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NAVIGATING THE SLIPSTREAM

Autumn approaches as I write this essay from my home in Ohio. Yellowed leaves drift past the window of my office, falling from the great maples and oaks lining my driveway. Frost clings to the grass. I am reminded, as I always am this time of year, of the tradition of Halloween. A holiday with roots going back to the Celtic festival of Samhain, which later became the Christian All Saint's Day and the Mexican Day of the Dead. Halloween is my favorite holiday, autumn my favorite time of year in part because of the scary stories that go with the season. I cut my writer's teeth on Irving's headless horseman, the tales of Poe, the science fiction/fantasy of Bradbury. Every October I'd buy a new recording of Vincent Price or Christopher Lee, or someone who sounded like them, reading such stories, a beating heart or thunderstorm as background music. I'd play that record over and over in my room until it was unusable.

Stories and storytelling seem somehow inextricably tied to the shortening of the day, the turning of the leaves, and the slow chill that signals autumn. I don't know why. It must have something to do with the human need to keep back the long night of winter, to fight back death with a living, breathing story. And so, it's no accident that a big part of autumnal holidays, at least for me, involves sitting by the fireplace or around the dinner table, or in a dark closet with a flashlight in hand, telling stories, usually about things that go bump in the night. We are hardwired for stories. Autumn reminds us of that. So, why now, in the fall of my fiftieth year, do I find myself lost in the woods of "literature," wondering what happened to the sheer pleasure of hearing a story?

As long as we've been telling stories we've been experimenting with them. The two go hand in hand. The storyteller's need to explore how best to scare the pants off his listener or put that same listener in thrall is tied to the audience's need to step outside of their known world and thereby have their place clarified in it. And yet, as a fiction editor, a professor of creative writing, and an avid reader, I pick up story after story—either genre or "literary"—that fails to do either.

You could argue that there are no new stories to tell, that our job as writers is to continually reinvent the old ones, to put our thumbprints on them, and I wouldn't disagree. All stories take the journey shape in some form or another. All stories are either

about love, or death, or both. And yet, great stories make us feel as if we are hearing them for the first time. Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* is a case in point:

They saw one day a pack of vicious looking humans mounted on onshod Indian ponies riding half drunk through the streets, bearded, barbarous, clad in the skins of animals stitched up with thews and armed with weapons of every description, revolvers of enormous weight and bowie knives the size of claymores and short two barreled rifles with bores you could stick your thumbs in and the trappings of their horses fashioned out of human skin and their bridles woven up from human hair and decorated with human teeth and the riders wearing scapulars or necklaces of dried and blackened human ears and the horses raw looking and wild in the eye and their teeth bared like feral dogs and riding also in the company a number of half naked savages reeling in the saddle, dangerous, filthy, brutal, the whole like a visitation from some heathen land where they and others like them fed on human flesh...¹

Part western, part horror story, part Old Testament, part literary fiction ala *Moby Dick*, McCarthy navigates the slipstream *between* genres and in so doing makes his story new. I have never heard McCarthy called a slipstream or interstitial writer, and yet what is *The Road* if not an example of the science fiction apocalypse story made fresh by language and attention to character; in short, sci fi tossed in the blender with the "literary." His novels bring us back to a time as readers when books enraptured us because they weaved a world out of wholly new cloth. What does it matter if that quilt is made up of the rags of other stories? Hasn't it always been that way? The *Beowulf* we have now is nothing more than the accumulation of many different versions of the epic told over the centuries, each building on the other. The same for Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Like the Bible, the story that remains is a hodge-podge of previous versions many of which are now lost.

McCarthy's books work because they break open our reading habits, expose our reading biases for what they are—expectations about what a text should do based on convention:

Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war...and art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived not as they are known.²

In his *Theory of Prose*, Victor Shklovsky discusses how great fiction must defamiliarize the reader, make him see the world in a way he has not seen it before. Something slipstream fiction does almost by definition. Slipstream takes the tropes of genre fiction—the cat and mouse game and reliance on reason from mystery, science and technology from science fiction, monsters and the macabre from horror, strange new worlds and magic from fantasy—and blends them with the traditional concerns of “literary” fiction, i.e. attention to language that creates its own tension and complex characters whose fears, desires, and conflicts propel plot. The result is a continual re-spinning of the web of story so that each version creates a tapestry we’ve not quite experienced before. So, why then do so many stories, stories published in reputable magazines or by New York publishers fail at this the storyteller’s most basic task, to defamiliarize us, to make the world new?

