

Necessary Failures

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Let heaven exist, though my own place be in hell.

—Jorge Luis Borges

The infidels have spoken: literature's implements are nebulous and flawed. To the acolytes of postmodernism and the detractors who would burn our novels at the stake, our art wields "inadequate instrument[s]," instruments we use to erect desperate monuments to "man's incapacity to express in words his innermost truths, his sensory experiences, his moral and transcendent intuitions" (Steiner "Presences" 23). Even Virginia Woolf, dread mistress of our art and would-be crusader, freely admits that "our vocabulary is miserably insufficient" and that even the best novels feel "dislocated," clunking along like lugubrious snails compared to the "fantastic contrasts . . . flashed before us" in the visual arts ("Cinema" 181, 185).

Those of us who have toiled to add one more brick to literature's ancient edifice know better than to believe such babble. "On the margin of what man can do," says John Berger, quoting Max Raphael, "there appears that which he cannot or cannot yet do—but which lies at the root of all creativeness" (Berger 203-204). The "means" of an artist's medium, he says, namely the stylistic and physical tools of the trade, constitute "both an opportunity and a restraint"; knowing full well about our limitations is necessary if we are to overcome them. Only by being conscious of Art's flaws will the artist be able to "push against" them, defy them, and ascend to new heights (Berger 203).

But it isn't sufficient to name our failures—we also have to identify their sources. In "Real Presences," George Steiner declares that "the text . . . incarnates . . . a real presence of significant being," a "singularity" at the heart of the text that contains meaning and does not necessarily follow the author's will (35). If we believe this, though, we must also believe that this presence is

both benefactor and dictator, bestowing the “opportunity and restraint” we must accept and resist (Berger 203). This someone, or something, hides in the shadows of our craft; from him, or her, or it, we receive both wisdom and frustration.

He can only be the Creator. “Western art, music and literature have . . . spoken immediately either to the presence or absence of the god,” says Steiner (“Presences” 37). All great artists, from Homer to Picasso to Woolf, make “loans of terminology and reference from the reserves of theology,” and “wrestle with the terrible precedent and power of original creation” (36, 37). Their work, then, constitutes a sort of worship, “a literal construction, animation, unfolding of conceptual possibilities” that seeks to replicate the Divine presence on the page (22). “On the margin of what man can do, there appears that which he can or cannot do,” says Raphael—but there also appears He who can do what man cannot (Berger 203).

And if literature is an homage to Adamic conception, then the act of overcoming literature’s limitations represents a desire to supplant God Himself—to assert a divine power that the author may not possess. In “Modern Fiction,” a manifesto against the conventional novel, Virginia Woolf speaks of the writer’s irresistible subjugation to a “powerful and unscrupulous tyrant” who commands the novelist to clothe his works in “ill-fitting vestments.” Literature’s *raison d’être* is to represent life—“trivial, fantastic, evanescent” life. But the structure imposed by words can never fully do so; it always constitutes a sort of “failure” (“Fiction” 149). If we build a tower out of the earth that He has made, He can tear us down at will.

To overcome, then, would require the rejection of the hallowed tools handed down to us in favor of something more bespoke. In Woolf we read a new, daemonic testament: “Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.” What the artistic rabble needs to do, says Woolf, is reproduce the “luminous halo” of life on the page, and in doing so bring ourselves that much closer to the Divine (“Fiction” 150).

In this light, *Mrs. Dalloway* is Woolf’s own “spasm of rebellion” (“Fiction” 149). A synopsis of *Mrs. Dalloway*’s plot would take ten seconds: Clarissa Dalloway plans, and eventually hosts, a party on a day when a besotted would-be lover pays her a visit—the same day that Septimus Smith loses his grip on reality and hurls himself to his doom from a bedroom window. But the novel’s focus is never on plot. When Clarissa Dalloway “plunge[s]” into London in

the opening pages, her thoughts turn, without warning, to the city, then to Peter Walsh, then to the war, then to her friend Hugh Whitbread, and so on (*Dalloway* 3). Characters, images, and events in the novel are connected only by a “thin thread . . . which would stretch and stretch, get thinner as they walked across London”—that is, they reach no denouement, fulfill no hoary obligation to catharsis or closure (*Dalloway* 109).

The result is a novel that flies swiftly from one image to the next, a gadfly that buzzes between innumerable Olympian heaps. “How sights fix themselves upon the mind! For example, the vivid green moss,” Woolf writes, before moving on to a description of Clarissa as “iron, like flint, rigid up the backbone” (63). We see the green moss for the briefest of moments, the amount of time it takes our eyes to take in those two words, before we are rushed to a different scene, and for that reason the green moss endures. In writing a spectral narrative, one that weaves tightly together a multitude of characters and a metropolis of parks and omnibuses and social spaces, Woolf rails against the conventional and tries to wrest control of literature’s sky. “It might be possible that the world itself is without meaning,” she writes, and by trying to prove this through her novel-that-isn’t-a-novel, she becomes a sort of cavalier conjurer, rebelling against the repressive edicts of her tyrant with sorcerous performances (*Dalloway* 86).

But if *Mrs. Dalloway* is an altar to the Cult of Woolf, then it is littered with all sorts of golden calves. It is no magical coincidence that images of vivid green—in dresses, parks, jewels, and Clarissa’s daughter Elizabeth, a “hyacinth” in the afternoon sun—pervade every character’s thoughts (*Dalloway* 120). Nor is it a coincidence that the “leaden circles” of the clock resound identically in both Peter and Clarissa’s minds, repeating as motifs are wont to do (*Dalloway* 4). Through the lens of artifice, we see Woolf playing God. We also see that she is not God.

