

HOW DO YOU READ A NOVEL, PART I

TO THE READER:

This piece of writing has a rather long history. I submitted its “Part I” for credit in an 18th Century English literature course at the University of Iowa in either the fall term of 1967-68 or the spring term of 1968-69. That essay was highly praised but nevertheless languished unseen until the middle 1990’s, when I brought it back into the light and brushed it off but failed nevertheless to find any place for its publication. Then came—as readers of Part 2 will find—my second novel (*I Am Zoë Handke*) and the remarkably divergent readers’ reactions to it, from near-adoration to near-repugnance. This bifurcation—and an explanation for its existence—became the subject of the essay’s “Part II” as the essay emerged as a kind of companion-piece to my 2006 book, *A Nation Gone Blind: America in an Age of Simplification and Deceit*.

EL

A NOTE ON THE QUESTION OF “AUTHENTICITY” IN PROSE NARRATIVE: A DISCUSSION OF ONE ASPECT OF IAN WATT’S *THE RISE OF THE NOVEL*

“[Coincidences in Fielding] tend to compromise the narrative’s general air of literal authenticity by suggesting the manipulated sequences of literature rather than the ordinary processes of life.”

—Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*

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

—Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*

The difficulty, which has become almost traditional, of finding an accurate yet sufficiently flexible set of critical terms and assumptions in defining and describing the novel as a literary form is only emphasized by a paper such as this one: for, while my attentions are directed in theory toward the novels themselves, in reality I am considering them first through a critical work written about them. The danger is that in dealing with the criticism, I may prohibit myself from a direct confrontation with those very works whose existence in the first place gave rise to the necessity for their criticism. I will have become entrapped, like a Platonic man, in an inferior world once removed from truth.

Nevertheless, I am forced to run such a risk. Obviously, there are times when a consideration of a critical theory can shed light on the literary works behind that theory. In this case, I hope my comments will not seem to stand simply as a rebuttal of the entirety of Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*.¹ I hope, rather, that by pointing out what seems to me a specific discrepancy in logic in Watt's theory of realism and "authenticity" of narrative, I can at the same time, by implication, arrive at a clearer understanding of what is actually involved in looking at literary art as a transcriber of reality.

It is undeniable that in the great novels of the eighteenth century we are faced with a new kind of literary product or genre, one which it is conventional to describe at least partly by use of the adjective "realistic." If adequately controlled and specified, there is nothing wrong with this term. There is, for example, no argument with the basic observations of the following passage, taken from Ian Watt. Having spoken of "the main analogies between realism in philosophy and literature," Watt suggests another comparison:

The novel's mode of imitating reality may therefore be equally summarized in terms of the procedures of another group of specialists in epistemology, the jury in a court of law. Their expectations and those of the novel reader coincide in many ways: both want to know 'all the particulars' of a given case—the time and place of the occurrence; both must be satisfied as to the identities of the parties concerned, and will refuse to accept evidence about anyone called Sir Toby Belch or Mr. Badman—still less about a Chloe who has no surname and is 'common as the air'; and they also expect the witnesses to tell the story 'in his own words'. The jury, in fact, takes the 'circumstantial view of life', which T. H. Green found to be the characteristic outlook of the novel. (p. 31)

Given the fact of the "circumstantial view of life," the basic quality in which the novel differs from earlier genres, it follows, Watt seems to suggest, that there will be two other major ways in which the novel asserts its originality. Both of these are technical: the nature of plot in the novel, and the nature of the language in which the narrative is written. I

¹ University of California Press, 1959. All quotations, unless specified otherwise, will be from this source.

will consider the nature of plot first, and return later to discuss the matter of the language of the realistic prose narrative.

