

HUMANITIES 4630
PROSE FICTION WORKSHOP

"I feel that by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else."

Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past"

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Vanier 230

York University
Division of Humanities
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Humanities 4630

The course will concentrate on the *art* of writing intelligent, significant, moving prose fiction (fragments, stories, novels, whatever). Only students who are serious about becoming good writers, who want to work hard and learn their trade, and who can

identify with Vincent van Gogh's remark: "[the word artist includes] the meaning: always seeking without absolutely finding. . . . As far as I know the word means 'I am seeking, I am striving, I am in it with all my heart'"--should embark on this course.

The following texts will be used (available at York Book Shop):

1. THE ART OF SHORT FICTION:
AN INTERNATIONAL ANTHOLOGY ed. Gary Geddes (Harper Collins paperback).
This will be our text for examples of exemplary fiction writing and story form; though keep in mind it is one editor's choice and a small selection at that.
2. HUMANITIES 4630 COURSE ANTHOLOGY, ed. Matthew Corrigan
The Course Anthology offers some exemplary models from the Modern and contemporary periods (mostly novels)--many chosen by former students in this workshop. Also included are some key essays on the craft of fiction writing. (Please use 1996-97 edition.)

STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES

1. Regular attendance at workshop is required (even when your work isn't being critiqued); participation, critically, in workshop is also required (this requires reading each other's work carefully BEFORE class).
2. Work should be submitted on a regular basis (every 3-4 weeks). Try for as much as possible at one time (but not more than 10 typed double-spaced pages each submission--at least until second term). (Initial assignments should be 1-2 typed pages.)
3. Each student will make one presentation to class during the year from readings in Geddes's ANTHOLOGY or COURSE ANTHOLOGY. Presentations should be 15 minutes maximum and should unfold the piece from a writer's (not a literary critic's) point of view: merits of perspective, character, story, dialogue, structure, language, tone, imagery, mood, irony, etc.
4. Each student is strongly encouraged to maintain a 'writer's journal' of general facts, problems, discoveries as a record of his or her passage through the course. Keep this for future if not present use (years hence you will castigate yourself for not keeping such an inventory of growth). This journal, in whole or part, may be submitted at end of term to enhance one's grade (not doing so will not affect one's grade).

5 Each student should become adept at using a computer (if this is not already a reality); we'll make arrangements in the Humanities Computer lab if you don't own a computer. Use a good quality printer (no poor quality dot matrix printers please). Xerox copies for class should be legible and of dark print. Work may be single-spaced (instructor would appreciate his class copy double-spaced).

6 Each student to form a literary partnership with another member of the class (by the fourth meeting); these partnerships to be reviewed and (if necessary) changed at the beginning of second term. This partner should screen everything you write BEFORE it comes to the workshop. Telephone contact is usually the best way to accomplish this.

7 Grading:

20% for attendance and active participation in workshop during the year (the quality and consistency of your workshop critiques). (Students whose attendance is unsatisfactory will be asked to drop the course.)

10% single class presentation (see item 3 above)

70% for written work. Written work to be adjudicated as follows: a) degree to which you become aware of your abilities as a writer (what you can and can't do); b) distance you take your talent during the year (quality of work produced).

In other words, self recognition and actual achievement during the year. Self-consciousness plus actual quality work. A minimum of 30 pages of typed, double-spaced, finished (professional) prose is required for a passing grade. Try to finish at least one story or novel chapter during the year. (To earn an A you must complete one story or novel chapter.)

CREATIVE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

The course will begin with several short assignments.

The point of these assignments is to make you aware of possibilities you may not be aware of as fledgling writers. In particular, to make you aware of the importance of perspective in narrative structure. A good writer will experiment with different perspectives, though probably hone in on one (third or first) for most of his or her main work (but not without considerable experimentation to reach such a stage).

Undertake these assignments in the right spirit and try to learn from them. By all means, use writing you have already done that fits (or can be made to fit) a particular

assignment.

Each assignment should be 1-2 typed, double-spaced pages and may be from the beginning, middle, or end of some larger (still uncompleted) work.