In her rebellion, Woolf runs into another restraint: namely, the mind’s desire to impose sense upon the world’s chaos. Steiner calls upon us to “read as if the text before us had meaning”—an inexhaustible, multifarious meaning that “makes us answerable to its force of life” (“Presences” 34). And if life itself were to be reproduced as a text, it would require us to make sense of the infinite images residing within and without. The imposition of words thus invokes the omnipresence and totality of a deity, the very same one against whom we instigate a revolution. The works that arise from the gospel of Woolf speak not of Genesis, but of mimesis, an attempt to immaculately reconceive the “infinite richness” of life (*Dalloway* 159). Woolf doesn’t reproduce the “luminous halo”; instead, she uses words to create a numinous halo-

gen, an ersatz moon that merely reflects the radiance of the one true Sun. The writer's heavenly grasp is checked by her preordained proclivity for sense-making (and ours), and the tower comes crashing down all over again.

If the author's proclivity for sense-making is but another restraint, John Fowles leads his own insurrection against it. His novel *Mantissa*, a fictional recreation of the creative process, is a paean to the infinite space within the novel and the mind. Ostensibly a novel about inspiration, it draws us into a cerebro-sexual game between the fiction writer Miles Green and his muse—also known as the classical muse, Erato. Beyond that, Fowles's book, like *Mrs. Dalloway*, eludes easy classification. The plot is a debate on the nature of plot itself, with several passages daring to break the fourth wall—the structure, a set of four seemingly interminable dialogues that end on whims and acts of physical force. Denouement occurs at least four times, with no conclusive resolution. What we see is a representation of mental chaos, the “wast[ing of] vital intellectual aspirations and juices on mantissae and trivia” and dead-ends in both the writer's mind and our own (Fowles 188).

Where the prose of *Mrs. Dalloway* sought to overcome its limitations by piercing the heavens, *Mantissa* retreats deep into the human mind to show us a boundless universe. “One can hardly end a contemporary novel on the implication that mere fucking solves anything,” Erato claims, just before she and Miles Green proceed to do just that (108). Green ironically dubs their sadomasochistic metaphysical exchange an “unwritable non-text,” a claim that discomfits almost as much as his subsequent reference to the exact page number of the book we are reading (183). At the end of the novel, as Erato leaves Green in a catatonic state within his own mind, we wonder if he will rise once more from the bed after we close the book, ready to resume his reflexive joust. Arguments, paradigms, and even personae become ambiguous as they rub against each other and produce fuddled friction. We end up wanting to throw Fowles's Carrollian offering out the window in frustration.

And in our discontent, we see that the novel is an artificial dawn. For all its self-reflexivity, *Mantissa* is a matryoshka doll, a novel-within-a-novel that sees pointless scenes segue into more pointless scenes, and which buries John Fowles deep within Miles Green. Much of the dialogue between Miles and the muse Erato struggles with the “difficulty of writing serious modern fiction,” and the notion that true Art is “Unwritable . . . Unfinishable . . . Unimaginable [and] endlessly revisable,” which in turn tells us that Fowles himself is struggling with the futility of his craft (118, 161).

Yet we resist the urge to dismiss *Mantissa* because we, as readers, believe we can understand Fowles's dilemma and solve it for him. We read the novel over and over, parsing its sentences like a crone reading tea leaves. As "the immediate heirs to the textualities of western Judaeo-Christian theology . . . derive[d] from the study of Holy Scripture," we, too, read seeking the presence of something divine on the page (Steiner "Presences" 36). We believe fervently that "the meaning striven towards [in a piece of writing] will never be one which exegesis, commentary, translation . . . can ever exhaust, can ever define as total," even if the piece itself, like *Mantissa*, tells us that it is a "total waste of ink and paper" (Steiner "Presences" 34, Fowles 186). Perhaps we do not ever find the Divine we seek in the depths of the text. Just as *Mrs. Dalloway* is confined within the bars of Woolf's mind, our reading of any piece of art remains indebted to, and restrained by, a hoary tradition. This is how art fixes itself upon the mind. *Mantissa* reveals that we are imprisoned along with our writers and writing.

But as readers, our place of incarceration has already been illuminated for us. Steiner is right when he says critical reading and annotation are a "continuation of the book[s] being read": our path is made clearer by the halogens of our predecessors, who have failed in their rebellion, and yet have kept the flames burning for us ("Reader" 8). Woolf and Fowles clutch at straws, and we deem them to have failed in their reproduction of the Creator; and yet, in the moon of their mimicry, we find that we have gotten that much closer to the one true sun. If "the process of textual interpretation is cumulative . . . susceptible to amendment, to revision, even to rejection as fresh knowledge becomes available, as linguistic or stylistic insights are sharpened," perhaps we may overcome our restraints in time through some collective evolution (Steiner "Presences" 27). But even if we cannot, we continue the artistic struggle. If "latent in every act of complete reading is the compulsion to write a book in reply," then a thousand will-o-the-wisps will rise out of every fallen text, lighting the way for more flawed followers ("Reader" 8). The ruins of the tower become stepping-stones, allowing us constantly, minutely, to inch higher.

Works of art are necessary failures. They soar on wings of wax to a writer's personal zenith, nearing the presence of the Divine, but in so doing, these works prove their own creators' mortality. But they also show us our own failings, and when we are cognizant of our margins, we might know how to push against them. If "there is a best reading," and a best writing, that contains "a constellation of meanings to be perceived, analysed, and chosen over

others,” we, like Borges’s stoic persona in “The Library of Babel,” must accept that it will never be found (Steiner “Presences” 27). We will always fall short. But as we build on our ruins, under the glare of unholy light, we attain incremental immortality. Our rebellion shows us that we are confined within infinity.

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