In a concise passage, Watt explains the relation between plot and an awareness of what might be called “real time”:

We have already considered one aspect of the importance which the novel allots the time dimension: its break with the earlier literary tradition of using timeless stories to mirror the unchanging moral verities. The novel’s plot is also distinguished from most previous fiction by its use of past experience as the cause of present actions: a causal connection operating through time replaces the reliance of earlier narratives on disguises and coincidences, and this tends to give the novel a much more cohesive structure. (p. 22)

Considered in the light of this passage, *The Vicar of Wakefield* seems to offer a typical example of prose narrative which recognizes and employs “the time dimension” in the way Watt describes, and yet which does so only partly, as though the work were one of transition from the tradition of timelessness into time. Thus on the one hand the characters do seem to grow, learning through experience to be more wise and less eager for social advancement. The story is not, as it could be, an allegory in which ideas and moral truths exist in abstractions which are not so much experienced *by* the characters as they are applied *to* their behavior. In *The Vicar*, whatever is learned is learned by experience, not precept. The characters, insofar as they learn anything, demonstrate, as Watt says, “development in the course of time” (p. 22).

Yet on the other hand Goldsmith’s short novel is also constructed upon what seems the more arbitrary and less “realistic” use of disguise (Thornhill disguised early in the story as Burchell) and unlikely coincidence. Goldsmith in fact comments on this aspect of the story:

Nor can I go on without a reflection on those accidental meetings which, though they happen every day, seldom excite our surprize but upon some extraordinary occasion. To what a fortuitous concurrence do we not owe every pleasure and convenience of our lives. How many seeming accidents must unite before we can be cloathed or fed. The peasant must be disposed to labour, the shower must fall, the wind fill the merchant's sail, or numbers must want the usual supply.²

The fact that Goldsmith feels compelled to make an apology for the use of coincidences serves, of course, to suggest that he feels they are *not* in fact so natural or readily acceptable—so common, I should say—as he rather earnestly claims: if they were, neither his nor our attention would be drawn to them, and nothing would need be said. He appears

² *Oliver Goldsmith, The Vicar of Wakefield and Other Writings*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles (The Modern Library, 1955, pp. 450-451).

troubled by a sort of “artificiality” which, however, remains a necessary device to allow the completion of his story.

My purpose in referring to this rather self-conscious comment of Goldsmith’s³ is to suggest that it gives credence to Watt’s general opinion that the use of highly manipulated plot is contrary to the general aim and spirit of realistic narrative. Watt states clearly that the purpose of the narrative method of the novel, which he calls “formal realism,” is to allow expression of the novel’s basic attempt and purpose, which is to be “a full and authentic report of human experience” (p. 32). *Clarissa* and *Pamela* succeed in being such reports, but *Tom Jones*, which, like *The Vicar*, has numerous coincidences and a manipulated plot, does not:

Once again the contrast with Richardson is complete. Much of our sense of *Clarissa*’s psychological development arises from the way that her experience brings a continual deepening of her understanding of her own past: as a result character and plot are indivisible. *Tom Jones*, on the other hand, is not in touch with his own past at all: we feel a certain unreality in his actions because they always seem to be spontaneous reactions to stimuli that the plot has been manipulated to provide; we have no sense that they are manifestations of a developing moral life. (p. 275)

The basic dichotomy with which Watt is concerned, then, is that of literary artifice on the one hand, and of human experience on the other. *Tom Jones* is not as successful a novel (given Watt’s terms) as *Pamela*, because “the ultimate cohesive force of the book resides not in the characters and their relationships, but in an intellectual and literary structure which has a considerable degree of autonomy” (p. 277). *Pamela*, on the other hand, “brings us extremely close to *Pamela*’s inner consciousness” and in fact “makes us feel that we are in contact not with literature but with the raw materials of life itself as they are momentarily reflected in the minds of the protagonists” (p. 193).

This is the dichotomy—artifice as opposed to experience or “reality”—which becomes basic to the presentation of “formal realism” in the novel as Watt puts it forth: but, as we will see by turning now to his comments about the *language* of “realistic” prose narrative, Watt himself is unable logically to maintain his own posited dichotomy. He cannot logically maintain the dichotomy, and yet, in order for his concept of realism and “formal realism” to remain valid and workable, it *must* be maintained.

