

Other Books by Charles Baxter

NOVELS

First Light
Shadow Play

SHORT STORIES

Harmony of the World
Through the Safety Net
A Relative Stranger
Believers

POETRY

Imaginary Paintings

Burning Down the House

ESSAYS ON FICTION



Charles Baxter



GRAYWOLF PRESS

LIBRARY
OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING
LARAMIE 82071

that that person is yourself. Literature exists in moments like that.

Notes

Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Journals and Papers*. Edited by Humphrey House (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 193–194. I am following a discussion of the widowed image in Irving Massey, *Find You the Virtue: Ethics, Image and Desire in Literature* (Fairfax: The George Mason University Press, 1987): 153–155.

Viktor Shklovsky, "Art As Technique," in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. Translated and edited by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (University of Nebraska Press, 1965).

Against Epiphanies



42

I've just had a major revelation.

These words typically fill me with dread. I have spent much of my life among the officially unconverted, but even they have their secret faiths and scrappy household gods. They, too, have visions. In social situations, piety is sometimes attached to some unusual articles of belief, and listening to descriptions of those beliefs can be a tricky business. The listener may never find the correct tone in which to respond, especially when agreement or disagreement are somehow beside the point.

When the large beliefs give way, the smaller ones are sometimes felt with an almost intolerable fervor. I once knew an ex-Catholic, a former altar boy, who was capable of lecturing me, and almost anyone else, at length about the benefits of cold-pressed salad oils. The emotion and rhetoric had a certain learned eloquence and were exalted but relentlessly applied to a pathetically diminished sub-

ject. The feeling for proportion was off. (Also a characteristic of television commercials, where love songs like "No-body Does It Like You" are applied to Hoover vacuum cleaners.) In a relentlessly commercial culture, the communication of our private meanings has been vaguely corrupted around the edges by the toxic idioms of merchandising. Wanting to convey an inward sensation of the sacred, we find ourselves skidding toward the usages of sales and marketing. With the idiom already compromised, the experience of revelation begins to grow ever more uneasy: Its effect can be like seasickness, but without the sea. In our age it tends to tremble and vibrate, like any visitation. It breaks boundaries and jeopardizes a feeling for scale.

A friend calls. She has been in emotional difficulty, but now, she says, everything will be fine. She was awake last night, and it came to her.

"What did?" I ask.

"Why I've been feeling this way," she says. "My troubles. Suddenly I realized it."

So I asked what it was. She had been granted a revelation, and now she was passing it on, like a virus, to me. I didn't believe that her explanations were the right ones, but I kept my opinions quiet. I made nondirective noises, the sounds of telephone tact. Besides, who was I to comment? Who was I to say that it wasn't the zinc in the vitamin pills, or the dust in the air, or the selfish violence of men, or the unimpeachable banality of the Midwest that had caused her anguish?

Suddenly I realized . . .

The language of literary epiphanies naturally has something in common with the rhetoric of religious revelation. The veil of appearances is pulled aside and an inner truth is revealed. A moment of radiant vision brings forth the sensation if not the content of meaning. An epiphany, in a traditional religious context, was the showing forth of the divinity of the Christ child. It was, quite literally, an awful moment. Awe governed it. To adapt this solemn moment for literary purposes, as James Joyce wished to do, was a Promethean gesture: It was an attempt to steal the fires of religion and place them, still burning, in literature.

Consider this statement of the condition in Joyce's *Stephen Hero*:

By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. . . . He told

Cranly that the clock of the Ballast Office was capable of an epiphany. . . . — Imagine my glimpses at that clock as the gropings of a spiritual eye which seeks to adjust its vision to its exact focus. The moment the focus is reached the object is epiphanized. It is just in this epiphany that I find the third, the supreme quality of beauty. . . . First we recognize that the object is *one* integral thing, then we recognize that it is an organized, composite structure, a *thing* in fact; finally, when the relation of the parts is exquisite, when the parts are adjusted to the special point, we recognize that it is *that* thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from

the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany.

The relation between this showing forth of the object's being and the focus that the viewer brings to it is reciprocal. When the act of attention is turned upon oneself, the self, through a moment of seeing-in, an insight, may become radiant. But in this formulation it can only be achieved through a sort of intellectual and spiritual discipline.

As a writer, Joyce never quite lost his vocation for the priesthood. The passage quoted above has retained its debt to Catholic theology, particularly Aquinas, but has been iced over with the slightly hectoring tone that Joyce gives to Stephen's pronouncements. Like several of the Modernists, Joyce wished to convert the drabness of truth-to-life detailing in narrative into a condition of inward revelation and resplendence. The passage from *Stephen Hero* is a heroic statement of the manner in which a drab city object can be converted into an essence, an object of beauty.

Most of Joyce's writings involve a conversion of one kind or another, both in substance and in style. The stories in *Dubliners* are astonishingly detailed, but they continually aim for a climactic moment of brilliant transforming clarification. The clarification happens on the page, even if it does not become visibly apparent to the characters. The stories aim for this effect because the lives Joyce is putting on display might be insufferable to contemplate otherwise, or, rather, they would exist in a condition of unimproved Naturalism. One such transformation arrives by means of

the moment of conclusive insight, the ripping away of the veil of appearance, given to the narrator of "Araby" and to Gabriel Conroy at the end of "The Dead."

Here is the ending of "Araby," in which the narrator arrives at the little fair after it has closed, hoping to get a present for the girl for whom he has an infatuation. He stands before a vendor:

I lingered before her stall, though I knew my stay was useless, to make my interest in her wares seem the more real. Then I turned away slowly and walked down the middle of the bazaar. I allowed the two pennies to fall against the sixpence in my pocket. I heard a voice call from one end of the gallery that the light was out. The upper part of the hall was now completely dark.

Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derived by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger.

This miraculous and much-quoted passage manages to convey the bittersweet isolation of adolescence without quite yielding to it. It's as if the outer world gradually shuts itself off switch by switch, echo by echo, leaving the boy in his one burning isolated spotlight on his small diminished stage. He has become visible to himself. This seems to me a very canny understanding of the self-conscious awkwardness of adolescence. In this spotlight the boy sees that the world is arrayed against him. But not only the world: He is arrayed against himself. Granted his insight, he now possesses a sort of heroic watchful wretchedness.

As in a dramatic lyric, the *I* stands squarely at the cen-

ter of this experience, of this world. The boy is the pale knight-at-arms on the cold hillside, the Byron who has failed at every pose he has attempted to strike. To get this mixture of anger, pathos, desire, and insight mixed in the right proportions is the miracle of Joyce's short stories. The insight follows the images but is not secondary: It balances them. The insight feels transfiguring in the way that melancholy can be for those who are starting to understand the depths and the identifying marks of their own inwardness. It also feels newly discovered, despite its debts to Romantic poetry and the culture of Irish Catholicism.

Reading a passage like this one is a bit like reading Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*. It is the trickle that precedes the flood. When the middle classes discovered insight—revelation free of the obligations of organized religion—they made a serious investment in it, and the proportions so carefully watched over in *Dubliners* began, imperceptibly at first, I think, to be violated. The logic of unveiling has become a dominant mode in Anglo-American writing, certainly in fiction, particularly short stories. We watch as a hidden presence, some secret logic, rises to visibility and serves as the climactic revelation. (It may be visible to us but not to the characters; however most of the time, in contemporary writing, the characters not only see it, they announce it.) The world of appearances falls away, and essences show themselves.

