

## HOW DO YOU READ A BOOK, PART II

“—a pretty story! is a man to follow rules—or rules to follow him?”

—Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*

“It is false that any representation is mistaken for reality; that any dramattick fable in its materiality was ever credible, or, for a single moment, was ever credited. . . . The truth is, that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from first to last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players.

—Samuel Johnson, “Preface to Shakespeare”

And there you are. My old paper ends, granting its last word not to Ian Watt but to the great, towering, common-sense genius of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Samuel Johnson. I do think it’s more exact to say the paper ends rather than concludes, since its central and paradoxical question remains—as every paradox must—unanswered. And here it is: Where does what’s real and meaningful in a work of art lie? Does it lie in whatever illusion (of “reality” or of anything else) a work is able to create, evoke or—conceivably—copy? Or does it lie *in* the artwork itself? That is, does it lie in the very artifact itself whose existence has made possible, created, or brought forth meaning?

One more way: Is meaning in the *content*, or is it *in* the art object? Remember: without the art object, there’d be no meaning.



So, like any paradox, it’s unanswerable. Well and good. And yet, after a person has read my old paper about Watt, Richardson, Sterne, Fielding, and Johnson—after that, person at least knows a lot more *about* the paradox than before, isn’t it so?

In the headnote to this “Ideas” section of my website, I wrote that “Today, if asked what’s ‘real’ in, say, a novel, almost everyone would be likely to say that it’s the ‘story,’ or perhaps that it’s the ‘characters.’” Age of Simplification or not, readers have different tastes and see things in different ways—sometime to an author’s sorrow. Back in 1927—far indeed before the Age of Simplification—E. M. Forster took up this question in what has always seemed to me a particularly charming way. “We shall all agree that the fundamental aspect of the novel is its story-telling aspect, but we shall voice our assent in different tones, and it is on the precise tone of voice we employ now that our subsequent conclusions will depend.” He goes on:

Let us listen to three voices. If you ask one type of man, “What does a novel do?” he will reply placidly: “Well—I don’t know—it seems a funny sort of question to ask—a novel’s a novel—well, I don’t know—I suppose it kind of tells a story, so to speak.” He is quite good-tempered and vague, and probably driving a motor-bus at the same time and paying no more attention to literature than it merits. Another man, whom I visualize as on a golf-course, will be aggressive and brisk. He will reply: “What does a novel do? Why, tell a story, of course, and I’ve no use for it if it didn’t. I like a story. Very bad taste on my part, no doubt, but I like a story. You can take your art, you can take your literature, you can take your music, but give me a good story. And I like a story to be a story, mind, and my wife’s the same.” And a third man says in a sort of drooping regretful voice, “Yes—oh, dear, yes—the novel tells a story.” I respect and admire the first speaker. I detest and fear the second. And the third is myself. Yes—oh, dear, yes—the novel tells a story. That is the fundamental aspect without which it could not exist. That is the highest factor common to all novels, and I wish that it was not so, that it could be something different—melody, or perception of the truth, not this low atavistic form.<sup>1</sup>

Now, in our present Age of Simplification and *seventy-nine years* after Forster’s hypothetical query, which of his three gentlemen (none are women, notably) would be the dominate type in book-buying, publishing, the arts in general? It’s quite possible that today’s dominant type would be one not even considered by, or imaginable to, Forster—a self-help or ten-steps kind of person, or a chick-lit packager like the *Harvard* sophomore Kaava Viswanathan, disputed author of *How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild and Got a Life*. But if we restrict our own query only to types of people who are at least putatively adult, and only to novels (no self-help or Oprah-style emotional-analysis books or fraudulent best-selling non-fiction like *A Million Tiny Pieces*)—well, what then?

It’s obvious, isn’t it? Certainly it would *have* to be the middle guy, the guy of whom Forster says, “I detest and fear” him, the smug and self-satisfied guy, the one with the powerful sense of his own rights—including his proudly non-intellectual or “dumb rights.” Readers of *A Nation Gone Blind* will know this fellow. And they’ll also know that he doesn’t *have* to be smug and pugnacious and a rights-bully to remain himself—or, for that matter, *herself*. Anybody who feels as he feels, whether truculent in the expression of that feeling or not, is most likely to be a member of that type of Age of Simplification novel-readers who (whether diminishing in overall numbers or not) comprise the obviously dominant part.