As you might guess, the answer is steeped in a capitalist system that makes a commodity of story; but that system has become so tangled it requires a little un-tangling to see our way back to the roots of what storytelling is all about. It’s taken as a given that fantasy, horror, romance, science fiction, and mystery are genres reliant on a formula designed to sell lots and lots of books, but what about “literary” fiction?

When we say “literary” fiction in this country, what we’re really talking about is narrative realism. To understand how pervasive it is in our culture, simply browse through the local bookstore. From the first book on the remainder stack, pull a little exposition to understand the character’s emotional state, his circumstances, what he desires. From the second, note how quickly that conflict is introduced. See how the tension created propels the story forward as the hero ultimately rises above the conflict and changes in the process. Admittedly, a few contemporary works eschew the protagonist’s epiphany and supply instead a reader’s epiphany, but the point is that the story moves forward through linear time, following a cause and effect model over the Freytag hill, and characters and reader are all the better for it. Or are they?

Inherent in the ideology of narrative realism, or “naïve realism” as Julio Cortázar terms it, are two basic assumptions that I would argue have more to do with our western European roots and particularly American sensibilities than their power to propel a story. With the publication of his *Principia* in 1687, Sir Isaac Newton not only single handedly explained the world in a way that made sense in terms of our experience but also paved the way for a scientific and philosophic revolution best summed up by the phrase “seeing is believing.” The so-called “Age of Enlightenment” followed in large part as a direct result of Newton’s work, and the rationalism that appeared in its wake, with its empiricist method

and belief in a cause-and-effect reality that has largely stayed with us to the present day, despite an entire century of scientific breakthroughs that shatter the Newtonian model. The rise of narrative realism in the 19th century was no accident, but a direct reaction to the previous centuries privileging of rationalism.

A few centuries later, and we still haven't been able to shake the yoke of "naïve realism." In his preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, Conrad presents his theory of literary art:

And art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect.³

His concept of "bringing to light the truth...underlying its every aspect" clearly stems from a Newtonian world where if we only look hard enough we will gather enough information to understand the "truth" beneath the surface. In Conrad's vision, there is even a kind of "justice to the visible universe," a working order that will reveal itself to those willing to pay attention. Conrad even equates the role of the artist with that of the scientist: "The artist, then, like the thinker or the scientist, seeks the truth and makes his appeal."⁴ The artist as truth-seeker hearkens back to that time of innocence before the relativity of the post-modern world when the idea of absolute truth sounded both noble and achievable. But it is not simply a matter of false innocence. Conrad's goal was to represent the world as we *see* it, the world of the "visible universe."

My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see*. That—and no more, and it is everything.⁵

Given Newtonian physics, it is as possible for the artist to create a "true" representation of "reality" as it is for the scientist to uncover the secrets of that "reality." And Conrad is not alone in voicing his assurance in an objective reality; in fact, his thoughts are echoed time and again by other writers of the day. In his essay "The Art of Fiction", Henry James seconds Conrad's notion: "The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life."⁶ Representation is not only the highest calling of the novel, it is the only calling. James goes on to talk of how the writer competes with life in his attempts to render "truth":

I may therefore venture to say that the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel...It is here in very truth that he competes with life; it is here that he competes with his brother the painter in *his* attempt to render the look of things, the look that conveys their meaning, to catch the color, the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the human spectacle.⁷

Interestingly, there are no cracks in the “surface” of the life James seeks to render. Words such as “solidity” and “substance” reinforce the sheer mass of James’ objective universe. There is no talk of the vagaries of time and memory, for time moves in one direction only; it is quantifiable. And memory is simply an authentic snapshot of a solid moment in space and time. I’m simplifying the issue to make a point. James is a transitional figure, as is Conrad to a lesser extent. Though James’ theory often seems to indicate an alignment with traditional realism, in such works as “The Jolly Corner” he is clearly beginning to interrogate external, represent-able reality, to dip into the slipstream.

