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POETICS OF PROSE

Literary Essays
from Lermontov
to Calvino

Mark Axelrod



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A Poetics Introduction, Mostly

Abstract Like the notion of “postmodernism,” there’s a kind of enigma to the notion of “poetics.” Forms often undermine the Aristotelian notion of fair game, fair play, of what Leonard Orr writes of as “Aristotelian novels” versus “non-Aristotelian” ones; of a seemingly corporeal harmony for Socrates. Just as we are left pondering Brian McHale’s question “whose postmodernism is it anyway?” when he writes “we can discriminate among constructions of postmodernism, none of them any less ‘true’ or less fictional than the others, since *all* of them are finally fictions. To work on the notion of *a* poetics is to work on a disputational system of erecting monomyths in order to destroy them.”

Keywords Poetics · Literary form · Poetic prose · The novel

These are the truly stupid things: 1. literary criticism, whatever it may be, good or bad; 2. The Temperance Society; 3. the Montyon Prize; 4. a man who vaunts the human species—a donkey eulogizing long ears.

From Flaubert’s Intimate Notebook, 1840–1841

It has taken me five days to write one page . . .

Flaubert’s letter to Louise Colet, January 15, 1853

Like the notion of “postmodernism,” there’s a kind of enigma to the notion of “poetics.” To an understanding of poetics, to a poetics of novel notions: a cacophony of phonetics, semantics, semiotics, linguistics and so forth. An enigma of forms that often undermine the Aristotelian notion of fair game, fair play, of what Leonard Orr writes of as “Aristotelian novels” versus “non-Aristotelian” ones; of a seemingly corporeal harmony for Socrates, placating Peripatetic wanderings. Just as we are left pondering Brian McHale’s question “whose postmodernism is it anyway?” when he writes

we can discriminate among constructions of postmodernism, none of them any less “true” or less fictional than the others, since *all* of them are finally fictions. Thus, there is John Barth’s postmodernism, the literature of replenishment; Charles Newman’s postmodernism, the literature of inflationary economy; Jean-François Lyotard’s postmodernism, a general condition of knowledge in the contemporary informational regime; Ihab Hassan’s postmodernism, a stage on the road to the spiritual unification of humankind; and so on. There is even Kermode’s construction of postmodernism, which in effect constructs it right out of existence. (McHale, p. 4)

We have to ask, “whose poetics is it anyway?” Shklovsky’s? Wellek’s? Warren’s? Frye’s? Said’s? Todorov’s? Hutcheon’s? (who even labels hers “postmodern”). And what is this thing called *poetics*? Presumably it is the method of *their* madness: those fools who protest too much; those deceivers who actually know the difference between windmills and giants, but execute their own game; those fabricators of labyrinths and manufacturers of such and such and so on and so on and so such. It is their vision that disembowels the genie to perform the Herculean feats of transmogrifying the intangible, the inchoate, to that which makes incisions into some fleshless archive called “craft” or “art” To work on the notion of *a* poetics is to work on a disputational system of erecting monomyths in order to destroy them. Yet there must be a method to the mania (whether Aristotelian or not) that enables the writer to satisfy the expedients of the fissures of the soul in order to mollify the anguish that disturbs one, perturbs one, to write. In addressing the notion of “the arduous labor of style,” Barthes writes of Flaubert that

the dimension of this agony is altogether different; the labor of style is for him an unspeakable suffering (even if he speaks it quite often), an almost expiatory ordeal for which he acknowledges no compensation of a

magical (i.e. aleatory) order, as the sentiment of inspiration might be for many writers: style, for Flaubert, is absolute suffering, infinite suffering, useless suffering . . . it requires an “irrevocable farewell to life,” a pitiless sequestration. (Barthes, p. 69).

And for Beckett, writing was “the only thing left for [me] to do” (Axelrod Personal Interview).

For example, Derrida, in his “*Laguna Beach Interviews*,” said that

deep down I have probably never drawn any great enjoyment from fiction, from reading novels, for example, beyond the pleasure taken in analyzing the play of writing, or else certain naive movements of identification. (Derrida 1992, p. 39).