There’s more to it than just this, since—and I write these words with full awareness of their heavy irony—the Age of Simplification is a complicated thing. On which, more in a moment, but let’s take a look, first, at an interesting and concrete example of the specific subject—novel reading—that we’re talking about.

When my second novel, *I Am Zoë Handke*, came out in 1992, it got a pair of pre-publication reviews that now, these fourteen years later, are more interesting than ever in light of our subject—that is, what is it that’s real or meaningful in a book, or, specifically, in a novel.

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<sup>1</sup> *Aspects of the Novel* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1954), pp. 25-26.

One of the reviews was from *Publisher's Weekly*, and here it is:

"I was born into my mother's madness," observes Zoë Handke, nearing 40, in Larsen's charged and introspective study of a dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship. Zoë staves off emotional collapse by continually sifting images of childhood events and personalities that molded her. Often, young Zoë felt dangerously close to her physically abusive mother ("I was a mirror. My mother wanted me broken"), who was given to rageful outbursts and fabrications, and seemed to detest her daughter's very existence. Zoë's father, a mechanic from Missouri, was a shadowy, ineffectual figure in this working-class Illinois family. At college in Minnesota, Zoë endured self-punishing episodes of blindness and deafness—expressions of the terrible guilt her mother instilled in her. How she regains her faculties, marries and has children of her own is conveyed in extended reflective sections of almost shattering intensity. In a remarkable performance, Larsen (*An American Memory*) magically unravels a family's system of denial, reward, blame and myth. (Copyright 1991 Cahners Business Information, Inc.)

I'm sure it can be understood easily enough that I was pleased with the review—in fact, greatly pleased. Constrained by a length of 150 words or so, its writer, wasting no time, went straight to the novel's central situation or theme—the theme of Zoë-and-her-mother—then managed most capably indeed to do two things at once for the remainder of the review: that is, to provide an obligatory synopsis (what's the book *about*?) and at the same time, without losing a beat, to *evaluate* the book. This is an extraordinarily difficult genre, the short pre-publication review; over eighteen years or so, I myself wrote in the neighborhood of five or six hundred of them, and I thought of them as the sonnets of book reviewing, though possibly the haiku would have been more accurate.

In any case, I know from the inside that the reviewer who got assigned Zoë was, or is, a very good one. He or she wrote in a tapestry-like way, deftly interweaving story-background with critical judgment by choosing and then unobtrusively injecting adjectives ("charged," "introspective") that describe not *just* story but also style, manner, and tone. Knowing that to reveal this book's ending will do no harm and perhaps even good, there's no coy holding back of the fact that Zoë survives, though only after "punishing episodes" having to do with "terrible guilt." And then, most rewarding of all—to the book's author, that is—there come at the end a descriptive phrase ("extended reflective sections") followed immediately by three evaluative ones that might cause said author to dance on a chair ("almost shattering intensity," "a remarkable performance," "magically unravels").

So there you are: not only a *positive* review, but an excellent one—deft, concise, efficient, confident of itself *and* of its own internal logic, and at home with its sense of the book and with its feeling *toward* the book.

Now, however, comes something quite different, a review from *Library Journal*. I remember first reading it on the train going to Washington, D.C., a memory-fragment of interest, I'm sure, to no one else in the universe except me. That having been said, here's the review:

Although Larsen's first novel, *An American Memory*, won the first Heartland Prize in 1988, this first-person account of Zoë and her relationship with her family is disappointing. Although the static prose is more collage than narrative, the reader is evidently supposed to be drawn on by the mysterious, powerful language and such self-important, self-absorbed declarations as "My mother was doomed. Therefore I was doomed with her." Such moments create a spurious tension, tricking the reader into believing that something is going to happen when, in fact, the story is a collection of memories pasted together to form a curiously unsatisfying whole. Larsen fails to make us care about the ultrasensitive Zoë. We recognize her as being somehow ersatz, like artificially flavored candy—even though it tastes like strawberry and it's good, you know it's not the real thing. Linda L. Rome, Geauga Cty. P. L., Middlefield, Ohio. (Copyright 1992 Cahners Business Information, Inc.)