It’s interesting to note that James compares the writer’s work with that of the painter, for European painting at the time had begun moving away from realism, a movement that has continued to today. The art world has realized the limitations of realism as the predominant mode, as has the world of dramatic theater. With the prevalence of movies in modern culture, playwrights have responded by moving far afield of realism into shorter, non-narrative, non-“real” works. Why then does mainstream literature in the United States seem stuck in the mud of narrative realism?

The cinema dominates modern American storytelling, and movies rely almost exclusively on realism. I can think of only one American director that has garnered some audience and recognition in the last twenty-five years that stepped outside these boundaries: David Lynch. I am sure the lack is in part the result of my own ignorance, but it is also quite obvious that the vast majority of movies follow the assumptions of realism. When you step outside western culture—into Latin American, Asian, African, or Eastern European literature—you find “realism” is no longer the dominant form.

If movies and contemporary, American literature are both slaves to “realism,” they are similarly slaves, if only slightly less so, to the Freytag model of narrative. How many of us have sat in the movie theater only to predict the entire plot after the first five minutes. Movies and TV are passive art forms. They do not challenge our assumptions of storytelling nor do they ask much of the viewer in terms of imaginatively creating a new reality. Rather,

they mirror assumptions so closely held we don't even know we have them. What else is the Freytag model but a recapitulation of both Capitalist and Christian ideology. Inherent in Freytag is the assumption that free will is a given. In the U.S., we take it a step further. The necessity for change is the natural result of American free will, of manifest destiny. In short, the Freytag model is the Horatio Alger story told over and over ad nauseum. But instead of the poor impoverished newsboy or shoe-shiner facing off against nature and pulling himself up by his bootstraps, modern narrative realism turns inward. The poor impoverished newsboy becomes the poor impoverished spirit in conflict with itself. After carefully laying out the trauma in flashback, the writer of narrative realism skillfully leads our hero toward the appropriate epiphany. The necessity of change is the cornerstone of American culture. We must always be transforming ourselves as dictated by the market driven ideology that demands everything be "new and improved." But this desperate need to transcend our old selves, "to light out for the territory," ties into the roots of American Christianity as well.

Let us not forget that Alger was also a Unitarian minister educated at Harvard Divinity and that later in his life he resigned his post as minister after allegations that he molested two boys. Our obligation to make ourselves over rises directly out of our Christian past. It is so much a part of who we are that we assume our God-given right to change, to be redeemed. Ever concerned with the bottom line, Hollywood knows a good bet when it sees one. And movie after movie capitalizes (pun intended) on the Freytag model so that we can sit in the movie house and have our unconscious expectations fulfilled.

The "blockbuster" virus has infected the corporate publishing world as well. The narrative realist model has become so much a mainstay of corporate publishing that I challenge the reader to spend an afternoon in a Barnes and Noble looking for fiction that doesn't fit this model. You'll count the exceptions on one hand. It is understandable to an extent. Hollywood and the corporate publishers are out to make money, so they give a passive public what it expects. Why then do so many of our MFA programs in creative writing teach narrative realism to the exclusion of almost everything else? Why do so many of our most respected literary magazines publish this formula called "literary fiction" without challenging its precepts? If I had a dime for every rejection letter that said, "the writing is wonderful, but the character doesn't change enough," I'd be a rich man. From my experience as a fiction editor, I can say clearly that of the thousands upon thousands of manuscripts I read each year I can predict the plot of 99% of them after the first two pages. Without naming names, the writers of these formula stories generally

come from our “best” MFA programs. Has the MFA degree become such an industry that it, too, is concerned with the bottom line?