The loss of innocence, and the arrival of knowingness, can become an addiction. Cultures with a fascination with innocence often cannot get enough of these moments.

Here, as another example, is the ending, the last paragraph, of John Cheever's "Goodbye, My Brother." The narrator is deploring the gloom and pessimism of his brother.

Oh, what can you do with a man like that? What can you do? How can you dissuade his eye in a crowd from seeking out the cheek with acne, the infirm hand; how can you teach him to respond to the inestimable greatness of the race, the harsh surface beauty of life; how can you put his finger for him on the obdurate truths before which fear and horror are powerless? The sea that morning was iridescent and dark. My wife and my sister were swimming—Diana and Helen—and I saw their uncovered heads, black and gold in the dark water. I saw them come out and I saw that they were naked, unshy, beautiful, and full of grace, and I watched the naked women walk out of the sea.

This passage has its own narrative grace and fluidity, and an eloquence about essences in both the discursive insight at the beginning of the paragraph and the dramatic epiphanic image that ends it. It feels a bit like an aria, but the voice is under very little strain in singing it. Nevertheless, the materials are being pushed toward timelessness and myth (Diana and Helen) and grand gestures, even affirmations of faith, such as "the inestimable greatness of the race." The tessitura, the line of the melody, is much higher than it is in "Araby." I am conscious here, as I am not in "Araby," of the difficulty of putting this over. Women might not care for what is being done to and for

women here. The passage is determined to be gorgeous without being lush. I think it succeeds, but just barely.

Some of the most beautiful stories ever written, at least in the last 150 years, follow this pattern. Several of the greatest ones in the literature of this century have endings that resemble those in "Araby" or "Goodbye My Brother." But a mode that began with moves of elegant feeling and energy, particularly in stories that have to deal with worlds within worlds of urban or small-town or even familial hypocrisy can get stale. Worse than stale: rotten. The mass production of insight, in fiction or elsewhere, is a dubious phenomenon. However, in contemporary society almost anything can be mass produced and marketed, even insight. Especially insight. Because it is a private experience, it can't be debated or contested. Suddenly, it seems, everyone is having insights. Everyone is proclaiming them and selling them. Possibly we have entered the Age of Insight. Everywhere there is a glut of epiphanies. Radiance rules. But some of the insights have seemed disturbingly untrustworthy. There is a smell about them of recently molded plastic. At the level of discursive rhetoric, it is a bit like the current craze for angels. Perhaps, one is free to wonder, perhaps these are not true insights at all. What then?

This country has always harbored, and perhaps has always been fascinated by a certain variety of the isolated thinker — sometimes a genius, sometimes a crackpot, and sometimes a weird mixture of the two. The isolated thinker comes up with philosophies that depend, not on commonly agreed-

upon observations, but on cranky insights. Thoreau is perhaps the best example, but Henry James, Sr., with his interest in Swedenborg and the occult, is another. We would probably not remember much about the writing of the elder Henry James if it weren't for the ways that his distrust of appearances became apparent in the fiction of his son.

Insights, in art and outside of it, depend on an assumption that the surface is false. That what one sees — the evidence of one's eyes — is at best a partial truth. That almost everyone has been mistaken. All cults, and the occult arts, assume this to be the case. The loss of innocence is partly a recognition that there are depths to things, that what you see is not always what you get. The pathos of this discovery is well known, especially among Americans and adolescents. But the fascination with false surfaces leads, fairly quickly, to a fascination with conspiracies. It is one thing to say that the surface is illusory. It's another to say that the illusion has been designed that way by fools or malefactors.

Conspiracy theorists thrive on epiphanies, insights, and revelations. The business of uncovering a conspiracy is very close to the mechanisms of literary production: It's why the word "plot" suits both of them. Something Else — the hideous prime mover, masterfully disguised — is in charge. When a conspiracy is unmasked, the insights that follow are peculiarly unsettling however, because all the truths that emerge are ugly. This is at variance with our hope that the truth, when it rises to the surface in a story, will be as beautiful as Cheever's swimmers walking out of the sea.

What good are insights? They only make things worse.

—Raymond Carver

Insights leave one stunned. Sometimes the vision causes the world to fall away, and sometimes the objects in that world take on a Promethean fire and radiance, but quite often the truth of things is so overpowering that one simply has nothing to do and nowhere to move. Following the radiance comes the immobility. Radiance doesn't need anyone to add anything to it. And sometimes the epiphanic insight is not so radiant. You discover that you are going to spend your life in Laundromats, fighting other people to get access to the dryers. In most stories, this moment, which is understood in our literary tradition to be important and climactic, carries with it a stop-time effect. When things just stop, the fire of insight inhabits the screen.

Insight is one of the last stands of belief in a secular age. I feel that I am saying something here that is both obvious and obtuse. Insight's connection to the loss of innocence, to a vestigially religious worldview, and to conspiracy theories, makes it particularly suited to a culture like ours that thrives on psychotherapeutic models, paranoia, and self-improvement. A belief that one is a victim will lead inevitably to an obsession with insight. There is really nothing wrong with any of this except for the conventions it is capable of fostering. The mass-marketing of literary epiphanies and climactic insights produces in editors and readers an expectation that stories must end with an insight. The insight-ending, as a result, has become something of a weird norm in contemporary writing.

The reason I find these developments baffling is that discursive insights are so rare, in my experience, that they seem freakish. Another reason I am baffled is that, in retrospect, I can say with some certainty that most of my own large-scale insights have turned out to be completely false. They have arrived with a powerful, soul-altering force; and they have all been dead wrong.

But, to paraphrase Cheever, if you take away fiction's insights, what do you have left?

Imagine, for the sake of the argument, two ways of approaching a story.

Suppose, in honor of the least visible of the Marx Brothers, we have before us a well-meaning apprentice writer named Zeppo. Let's suppose that Zeppo is writing a story with a conventional plot structure, one in which, following suggestions that go back for over two thousand years, he creates an introduction of oppositions, a deepening of those oppositions, a crisis, and a resolution. Zeppo has arranged his plot so that his protagonist, a charming gangster, has won the heart of the mayor's daughter. He is opposed in this love match by the mayor himself, who has allied himself with a rival group of gangsters. Near the end of the story there is a battle of some kind, and someone wins. From *The Decameron* to *Romeo and Juliet* to *The Godfather* and *Prizzi's Honor*, this story has held the attention of readers. The characters need not be distinguished by their intelligence or sensitivity. The poetry may be supplied by the narrator or by the eloquence of the participants. Eloquence isn't the same as sensitivity. The action itself may

be intricate and beautiful in its understanding of character and milieu, but it need not be redemptive in any sense. What these characters do have is powerful desires. Also, there may be many coincidences that lead to violence.