There it was. The minute I read *this* review, it was absolutely clear to me that *Zoë* was charted toward very rough waters indeed.



And so it was. In my own view—then *and* now—*Zoë* was a superior book to *An American Memory*. It was more ambitious, deeper, more dramatic, more intense, more exploratory both in language and in theme, and, in many ways much more beautiful. But it reached many fewer people and did far less well than had been the case with *An American Memory*. I'd thought it would be a much *better* success than AAM, but the opposite proved to be the case. A small number of reviewers wrote about the book in ways that couldn't conceivably have made me happier, and, if I could, I would thank them on my knees. Ruth Moose, for example:

"[It's] all spellbinding and wonderful and absorbing and so startlingly different you relish each delicious page. . . Plot does not carry you forward, but rather a mesmerization. You are held by some of the most shimmering prose ever put on paper. . . This is the life of a girl growing up in the Midwest caught between her mother's madness ('I was a mirror. My mother wanted me broken.') and her grandmother who lives in their attic, dropping one shoe, but not the other. This book is like that waiting for the other shoe to drop. . .

"Marvelous, marvelous work. If you love literature, writing so wonderful it makes you catch your breath, read *Zoë* Handke."

*The Greensboro News and Record*, April 12, 1992

And Bob Moyer, in *The Grand Rapids (Michigan) Press* for September 6, 1992, opened a review like this: "Exquisite, elegant, exceptional, eloquent—just a few of the words which all together do not add up to an adequate description of Eric Larsen's companion novel to *An American Memory*. . ."

So *Zoë* did prove able to reach some few readers, and those appeared to be touched by it quite powerfully indeed, much to my gratification and delight. But by and large it missed, getting reviews much more akin to the one in *Library Journal* by Linda L. Rome—or like the similar one Jane Smiley wrote for the *Chicago Tribune* of April 5, 1992.

A handful of the paragraphs from Smiley's review will be enough, and then we can start talking about what all this means or may mean. The first of paragraph of her review is a bit confusing, but let's have a look at it before seeing why:

It is a truism of literary study that style and story are one and the same—that the scenes of a novel can't be separated from the manner in which they are expressed. Nevertheless, novels do leave readers with memories of moments that the readers have never experienced but have conjured from mingling their imaginations with the imagination of the author.

I'm not sure what this means, but at *first*, except for that out-of-place pejorative, "truism," it sounds like a rather sophisticated assertion that form and content in art are one and the same, if, that is, style means language. This is a stance far away indeed from, say, Linda L. Rome's position (more in a minute). But then Smiley's paragraph gets all mixed up. She seems to say that readers can remember experiences that they've never actually had but have just read about in novels. Certainly so; no problem there. But then something very odd happens and the reviewer swerves off track, introducing an entirely new element: She leaves the subject of language *or* style completely behind and says that readers can have memories of non-experienced experiences *not* because they've read them in language but because they have "[mingled] their imaginations with the imagination of the author."

To some—like me, for example—a "mingling" of this kind sounds faintly obscene and certainly not hygienic. What happened to the notion that "style and story are one and the same"? No longer true, apparently, for now it would seem that "imagination and story are one and the same," and the way a person "gets" the story is through this strange and quite unappealing "mingling" of imaginations.

Nit-picking? Indeed not. We have here a nationally celebrated author writing in a major national newspaper—and it's then *nit-picking* to ask for coherence in an introductory paragraph? Only in the Age of Simplification might it be considered so. And, as we'll see in a moment, this particular example of incoherence will have enormous application to the questions we discussing.

Meanwhile, Smiley's second paragraph:

In those images, as in real memories, language does seem to fall way [sic], leaving only sharply focused pictures. And the virtue of Eric Larsen's new novel, "I am Zoe [sic] Handke," is that it does leave a residuum of these sharply focused sights: the picture of an empty athletic building, the footballs of past winning seasons half deflated in the sunbeams, other empty college rooms, an angry mother chopping furiously at the kitchen sink and the daughter, nearby, afraid. Unfortunately, Larsen's powerful visual imagination is expressed in a style that is intensely annoying and finally almost impossible to read.