The truth is that the “top” MFA programs have become an industry where the bottom line is not good writing but making money. These programs tout the success of their graduates in the corporate publishing world as their primary advertising mode. Simply browse a recent issue of *Poets and Writers* or *The Writer’s Chronicle*. The implicit message of their ads is, *Come to our program and you will be published and successful*. Because the success of their program (and by success I mean the amount of dollars flowing in) is tied directly to how often and quickly their students publish, it behooves these programs to teach the formula most accepted by American, corporate publishers and the movie industry. Even more disheartening, perhaps, is the fact that many programs now have “field trips” to New York to meet editors and agents or fly in editors and agents to meet with students nearing the end of their term. Ah yes, the American workshop is alive and well, modeled on the American system of capitalist apprenticeship, the end result being not necessarily a quality, original creative work, but connections. When the MFA has become big business, there is simply no incentive to teach alternative (read less marketable) forms. In short, the term narrative realism can be substituted for literary fiction in this country, and it has become a genre.

Freed from the shackles of expectations by the acknowledgement that “literary” fiction is just another genre with its own set of conventions, the slipstream writer can now happily create work that pulls from the best of each genre. It’s uncharted territory, one fraught with the potential for failure at every turn. So how to think about the artist’s role outside the marketplace? In his classic treatise *On Modern Art*, Paul Klee gives us a possible model:

As, in full view of the world, the crown of the tree unfolds and spreads in time and in space, so with his (the artist’s) work. Nobody would affirm that the tree grows its crown in the image of its root. Between above and below can be no mirrored reflection. It is obvious that different functions expanding in different elements produce vital divergences.⁸

Klee expresses the essential complexity of the artist’s process. The crown and the root are utterly different, reflecting the shaping power of the artist’s vision. The artist’s role, then, is to make the reader/viewer *see* but not in quite the same way Conrad meant it. The artist

is not concerned with representing reality but with transforming it by allowing it to pass through his/her imagination. The poet e.e. cummings put it this way:

The symbol of all art is the prism. The goal is unrealism. The method is destructive. To break up the white light of objective realism, into the secret glories which it contains.⁹

Again, the artist is the vehicle through which the world passes. Contact with the artist changes that world. Those “secret glories” cummings mentions break the reader free from the chains of habitual ways of seeing, or rather of not-seeing. Interestingly, cummings’ model of the prism breaking up the “white light of objective realism into the secret glories which it contains,” also serves as a model for the constituent parts of great fiction. In short, we need a polyphonic way of talking about our multifaceted reality. As Bakhtin suggests in his seminal work *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, truth needs multiple voices with which to speak. It cannot be contained in one specific mind or one specific genre.¹⁰

Enter Slipstream. Interstitial fiction blends narrative realism’s attention to language and character with a willingness to explore alternative perceptions of reality or alternative realities (i.e. science fiction, fantasy, and horror) then throws a dash of formal experimentation (i.e. noir, surrealism, or any of the above genres), and in so doing moves beyond any mere “genre” in offering up a vision that makes the reader “see” anew. That kind of radical power is political, not in the sense of conservative or liberal, but in the sense of damaging to the state. In this case, that “state” can be defined as fiction as commodity—whether narrative realism or “genre.”

In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari discuss the political potential for a “minor literature” working from within:

if the writer is in the margins or completely outside of his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility.¹¹

In combining tropes from each literary community, the slipstream writer works outside of every community, thereby “forg(ing) the means for another consciousness and another sensibility.” Entering the slipstream alters our perception of the world because it reconfigures that world in a way we’ve not seen before. It defamiliarizes us.

If the book we are reading does not wake us, as with a fist hammering on our skull, why then do we read it? Good God, we would also be happy if we had no books, and such books as make us happy we could, if need be, write ourselves. But what we must have are those books which come upon us like ill-fortune, and distress us deeply, like the death of one we love better than ourselves, like suicide. A book must be an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us.¹²

Kafka had it right. Great fiction does violence to the known. It rips apart the expectations of genre. Devours our habits. It hacks readers loose from the moorings of the “literary” fiction industry where humanity always has the possibility of changing for the good, and where the workshop model filters out anything not fitting the template set by twelve people sitting around a table. Yes, an “ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us.” That’s political. That’s how slipstream writing works.