But Zeppo has read Henry James's prefaces and Chekhov's letters and several volumes of Virginia Woolf's diaries and the last ten volumes of *Best American Short Stories*. He knows that his story is not especially subtle, although it is a page-turner, so he tears it up and starts over. In the story that Zeppo then writes, the charming gangster is transformed into a young man, who discovers during the time he is taking out a young woman, that his own father, whom he once idolized, has distant ties to certain elements of organized crime. This revelation leads the young man to a second revelation, namely, that there is a connection between adulthood and guilt, and that crime is sometimes a matter of moral ambiguity. Should he tell his wife-to-be? Whether the gangster's son marries the young woman in this story may be less important than the boy's moment of recognition of who he is in relation to the guilt or innocence of the adult world.

In this story, the boy's youth is an important thematic ingredient, and it is also helpful if the young person is intelligent enough to experience a kind of revelation. What is sometimes (and condescendingly) called "sensitivity" has entered the picture. *The Godfather* also tells this story, the representative figure in this case being not a man but Kay Corleone, née Adams, Michael's girlfriend and subsequently his wife. And we find versions of this state of affairs in the insights granted to Nick Carraway in *Gatsby* or

Catherine Sloper in *Washington Square* or Miranda in Katherine Anne Porter's "Old Mortality" or virtually all of the protagonists in J. D. Salinger's fiction or . . . many other characters in many other stories and novels. In this story the actions are less important than what is made of them in the protagonist's consciousness. The significance of the story has moved part or all of the way out of action into sensibility, and the product of action, in this model, is a kind of wisdom, often about hypocrisy. We have entered the thickets of the coming-of-age tale.

Writing the first story, Zeppo moves toward a dramatic climax in which the charming gangster engages in some appropriate conclusive action, usually violent. Having discarded that story, Zeppo moves toward a climactic moment in which the protagonist, who is now telling the story, says, in a moment of stunned clarity, "Suddenly I realized . . ."

In moving from story number one to story number two, Zeppo has relived the conversion that Henry James and James Joyce pioneered in the form of the Anglo-American short story when they steered it away from the plot structures tending to require a set of coincidences or contrivances of circumstance, which they found unacceptably coarse. Versions of the coincidence story—with a suppressed narrative or a "poetic justice" ending—can be found in the work of O. Henry, Somerset Maugham, Rudyard Kipling, Stanley Elkin, and Roald Dahl. But insistence on action has caused this sort of story to reside most often in the movies, where sensitive protagonists and their insights are not as effectively dramatized as hot-blooded

characters who take immediate steps to get what they want.

I have a feeling that the literary short story took up secular epiphanies because the movies didn't need them, or at least didn't require them as much as other more visible and dynamic narrative ingredients. Insight is a difficult quality to capture on film, and radiance, with its tendency toward visual bombast, is worse. But that's not the only reason. There's something here having to do with class. A professional-managerial class believes that it needs insights in order to survive. For the middle class, information and mental events are far more important than physical actions. Insights can lead to a sense of how things work and how they may be controlled, what a friend of mine used to call the "Bingo moment."

But I must confess a prejudice here, which is probably already apparent. I don't believe that a character's experiences in a story have to be validated by a conclusive insight or a brilliant visionary stop-time moment. Stories can arrive somewhere interesting without claiming any wisdom or clarification, without, really, claiming much of anything beyond their wish to follow a train of interesting events to a conclusion. I am begging the question by using the word "interesting" here, but not much. Nor do I think that the insight—if it does come—needs to be valid or true. Stories built from false insights have their own peculiar interest, particularly in a hard-sell society, all of whose economic pressures warp in the direction of secret knowledge that can be cannily merchandised.

One other trouble with epiphanic endings is that they

have become a tic, a habit, among writers (and editors) of literary fiction. Insights provide a certain kind of closure, and, not to put too vulgar a point on it, a payoff. Radiance, after a while, gets routine. That old insight train just comes chugging into the station, time after time. Flannery O'Connor once said that her aunt felt that a story had not really ended unless, at the conclusion, someone was either married or shot dead. If you gave Flannery O'Connor's aunt a college degree, she might very well demand, instead, an epiphany at the end of a story. In most anthologies of short stories published since the 1940s, insight endings or epiphanic endings account for approximately 50 to 85 percent of all the climactic moments. I once received a letter from an editor of a respected literary journal who complained that the story I had submitted to him was unsatisfying because "the amount of insight given to the protagonist is not great enough to justify the quantity of narrative detail."

This is not a stupid critical objection. It has some traces of reader weariness. This reader has probably read too much fiction that hasn't led anywhere. The fatigue has been inscribed in the critical position. Notice that in this statement, narrative detail is assumed to require a justification. That's the postmodern impatient middle-class Puritan speaking, sick to death of one story after another.

You almost have to get outside of a culture tainted by Puritanism to talk about other kinds of endings. Almost.

Obvious point: Short stories end before novels do and therefore have a more critical relation to the immediacy of closure and what might constitute it. Arguable point:

Characters in short stories, unlike the characters in novels, do not, as a rule, make long-term plans. They tend, instead, to be creatures of impulse.

The ending of the short story often does glance uneasily toward the future, but stories frequently try to keep both the past and the future bracketed and separate. The story form has an extraordinary capacity to sense what's been at stake in any action or encounter because it has a heightened feeling for immediate consequences. I want to lean here on the word "consequences." We can have stories of real consequence in which no discursive insight appears, or in which the insights are shown to be false (this is a kind of story one often finds in Borges). What if, as Raymond Carver argued, insights don't help and only make things worse? We can still see people acting meaningfully or stewing in their own juices or acting out of the depths of their bewilderment, and we can make of that what we will. A story, as Borges has shown, can be a series of clues but not a solution, an unfolding of a mystery instead of a revelation. It can contain the images without the attached discursive morality.

Bewilderment—in the moment before the insight arrives, *if* it arrives—has at least two very attractive features. One is its relation to comedy. The other is its solitary stubbornness.

Anti-epiphanic writing is perfectly capable of sneaking its own visionary eloquence through the back door, but it is usually at some pains to avoid the proclamation effect and the conclusiveness of vision or insight that I have been de-

scribing. It has been and probably will always be a kind of minority writing: quarrelsome, hilarious, and mulish. It is resistant to authority. Instead of a conclusive arrival somewhere, we end, or rest, at a garden of forking paths, or an apartment complex where no one knows how to start the car, but everyone has an opinion, possibly worthless, about the matter.

To line up with the anti-epiphanic is to withdraw from officialdom. Officials, and official culture, are full of epiphanies and insights and dogmas. One is free to be sick of that mode of discourse.

In James Alan McPherson's "Elbow Room," the concluding story in his book of that title, the narrative, the paraphrasable part of it, has to do with the courtship, marriage, and parenthood of Paul Frost, a young white man from Kansas, and Virginia Valentine, a young black woman from outside Knoxville. The story, however, has another level: the narrator's meditation on them and their baby and on his story generally, and his bemusement over his (possible) inadequacy in telling about the story "clearly." In the course of the story, Paul seems to metamorphose in some manner into a different kind of man (he is called a "nigger" twice), and the narrator makes a considerable point of not knowing exactly what his own story means, and in particular what has happened to his central characters.