Now, something very interesting is going on here, and it has to do with what's arguably the biggest subject of all for anything whatsoever that's literary: and that subject is *language*.

And what we're going to find out about language is that Smiley doesn't much like it. In fact, she actively *dislikes* it, for reasons that we'll get to in a minute. Before that, though, allow me to make a disclaimer: This essay, the one I'm writing now, has nothing whatsoever to do with Smiley's disliking in particular the language in *I Am Zoë Handke*, a novel, indeed, that happens to have been written by me. The subject, instead, is Smiley's attitude to literature, or more specifically the novel, and language *generally*. Depending on his or her own suspiciousness of nature, I can imagine a reader taking the disclaimer or leaving it. But there it is.

Having declared the language in *Zoë* to be "intensely annoying and finally almost impossible to read," Smiley describes some of the premises and events in the novel, among them Zoë's difficult birth and, later, her interest in her "dead ancestors." Smiley writes:

"The power of her imagination [there's that word again] is such that she can visualize their lives as if she were witnessing them, a conceit that allows Zoe [sic] to tell her story with authority. But finally it is not especially believable. And her readiness to claim their every action seems relentlessly self-involved."

If nothing else, it's clear that we're dealing with two powerfully opposed kinds of readers, Smiley finding the book (or the character) "annoying," "almost impossible to read," "not especially believable," and, now, "relentlessly self-involved." How extremely different these phrases are from those in the *Publisher's Weekly* review ("charged," "introspective," "punishing episodes," "terrible guilt," "extended reflective sections," "almost shattering intensity," "remarkable performance," "magically unravels") or in the Ruth Moose review we also saw. Such strong divergence of views could be due, as is often said, simply to a matter of taste. But the phenomenon is much, much more interesting than that. What's involved here is a deep, deep, fundamental literary question—having to do, indeed, with language foremost and secondarily with "imagination," but, most important of all, having to do with powerful symptoms and manifestations of the Age of Simplification.

A little more of Smiley's review, and then we'll be in a position to talk. Says she:

For Zoe [sic] no language is intense enough to express the significance of this story. This is her description of laundry hanging on the line: "headless or armless, with empty legs or footless, we hung upside down, or sideways, or right side up in a spectacle of disorder, dismemberment, and madness, the empty and dislocated pieces of us. . . [sic] flapping like a ludicrous gathering of the damned, raising, without voices, a chorus of discomfiture and lamentation.

This short paragraph follows:

The simultaneous intensity and abstraction of such a style barely allows for a story to be told. It is certainly never relieved by humor or irony, hardly even by dialogue.

And finally, the closing paragraph, which I include in order to assure readers that I am making no attempt to distort Smiley's words, or even to overlook what slight praise she does allow:

Clearly, it is not easy to render intensity of inner experience, especially in prose. In "I Am Zoe [sic] Handke," Larsen has made a game effort, and to a small degree, succeeded. But finally his success is overwhelmed by a prose style that gets less and less readable with familiarity.



Now. What have we gathered, learned, and what can we conclude? No more now than before can there be any solution to paradox—and yet it seems to me that we're no longer dwelling in the region of paradox region but that we've moved on to something quite different, something we can identify, describe, analyze, and even judge. Whether the meaning of an artwork resides in its content or in the artwork itself can be left behind for the moment, not because it's no longer of interest to *me*—it will remain of intense interest to me, I trust and pray, for the rest of my life—but because it is so obviously of no interest whatsoever to Jane Smiley, Linda L. Rome, or, it's fair to say, any others who may think, in literary matters, as they do.

Nor am I setting the art-paradox aside just to replace it with a thing far lesser and also meager and spiteful—that is, with the subject of me, author with injured pride complaining that some people really love *Zoë* while other people really, really apparently don't like it at all—and, it's fair also to say, in the case of Jane Smiley, quite actively to *dislike* it.