Disruption. That’s what we’re talking about. Fiction that doesn’t simply make us see, doesn’t simply disturb our notions of reality, but completely disrupts all that we know. That’s what it means to navigate the slipstream. It is to enter the Literature of Disruption. Fiction that shakes the bones of our very being and scares the daylights out of us in the process, not necessarily because we’ve entered the horror genre but because the multivocal narrative has the power to reveal truths lurking beneath the surface. As a teenager I read everything Ray Bradbury wrote. Thirty years later, I still remember the dinosaur rising from the deep tricked by the foghorn into thinking its mate had returned. I still remember the long rain that slowly drove the astronauts crazy on that distant planet. I still remember the lions of the veldt born from the imagination of two children only to eat their parents. I remember these stories and hundreds more even when I can’t remember most “literary” or genre stories I read yesterday or last week. I remember them because they navigated the slipstream.

The best fiction has been doing this since humans first sat around the fire in caves telling stories. We’ve always needed our stories to do this, to pull from the patchwork cloth of what came before in order to awaken us from the stupor of habit, the dull monotony of survival. But with formulaic storytelling shoved down our throat from every corner, with publishing houses and Hollywood both looking for the recipe that guarantees a “blockbuster” the need for interstitial fiction to “break the sea frozen inside us” is stronger than ever. Luckily, a rising number of contemporary writers seem willing to jump head first into the slipstream.

Brian Evenson's short story collection *The Wavering Knife* won the International Horror Guild award for best short story collection in 2005. The stories in the collection were originally published in some of our best "literary" magazines: *Conjunctions*, *The Chicago Review*, *The Denver Quarterly*, *McSweeney's*, *The Southern Review*, *The Paris Review*, etc. Having received international awards for literary fiction, horror, mystery, and fantasy, Evenson is one of our greatest slipstream writers. Take this example from the first story in the collection, "White Square":

The black square on the table is meant to represent Gahern's estranged wife; it is presented as such at Gahern's request. The gray square beside it stands in for the black square's new husband, also presented as such at Gahern's request. Though Hauser has offered him the full gamut of shapes and colors, Gahern insists upon remaining unrepresented. Nothing stands for him. When Hauser suggests to him that the investigation might proceed more smoothly were a shape allowed to stand in for him as well, Gahern simply refused to reply. *Perhaps a green rhombus?* Suggests Hauser. Gahern asks to be returned to his cell.¹³

The opening paragraph simultaneously establishes a world we know, i.e. the noir novel, where the hard-boiled detective interrogates the murder suspect *and* disrupts that world with its insistence on the logic of geometry, representing people with shapes. On the "literary" level, the story estranges us from our preconceived notions of identity. Of course, the story also operates on a meta-fictional level, pointing out the arbitrariness of symbols. We enter a world where reason or rationality is taken to such an extreme the character's are cut off from their own identities. The detached narrative distance divorces the reader from the habit of making sense, of compiling the details together to make a fully fleshed out character we can *identify* with. How can the reader identify with a green rhombus? Evenson frustrates "literary" and genre expectations, forcing the reader to "see" anew. And what do we find? Human identity, human knowledge reduced to representation. Because there is slippage inherent in representation, identity is unstable. Reality is unstable. "*I, too*, Hauser insists, *remain unrepresented*. He holds his hand before his face, assures himself it is still a hand."¹⁴ And because our representations of that reality are arbitrary, subject to will alone, we are left only with the white square of the title, a shape we choose to represent our reality, a shape that contains nothing except what we choose to make it signify. The genius of the story—and why I'll never forget

it—is the way in which Evenson gives us the setting and action of the noir detective story and the perfectly pitched prose of literary fiction, yet disrupts our expectations in both genres. The epistemologies of both the mystery genre and the “literary” are built on the absolute possibility of understanding, of rationality leading to an answer, of the piling up of observable detail upon observable detail pointing the reader to an epiphany. At the end of Evenson’s story, “there is nothing to do but wait.”¹⁵

Kelly Link, one of the other essential names in the growing list of slipstream writers plays with a different set of genre expectations in the story “Stone Animals” from her second book, *Magic for Beginners*—a collection that garnered awards from both sides of the aisle with Hugo, Nebula, and Best American Short Story awards. “Stone Animals” happily turns the American dream on its head as the protagonist, Henry, escapes the big city to start a life in the country with his family. The list of tropes from New England literary fiction is long: Henry’s job in the city consumes him; the city is rife with crime; Henry almost has an affair with his boss; Henry’s wife Catherine almost had an affair with her professor; the increasing number of possessions in their “suburban” life threaten to overwhelm them, etc. It is with this last point that Link’s story enters the slipstream as the possessions increasingly appear to be haunted:

“What’s wrong with the TV?”