“The *play* of writing?” Perhaps there is no method for Derrida that would satisfy his apparent need for the epiphany of a transcendent reading, a kind of orgasmic reading. So, without any “direction” suggested even from the guru of deconstruction, what then is *the* method of poetics? Or are there methods? Are there approaches that coexist with the verities of the script, from whatever storehouse of methodologies that exist? Can there be a “poetics of *the* novel” at all? Or merely “poetics *of* novels?” Is there a way to apply the standards of a “poetics of the novel” to texts as disparate as *A Hero of Our Time* and *The Stranger*? Can we take Henry James seriously when he writes in his *The Art of Fiction* that: “The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to *represent* life. When it relinquishes this attempt, the same attempt that we see on the canvas of the painter, it will have arrived at a very strange pass?” (James 1948, p. 5, emphasis added). Actually, no. Theories of the novel from Lukács to Leavis, Lubbock to Stevick, the art of fiction from James to Kundera all tend to homogenize the beast into a senescent organism capable of swallowing itself (something Titanesque, like Goya swallowing paint) and most often these theories are in relation to the critical bantering of those who have the privilege of canonizing those who reign mainly on the plains of the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, the Caspian: waterworks that tend to avoid pacific oceans, cone-shaped coasts, far northern latitudes or Babylonian tongues. But the subversion is merely a categorization of the frenetic confabulations of an eagerly awaited demise. What motivates an individual writer to write his/her way is a mélange of ascendancies. A carnival (no allusion to Bakhtin where none intended) of a different

color, which absorbs a writer in the exploration of the finiteness of his/her ability. Balzac, even in his majestic sloppiness, is equal to Beckett in the respect given to his signature on the page—most of the time.

These essays will attempt to engage the heretofore unengageable—at least the heretofore unmanageable; an awkward notion in light of the panoply of scientific discourses from French and German scholarship. That is, to return to those thrilling days of Shklovsky, Tomashevsky, Eichenbaum, and Robbe-Grillet, to minimize archaeologies of knowledge and vials of semiosis and return to the architectonics of the texts themselves, which is where the writers wanted us to return at the beginning. In the beginning, was the word. Because in the final analysis one is merely left with two things: the text *qua* text and the person who wrote it. As Ronald Sukenick has written: “The truth of the page is that there’s a writer sitting there writing the page” and the reader

is forced to recognize the reality of the reading situation as the writer points to the reality of the writing situation, and the work, instead of allowing him to escape the truth of his own life, keeps returning him to it but, one hopes, with his own imagination activated and revitalized. (Sukenick 1985, p. 25)

After all the persiflage is removed, the meretricious persiflage is removed, the patter of ecclesiastical clatter cannot shroud the hollowness of the poetics pursuit and the aversion to the germ of the text only transmogrifies into an even more unhappy resolution. This is not to say the politics *in* the text is less important than the politics *of* the text; it is meant to say in dealing with notions of poetics the content will pay homage to its parent structure and implied in the structure is a politics that may even transcend the content.

This approach is somewhat “radical” in that I’m suspending the rules of literary criticism *à la mode* (whatever that may be now). I am more interested in returning to a rather basic and fundamental notion about novels and that is how novels are made and to speculate (including the “ogre” of intentionality) on why the writers engaged themselves in such a manner of writing; why they spent their minutes, days, hours, weeks, months, and years, often their last years, months, weeks, hours, days, minutes, seconds in revising, reviewing, and revitalizing their texts (one need only read Lispector’s “The Author’s Dedication” in *The Hour of the Star* in which she dedicates her narrative to “*Death and Transfiguration*,

in which Richard Strauss predicts my fate” or recall Flaubert’s incantation “two days to reach the end of two lines” for such a validation) executing them into the “shape” they wanted them to be in before being stolen upon by the vagaries of the night, the fright, the texture of the darkness of an eternally empty page. As Valéry has written:

The art of literature, derived from language and by which, in turn, language is influenced, is thus, of all the arts . . . the one which engages and utilizes the greatest number of independent parts (*sound, sense, syntactic forms, concepts, images* . . .). Its study . . . is basically . . . an analysis of the mind executed with a particular intention. (Hytier 1966, p. 224)

To that end, writers exist in the text whether we critics want to accept that or not.