But the story has a third voice as well: a representative of officialdom, an editor, whose comments, *in italics*, litter the story with demands for clarity and insight. Quite properly, this editor is faceless. We know nothing about him or

her except for the nagging comments that s/he makes all the way through the story. This editor is a police-state formalist and keeper of the orders, and as such s/he has the first and last words, both of them indictments:

Narrator is unmanageable. . . . Insists on unevenness as a virtue. Flaunts an almost barbaric disregard for the moral mysteries, or integrities, of traditional narrative modes. This flaw in his discipline is well demonstrated here. In order to save this narration, editor felt compelled to clarify slightly, not to censor but to impose at least the illusion of order.

Those "moral mysteries" sound like Stephen Dedalus talking. At the end of the story, the narrator disowns insight, after having been badgered by the editor-in-italics. "It was from the beginning not my story. I lack the insight to narrate its complexities. But it may still be told." Several sentences later, of course, the editor butts in again, with a final nagging insert: "*Comment is unclear. Explain. Explain.*" Nevertheless, all the way through this tale, the editor has been obtuse about the complexities of racism, narration, identity, and storytelling, and has wanted these matters wrapped up and commodified, as if for an anthology to be used for pedagogical purposes. "Elbow Room" resists the editor's packaging, absolutely. It will not grant the editor—which after all may be an inner editor—the neatness of clarity, because any clarity concerning its events would be false to the shadings and nuances of Paul and Virginia's story and the narrator's own itchy involvement with it. It is the most complex American story I know about a resis-

tance to the packaging of neat explanations of racism for the edification of readers. To the degree that the story resists that packaging, it gives back to its events the dignity of their own complexity.

The story is not, however, widely known as a classic. It shrugs off portentous declamations and in general resists the earthshaking masterpiece tone, meant to impress and terrify. It sets before us, instead, the fictionality of all insight. What a relief.

Here is the totality of a story by Lydia Davis called "Disagreement," printed in *Indiana Review*:

He said she was disagreeing with him. She said No, that was not true, he was disagreeing with her. This was about the screen door. That it should not be left open was her idea, because of the flies; his was that it could be left open first thing in the morning, when there were no flies on the deck. Anyway, he said, most of the flies came from other parts of the building: in fact, he was probably letting more of them out than in.

This particular story is not from her book *Break It Down*, although it would fit well in that collection of virtuoso oddball exercises in comic and anguished skepticism. In that collection, Lydia Davis seems, sometimes, to be reinventing the short-story form each time that she sits down to write. (Most of the stories, I should add, are longer than this one, but they are not so much developmental as permutational; they do not advance on a line so much as spin on a point, and report on what is glimpsed from that par-

ticular angle before turning to a different angle on the same point. They are not revolutionary so much as rotational.) What she often produces is a report on a world in which insights are flattened by the exasperated monochromatic voice into minimal observations that are then contested by other observations, reported in exactly the same manner.

These stories stare, critically, at their own language. They are particularly interested in debased and public languages that people are gleefully using without knowing what they mean. Consequences arrive whose truth cannot be paraphrased because that particular language won't permit it.

There is probably a limit to how many of these stories can be absorbed on their own terms before some readerly failure-to-respond kicks in, but they have the virtue of their own obsessiveness, and, often (as in "Disagreement") they process heated exchanges through almost comically elaborate and distanced syntax. "That it should not be left open was her idea, because of the flies. . . ." The language of contract law, of hair-splitting, of intelligence generally at its wit's end informs this and many of her other sentences. These stories glimpse an opportunity in mangled Cartesian rationalism never to arrive at a still point of the turning world. The still point is screwed, almost literally, to the wall, and is forced to spin.

If I were not me and overheard me from below, as a neighbor, talking to him, I would say to myself how glad I was not to be her, not to be sounding the way she is

sounding, with a voice like her voice and an opinion like her opinion. But I cannot hear myself from below, as a neighbor, and cannot know how I ought not to sound, I cannot be glad I am not her, as I would be if I could hear her. . . .

That is from "From Below, as a Neighbor."

In these stories there is a gradual freezing of the narrative frame. It seems to me to involve a stop-time effect but without the accompanying discursive enlightenment, and it depends (in the examples I've given from McPherson and Davis) not on the resources of conflict resolution, but on the resources of quarreling. The quarrel is not resolved; the quarrel goes on; the quarrel becomes the life. But gradually the frame and the elemental ingredients of the story begin to freeze in their position. Raymond Carver's stories often seem to freeze at the end, particularly those unforgiving stories in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. It is sometimes hard to tell if this effect is meant to be funny or not. The tone is so undecidable that one is free to laugh or fall into some other condition. There is a certain refusal to please the crowd that hardens into an attitude, a pose, and the hardening of an attitude can be comic, but only if you have a certain distance from it.

At the end of "Viewfinder," a man without hands, who goes door to door making a living by taking pictures of peoples' houses, makes the acquaintance of the narrator. The narrator, in his fashion, has been sitting and looking out of the window after his wife and children have left him. He has been brewing coffee and making Jell-O. He lets

the man without hands use the bathroom and drink the coffee. It's "Cathedral" without the cathedral and the healing and the late-night lifting of the spirit, which is to say that it's quite a different story. At the end the narrator climbs onto the roof of his house, the sort of locale, given the altitude, where epiphanies often come from, at least in the suburbs. But instead of getting a view of things, the long view, for example, this is what the narrator gets, and what he does with it:

It was then that I saw them, the rocks. It was like a little rock nest on the screen over the chimney hole. You know kids. You know how they lob them up, thinking to sink one down your chimney.
 "Ready?" I called, and I got a rock, and I waited until he had me in his viewfinder.
 "Okay!" he called.

I laid back my arm and I hollered, "Now!" I threw that son of a bitch as far as I could throw it.
 "I don't know," I heard him shout. "I don't do action shots."

"Again!" I screamed, and took up another rock.

Instead of having an insight, the narrator acts out. The story ends in the middle of an action, as the narrator picks up another rock. Anger can be its own poetry and does not need to be assuaged. One could say that the story has an exacting focus on its objects without extracting any radiance from them. This kind of story begins an action but does not complete it.

We find this in many other short stories. Perhaps my fa-

vorite practitioner of the mode is Dino Buzzati, in his collection *Restless Nights*, and in such stories as "The Falling Girl." The falling girl, at the beginning of her story, "leaned out over the railing and let herself go. She felt as if she were hovering in the air, but she was falling."

But she is not, as it happens, falling swiftly. She falls in fictional time, rather than real time. Events slow down for her and seem, gradually, to freeze. The effect is lyric and comic and rather tender. (It is not so tender with another practitioner of this mode, Italo Calvino, whose fiction enjoys trapping its protagonists in formal boxlike structures with violence-prone antagonists just outside.) Marta, the falling girl, has conversations with cocktail-party guests out on their balconies; she refuses the occasional flirtatious gesture; she continues to fall.

A young man, tall, dark, very distinguished, extended an arm to snatch her. She liked him. And yet Marta quickly defended herself: "How dare you, sir?" and she had time to give him a little tap on the nose.

The beautiful people, then, were interested in her and that filled her with satisfaction. She felt fascinating, stylish.

It does not take a particularly attentive reader to realize that Marta will never reach the ground, at least in this story. The action has started but has not, will not, complete itself, and the fall begins to convert itself into a sweetly suspended metaphor. Metaphor is holding Marta up in the air. No one is going to arrive anywhere in this story. We don't even end with Marta, but with an unidentified man musing

about the falling women (he lives near the ground, and the girls have grown old by the time they fall past his floor). Their apartment is cheap, his wife says, because the girls have aged by the time they get there. The man sips his coffee. He thinks about his wife's observation. Perhaps it is not true. The story seems to end...