“I don’t know,” Catherine said. “It’s working fine. But the kids won’t go near it. Isn’t that great? It’s the same thing as the toothbrush. You’ll see when you get home. I mean it’s not just the kids. I was watching the news earlier, and then I had to turn it off. It wasn’t the news. It was the TV.”

“So, it’s the downstairs bathroom and the coffeemaker and Carleton’s toothbrush and now the TV?”

“There’s some other stuff as well, since this morning. Your office, apparently. Everything in it—your desk, your bookshelves, your chair, even the paper clips.”¹⁶

To make matters worse, rabbits appear, multiplying on Henry’s lawn to the point where they will soon be overrun: “Rabbits pelted across the footpath in front of his bike. There were rabbits foraging on his lawn.”¹⁷ Thematically, we’re in Updike and Cheever country as we watch this family struggle with suburban materialism and detachment, and yet something else seems to be happening, something culled from beyond realism: “You can’t touch that breast,” Catherine said. “It’s haunted.”¹⁸ By blending the fantastic

with the *New Yorker* style story, Link reinvents what it means to be haunted. We watch in horror (and occasional humor) as family members turn on each other, consumed by the false promise of capitalism:

The rabbits are out on the lawn. They've been waiting for him, all this time, they've been waiting. Here's his rabbit, his very own rabbit. Who needs a bike? He sits on this rabbit, legs pressed against the warm, silky, shining flanks, one hand holding on to the rabbit's fur. . . He has something in his other hand, and when he looks, he sees it's a spear. All around him, the others are sitting on their rabbits, waiting patiently, quietly. They've been waiting for a long time, but the waiting is almost over. In a little while, the dinner party will be over and the war will begin.¹⁹

It's an unforgettable story because it so completely takes apart and rearranges our expectations into a new pattern that complicates and deepens rather than simplifying into a formula fit for either "literary" or genre consumption.

It's interesting to note that Link self-published her first book and Evenson's work has been published by a range of independent presses. There is still resistance to interstitial fiction in both "literary" and genre corporate publishing houses. Fortunately, digital publishing is now revolutionizing the book world just as it did the music industry, and as it will the movie business. Small presses pop up by the dozens each year, and more and more of them want to enter the slipstream. That's a good thing for the lover of literature, for those who want stories that make us remember what it's like to read for the first time, what it's like to sit around the campfire or at that slumber party when we were twelve, passing around the flashlight and telling stories as the leaves turned colors and died on the branches beyond the bedroom window. Slipstream stories remind us of the "old verities" Faulkner once mentioned and that while great fiction must always deal with the old truths, it is a still older truth that the artist's job is to so disturb our notions of those "old verities" so that we see them anew.

It is the work of the writer to move beyond the simple definitions or descriptions of things—which is of limited interest after all—and to bring a dream to life through the alchemy of language; to move from the street—the place of received ideas—into the forest, the place of the unknown.²⁰

The writer who navigates the slipstream well can take the reader headlong into the vast sea of disruption, a place that shakes us loose from the received ideas present in so much of

“literary” and genre fiction. Like Ducornet’s forest of the unknown, that sea of disruption seeks always to remind us that the best stories lead us into the dark complexities of life even while movies and TV forever push us into the false light of realism or the empty promise of the Freytag pyramid. The writer willing to navigate the slipstream may not make the New York Times bestseller list or be reviewed in the *New York Review of Books*. He is probably doomed to haunt the edges of the mainstream, shaking chains and banging shutters in hopes of catching the complete attention of even one believer, but he wouldn’t have it any other way.

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