

NOTES TOWARD A SUPREME FICTION

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I WAS BORN IN INDIA at the end of World War II. My mother had come to Calcutta in the hope of welcoming my father alive out of Burma where she believed the Japanese had interned him. They had. The Indian army brought him down in a truck to Rangoon from a hospital near Prome. Then, because of a mix-up, instead of his coffin being shipped to Calcutta, it ended up, after a ten-week voyage via Hong Kong (a slow change of holds here), in Vancouver. My mother hadn't realized he was dead until she received a cable at the American Consulate in Calcutta. Her husband, for reasons she later claimed were flimsy, had volunteered for a classified mission against the Japanese in Burma a few months before Truman dropped the Bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As a pilot in the R.C.A.F. he knew how to parachute. He also happened to know some Japanese from working as a teen-ager on fishboats out of Steveston in the thirties. Perhaps he'd gone into the rain forest to broadcast false messages over the wireless to confound the Japs. But with his accent? My mother later told me he sounded like George Burns speaking Japanese. His being shot for having a comedian's accent isn't something I used to go around telling people in school about my posthumously decorated father. Accounting for him, and I very much wished him to be accounted for, required a degree of limpid fabrication.

Well. Most of this never happened at all.

What has happened, today as I sit down to write, is that the Nobel Prize for Literature has gone to the novelist William Golding. Listening to the Academy's somewhat clotted citation, "for his novels which with perspicuity of realistic narrative art and the diversity and the universality of myth illuminate the human condition in the world today," I am oddly reassured by the rhetoric. Somehow it exonerates the question-begging title I have borrowed in honour of this journal's silver anniversary. The rhetoric strenuously refuses to accept the demise of great fiction, even today, and attributes to the tattered novelist wandering out of the jungle in shock, carrying with him his book of life, a unique and valuable knowledge. A wry smile of satisfaction comes to the survivor's lips. He feels something of a hero. Wrought as it has been out of the guerilla warfare characteristic of his own century, his book has not after all been laid to rest on the grander battlefield of the nineteenth-century novel. War and peace, in all of their internecine, cul-

tural, and amorous manifestations, remain poles of "the human condition in the world today," and the fiction writer today, no matter how uncertain of his audience in a small country like Canada, nevertheless aspires to the same knowledge as his great predecessor. And what is this survivor's unique and valuable knowledge?

Elephant.

At least, coming out of the jungles of Ceylon, this was Lawrence's knowledge in the long poem he wrote by this title. His knowledge through and through is Elephant. We see Elephant, we smell Elephant, we mourn Elephant. The writer says that what we've done to the beast is what we've done to ourselves, crooking the knee to salaam the white man, the Prince, the pale and enervate ideal. A mountain of blood caparisoned at the neck with bells, tong-tong-tong, this is the human condition suggests Lawrence. He ends up wishing *he* were in the pagoda, instead of the visiting wisp of English royalty, for his own supremacy seems to arise from the knowledge that *his* fiction, *his* ideal, is likelier to animate the disappointed people parading past. The assurance is unmistakable. Lesser writers would have said less — and if less sprawingly, neither with so daring a knowledge. Who of these would not also have toned down the Horse, Ursula's "Lightning of knowledge," at the end of *The Rainbow*, indeed much of the vaulting fiction that precedes it, and ended up with another book? Dickens, Hardy, Melville, Faulkner: these are not perfect novelists, but they are inarguably supreme. What, if it isn't Elephant, is this supremacy founded on?

In Canada we continue to believe we live in a large country, and that this largeness, this landscape, not only defines us but must surely one day account for greatness. Perhaps it will. But not I suspect before an awareness of City begins to refine this accepted definition, and our fiction enables us to see more completely. Man in relation to his environment is only half a vision if there's a failure to understand environment as both Wilderness *and* City: animate as well as inanimate existence, multitudinous as well as reductive. By City I mean a jungle no less various than Wilderness, for the beast it contains is the soul of the culture. Urban and Rural are merely shadows of this fuller, and necessary vision.

Our literary past, we know, has included the smallness of T. E. Hulme's vision, roused in 1906, when this visiting Englishman and failed philosopher noticed that "The first time [he] ever felt the necessity or inevitableness of verse, was in the desire to reproduce the peculiar quality of feeling which is induced by the flat spaces and wide horizons of the virgin prairie of Western Canada." The sort of laconic poems he began to write stimulated Pound who founded Imagism. (I always think of the last three lines of Hulme's little poem, "The Embankment," as Canada's dubious contribution to Modernism.) The odd feeling Hulme got from the prairies was of a "chasm" between himself and God, "the fright of the

mind before the unknown." Interestingly, his response was to return to the City (Brussels) and study more philosophy.