The epiphany was never meant to be used for merchandising and therapy. It is not easily adapted to a mass market. But practical measures have been applied. The job has been done. These singular occasions of perception have become so ubiquitous that a refusal of them seems not so much perverse as quietly heroic. No one wants to be numbered among the lost, exactly, or among those without the resources of insight; everyone wants to be saved. It all has to do with the conditions of salvation. Sometimes it may be better to muddle through, slow down the action, and put on a few ironies for the time being. German literature right now is exemplary in its employment of fastidious and lyrical irony. It has to be. It's a correction. Just because there is no religion around doesn't mean that the rest of us aren't under intense pressure to be saved these days, not when there is so much money to be made in the saving of us. Now that the production of epiphanies has become a business, the unenlightened are treated with sad pity, and with the little grace notes of contempt.

There are the happy ones on the ship, embarking, outward bound. And then there are the rest of us, standing on the dock.

Sometimes readers are not going to be helped along by

the stories they read. Literature is not an instruction manual. For obvious reasons, this is rarely noted in fiction. Denis Johnson's narrator in "Car Crash While Hitchhiking," however, leaves himself narratively in that story in detox at Seattle General Hospital. He is hallucinating, flopping like a fish, and then on his stomach, as the nurse injects him with what she says are vitamins. Here is the last paragraph of the story:

It was raining. Gigantic ferns leaned over us. The forest drifted down a hill. I could hear a creek rushing down among rocks. And you, you ridiculous people, you expect me to help you.

On Defamiliarization

42

42

We start, this time, at a funeral. It's April. I'm sitting at the back of a church, where a memorial service is being staged for someone I did not know well. My responsibility is simple: to swell the crowd. I am present in the group of mourners for the benefit of the family, some of whose members I do know. For once, I am a willing statistic in a head count. Such a role makes almost anyone uneasy about social life: I mean the disturbing manner in which publicly displayed feelings tend to become stacy and to turn whatever surrounds them into theater. Contemporary poetry readings usually have this quality. Likewise the boy's-night-out and the business lunch and the bridal shower. They often have a kind of acted-out, scripted emotional life. In a similar way, family reunions sometimes shimmer with performance anxiety. In the midst of planned hilarity, we witness the show business of everyday life. Now, in this church, I have almost no feelings for, as the minister calls him, "the departed." Nevertheless, I am here.

With my attention wandering, I am trying not to look self-conscious. I pay attention to what people are wearing and am perversely pleased when I see food stains. I glance around at the corners of this gloomy Gothic Revival church. The stained glass is beautiful but in a stingy and pinched small-town Midwestern manner. All the beauty in the Midwest, I think irritably, is on a *budget*. A measured sampling of color in the stained glass was all the past generations in this city would tolerate. But so far, everything is going according to form: Episcopalians are in charge. The cut flowers—lilies, I think—are out on display, the organist has played Buxtehude and Bach, and the minister is reading an elegy that is touching and probably, within its limited terms, accurate.

By the end of the service, I am glancing at the faces of the mourners and doing my best to hide myself. I am beginning to feel like an intruder, the orphan of good intentions, whose feelings are at the opposite pole from sentimentality; this interesting and nagging condition has no name, at least in English: You are supposed to feel some emotion, but can't. You are supposed to display feelings you don't actually have. This condition is one of the many sources of collective social anxiety, and the accumulation of performance strain in day-to-day life causes an emotional disturbance that is visible on faces in the crowd: a drawn, exhausted look from hours of compulsory insincerity.

People bred to social and urban organizations are forced to confront the dribs and drabs of social make-believe almost by the hour. Whitman recognized the problem and thought that it was breeding and spreading in

America after the Civil War in the rise of oligopolistic business practices. Out of his delicate rage, in "Democratic Vistas," he described how men and women lose themselves "in countless masses of adjustment." By now it's a familiar story. Driving home, I think with guilty annoyance about the eulogy. My problem was that I hadn't known the deceased well enough to know his failings—those features by which I might have identified with him—and the litany of praise only managed to distance him from me. I wanted a recital of his failures and oddities, which is exactly what Episcopalians do *not* hold up for display at funerals.

Most funerals contain a kind of narrative, a partial, inside narrative meant for the public or an idea of the public. The persona memorialized is remembered for his or her qualities, lovability, or achievements. But to misuse slightly a word from psychoanalysis, such a recitation is all overdetermined. All the arrows point in one direction: a characteristic feature of public rhetoric. In such a terminal narrative, everything fits. Because the details of the narrated life have a single function, the mourners feel that they have discharged a civic obligation. Tolstoy writes shrewdly about such survivor politesse in the opening section of *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, but he cannot resist a barely controlled Tolstoyan irascibility at the truthlessness of such occasions, visible in the scurrying around, the unpleasantly mouse-like qualities that he gives to Ivan Ilych's remaining family and friends, particularly Pavel Ivanovich.

If stories and novels used the selective form of funeral elegies, no one would read them. Characters who are entirely likable or admirable—who are remembered in the

way that funeral elegies remember people—have a tendency to become either allegorical or bland. Narrated this way, they don't stay in the memory. Perversely, they vanish instead. By contrast, in fiction, characters are under no obligation to be good; they only have to be interesting. This statement is less tautological than it looks. As readers, we are asked to have feelings about people we haven't met and don't know, imaginary people who are strangers to us, and the only way to elicit those feelings involves using information about characters that doesn't fit a neat identity theme. Better yet, it may be unfavorable to them. The difference between fictional art and public rhetoric is that in fiction, the arrows point in *all* sorts of directions.

The problem I'm struggling to define arises with particular intensity when fiction is put to some social use. Social pressure makes demands and asks for model citizens, both in literature and outside of it. The obvious examples—the New Soviet Man in the era of socialist realism, the formulas of genre literature, including lonely beauties and mysterious romantic aristocrats—don't require much rethinking. But the problem for writers is that some social pressure of an obscure unanalyzable kind operates on characterization. Editors, agents, teachers, friends, and common readers are not slow to tell writers about what kind of characters they would like to see stalking through their pages. Even when these voices are absent, most writers feel their presence, like a star whose gravitational field bends the light that passes through it.

The first time I read Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, I was still in high school. I read the novel in one sitting in front of a window fan. Shrike's "first church of Christ, dentist" and his hysterical irony about art and redemption had a pleasing adolescent nastiness. I broke out into a sweat but not because of the heat. It was a readerly sweat. In a bit of a daze, I walked down the hill from our house to the lake and went swimming alone in the dark, which I had been instructed, countless times, never to do.

Miss Lonelyhearts himself made no sense to me as a character. That senselessness was pleasurable: He was like no one and nothing I'd ever encountered. At *his* funeral you would have no idea what to say, but in my mind a blank space full of misery and compassion waited for the likes of him. He instantly filled it. What a pleasure to recognize something without knowing *what* you're recognizing! He effortlessly took the shape of an emotion I knew but had no name for. In certain respects he was a character of pure contradiction. I couldn't have said that he was a thin shell built to house a relatively pure feeling, although that's a phrase that occurs to me now. What I loved about the book was that most of the rules, as far as I understood them, were being broken so that a memory stain resulted.