1. FIRST PERSON 'PEDESTAL' NARRATIVE

Compose a section of first person 'pedestal' narrative--one that involves the narrator in the life of another (usually 'superlative') character. Examples: F. Scott Fitzgerald's *THE GREAT GATSBY*, Joseph Conrad's *HEART OF DARKNESS*, Ford Maddox Ford's *THE GOOD SOLDIER*, William Styron's *SOPHIE'S CHOICE*.

Usually, in this kind of narrative, the narrator is the author disguised; and usually the narrator is more or less invisible (*SOPHIE'S CHOICE* is an exception), the emphasis being on the individual written about--often an individual of some worth who is lionized or placed on a pedestal. This kind of narrative is exploratory and adulatory (looking up at the character even though the character may be of dubious morals [Mr. Kurtz in *HEART OF DARKNESS*])--and the energy released one of idolization or idealization (often involving heightened expectation and muted or outright suspense [*GATSBY*, *HEART OF DARKNESS*]).

A special 'energy' is released by this kind of narrative that has, I suspect, to do with the fact that the reader's perceptions are focused by the narrator--and focused towards a figure of some worth, depth, and mystery (i.e., away from the narrator himself or herself, who serves merely as a lens or telescope for the action itself).

2. FIRST PERSON 'EXPOSITORY' NARRATIVE

Compose a section of first person 'expository' narrative. This is perhaps the most popular type of narrative in our age and many successful examples can be found in Geddes's *THE ART OF SHORT FICTION*.

The focus is on story, event, happening, or character involving the narrator; and the 'story' or 'character' is now being unfolded or examined by the narrator, who has the chance to organize materials as he or she sees fit for maximum effect. *STORY* is usually paradigm here; something has happened that can now be told. Or *CHARACTER* (other than the narrator) is explored in retrospect. Emphasis is on making the story (or character) as believable and interesting as possible. Psychological insight, characters in action (dialogue), 'spirit of place,' may be important. Delivery is often 'writing [that is] degree zero' (as Barthes calls it), without embellishment or conscious style.

Examples (from Geddes): Mavis Gallant, Nadine Gordimer, Amy Hempel, Margaret Laurence, Bharti Mukherjee (though some of these might fit 'pedestal' narrative as well).

3. FIRST PERSON 'LYRICAL' NARRATIVE

Compose a section of first person 'lyrical' narrative. This is a different accounting where the narrator himself or herself (and his or her experiences) is the focus: one in which the writing celebrates the "I"--his or her personality, character, perceptions, energy, life, etc. The 'egotistical sublime.' Others may be involved but the piece invariably returns to the narrator. Clark Blaise's work is a good model here; also works like Salinger's *CATCHER IN THE RYE*, Leonard Cohen's *BEAUTIFUL LOSERS*, John Updike.

Language and style are as important as narrative thrust. The self (his or her feelings, experiences, life) undergoes lyrical analysis. An actual story may or may not play a part in such a narrative, which is actually a single ego expounding upon itself (hopefully not to the disgust of the reader). Focus is on the here and now of experience (rendered powerfully in language) rather than on narrative end or narrative disclosure involving other individuals. Ego vs. narrative (in a sense). Subjectivity vs objectivity (in a sense).

This is one of the most difficult and treacherous types of narrative because it involves so much ego. A plethora of ego will quickly disengage the sensitive reader. Our own age is full of such writing and much of it is mere self-expression (not art certainly, which is different from self-expression). The challenge is to balance ego against objectivity (a question of style as well as psychology and good taste).

Many major writers never attempted such a perspective (Tolstoy, Mann, Woolf), so don't be too disappointed if your attempts here do not succeed.

The Malcolm Lowry novella "Forest Path to the Spring" is a truly fine example of this type. See sample in our ANTHOLOGY.

Typically, the *Bildungsroman* (novel of education), if written in the first and not third perspective, belongs here.

4. THIRD PERSON 'SUSTAINED CONSCIOUSNESS' NARRATIVE

Compose a section of third person he or she narrative where the perspective is situated within one particular character and sustained there.