Less familiar is the journey into western Canada three years earlier by another would-be poet, a failed reporter, from New York City. Like Hulme he was trying to find himself, but instead of stopping on the prairies he came farther west, for a month of hunting in the B.C. Rockies. The importance of this journey on his next fifty years is evident not only in the frequency with which he spoke of it to his daughter in the weeks before he died, but also, I believe, in his poetry. Like Hulme, Wallace Stevens discerned the tension between Wilderness and City, and an entry in his diary from the summer of 1903 shows this tension becoming part of his imagination.

There are certain areas of spruce and fir in the forests that take on the appearance of everglades. They are filled with a brownish gloom, still, mysterious. Here the city heart would emit a lyric cry if a bird sang. But we have no music here. The wells of song would freeze overnight.

Lying in one's tent, looking out at the sky, one's thoughts revert to New York: to the trains stopping at the L stations, to the sinuous females, to the male rubbish, to the clerks and stenographers and conductors and Jews, to my friend the footman in front of Wanamakers, to Miss Dunning's steak, to Siegel and his cigars.

Here come the ants — heads, feet and bellies.

The poles of Stevens' thought became many, and here we can notice the seeds of his interest in North and South, Cold and Tropical, Familiar and Exotic, Wilderness and City. What we also notice is the precise and natural way his mind transmogrifies what it sees into omniscient memory. There's a quality of wonder about such looking, crucial to artists, which I want to return to. Stevens, we know, returned to New York City; indeed living elsewhere he spent the rest of his life returning to New York City, and he evolved slowly into a poet. In the spring of 1904, now away from the Wilderness, he wrote of "how utterly we have forsaken the Earth, in the sense of excluding it from our thoughts. . . . The rivers still roar, the mountains still crash, the winds still shatter. Man is an affair of cities." Stevens seemed to be dedicating himself to revealing what he called the giant's face at the window, to understanding the proper association of Wilderness and City, for even man's "gardens & orchards & fields are mere scrapings," he concluded, in the face of this Gulliver. Over forty years later in *Transport to Summer* he published his greatest poem whose title I've borrowed for these notes. His poem is the distillation of a lifetime's thought about the nature of poetry (It Must Be Abstract, he wrote, It Must Change, It Must Give Pleasure). Unwisely, perhaps, I should like now in my thirties to offer no less didactically than Stevens in his sixties my own, rather dissimilar subtitles in search of the elusive Elephant Stevens glimpsed in this country eighty years ago.

It Must Be Autobiographical

I WAS BORN FACING WEST, in Perth. This was the stepping-off city of the world, according to my mother, who along with my father had gone there by freighter from Colombo, where they'd encountered each other after his release from the Japanese in Singapore. He was English, she American. A few months before the war they'd met in London where my mother went in 1939 to find out if she could get an entry into Wimbledon. (In San Francisco she was City Open Champion.) She ended up instead with an invitation from my father to keep in touch. He lived in Chelsea. They exchanged letters. The war intervened and he forgot her. Her later voyage to Colombo on the chance of meeting up with him again was a westward act of love, and a sudden begetting. In Perth they had sun and no winter, regretted this at last, and moved to the world's second stepping-off city, as my mother called it, Vancouver.

Most of this never happened at all.

What then is its use, this failing to understand the conventions of expository writing, this failing to account for parents, this being arch with metaphor?

Suppose you were to write a travel book full of lies; or perhaps a novel that was libellously true. In the first instance, if discovered, you would be called an impostor; in the second, possibly called into court. The travel writer could do well not to count on sales, since no one trusts a liar. Depending on his libel, the novelist might sell out and be reprinted. In his case we have someone pretending to tell lies, and in the traveller's case someone pretending to tell the truth. It's quickly evident who is more admired and read: the one with the smaller imagination, in my example the novelist. But reverse the situation, return it to the conventions of genre, and you end up with the travel writer's reputation restored. His stock is back up. And the novelist? With no libellous *roman à clef* to sell, he should probably forget about money, especially if it's his first or even third novel.

The imagination is distrusted. As readers of fiction we may all be guilty at one time or another of wondering how much of what he writes "happened" to the author. The question is on the tongue of every talk-show host who has ever interviewed a novelist. Built into this naïve question is the underlying assumption that form and content are separable. This assumption leads to such meaningless, unspoken questions as How much credit should I give this writer for "making up" what he's written? How interesting is this writer, really? The question of autobiography is a fundamental one because readers, once out of childhood, do not take so easily to made-up worlds. They want their fiction rooted in a reality they recognize and can "learn" from. (Melville's English publisher had to be convinced that the travels in the South Seas related by Melville in his first novel

Typee had actually happened. At least John Murray published the book. An American firm rejected it because it seemed “impossible that it could be true”!)