I could wish this to be otherwise, but to go on harboring a wish of that sort, especially at this late date, would be both foolish and indecorous. I will say something else, though, in the name of honesty *and* by way of suggesting how important I consider these matters to be—something, that is, almost by way of a confession, before going on with our discussion. It has to do, once again, with E. M. Forster and the passage I cited earlier, from *Aspects of the Novel*. I don't know how to say this delicately, and in fact I suspect there *is* no way to say it delicately. But readers will remember the three people Forster "asked" what a novel "does," the bus driver, the golf fellow, and then the one who turned out to be Forster himself. And they'll remember Forster saying that he "respect[ed] and admire[ed]" the bus driver but "detest[ed] and fear[ed]" the golfing one. I must declare now, in the vein of Forster's precedent, that I, the writer of these words, do in fact detest and fear Jane Smiley and Linda L. Rome.

There's nothing personal about this, let me assure the reader emphatically: nothing personal in the least conceivable way. No, what's involved here is a *literary* matter only and entirely, and, as such, it goes far, far beyond the personal. The fear and detestation I speak of have *nothing* to do with the personal. They have to do, instead, with the literary, and, although it may surprise some to hear it, and others to hear me dare say it, these emotions of

hatred and fear therefore have to do only with the aesthetic, the philosophic, and the universal.



The reviews by Smiley and Roman reveal parallel literary thought and assumption, but let's begin with the Roman review because its brevity may make it the easier to see whole, for purposes of analysis.

Although we don't *know* whether Roman joins Smiley in believing it "a truism of literary study that style and story are one and the same," we do know that, like Smiley, she dislikes *Zoë's* language. The book is "disappointing," she says, and then immediately turns to its style, mentioning that the "static prose" is "more collage than narrative," and that the reader "is evidently supposed to be drawn on by the mysterious, powerful language. . ." Now, though a person might expect "powerful" to be a good thing in language, it turns out here to be a *bad* thing. Why? Well, because the power leads to the "self-important" and thus to "such self-absorbed declarations as 'My mother was doomed. Therefore I was doomed with her.'"

I wonder what Roman is really talking about here, and what the reason is for her so disliking those words of *Zoë's*, about her mother and herself. Oddly, although the words come from a "mysterious, powerful language," they end up being felt "spurious," as in this next, very Smiley-esque sentence:

Such moments create a spurious tension, tricking the reader into believing that something is going to happen when, in fact, the story is a collection of memories pasted together to form a curiously unsatisfying whole.

This is a kind of near-wizardry. Referring first to *Zoë's statement* ("My mother was doomed. Therefore I was doomed with her"), Roman transforms it at once into a "moment," then declares it a "fake" or "spurious" "moment" that "[tricks] the reader into believing that something is going to happen"—the problem being *not* that something *doesn't* happen but that the things that happen aren't the *right* things ("the story is a collection of *memories*"). Worse, these memories are "pasted together"—pasted, that is, as opposed to. . . what? Well, don't know. Rome isn't saying, but is keeping mum on that subject. *All* she tells us, in a vein truly Smiley-esque, is that she *doesn't like it* ("a curiously unsatisfying whole), though she offers not so much as a whisper as to why *not*.

Amazing, isn't it, how many words people can write without saying what they mean. My impression is that Roman is working very hard indeed in her effort to say—well, her effort to say that she doesn't like the book. I appreciate and understand effort of that kind, just as I appreciate and understand the effort demanded—at least for me—by virtually *any* writing beyond, perhaps, putting together a grocery list.

But what I really wonder—and this, it becomes clear, is the question lying at the very heart of the matter—is *why it is* that Roman and Smiley are both failures at explaining why they don't like *Zoë*; or, if the actual fact is that they're *unable* to say it, then what the reason is for *that*.



And the answer, in each case, is this: there *isn't* any reason. They just *don't*.

Now, it's a big temptation to stop here, say no more, analyze no further, and let the matter lie. But there's much interest still remaining in our investigation, and there's the great question, too, of the *significance* of our findings.