Take us immediately into the central character (invariably a character of substantial worth) and have us observe the character's world through his or her perceptions and thoughts (consciousness).

Henry James deems this the highest achievement of prose fiction writing, capable of the most marvellous, diverse, and lasting effects. It is the most difficult to achieve and requires special handling (and seeing) on the writer's part to be successful. James is a purist and counsels that nothing should be extraneous to the consciousness at hand; nothing delivered that the character couldn't this instant observe or feel or think.

The great Modernists agree with him and this becomes THE method of Modern

prose fiction, with many contributing to its formulation: Joyce, Woolf, Mann, Wharton, Cather, Faulkner, Lowry, Bellow, Malamud, Lessing, Updike, Gallant, Brookner among them (though the great Mann's understanding of this technique was somewhat faulty (DEATH IN VENICE, THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN). Still today a viable method, it allows the writer with something to say infinite permutation and combination.

Joyce's PORTRAIT is possibly the most sustained and careful example. The narrative follows Stephen Dedalus from age six (earlier if you consider the book's 'proem') through about age twenty, rendering Stephen's emotions and thoughts at significant stages of his life (the "epiphanic" stages of his life, as Joyce thinks of them). Nothing in this *Bildungsroman* (novel of education) is extraneous to Stephen's perceptions, thoughts, philosophizing. Other characters are realized through Stephen's experience and judgment of them (or through their own speech as they engage Stephen).

While such a method might seem limiting, in that it deals essentially with one character (often for huge lengths of narrative, eg., Mann's THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN [700+ pages]), the opposite is the case. The reader falls comfortably into the mind and senses of the character and experiences a whole world thereby. The reader always knows where he or she is standing, thus can enter the novel at any point. The novel's richness depends on the mind and sensibility of the protagonist--often the writer's alter ego. The great Modernists achieved their best (and often most autobiographical) work in this perspective.

Other good examples are TO THE LIGHTHOUSE (though here consciousness moves back and forth among the central characters, at times disconcertingly within the same sentence, and not always successfully); and UNDER THE VOLCANO (Malcolm Lowry), where each chapter reflects one protagonist's point of view, though the book is essentially one character's sensibility (Geoffrey Firmin--Lowry himself), and is delivered through his perspective. (The opening page of VOLCANO, however, is omniscient in point of view [presumably to achieve panoramic effect].)

Bellow's HERZOG, Malamud's DUBIN'S LIVES, Brookner's HOTEL DU LAC show deft handling of this perspective. (Bellow and Malamud often pull the camera back a little from their protagonists and provide a kind of 'over the shoulder view'--which can be very effective.)

Style is of the utmost here. A style commensurate with the character's perceptions and intellect must be found and maintained at peak performance throughout the narrative, with no lapses of voice, tone, imagery, complexity, etc. In PORTRAIT Joyce changes the style to accommodate Stephen's growth (the different stages of intellectual and emotional growth); thus at ages 6, 11, 15, 18, and 20 the style (sentence length and complexity, cadence, metaphors, diction, etc.) reflects Stephen at these ages.

'Stream of consciousness'-- a popular kind of writing earlier in this century, is really a sub category or more focused version of this perspective. Here the emphasis is on the protagonist's consciousness (how it perceives and judges the world), as opposed to action. Character is achieved through specific imagery, syntax, cadence, repetition; and the actual texture (or 'voice') of consciousness replicated thereby (Molly's soliloquy at the end of Joyce's ULYSSES).

5. 'OMNISCIENT AUTHOR' NARRATIVE

Compose the beginning of an 'omniscient author' narrative: one in which the author sees beyond his or her dramatis personae and, in a sense, manipulates the characters and events, and even our estimation or understanding of them. One character may be significant but others receive attention as well; and the feeling is that the author has created these characters and their world(s) and knows everything or almost everything about them. No restrictions of vision apply.

This is narrative fiction's first established technique (along with the Epistolary Narrative [narrative of letters from one character to another], developed in the 18th and 19th centuries, but seriously questioned by the great Modernists, who found such a method out of tune with their own 'psychological' age.