If the novel is to differ from earlier types of literature by being a “circumstantial” and “full and authentic report of human experience,” then the language of its narrative may be expected to differ too. This proves to be the case, and Watt writes that “the function of language is much more largely referential in the novel than in other literary forms; that the genre itself works by exhaustive presentation rather than by elegant concentration.” (p. 30)

In speaking of “elegant concentration,” Watt is referring, of course, to earlier literary concepts of stylistic decorum and stylistic conventions. He explains the matter as follows:

³ Fielding makes a similar “apology” in *Tom Jones*, Book XVIII, chapter II.

In any case, of course, the classical critical tradition in general had no use for the unadorned realistic description which such a [referential] use of language would imply.... The implicit assumption of educated writers and critics was that an author's skill was shown, not in the closeness with which he made his words correspond to their objects, but in the literary sensitivity with which his style reflected the linguistic decorum appropriate to its subject. It is natural, therefore, that it is to writers outside the circle of wit that we should have to turn for our earliest examples of fictional narrative written in a prose which restricts itself almost entirely to a descriptive and denotative use of language. Natural, too, that both Defoe and Richardson should have been attacked by many of the better educated writers of the day for their clumsy and often inaccurate way of writing. (pp. 28-29)

We are faced here again with the dichotomy between "reality" and artifice: any prescribed or conventionalized style, any suiting of style to subject by reference to the arbitrary code of "linguistic decorum"—either of these is "artifice" which can serve only to hide reality. And as in his discussion of plot, so here too in his discussion of style, Watt is led to present Richardson and Fielding as representatives of the two opposite sides of the dichotomy, Richardson as "real" and Fielding as "artificial." We are told that "we must regard the break which Defoe and Richardson made with the accepted canons of prose style, not an incidental blemish, but rather as the price they had to pay for achieving the immediacy and closeness of the texts to what is being described" (p. 29).

Fielding, however, is another matter:

Fielding, of course, did not break with the traditions of Augustan prose style or outlook. But it can be argued that this detracts from the authenticity of his narratives. Reading *Tom Jones* we do not imagine we are eavesdropping on a new exploration of reality; the prose immediately informs us that exploratory operations have long since been accomplished, that we are to be spared that labour, and presented instead with a sifted and clarified report of the findings. (pp. 29-30)

In Fielding, "a patent selectiveness of vision destroys our belief in the reality of the report," while, on the other hand, in Defoe and Richardson, a "very diffuseness tends to act as a guarantee of the authenticity of their report" (p. 30). It would clearly be foolish and erroneous to argue that these basic differences in the two kinds of novels do not exist. Watt is absolutely correct in saying, for example, that Fielding does not "break with the traditions of Augustan prose style or outlook" to the extent that Defoe and Richardson do. But even accepting those aspects of his argument and observations that are undeniable and valid, it is still not possible for the careful reader to accept his views completely.

To argue that Fielding differs from Richardson is fine: this is clear, descriptive, and empirical. But to say that one narrative is more "authentic" than another is an implicit contradiction of Watt's most basic premise in putting forth his concepts about realism. The impulse of realism, he tells us, is a breaking away from the eighteenth century's "strong classical preference for the general and universal" (p. 16), away from the neo-Platonic concept of generality which said that reality existed in general ideal "types" or "generalities," and that "particularities" were simply not as "true" as the ideals of which they

were only imperfect or “accidental” versions existing at least one remove from the “real.” The impulse of realism, then, is to accept the “particular” as real or true rather than the “general.” It is, one might say, an impulse to see truth or reality in things as they are rather than as they should be. It is not Platonic in its impulse, it works against traditional conventionalization in literary forms, and it doubts the existence of truth in idealized abstractions.

And yet it cannot accurately be called “realism.” It is not, strictly speaking, more “real” than “conventionalized” literary forms. Watt’s repeated use of and reliance on the term “authentic” in referring to prose narrative reveals the discrepancy in his logic. While he is arguing for a break from idealized truth (from art as reference to “the unchanging moral verities” [p. 22]), the very term “authentic” implies *another* ideal to which various works approach according to their greater or lesser degrees of “authenticity.” The idea of “authenticity” becomes a kind of inverse Platonism. *Clarissa* approaches closer to the “ideal” of reality than does *Tom Jones* because its narrative is more “authentic.” That is, it is closer to truth, which must be itself an idealized and absolute concept. Greater or lesser degrees of “realism,” then, come to mean nothing other than more or less “perfect” imitations of a static and unchanging *concept* or *ideal* of reality.