It both is and isn't true—what I said a second ago—that there *isn't* any reason why these two writers dislike *Zoë*. I say this because the real reason that each of the two dislikes the book is, putting it most simply, because of prejudice. Or, you might say, if you prefer a more euphemistic word, because of *conditioning*. They're prejudiced or conditioned in favor of the familiar, the expected, the easy, and the conventional, and simultaneously *against* the opposites of those things. And so that's why it's true to say there *is* a reason for their dislike: namely, prejudice or conditioning. But, on the other hand, it's also *false* to say there's a reason: after all, how can prejudice be a *reason* when it's not something *thought*? Certainly it's not a *literary* reason or an intellectual reason. It's not a *reasoned* reason or a *reasonable* reason, any more than, say, my reason for punching a guy in the nose being that I don't like the way he parts his hair. What it ends up being, in conclusion, may be nothing more than a matter of taste. So be it. But this fact in itself is significant by merit of its being an unexplored, unexamined, and unanalyzed taste, a taste that has undergone no intellectual test and that has been set into no broader context in order that it may be seen (by comparison to other things) for what it both is and is not. It is, in short, a lazy taste, a taste that's unwilling even to *consider* a challenge to itself, a taste that takes it as its *right* to be satisfied in precisely the way it chooses and in no other.

It's parochial. It's insular. It's inflexible. It's narrow. It's unsophisticated. It's unbroadened. And *here's* the key importance of it: it's the kind of taste that governs almost all "literary" or "quality" writing in America today.

I find it probable in the case of Roman that she really, truly, absolutely, just *doesn't know* why she dislikes *Zoë*. She makes one last attempt at finding a reason by declaring *Zoë* to be "ultrasensitive," this *apparently* being a bad, not a good, thing, though Rome still doesn't say *why*. The assertion about ultrasensitivity nevertheless leads her—though by no *logical* step—to say that "Larsen fails to make us care about" her. Well, maybe so, but, again, how come not? What's missing, erroneous, wrong, what's the *cause* of this failure? Dunno. *Just don't like it*. Am I now being unfair? No, I'm not. And the reason I'm not being unfair is because Rome herself gives or makes no argument, but instead concludes by throwing her hands in the air and saying the equivalent of I don't *know* why. I don't like it, so *there*.

We recognize her [she concludes] as being somehow ersatz, like artificially flavored candy—even though it tastes like strawberry and it’s good, you know it’s not the real thing.

But—*how* do you know? The reasoning here is perfectly circular. If it tastes the same and if it’s good—then *how* do you know “it’s not the real thing”? If it barks, has fur, four legs, and a panting tongue—why, then, is it *not* a dog?

Well, we’re not going to find out any answers from Rome, whether because she *can’t* tell us or because she *won’t* tell us, so there’s no point hanging around here any longer. So let’s go back and visit Smiley. All we know about Rome is that she has a secret. But so does Smiley, and maybe from the one we can find out something about the other.



And, voilà! It’s been a long hard road, but our analyses of Rome were worthwhile, since they’ve prepared us at last to crack the code in the Smiley review. Once more, it’s the writer’s *logic* that we need to turn to.

And there it is, staring us in the face, sticking out as plain as daylight in Smiley’s very first sentence, sort of like the Holmes story about the writing on a map being in such plain sight that no one saw it.

“It is a truism of literary study that style and story are one and the same,” we remember Smiley declaring at the start, adding “—that the scenes of a novel can’t be separated from the manner in which they are expressed.” But what we didn’t notice the first time around is that Smiley *doesn’t believe what she says*. We did notice something odd in that first paragraph—her quick switch from language over to “imagination”—but, at that time unprepared by means of our laboratory study of Rome’s logic, we didn’t notice *that Smiley turns the entire rest of the review over to a proof that what she told us at the start is absolutely false and that she doesn’t believe it for a minute*.

Curious that she even said it, seeing as how she doesn’t believe it. She seems to have said it’s true in order then to argue that it’s not true. Well, nothing to be done but persevere—that is, if we really *do* want to learn what this review is *saying*—by going through the review yet once again, this time with a close eye on its logic.