There are numerous approaches to the composition of novels and plays and to reading them. To that, Derrida has no monopoly. No matter how oblique or seemingly chaotic a text may be, a writer, if she/he is truly “an artist,” seeks a kind of cohesion that will keep the text unified and to that extent is charged with the laws of execution. Regardless of claims by critics such as H  l  ne Cixous that writing said to be feminine “revels in open-ended textuality” (Moi 2002, p. 109) there is a distinctly cohesive format in texts as seemingly open-ended as, for example, Lispector’s *The Hour of the Star*, Sarraute’s *Tropisms*, and Smart’s *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* that tends to undermine that notion. The apparently chaotic vagaries of Beckett are truly that, apparent not real, and the seemingly chaotic nature of a novel such as Cort  zar’s *Rayuela* is clearly meant to undermine the fabric of realistically represented novels, while paying homage to a clarified chaos of composition.

We find that poetics can involve a number of aspects devoted to the novel, but in order to deal with these on multiple planes, from different angles of reading, as Breton might have said in referring to *Nadja*, we have to acknowledge that the approaches to each of these novels will be both the same, yet different. What will be similar is the presumption, a presumption hedged in the formulation that writers write to say something (whatever that something may be) and execute it in a particular way. Though the mania of multiple readings perpetuates there is no mistaking the “meaning” by which an individual writer structures his/her work. That compositional poetics may be based upon a clearly defined social, economic, or political perspective that may be “reflected” (no allusion to

Lukács where none intended) in the manner of the madness or as a way of placating the madness, there is no question. From the cartographic journeys of Quixote to the epidermal ones of Braz Cubas to the suspicious “ramblings” of *Company’s* voice, the poetics of novels seek to reify a particular structure suitable to the behavior of the text and the person executing it.

It appears that many have approached the “anti-bliss point” in literary criticism; that is, that point at which, as a consumer of literary criticism one is both sated and saturated, and, in a way, I am writing this book precisely because I have lost interest in literary criticism that devalues (if not depersonalizes) the primary text and valorizes the secondary one, that diminishes the fiction and valorizes a criticism that “is fashionable.” In other words, one that subsumes the text to the appropriation of a trend of literary criticism *qua* philosophical nexus that tends to disappropriate the work of art. In other words, to avoid dealing *with* the writing in favor of dealing *about* the writing. A very different approach indeed. That the included writers were and are enamored of the word, the brilliance of the word, the majesty of its rhythm and measure can hardly be argued. Beyond the critical theories, the philosophical application both new and old (Hegel’s, Kant’s, Husserl’s, Heidegger’s, Derrida’s *ad astra*) the fact remains that writers of prose fiction (not necessarily those motivated entirely by commerce) set out with blank pages in order to dilate pupils, distend arteries, and infuse genitals. The notion that there are multiple readings and meanings of a particular work (a notion that novelists have known ever since Cervantes decided to be jocular) should not dissuade one from returning once again to the “mystery” of the text, of dispensing with the categories that deflate the senses of codes, that defray the imaginary and symbolic orders, that find invaginations rampant and penises erect. What has happened in criticism is the movement from *texts* to *techs*, from the word and composition of such, to the schematized, topologized, dissolution of such. In short, the science has undermined the art and the artist has become marginal to the critic(s) who exploit him/her. What I revere most (and have) about literature is the poetry of the prose. The execution: a line, well-crafted, balanced, that makes one ache to read it again and again. I have no intention of attempting to define a poetics of *the* novel, complete and unexpurgated (a futile task only surpassed by merchandising Sisyphus’s rock), but to engage in a path of a novel poetics that recognizes the need for a social, political, and economic register of texts, but who is not engaging in one now.