At least this conclusion is implied by the terms and quality of Watt’s argument. Reaching such a conclusion shows why the dichotomy between reality or experience on the one hand and artifice or convention on the other must be maintained: reality or experience must remain the only source of meaning, while literary narrative or artifice must remain nothing more than a means by which to copy, more or less accurately, the reality which already exists. But if this dichotomy should break down, if literary form or artifice should ever become meaningful or a source of meaning *in itself*, then “realism” as Watt uses it can no longer be a valid or meaningful term: for if the form of a work creates meaning in itself, then the existence of an external and unchanging “reality” has been denied. Reality will have been created, not copied.

Yet, returning again to the subject of plot, we find that Watt himself implicitly breaks down this very dichotomy. The way he does this can be seen by comparing his comments about Fielding’s plots with his comments about the plot of *Tristram Shandy*. Excessive coincidences in *Tom Jones*, Watt says, “tend to compromise the narrative’s general air of literal authenticity by suggesting the manipulated sequences of literature rather than the ordinary processes of life” (p. 253). This is, of course, the view we have already discussed. Compare with it Watt’s comment on Sterne’s plot:

Sterne, however, can manipulate until we are giddy without any breach of narrative authenticity, since every transition is part of the hero’s mental life which, of course, is very little concerned with chronological order. As a result Sterne is able to arrange the elements of his novel into whatever sequence he pleases, without the arbitrary changes of setting and characters which such a counterpoint would involve in Fielding. (p. 293)

My contention is that Watt has here undercut his previous suppositions of what “authenticity” really means or can mean, and that he has done so by saying that, even though the narrative of *Tristram Shandy* is highly manipulated, it is still “authentic” because

it portrays the unique patterns of Shandy's mind. Implicit in this statement is the idea that every mind (Pamela's, for example) can have its own "reality." And if this is so, which I contend it is, we are of course deprived of any standard whatsoever by which to judge or estimate degrees of reality, and the very word "authentic" becomes useless. As many "realities" exist as there are minds or perceiving apparati to react to the stimuli of life and experience. It becomes theoretically impossible to say what is and what is not "truth to individual experience," which is the "primary concern" of the novel (p. 13).

Since Shandy's (Sterne's) mind is unique, there can be no way of determining what constitutes an "authentic" description of it. There is no such thing as a reality to which one can hold up the finished narrative product in order to estimate how close it comes to being a perfect ("authentic") copy. This cannot be done because the "reality" that is being dealt with (Shandy's mind) *is* unique and thus has no counterpart in nature. There is, in fact, only one place and one place alone from which meaning can come, and that is from the narrative itself. No one can say whether the narrative is or is not "authentic" because no one can with certainty experience the reality it describes. It follows, then, that for everyone but Shandy himself, this unique meaning, truth, or individual experience exists only in the narrative. The narrative, as far as we will ever be able to know, *is* the experience. For everyone but for Shandy, reality has been created rather than copied. The artifice becomes the same thing as reality or as meaning: the narrative is its reality. We cannot say whether it is authentic or not, but only that it is.

This is why *Tristram Shandy* seems to us so modern a novel—because it is not a more or less "authentic" copy of a changeless or absolute external "reality," but because it is an incorporation of its own truth and reality in itself. Sterne's black pages, for an obvious example, his squiggly lines, his empty spaces—these serve as copies of no "reality" in nature, nor are they "authentic" copies of some concept of unchanging reality: if they are "authentic" representations of anything, it must be agreed that they are representations of Shandy's narrative itself, and it must be agreed as well that that narrative exists nowhere else in nature than in the form Sterne has given it. We are reminded of the words Oscar Wilde puts in the mouth of Vivian in "The Decay of Lying": "Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself."⁴