Miss Lonelyhearts has nothing to do with the pleasures of recognition. Its impatience with realism is quite feverish. The book has instead a peculiarly pure interest in the derangements of meaning. Recognition is forced to yield to a sort of comic-grotesque literary cartoon of the unnameable. Shock has something to do with this experience. So does

the perception that profound emotions, at least in America, often *feel* cheap.

Unlike the austere purity of Beckett's unnameable, West's version of what lies beyond language is likely to come barging out of a comic book or a luncheonette. What he understands about the American sublime is that the aura, here, does not attach itself to churches or official monuments but to doggerel objects like mannequins, neon signs, and junk jewelry. In a letter, Rilke sneeringly refers to the products of America as "dummy life," but dummy life fascinates West because it's there that the spirit seems to have taken hidden refuge in America. West, of course, was obsessed by Hollywood, and with the semi-mechanical human beings in Los Angeles from whom the humanity seemed to have leaked.

A transition. Now it's February. A student of mine has turned in an eight-page story. The point of view is first person detached: In other words, an adult is telling (in the present tense, however) a story about what happened to her as a child. The story is written in six seemingly unconnected scenes, with space breaks but no transitions. A reasonably good workshop story, its milieu is a lower-middle-class family in a blue-collar suburb of Detroit. In the first scene, a family is barbequing their Sunday afternoon meal in the backyard when the father interrupts the meal to make a strange frantic speech about baseball. In the second scene, he buys a clunker car, takes it to this same backyard, and is about to fix it up when he decides to buy a speedboat, which, after a few spins, he also transports to

his backyard on a trailer. He keeps buying objects that the family doesn't need. After a while the yard is so crowded with junk that it's impossible to barbeque there. In another scene, the father interrupts a picnic by building too large a fire, using gasoline, and in yet another he stops a Little League game by yelling gross obscenities at the umpire, in front of the children. It gradually dawns on the reader, in this case, me, that the story is about the father's alcoholism, a cause or effect of his bad behavior. In the subsequent scenes, there's an all-American setting (a state fair, a bar-and-grill) where the tone of placid companionable activity is ruined by the father's misbehavior. It's like a Norman Rockwell painting with a charcoal-sketched demon raving away at the edges.

As I read through the subsequent scenes and began to think, "Uh oh, he's going to be drunk again," the story's initial surprises began to seem less wonderful, even though its details were excellent, and the story was never anything but truthful. But the story had begun to read itself too early, and before very long it was always and only about one thing, with the result that all the details fit in perfectly. All the arrows pointed in the same direction. When all the details fit in perfectly, something is probably wrong with the story. It is too meaningful too fast. Its meaning is overdetermined and the characters overparented. When writers overparent their characters, they understand them too quickly. Such characters aren't contradictory or misfitted. The writer has decided what her story is about too early and has concentrated too fixedly on that one truth. Well, what's wrong with the truth, and under what condi-

tions does the truth grow undramatic, that is, without tension or instability? There's an issue here having to do with familiarity and writing, and anybody who has spent any time at all writing fiction has some intuitive sense of what this issue is.

This question is a remnant of the obsession of the Modernists with their own historical belatedness. The Modernists, many of them, experienced themselves as latecomers to virtually any scene that mattered. They felt that the truth had gotten stale, and they consequently came to dislike the word "truth." Erik Satie: "I was born very young in a very old time." This sense of things can be tracked already in the mid-nineteenth century with Flaubert, whose horror of clichés is simultaneously a spiritual nausea at arriving at all experience late, after everyone else has already gotten there, and a kind of revulsion at language that has been soiled by having been spoken first by the previous multitudes. Life, for Flaubert, is mostly a matter of making do with leftovers. Most experience, for him, has already started to rot, like a nearly inedible peach around whose decomposing sections you must eat with terrible, precise bites. I have always thought that this accounts for Flaubert's interest in affairs and in situations in which young men fall in love with married women. Charles Bovary, as a schoolboy, arrives late in class. Bouvard and Pecuchet arrive late at every subject on which they focus their easygoing haphazard attention.

One side-struggle of the wars of the avant-garde in the early decades of this century involved finding a way of introducing novelty into writing, the appearance of the new-

born, the aesthetics of shock and surprise. Ezra Pound, that great demander, demanded, "Make it new." Diaghilev asked of Jean Cocteau, "Étonne-moi, Jean." The signs of success in this mode are the opening-night riot and the literary criminal. Norms are violated, the audience is shaken, and the artist-as-revolutionary gains tremendous authority. (In a certain light, this situation can seem to be all about artistic authority; after all, what composer today is looked up to as Stravinsky was?)

The anxiety of belatedness springs from an aesthetic restlessness, a troubled recognition that it is not always enough simply to tell a truth in art, especially if the truth has no dramatic tension or has lost its emotional force. The truth can get dull. It may fall into a nonnarratable condition. There is an odd, stranger-at-the-funeral sensation in the face of art that is truthful but too familiar, where the author is deeply moved, but no one else is. Most writers understand Chekhov's invitation to tell the truth *clearly* and *absolutely*; and writing that does not bother to tell the truth may fall into all sorts of errors of false dramatization, such as sensationalism or pornographic highlighting. In the late nineteenth century and the early part of this century artists became collectively worried—they noticed, all at once, that it was not enough to tell any story in a dramatic medium because its truth might have become familiar. In fact, all kinds of stories had become crushingly familiar.

What is the real relation between familiarity and contempt? This is by no means a simple question. Many marriage counselors think about this issue for long periods of time, as if it were a Zen koan. Familiarity, after all, is a kind

of power, the power to predict and the power to abstract. It replaces the pleasure of the unknown with the pleasures of security. It signals that our defenses are in place and are working. The kingdom is running smoothly. It's running smoothly because no one is learning anything. As in the story of the drunken father, all the details support the one central theme.

The assumption that some writers work from, that any valuable truth may essentially be dramatic, is clearly and unhappily mistaken. What I would argue is that the truth that writers are after may be dramatic only if has been forgotten first: if the story, in other words, pulls something contradictory and concealed out of its hiding place.

Anybody who has spent more than about twenty minutes in a fiction workshop will be familiar with this scene: Somebody's work is being critiqued. The piece is competent and about common life but rather conventional, without anarchy or excitement, and some devil's advocate in the room says, *Well, all right, the piece is competently written but, well it's sort of...* and there's a long pause while a substitute for the word "boring" is searched for. I've never heard participants in a writing workshop call a boring story "boring." It's bad form. They talk about dramatic construction or they say, "I had a problem with the pacing." All the same, it's obvious what they mean. And the writer of this piece, wounded all over again by life, eventually says, "But it really happened!" or "It's all true!"

