

MAKING REPRESENTATIONS

I HAVE BELATEDLY BEEN READING a 1977 book from Indiana University Press, *Towards a Poetics of Fiction*, edited by Mark Spilka. The book collects a number of essays from the journal *Novel*: essays on fictional theory, literary history, and language and style, among which are three by Canadian critics Graham Good, R. P. Bilan, and Jerry Wasserman, on Lukács, Leavis, and Rabelais respectively. Despite their quality, it was not these essays that caught my attention, but rather the seven opening papers which gave the book its title and which explore the possibility that it might be possible to chart a poetics of the novel by means of structure, language, history, narrative, genre, or time. The word “or” is the most important here. For the essays take such exclusive stances as to end up being positively irritating, and it is refreshing to get to the seventh, by Walter Reed, on the problems raised by the assumption that a single methodology will open all novels to a reader. Indeed, the problem with a lot of writing (and a lot of reviewing) is that it seems to stem from a single preconception about method or value. How to write a book is a much more complex challenge than such a stance implies; how to read one is equally complex, dependent upon experience and sensitivity and intelligence and talent for associative understanding and scores of other attributes, in unequal measure. Neither process can be reduced to a set of exercises without producing a mechanical literary work. Repetition does not constitute ritual, and criticism is not just an act of rhetorical ceremony.

Hence it is frustrating to encounter simplistic dogma shaped as criticism, as in this passage from Eleanor Hutchens’ contribution to *Novel’s* “poetics debate”:

The assumption of poetry is that we can beat our way to truth: that by setting up rhythms of sound and imagery we can conjure up the archetypes of meaning. The assumption of drama is that we can mime our way to truth: that by acting out our beliefs we can make the god appear. The assumption of the short story is that we can see eternity in a grain of sand: that a single human situation, properly contemplated, will crystallize into a replica of an ultimate truth. The assumption of the novel is that truth is the daughter of time.

At once the passage seems to assume a unitary truth and a variety of universals, a generic restriction on sound, a visceral restriction on space, and a linear restriction

on time. How does one respond? Even if one objects to the minimalizing, there remains the rhetoric: an implicit declaration of faith in the shaping of meaning, in the human capacity to use language to give shape to ideas. And language *does* code, enact, re-present. Given that, how does one enfranchise it from system?

The other essayists in the debate follow their own rhetorical paths. Robert Scholes, celebrating “the precise discriminations of genre study,” asserts that “generic theory provides a rigorous intellectual discipline, which can hold its head high as an area of academic study, without compromising the essentially personal and imaginative qualities of individual response to literary texts.” It is significant that the principal clause celebrates discipline; the imagination gets hidden in a subordinate phrase. Frank Kermode claims that the novel ought to be seen in connection with sociology and “even” mathematics, in part because “The fact remains that a degree of ‘historical’ fidelity is something most people still ask of novels” — a phrase that is worth balancing with Barbara Hardy’s “The best fantasists, as we know from introspection or from *Emma*, work in starkly realistic terms.” Hardy herself holds that “narrative, like lyric or dance, is not to be regarded as an aesthetic invention used by artists to control, manipulate, and order experience, but as a primary act of mind transferred to art from life.” Which in turn assumes a universality of human “consciousness,” whereas this is precisely what twentieth century fiction — particularly that from the Third World, perhaps including Canada — has been at pains to reject.

But in the primary dispute, David Lodge objects to the notion of a single poetics of fiction, sensibly observing that writers use language and readers must read what they have actually written, while Malcolm Bradbury rejects the critical approach that presumes language is more important than structure. Bradbury’s distinction is more basic than this implies; discovering image patterns, he finally says, is not intrinsically more important — or a clearer demonstration of the “real being” of a book — than demonstrating its connections with society, with moral attitudes, responses, characters, and social relationships. “My case is,” he says of the novel, that “its main structural characteristic lies in a developing action about characters and events conducted in a closed — that is to say, an authorially conditioned — world containing principles, values and attitudes by which we may evaluate those events.” Readers must ask “questions about cause and effect” and “answer them from cruxes within the work,” by elevating “into prominence those conscious or intuitive choices which every writer must perpetually make, and to regard not only the discourse but the structure . . . as part of the matter to be persuaded.” Lodge’s reply is down-to-earth: “whatever novelists ‘feel,’ it is axiomatic that it is only through language that they are communicating, since there are no other means of communication at their disposal.” Those who celebrate space and silence might quarrel with his last clause, but it is a nonetheless telling assertion. A literary structure is a linguistic structure. The ideas that literature shares, the ideas with

which we associate values, the ideas that embody relationships between characters are all shaped by words. It is to the words that we respond.

And of course there is great joy in language; it has an enormous capacity to play, a quality Wasserman delights in as he writes about Rabelais. And it is capable of intense lyric expression — even, as Graham Good makes clear, from a critic as politically committed as Lukács. As Bradbury reminds us, if all that we respond to in fiction are words — that is, if we reduce human experience to words — then this constitutes at the same time a reduction in our capacity to appreciate the world and a reduction to the kind of world that we allow art to represent. But responding to words need not be reductive. Failing to take account of their flexibility and richness can be far more debilitating, for it robs us of the subtleties of argument and wit, it permits distinctions between fashion and style to fade, it exchanges articulateness (however laconic) for rhetorical monotone, mistaking utterance for speech. Seeking the structures by which literature communicates, by contrast, can be to elucidate more than just patterns of words; for through them, one can meet the patterns of mind that shape events as well as art, and engage in a genuine process of literary discovery.

W.H.N.

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CORRECTION: An error that accidentally crept into the editorial of *Canadian Literature* No. 85 may have caused both disquiet and some confusion, for which we apologize. We want to assure our readers that the critical journal *Canadian Children's Literature* is alive and well, flourishing under Mary Rubio's guidance, and that it is available from Box 335, Guelph, Ontario, N1H 6K5.

What the editorial *intended* to say was that Evelyn Samuel's Victoria-based children's journal, *Canadian Children's Magazine*, had to fold some months ago; it was a spirited enterprise, and its disappearance is something which we, and other members of the literary community, deeply regret.

W.H.N.

WALLY

J. D. Carpenter

In among the frozen elms
in parkland
below the schoolhouse hill
Wally sat in the shed
fed wood to the potbelly stove

In blue tobacco air
skaters laced their skates
rubbed cold toes