It should be clear that I am attacking the naïve view of autobiography that pervades even our more critical thinking. Fiction of any quality above the level of Harlequin Romance and Potboiler *must be autobiographical by its very nature*. This is to say that writing fiction is an act inseparable from the mind that conceives it. The act of imagining is a real event. It happens. It happens to the author, and it happens to reveal his quality of mind, depth of vision, deftness of touch. (If I record the image of being born in a story, what is the difference between my memory of the image and my memory of the event that took place in Lima?) Fiction when it is true is idiosyncratic, and when it is supreme, profoundly idiosyncratic. It’s unique. It particularizes and generalizes concurrently. Its knowledge is Elephant. It is a continuous attempt to account for the author’s sense of both man alone in the world and man in society; of what it is to suffer long and to experience oases of joy. (It differs from non-fiction in a way worth returning briefly to later.)

By autobiographical fiction I do not mean fiction written in the first person any more than in the second or third. Neither do I mean a reminiscent style set in the past any less than a dramatic one set in the present. Each of these types can be just as self-regarding, self-indulgent, self-justifying as another, and therefore false, or at least stuck in adolescence. (I wouldn’t, as Eliot evidently did, claim there’s *necessarily* something suspect about writers who write best about childhood, so long as there is a perceived evolution from rawness to worldliness, from Wilderness to City.) The supremacy of fiction depends first and fundamentally on the thoroughness of its autobiographical voice. Hence the meaninglessness of such remarks as these in one of our national magazines: “. . . in his second novel, *Lusts*, Blaise begins to push the boundaries of his fiction beyond the autobiographical” — when a few lines later we read, “. . . if I’d been handed a page of this book without identification I’d have immediately recognized the Clark Blaise voice.” Can you have it both ways? Potboilers and Harlequins are cynical and voiceless works because the author sets himself up (especially if he’s only writing for money) as a mind apart from its product, instead of one *engaged in argument with itself*. No fiction worth writing has ever been undertaken, it seems to me, without the writer’s doubting his ability to complete it in the way he dares hope. Every completed story or novel should be a miracle, at least to its author, if it has any chance at all of conveying the wonder of its being alive.



It Must Subvert

MY MOTHER IS WATCHING a biography of Bette Davis on *60 Minutes*. When it's over my father switches channels to the middle of a documentary on Bolivian tin miners. Two miners aged thirty-two and twenty-five are dying of T.B. contracted in the mine. The younger man's in pain in hospital. When he can't afford the bed any longer he goes home, back to the mine. There's a light on his helmet, lights on all the helmets, slipping deeper by tram into the South American mountain. "This is the price of your tin can," says the narrator. We watch an impoverished family trailing after a casket, round brown faces empty of expression. Before his death the father brought home two dollars a day. "Now the family has to move out of its company-owned slum," the narrator says. Unionize? Last time the miners tried that the army shot dozens. Increase the price of tin cans? "Here *we're* the threat," the narrator tells us. "We'll just turn to more aluminum and plastic." This poverty's a cycle. The average miner dies at thirty-three. At seventy-two Bette Davis in California is thinking of making a comeback. "Her spunk really seemed spunky," my mother says to my father, "till you changed channels." My father looks moved too. He says we'll do exactly nothing for Bolivian tin miners, Cambodian refugees, starving Somalians. "What begins at home anyway?" he asks. My mother says, "What ends?" She picks absently at the hole in her sleeve. Of the three virtues, among those we had any chance of practising when I was young, ours was always Hope.

When we remember our parents they are seldom revolutionaries. It is the same with novels. Thinking of English and American fiction, say, we notice that innovation has never prospered when form was in excess of content, as form often is today in what we sometimes call "experimental" fiction. True innovation is inseparable from content. And the content of Supreme Fiction is subversive. I am talking about fiction that overturns expectation by juxtaposition, nexus, dislocation. I am talking about fiction that aspires to an understanding of cultural anorexy; fiction that creates the complexity capable of engaging our imaginations; fiction capable of perceiving the many ways that our received culture, for all its splendours of cohesion, for all our diplomacy, is suffering from edema of the soul. It's too easy to accept the belief that the great themes are now in the keeping of dissident writers in totalitarian countries, and thereby to fall into a decadence of technical obsession. For us it may be salutary to remember that the valuable writer in St. Augustine isn't the one of *The City of God*, but of his more earthly *City in Confessions*.

By overthrowing the predictable, which must always be boredom itself, fiction will offer fresh ways of seeing the relationships between people. No less the rela-

tionship between a man and woman as the one between cultures. Cries for technical subversion, which ignore the figures of life, are merely rhetorical. The lament over technical old-fashionedness in fiction is usually an indulgence of magpie jotters of isms and withinisms. Such jotters, who confuse fashion with innovation, seek a hearing (why so often from within universities?) not a vision. Elephant isn't one of their critical terms. They forget that a truly subversive mind, as the title of one of Stevens' poems has it, is "A Weak Mind in the Mountains" — in the Wilderness, where "The wind of Iceland and / The wind of Ceylon" are what "grapple" for mindfulness. Not, manifestly, hot air.