And we see that we should have been more alert the first time. After all, Smiley, right there in the second half of her first paragraph is contradicting, at least by implication, what she’s said in the first half. Language and story are one, *but* it’s not *language* that writer and reader share, it’s *imagination*. And what’s really nice about novels, she continues in paragraph two, is that during this sharing of imagination “*language does seem to fall away*, leaving only sharply focused pictures.” Zoë, she says, *does* have some of those “pictures,” but the trouble with the novel is—here we go—*that the language just won’t fall away, just won’t disappear, lie down and die, become invisible*..

*This*, then, is what Smiley and Rome have meant all along! The real, final, bedrock truth is this: *That they don't want language to get in the way of their stories. That's why they dislike Zoë*—because they *can't ignore its language*.

This means at least two things, maybe countless more. And they're all, it seems to me, bad things, *certainly* bad for the promise of strength and achievement in our already badly ailing national literature.



The first of the two things is that what Smiley says in the opening of her review is just so much flat-out hooley. She doesn't, she can't, conceivably mean that story and style are one and the same—not when she then with such perfect obviousness makes one (language) profoundly subordinate to the other (story), one of them the carrier and one of them the carried.

So much for that. Both reviewers, clearly, want language to serve as story-deliverer, then, like a polite butler, simply to disappear. Let's talk about this.

Readers will doubtless have noticed the two epigraphs at the head of this piece, both familiar from before, one from Sterne, one from Johnson. It's time now to ask this question: Where would Sterne and Johnson have stood on this question of the subordination of language to story, on the preference that language “disappear,” leaving the “reader,” as if suspended by invisible means, afloat in the soft and surrounding comforts of “story”?

Well, we already have Johnson's answer,<sup>2</sup> and, as for Sterne, it shouldn't be hard to figure out for anyone who's actually *read Tristram Shandy*, a novel where, again and again throughout, Sterne does all manner of thing to draw *attention* to the book's language, sometimes leaving it out altogether and substituting all whiteness—or all blackness—on the page, while at other times substituting squiggly lines, or at yet others rows of asterisks, and so on and so forth. The very last thing in Sterne's mind would be the desire for language to disappear, or even to disappear from consciousness, for even a minute. In Sterne, this time for true, story and style indeed are one, and there's never a moment in the entirety of his big, grand, long, heart-breaking, hilarious novel where he fails to be thinking about both of them at one and the same time.

And where does all this leave us, poor enervated denizens of an ever weakening America in a rapidly deteriorating Age of Simplification? There's a huge distinction between what's *in* a book and what a book *is*, and I, for one, know that I want to read books—I want to *experience* books—for what they *are* much more than for what's in them, or for what *might* be in them. We're talking now, of course, mainly about novels (although

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<sup>2</sup> “The truth is, that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from first to last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players.”

not solely), and just imagine the sweep of novels and narratives, not to mention short *stories*, that must by definition be lost to those “readers” who don’t like language, who want it to drop away, leave the room, turn its back, and let the somnambulism of “story” survive as and how it will. Such “readers” can’t possibly touch, read, or experience Faulkner, Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson; they certainly can’t touch Homer, Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare, Marlowe, or for that matter *any* poetry in the world beyond Hallmarkiana. How could they possibly touch the towering *Virginia Woolf*?

No, such a handicap, such an attitude, such an appalling simplification in putatively *literary* people is a ruinous and powerfully destructive thing to see. How much harm may such people already have done, not only by themselves *preferring* the simple, the easy, the expected, the predictable, the passively receivable and the one-dimensional over the complex, the demanding (of consciousness if nothing else), the unexpected, the unpredictable, the not-cloned—but also by dictating to *others* both by precept (as in reviews) and by example (as in the books they themselves “write”) that the weaker is really the stronger, the more meager really the more desirable, the *less* literary really the more deserving?

More and more, under the influence of such ideas and under the influence of such promoters of them as Smiley and Roman, is literary expression diminished and simplified, urged to degenerate into the emulation of one kind or another of visual media, so that “readers” can “experience” the results on the model not of reading but of watching. And when that happens, when language is encouraged to bow out and be forgotten about so that the reader can become lost or engrossed in the “story” alone—well, what’s really happening then is that this “reader,” falling away into passivity, is in fact no longer *reading* the book but is being *read by the book*. And *that*, of course, is precisely the way both big business and Big Brother want it to be.

—Eric Larsen

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