Oscar Wilde is, admittedly, a long way from Richardson and Defoe, and even from Sterne. And yet I think his relevance is admissible in an argument such as this one. I said that I hoped this paper would not stand simply as a rebuttal of Watt, and I think it is clear that there are many aspects of his work that should not be attacked. His first chapter is an example, where, among other things, he differentiates the novel from earlier and other genres by pointing out its interest in "real" time rather than in a classical timelessness, and its dominant tendency to be a "circumstantial view of life." Both these qualities, it seems undeniable, do reveal a break from neo-classical neo-Platonism with its tendencies toward conventionalization, personification, and generality. My argument with Watt begins after this much (and more, which doesn't need summary here) has been made clear. I part

⁴ Reprinted in *The Modern Tradition*, ed. Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson (New York, 1965), p. 20.

company with him when, in attempting to describe “realism,” he posits “reality” as a kind of pseudo-Platonic and unchanging “verity,” and sees literary narratives as means by which to copy that external⁵ “truth” which cannot be found in literary artifact itself.

For it must finally be agreed, it seems to me, that artifact is as much a part of reality as anything else. Perhaps Oscar Wilde is as much of an extremist in his direction (art’s only meaning is in itself) as Watt is in his (art’s only meaning is outside itself). This is an argument or problem I can’t settle here. But I also can’t take my leave before asserting once more that what we have in literary art is artifact, no matter how “realistic” the impulse behind its creation may be. All literary art is artifact and convention at least to some extent. The moment pen is put to paper and a word results, we have convention and not a copy of reality. There is in fact no such thing as a copy of reality; there is only artifact, which if course is born out of human existence, while at the same time no human can exist except in reality, or reality of some kind. That, however, is not precisely the point. I do not consider it an over-simplification to assert that for the literary critic (or for the writer) there are basically two phenomena: there is human existence and there are the artifacts produced as a result of that existence, and the two remain essentially separate. Neither is more “real” than the other.

What I mean is this: to speak of one as a copy of the other can lead only to a logical impasse, as I hope I’ve shown in my analysis of the theory of “authenticity.” And to do so, furthermore, is to misjudge and underestimate much of the greatest value and mystery of literary art. For no literature, not even the great realistic novels of the past, is merely a copy, authentic or otherwise, of reality. If it were so, it would logically be in a position subordinate to reality, and a position of subordination such as that would make difficult to understand either its centuries of continuing fascination or its sheer survival. It seems to me, rather, that the real energy and the real fascination of literature—its own particular truth, if you will—exists precisely at the mysterious, indefinable and elusive point where these two intensely separate things, verbal artifact and human existence, or fabrication and “reality,” come into a crucial, ineffable and above all unspoken and wordless union.

To discuss this idea more fully would almost undoubtedly require another and separate paper. The main point I’d like to make now, however, is simply that there are certain extremely interesting and serious pitfalls in what may have become for at least some of us a traditional and perhaps even absolute acceptance of the concepts of “realism” and “authenticity.” In truth, the relationship between these two essentially separate things, reality—whatever it is—and verbal artifact, is a uniquely symbiotic, ancient and compelling one. A part of me hopes it will never be entirely explored, or at least never entirely understood, for, in the end, the magic of literature is that it does something that can to a certain extent be described but that cannot, finally, be explained: it remains simultaneously inferior and superior to life, simultaneously autonomous and totally dependent. As for “realistic” or “authentic” prose narratives, whatever else they may justly be in contrast with other types and forms of verbal or literary expression, they, too, remain eternally artifacts,

⁵ Even though, as in *Clarissa*, this “truth” may be the truth of a character’s internal psychological existence, it still remains external, from Watt’s point of view, in the sense that it is external to the literary narrative, which remains a copying device.

even though at the same time, in an important and indispensable way, they remain eternally real. I wish, however, to avoid needless foundering in paradox. I would like to remain logical up to whatever point an analyst of literature or literary theory can. For this reason, in closing I will appeal to a comment made by probably the greatest critic of common sense, which, although it was written in consideration of another genre than the novel, seems to me comfortingly pertinent here. In the *Preface to Shakespeare*, Johnson writes the famous passage:

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.

