that idea in other writers, an infinitesimally tiny fraction would become a part of what I write. There would at least be the aspiration in my writing for the form to approach the content.

CJLC: *Do you feel drawn to writing? Do you feel an urge to write?*
ES: I feel the same feelings that everyone talks about, of both loving it and also finding it incredibly difficult. I think it was John Updike who talked about coming down each morning to a sunburst of yellow paper. I guess he must write on yellow-lined pads. It seemed extraordinary to me that it could be a feeling of radiant joy. I often marvel at people who have daily or weekly deadlines. I can't imagine writing under that kind of immediate demand.

CJLC: *V.S. Naipaul once said that he writes 300 words a day.*
ES: That's amazing. Towards the end of *The Body in Pain*, after the torture chapter, I would demand of myself that I write two pages each day. Paul Fussell once told me that he wakes up in the morning and won't stop until he has written five pages – whether he finishes at midnight or at 11 in the morning. That certainly worked for me – I would usually be done by 1 in the afternoon, and I felt as though I had climbed a mountain. It would take me the rest of the day to recuperate. Actually, I have often said to other people that that sort of routine is a better way of writing than waiting for inspiration.

CJLC: *You had mentioned that* On Beauty *came out of a lecture series, and you had also mentioned a graduate course you teach on beauty. How do teaching and writing work together?*
ES: That's a good question. For me they are not automatically compatible by any means. For certain people they are – Robert Nozick said to me that he almost never repeated a course, and his courses almost always became books. For me they don't necessarily dovetail. I suppose that's why I'm both glad and surprised that I did both the written and the course version of *On Beauty*. In a course one does so much more – we have a week per text. For example, in my course we actually do a cluster of four weeks, in which we concentrate on beauty in gods, gardens, people, and poems. We really have a chance to go in depth for each of those categories.

Currently, I'm teaching a course on "Philosophy, Literature, and the Problem of Consent." In a way the course is about this thing that I've been writing a book on forever – war and the social contract. But the book is about something very specific: nuclear weapons and the fact that the arrangements we have for them in this country are a desecration of the social contract and our democratic constitution.

Firstly, I don't make as overtly political arguments in class as I do in the book. Secondly, the course is less focused by virtue of the breadth of texts. In class we inhabit a text specifically in order to explore a much more rich, elaborate set of avenues. In teaching a book I focus on one task, towards which everything is directed. There is a section in the course explicitly called "Consent and War Deliberations" during which we discuss very specifically the nuclear weapons problem. But for the most part we're inside Sophocles, the *Iliad*, Thucydides, or the ratification debates of the Constitution. A number of courses I have taught and continue to teach have not been related to my writing – particularly my lecture classes.

CJLC: *We've spoken about the ways you intend for your work to interact with and intervene in the world, and both your subject matters and your language attest to a focus which extends beyond strictly academic circles. What is your role as an academic within society? Is it a question of mediation?*

ES: No, I wouldn't have thought of myself as mediator. That doesn't quite fit my own impression. I think of my language as coming directly out of the topics about which I'm speaking. I don't feel I'm translating out of the academy. And I don't know what to think about the university's relationship to the world right now.

In my view, the outside world tends to make excessively negative statements about the university. On one level, I don't think that's how people really feel. For example, parents and their children do everything possible to get into universities, even to expensive universities. Nationally, we put a lot of resources into the maintenance and development of universities and colleges.

I have also noticed that companies – Apple, for example – often organize their corporate headquarters as "campuses." I think there's probably a higher regard for and a higher trust in universities than the media sometimes seems to reflect. I remember once reading an article in which a right-wing and left-wing politician were debating the future of the university. The politician on the right actually said that the right had already won because the university was already held in disregard. Surely, then, there are specific interests at stake in portraying the university as an old, useless, worn-out place. Whether that view is shared generally I am not sure.

CJLC: *What do you think we have to learn from literature specifically, and the humanities more generally. What does the experience of beauty teach us? If there were a class on the experience of beauty co-taught by a neuroscientist and an English professor, what would literature's role be?*

ES: The role of literature is huge. I've actually taught a course similar to the one you are describing – it was a course with a cognitive scientist on memory and imagination. In that specific case, the neuroscientists had more to say, as we were discussing the specific operations involved in memory. But even those neuroscientists would say that there is a tremendous difference between the type of pictures by which their explanations were prompted and for which they could account, and the pictures Proust or Homer asks us to imagine. These images require athletic feats of the mind.

I read about neuroscience with fascination and also really believe it will have wonderful revelations. But with a subject like beauty or imagination, we have these writers who both enact for and act on us, writers that actually conscript us into imagining in certain ways. It would take a long time before neuroscience could provide an account for what happens when I read about Achilles' rage, for example. Even then, what would I do with that account?

That imagining, moreover, is social. In my seminars, I, like many people, ask my students to submit a response paper every couple of weeks, so that everyone gets the benefits of everyoneyes else's receptions. They are completely individual reac-

tions, but they are also translatable to others. There is almost not enough mental power for an individual to enact every line of a poem or novel. By working on it together, you at least have a fighting chance. •

Edited by Noah Block-Harley, Kate Meng Brassel, Gautam Hans, and Ling Tiong

This issue of the Columbia Journal of Literary Criticism has been sponsored in part by the Columbia University Department of English and Comparative Literature and by the Columbia University Arts Initiative. The CUAI Support Fund is made possible through a generous gift from David and Susie Sainsbury.

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