The fiction I am arguing for aspires to wide appeal and thus to cliché. It wants to be used up by familiarity, swallowed up as idiom, gobbled up and digested as proverb. This is its hope. This is its subversion: the unexpected resulting in the unforgettable, worn-out smile of the *Mona Lisa*, the opening bars of Beethoven's *Fifth*, Hamlet's To Be speech. It's the task of succeeding generations of artists to refurbish traditional ways of seeing, to reinvigorate worn-out idioms, to subvert the familiar. The novelist's hope is to make his own unfamiliarity dangerously familiar to the generation that succeeds him.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness. . . .

Call me Ishmael.

All happy families are alike but an unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion.

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.

. . . and yes I said yes I will Yes.

If the skeleton of fiction is narrative, then fiction's flesh is a complex of nerves, brain cells, muscles, features, and senses. The interdependency of all these is taken for granted until the backbone, say, is dislocated, and the morality of the human condition becomes increasingly apparent, important. The figures of fiction, both fat and starving, stand in awe of the brooding face of death. The resulting juxtaposition is what transfixes us.

It Must Be Wonderful

BY WHAT IN FICTION are we redeemed if it isn't the writer's love of life, growing out of his awareness of death? No fiction will be supreme unless it is haunted by Death. This is another way of saying it must be haunted by

Time. We do not, as Julian Huxley argues, have memory because we are aware of civilization. We have it because we are always facing death.

Death in many forms. The kind of death affecting us least often is the death of people. Even for Charlotte Brontë, whose brother, sisters, and mother all died off like broom blossom, the fact of human death was only one death among many. She, like us, faced deaths of far less dramatic kinds: the death of holidays, the death of years, the death of seasons, the death of meals, the death of days, the death of dreams, the death of visits, the death of books, the death of flowers, the death of altruism, the death of smells, the death of enthusiasms, the death of silences. In fiction as in life an awareness of death is the measure of perspective. Maturity is having learned to appreciate the didactic nature of memory. Growing up in Death's brooding face, our imaginations are educated. This leads to compassion. It offers redemption. The more experiences we have, by which I mean simply the more we *notice* of the world, the more deaths we live through. It was patently wrong of Wittgenstein to say death is the experience we do not live through. Autobiographical (unlike Harlequin) fiction is full of death, death that is lived through, and it's in this way the novelist distinguishes himself from the historian. How to remember what he is looking at is the novelist's obsession. How to look at what he can't remember is the historian's. The perspective we value more, the perspective we *must* value more, is the novelist's. His memories are created in the face of their deaths.

In several of Wallace Stevens' early poems, writes Richard Ellmann in an essay, the poet insists "that without death, love could not exist." This is similar to saying that the way we look at something in the present is determined by how we have educated ourselves to see it simultaneously in the future. The subversion of the present is the inevitable consequence of possessing memory. What, for example, do we mean by Here and Now, and what if any are the moral, the cultural, implications of There and Then? (What is Selfishness exactly?) Our interest in fiction accrues in ratio to the wonder we feel it expressing of the Here and Now as an ideal. The supremacy of fiction resides in its capacity to inhibit Time.

The Other Worldness of great fiction makes everything happen, or so it seems, for the writer's mandate isn't to change the world but to show that within the imagination, capable of evoking both the sublime and darkness together, exists a metaphor for God. The fiction we value more is inclusive rather than exclusive. It offers no answers except the order and multiplicity of its vision, the nuances of its humblest details, the miraculousness of its language. It offers a sense of Earth. But it offers more than this, for it is a benevolent and finally human God, interested in understanding the relations of man and nature in the broadest sense of man and man. This God, this imagination, this fiction is Wonderful, for there

is no getting through or around the authority of its vision and the intuitive logic of its means.

To be born without a sense of wonder, the supreme novelist tells us, is to die without knowledge. And this knowledge is finally metaphorical. "All knowledge," Kafka says in one of his stories, "the totality of all questions and all answers, is contained in the dog." Elephant, dog. The supreme writer enters his imagination, as Stevens tells us in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," and "The elephant / Breaches the darkness of Ceylon with blares." Stevens conceived of his theory and his fiction as inseparable. His metaphor became him. The hunger of the writer peering into the darkness is always such a becoming.

Dwelling simultaneously in Wilderness and City the writer has visions and revisions to account for his place in the world. Perhaps I was born the day my mother died, the day my father died, the day war ended. Who can say what matters more than the sheer accident of one's birth? Who can say the wonder of being alive is not the writer's entire theme? Elephant, he speaks, Elephant.

I was born.