HOW DO YOU READ A NOVEL, 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 paper⁶ ends, granting its last word not to Ian Watt but to the great, towering, common-sense genius of the 18th century, Samuel Johnson. I do think it’s more exact to say the paper ends rather than concludes, since its central and

⁶ From sometime in 1967 or 1968.

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, a person at least knows a lot more *about* the paradox than before, isn’t it so?

In a headnote to the “Ideas” section of an earlier version of this 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 Simplification⁷ 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 went 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.⁸

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

⁷ As in *A Nation Gone Blind: America in an Age of Simplification and Deceit*.

⁸ *Aspects of the Novel* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1954), pp. 25-26.

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 morally iffy 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 that man feels, whether truculent in the expression of his feeling or not, is most likely to be a member of that type of Age of Simplification novel-reader who (whether diminishing in overall numbers or not) comprise the obviously dominant part of the membership.

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. More on that point 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.

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 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-pub 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 even 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 comes 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 a 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 came to be. 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 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 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 odd happens and the reviewer swerves off track, introducing an entirely new element: She leaves the subject of language *or* style 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 grotesque 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 unappealing “mingling” of imaginations.

Nit-picking? Not so. We have here a nationally celebrated author writing in a major national newspaper—and it’s *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’re 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 interesting is going on here, and it has to do with what’s arguably the biggest subject of all for any discussion whatsoever that’s a literary one: and that subject is *language*.

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, let me make a disclaimer: This essay, the essay I’m writing now, has nothing whatsoever to do with Smiley’s disliking the language in *I Am Zoë Handke*, a novel, indeed, that happens to have been written by me. The subject is not me or my feelings, but, instead, the subject is Smiley’s attitude toward literature, more specifically toward the novel, and toward language *generally*. As for my disclaimer, I can imagine a reader, depending on his or her own suspiciousness of nature, taking it 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 matters of taste. But the phenomenon is much more interesting than that. What’s involved here is a deep, deep, fundamental literary question—one having to do, indeed, with language first and secondly 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 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, what have we 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, at least 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 *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—in Forster's sense—detest and fear Jane Smiley and Linda L. Rome.

There's nothing personal about this, let me assure you emphatically: nothing personal in the least conceivable way. No, what's involved here is a *literary* matter, 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 say it, these emotions of hatred and fear therefore have to do only with the aesthetic, the philosophic, and the universal, in no way the personal.



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 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 herself is keeping mum on the 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, 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 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 a great deal of 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 for each of the two disliking 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 they've been conditioned or prejudiced *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, an uneducated or inexperienced taste, a taste that's unwilling even to *consider* a challenge to itself, a taste, because it knows no other, 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. It's inexperienced. And *here's* the key importance of it: this is the kind of taste that governs the great preponderance of "literary" or "quality" writing in America today.

I find it probable in the case of Rome 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 ultra-sensitivity 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 is*. Am I now being unfair? I don't think so. 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—well, why, then, is it *not* a dog?

Well, we're not going to find out 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 (perhaps most greatly a secret from herself). 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 sees 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 false and that she herself 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 by us 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, Smiley 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, won’t 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 many 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 hooey. 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 of the two (language) profoundly subordinate to the other (story), one the carrier and one the carried.

So much for that. Both reviewers, clearly, want language to serve as story-deliverer, then, like a polite butler, simply 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,⁹ 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 performs all manner of tricks 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 real and for true, story and style indeed are one, and there’s never a moment in the entirety of his big, grand, long, hilarious, heart-breaking 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* literary works—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 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 that written by the great Hallmarkiana. How could they possibly touch James Joyce or the towering *Virginia Woolf*?

No, such a handicap, such an attitude, such an awful 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 compelling and deserving?

More and more, under the influence of such ideas and under the influence of such promoters of those ideas 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

9 “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.”

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”—well, what’s really happening then is that this “reader,” falling away into passivity, is in fact no longer *reading* the book but, at best, 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
—May 1, 2006