The good contemporary writer seldom employs this perspective--though there are exceptions. Doris Lessing's "To Room 19" (in *Geddes*) is a superlative example of this technique updated to the present. Lessing's narrative voice sounds like that of a friend of the characters, who is now relating their story in retrospect; but in fact her knowledge and understanding of the characters would seem to go beyond the possibility of mere personal acquaintance (friendship)--thus the narration's omniscient flavour. The narrator herself is invisible (we know nothing about her (him?) except that she (he?) is psychologically acute in her (his?) perceptions.

Much poor contemporary fiction uses this form, and badly, I suspect because it is an easier perspective to write in, requiring less skill and concentration in the writing (less thought too) than Third Person Sustained Consciousness.

Henry James's point is that the reader feels more at home when he or she is situated within the consciousness of the main character (Third Person Sustained Consciousness) and isn't made to feel the presence of the author looking over the characters' shoulders and generally manipulating events. He sees the omniscient technique as belonging to a pre-psychological age--thus incapable of rendering modern life in all its psychological complexities. Our modern sense of truth vs fiction isn't satisfied by such 'hokey' manipulation. James is right, I think, in his assessment, and the narrative richer and deeper if positioned within one central intelligence.

In any case, Omniscient Author Narration precedes our own psychologically aware age, and if we insist on using it we should be aware of its limitations and not use it naively.

Percy Lubbock's wonderful book *THE CRAFT OF FICTION* [1921] (spawned by James's 'Prefaces' to his own novels, collected and published under the title *THE ART OF FICTION*--itself one of the great works on novel writing) provides a masterful discussion of the merits of Third Person Sustained Consciousness over Omniscient Narration and should be required reading for any serious student of prose fiction (excerpted in our *ANTHOLOGY*). Norman Friedman's "Point of View in Fiction" (1955) provides a fine summary of the issues involved (see *ANTHOLOGY*).

OTHER ASSIGNMENTS (Optional) (which the student may wish to attempt):

1. Compose a page of dialogue involving one or more characters. The piece can be rooted in a third person sustained consciousness or be left open as to narrative structure. If possible, alternate the dialogue with some purely 'narrative' (non-dialogue) elements (what in play and film scripts becomes the staged action).
2. Compose a natural setting, a "spirit of place" (*Spiritus Loci*, in Latin), that would fit some particular consciousness or action. Many writers have little or no talent with this kind of writing (Joyce, Woolf, Munro); others rely on it significantly and achieve outstanding results (Melville, Hardy, Tolstoy, Conrad, Wharton, Cather, Lawrence, Mann, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Lowry, Lampedusa, Durrell, Updike). This is writing that is very much of the senses as opposed to aural or acoustic or cerebral writing. It is often called 'atmospheric' writing. It takes a special seeing to bring such description off; a poetic sensibility in effect (which is why so many of its greatest practitioners were also poets). Ideally, spirit of place comes from and through the protagonist's perceptions; thus takes on a personalized life of its own. Description should never be superfluous to character (character's perceptions); never superimposed upon it but linked dramatically and emotionally to it.

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SOME SUMMARY (BUT NOT FINAL) OBSERVATIONS:

The good writer will not be restricted to one perspective, one voice, one mode of delivery. Does a great actor possess only one voice and enact only one role? Or the great painter paint only one picture?

Undoubtedly, other narrative structures exist other than those defined above, particularly first person narrative ones. (Can you think of others?) These are general descriptive categories and not meant to be absolute or to circumscribe ALL writing, especially first person writing, which has always displayed and will continue to display near infinite possibilities. The criterion should be: "Does the piece work?" "Does it work for the discerning, sensitive reader who KNOWS something about good writing?" No other criterion should apply. The above are fairly proven categories and useful as beginning exercises.

Remember: There is a 'metaphysical difference' between first and third person consciousness, as anyone who has tried to transpose one into the other will discover. One is capable of things not available to the other. You limit yourself if you haven't tried both.