A certain segment of the contemporary avant-garde has entered this particular fray by insisting on the principle of

novelty or absolute innovation in technique or subject. If subjects about which you can say, "It's all true!" have become familiar, as all subjects must, then we shall concentrate on the language. Paraphrasing William Gass, there are no characters on the page, only words. Such a statement is unarguable but false to an experience of reading that concentrates on characters. It's like telling a bride on her wedding night that her spouse's body *really* consists of carbon molecules and hydrogen atoms and smaller subatomic particles such as quarks. It's true, but priggish, and beside the point. I admire visible language in fiction, but a fixation on it turns esoteric and mandarin quickly, and it does not really solve the problem of familiarity. It's like trying to fill an empty bank account by changing the pattern on the checks.

What's left of the avant-garde—there isn't much because anything can be packaged and made mainstream in this country—continues to insist on the (highly problematical) concepts of innovation and marginality. The old is relegated to the dustbin of history, and the new is briefly given its moment, usually by an outsider. This set of ideas replicates the production, use, and waste model of industrial consumption and capitalism. It also claims to be an attack on the bourgeoisie, but it uses a commodity model from free enterprise capitalism, and it packages itself with outrage. Outrage sells. Commercially successful commodified outrage is a dubious but by no means unknown category in American culture. One branch of the avant-garde has always thrived on throwing things out. To make it new, you have to haul the garbage away, and, in this particular

ideology, there's a lot of garbage. Against this model of aesthetic clear-cutting one could propose a kind of ecology aesthetics, opposed to the obsession with innovation and waste. Conventionalized innovation, as Donald Barthelme, among others, knew very well, can become a tiresome cliché. "It is difficult," the narrator of Barthelme's "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace" complains, "to keep the public interested . . . the supply of new ideas is not endless."

Right. The tradition of novelty, of ongoing necessary novelty has created a permanent confusion in this century in workshops and elsewhere. At the outer edge of experimentalism, innovation tends to put new lingerie on the banal. Many of us who are associated with writing programs have been made uneasy by these problems, and probably worry that we may be institutionalizing a series of conventional and conservative strategies for writing fiction. (That is what we are accused of, anyway, by the remnant of the avant-garde.) I myself have been made uneasy by these charges. But it seems to me that the concept of novelty, while not mistaken, is historically somewhat misleading, at least as a solution to the problem of familiarity, and I want to offer up another way to think about this matter by introducing, from Russian formalist criticism and the Russian critic Viktor Shklovsky, the concept of *defamiliarization*, which means to make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar. As another way of getting at this problem, I want to cite an idea from the notebooks of Gerard Manley Hopkins concerning the nature of the obsessive

image, the "widowed" image, the image that sticks in the memory as if glued there.

Hopkins appeared to believe that images became memorable when some crucial part of their meaning had been stripped from them. Sometimes an obsessive image is the product of a trauma. The trauma cannot be remembered but has left its trace in misfit details. You may not remember your violent abusive uncle very well, but his blue glass ashtray or his decoy duck stays in your memory as if riveted there. The burden of the feeling is taken on by the objects. Shock is registered through these objects but the origin of the shock is protected. The objects, as a consequence, have a feeling of impatience and scale, as a fetish does.

Hopkins describes these obsessive images of objects as things for which he has not "found the law." They are unfulfilled in meaning, but they take up a lot of room in the memory as if in compensation. They seem both gratuitous and inexplicably necessary.

In 1917 Viktor Shklovsky published an essay called "Art As Technique," which, among its other tasks, is a commentary on Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. Shklovsky concerns himself with numbness and boredom as problems of life and problems of art. He refers to the response of seeing the same thing several times as "algebrization." Algebrization is what we'd now call a coping mechanism. Algebrization is the process of turning an event or familiar object into an automatic symbol. It's like saying, *Oh, she's*

having another one of her crazy tantrums, or, *Yeah, it's another goddamn freeway gridlock*. We protect ourselves from the force of her tantrum by turning it into an algebraic equivalent: Let x be the tantrum. Well, she's having another x . It's just one of those things she does. Here's Shklovsky:

By this "algebraic" method of thought we apprehend objects only as shapes with imprecise extensions; we do not see them in their entirety but rather recognize them by their main characteristics. We see the object as though it were enveloped in a sack. We know what it is by its configuration, but we see only its silhouette. The object, perceived thus in the manner of prose perception, fades and does not leave even a first impression.

Shklovsky goes on to say that familiarity follows what he calls an economy of perception. You can't be equally attentive to everything. You have to budget your attention. That's how you survive. In order to drive to work, you can't treat every corner, every piece of perceptual material, as new, as if it were an image in a poem by Mallarmé. You have to drive the car; you have to get to work; you have to assume some familiarity with the problems you face or else you won't solve them, you'll just stare at them.

The process of defamiliarization is a technique for finding a certain kind of detail that resists the fitting of the object into a silhouette, that is, into a ready-made symbolization. Shklovsky advises a search for elements that don't fit—*misfit* details. He begins by arguing that if you have a familiar object or action to describe, you would do well not to name it, or to give it a new name, or to write as if you're

seeing it for the first time, in a state of what might be called profitable forgetting. (Paul Valéry: "Seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees.") In one example, Shklovsky argues that Tolstoy, in his story "Shame," defamiliarizes a scene of flogging in this way: "to strip people who have broken the law, to hurl them on the floor, to rap on their bottoms with switches." Then Tolstoy remarks, "Just why precisely this stupid, savage means of causing pain and not any other—why not prick the shoulders or any part of the body with needles, squeeze the hands or the feet in a vise, or anything like that?" Tolstoy wants to be obtuse about torture—he doesn't get it. He doesn't see why anyone *should* get it.

In another example, Shklovsky shows how Tolstoy defamiliarizes a scene by shifting the perceptual center away from what you would expect, from a human being, in one particular case, to a horse in the story "Kholstomer." Shklovsky, in his discussion of this story, says, rather wonderfully, that "an image is not a permanent referent for those complexities of life which are revealed through it; its purpose is not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception of the object—it creates a vision of the object instead of serving as a means of knowing it." A point of view that is off-center, a deflected point of view, may liberate the meanings of a story. As one gets older, the story of Hansel and Gretel becomes more interesting only when told from the point of view of the witch.

Shklovsky is talking about a process in which the object is stripped of its usual meanings. It is desymbolized, widowed. This removes the tyranny of meaning over

event. Art that is overcontrolled by its meanings may start to go a bit dead: The images in the story will have a wilted quality, the feel of the vehement message about to leap over the experience. The image or scene will have been clapped onto a use function, and because everything has become pre-programmed, it becomes airless. Instead of being an experience, it has become a vehicle of opinions.

There is always something anarchic about the imagination: It likes to find details that don't belong, that don't fit. On the way to divorce court, we stop at the Dairy Queen. Your mean-spirited neighbor plays the violin and weeps while performing "Humoresque." Street gangs sometimes act like families, and families sometimes act like street gangs. The familiar gives way, not to the weird, but to the experience of a truth caught in midair. It produces the near laughter of recognition, as if every truth contains within it another truth that neatly contradicts it.

An example of this discovery of an opposite essence: Sherwood Anderson's story "Adventure," in *Winesburg, Ohio*. Anderson has a habit of pushing his situations toward desperation and then inserting a moment of bland stupidity in the middle of what would otherwise be melodramatic. Anderson was interested in lives in which desires and the satisfaction of those desires were relentlessly out of alignment. Emotional misalignment is one of his great subjects, what Montaigne called "soul error"—wanting what you know you can't have. Misalignment might be another subdivision of defamiliarization.

In the story "Adventure" there is a character named Alice Hindman. Early on in life she has an affair with a

young man named Ned Currie. At the conclusion of their affair, he makes promises to her that he will return to town—he's leaving for Chicago—and marry her. Of course he has no intention of doing so. Not so extraordinary a story so far. So Alice waits back at home. During the day, she works in a dry goods store. She becomes obsessed with Ned. She prays to him. She thinks about him. Years pass. Ned does not return, but Alice continues to believe that he will.

One summer night, however, when she is twenty-seven years old, her belief system breaks down. She now knows that Ned won't come back and that she has been fundamentally—spiritually and sexually—humiliated. Outside, it's raining. The bottled-up force of her erotic feelings comes over her, and she gets an impulse to take off her clothes and to run naked in the rain in front of her house. And so she does. At this point, we are in what later became David Lynch Land, where the banal gives rise to melodrama and hysteria. (In Lynch's films, the grotesque, hallucinatory, and hysterical are the sole treasures of contemporary American life.)

But in Anderson's scene, as Alice is standing naked on the sidewalk, a man comes along, stumbling homeward. There are many ways of writing what follows, and they all depend on tone. The scene that Anderson wrote is both inevitable and unexpected and involves a genuine idea about loneliness. Alice, naked, rushes up to the man and says, "Don't go away! Whoever you are, you must wait!" And this man—who, the narrator tells us, is old and somewhat deaf—says, "What? What say?" And he goes on, tottering

down the street. Defeated, Alice returns home, puts on her nightgown, and goes to bed, turning her face to the wall. She has had what amounts to a vision, and the vision is about the power of nakedness and sexuality in a culture of absentmindedness and obliviousness.

It is not the peculiarity or sensationalism of Alice's running in the rain that makes this a remarkable and memorable scene for me. What distinguishes it is that Anderson has pushed it out of sensationalism back into what I would call the resources of *surprising banality*, with that old deaf oblivious man, who is completely blind to the fact that he has encountered a naked young woman on the sidewalk. A young naked woman is supposed to compel attention. In Anderson's society, and, for that matter, in ours, there is the virtually universal and somewhat Puritanical idea that a naked woman's body inevitably invites the tyranny and the cruelty of the gaze. We hardly question it. But Anderson is writing about blank lovelessness and sexual invisibility, and inside such a feeling is the perception that, when you are desperate for attention, you will *not* get it. Attention is exactly what Winesburg and the circumstances of Alice Hindman's life deny her. As a woman and a human being, she has been erased from Winesburg's map, and her body, her last semiotic appeal, or vulnerability, or precious secret—it's all of these things, but it will not be reduced to one meaning—carries the burden of her longing, and becomes the record of her erasure.

There is a pileup of contradictory emotions in this scene: sensuality and boredom and rage and revelation. The fallacy of much fiction is that in any particular mo-

ment we are feeling one emotion, when in fact we are feeling many emotions at once, many of them contradictory, such as lust and gloom. But of course lust and gloom often go together (*Women in Love*, *Ulysses*, *To the Lighthouse*), as do depression and cheerfulness (Evan Connell's brilliant *Mrs. Bridge*). What is a bored ecstasy like? What does one feel in the midst of pessimistic hope? Is there such a thing as a furious tenderness? Why are so many psychopaths lovable? The monsters we have all known in our lives are monsters almost by definition because they are often not monsters, and we expect them to be one way, and they turn out to be another. That's why we admitted them into our lives in the first place.

Psychopaths, after all, are great charmers. Bad people are good people who have gone on a sort of lifelong spiritual vacation, and who remember to be decent from time to time. In Shklovsky's terms, we can defamiliarize our expectations by destabilizing our characterizations, our narrative events, or our language, as say John Ashbery's poetry does. Ashbery's poetry is like an antique shop full of cast-off and secondhand phrases. The poetry itself is notable not for its new ideas—it doesn't have any—but for the new ways dull ideas and clichéd language can be employed. Ashbery himself combines a tone of full authority and total bewilderment.

Instead of making our narrative events and our characters more colorful, we might make them thicker, more undecidable, more contradictory and unrecognizable. In the example from Sherwood Anderson I've just used, the structure of the episode is close to a joke, but what is most

lovable about Sherwood Anderson as a writer is that when pain is present in a story, Anderson never sees the joke. He will not—as Hemingway, for example, sometimes does—permit us the distance to regard their sufferings as comic.

Schopenhauer said that the business of the novelist is not to relate great events but to make small ones interesting. So much for *War and Peace*. All the same, it's not hard to see what he means. It's not the size of the event that counts in a story, it's the size of the frame built around that event. A wedding ring's size, in fiction as in a film, depends on how closely you're looking at it. The intensity of the attention changes the size of the frame and changes the sense of scale. Sometimes the intensity of this attention is a product of perceptual misalignment.

It may be more productive in telling a story to choose a narrator or a narrative point of view of someone who does not know what his own story means. Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* is the textbook example of the obtuse narrator, but there are many others. I'm not talking about unreliable narrators here so much as a narrator whose point of view doesn't mesh quite properly with what s/he is seeing. Humbert Humbert, a cultivated but homicidally perverse European, has to find out about American motel culture for the rest of us, as if he were a sort of sexual Lewis and Clark. Benjy does not understand the South and would not be able to read the book in which he appears, *The Sound and the Fury*. Gatsby does not tell Gatsby's story; Nick Carraway does. Nick does not know exactly what the story means and allows it to go interestingly askew.

I do not read Russian, but I understand Shklovsky's

term in Russian, *ostraneniye*, literally to mean "making strange." The key here may be to add an adverb: moderately strange, slightly strange. The moderately strange in the middle of the ordinary is the lens for focusing the ordinary. Without it, the ordinary has nothing against which to define itself. The excessively strange gets us into overcolorization, characters who are "characters," and actions with a Hollywood-like event inflation. What's needed, in such cases, is what physicists call "renormalization."

You don't cry at the funeral unless you have had the time to know the person who has died and to know that person in success as well as failure. In some sense, taking on imaginatively the person who has died, you *become* that person. Defamiliarization is finally more about the way in which we recognize ourselves in an action and simultaneously see someone we don't recognize. Something has been widened, images have been freed from their meanings, something escapes us. We usually cannot recognize ourselves in a piece of fiction unless we have been taken down a path in which we find ourselves split and we meet ourselves coming in the other direction. Recognition is re-cognitions: not finding ourselves where we expected to be but where we did not expect to be found, and at a moment when our defenses are down. We wake up next to someone we've lived with for years but suddenly do not know. It's like that moment when, often early in the morning, perhaps in a strange house, you pass before a mirror you hadn't known would be there. You see a glimpse of someone reflected in that mirror, and a moment passes before you recognize

that that person is yourself. Literature exists in moments like that.

Notes

Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Journals and Papers*. Edited by Humphrey House (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 193–194. I am following a discussion of the widowed image in Irving Massey, *Find You the Virtue: Ethics, Image and Desire in Literature* (Fairfax: The George Mason University Press, 1987): 153–155.

Viktor Shklovsky, "Art As Technique," in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. Translated and edited by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (University of Nebraska Press, 1965).

Against Epiphanies

LS