Good narrative structures are learned forms; they require hard work, perception, experimentation. One isn't born a great writer; one becomes a great writer. (Talent, of course, helps.) Examination of the early, inchoate works of the great Modernists shows

this. The early work of Joyce, for example, is awkward, groping, and plain bad; lacking centre. It takes Joyce twelve years (age 20-32) to position his own life-story (A PORTRAIT) comfortably in the Third Person Sustained Consciousness.

A good structure will release one's creative energies in unexpected ways--leading to discoveries unimagined or impossible otherwise. (What Mark Schorer calls "technique as discovery"--an intuition all the great Modernists share.)

Many writers commit egregious mistakes in structuring their stories; and many otherwise fine writers never master the art of perspective properly, and their work suffers accordingly.

The school for any serious contemporary novelist or short story writer should be the great Modernists themselves, not one's contemporaries. The great narrative techniques were discovered and perfected by them and are as viable today as seventy years ago.

Remember: good writing is an art like any other and requires, in addition to talent, perception, intelligence, good taste, an education, a sense of vocation, a knowledge of what has been possible until now in the art of writing, infinite trial and error, a panoply of real and dead mentors (spurring one on), long apprenticeship, infinite patience, and lots and lots of hard work.

You owe it to yourself (your talent) to learn as much about writing as possible.

CORRIGAN'S ELEMENTS OF CRITIQUE

(Bring this list to the workshops and let it serve as guide for your critiques. Additions to it are welcome.)

1. "On whose authority is the story told?" (James)

Is perspective viable, consistent, convincing? If third sustained consciousness, is it properly, consistently, and believably controlled? Should perspective be changed altogether?

2. Significant subject? Even if working well how important is the subject for another?

Good writing is writing for all time--not for one's own age, peers, nationality merely. (Remember: self expression is not necessarily art.)

3. Character(s): Does the piece possess full, meaningful, and believable character(s)? Is character consistently rendered? Psychologically credible? Interesting? Treated condescendingly (beginning writers have a tendency to look down on their characters; to

create characters that are mere cartoons)?

4. Language: Is the language adequate? Is it too full or too thin? Consistent? Rhythmically fine? Does it avoid clichés? Are the sentences too short? Diction (Flaubert's dictum of *mot juste*)? Does the language transcend itself--create an extraordinary world for the reader? Does it have or could it use some poetic elements (imagery)? Is the lyricism controlled? Is the writer's vocabulary sufficient (if the writer doesn't keep language [words] alive who will?)

5. Story (if a story): is it credible? Interesting? Dramatically and psychologically well shaped? Paced well? Does it have a climax?
If a short story: are details properly proportioned (too few or too many details)?

6. Novel vs short story? Which is it? Is the writer more one kind of writer than the other? Many novelists were poor short story writers or wrote no stories at all. Determine this year where your own strengths lie. If a novelist you will take longer to develop your skills and complete your first work.

7 Epiphany (Joyce's "epiphany," Woolf's "moments of being"). Does the writing contain moments of genuine illumination (psychological, spiritual)? Great writing is full of such epiphanies.

8. Does the writing teach us (the reader) things? Show us things unseen before? The Homeric epics, in addition to being great literary works, are also encyclopedias of their age (compendiums of knowledge not otherwise recorded).

9. Significant (memorable) details? Images that are memorable. (Conrad: "Above all to make the reader see!") (Charles Olson: "One perception should lead immediately and necessarily to another.")

10. Re Novels: Is the larger dramatic, psychological structure effective? Is the pacing fine? Do events unfold naturally? Are the chapters more or less even in weight? Are the characters well developed? Is there a sense of character growth over the length of the action? Moral considerations?

11. *Spiritus Loci* (spirit of place). Does it convey such? Has setting and character been effectively annealed? Could the piece benefit from such effects?

12. Other matters of technique? Voice? Tone?

13. Mysterious factors? Charisma of good writing? Those elements not definable that great writing possesses and possesses differently from all other works.

On workshop criticism:

Try to be objective not personal in your workshop critiques. Never begin: "I like this piece. . . ." We are not here to like but to help each other as writers. Whether the piece works or not--is the issue. There are principles that apply to good writing (taking into account the mysterious elements of all greatness); these principles can be enunciated and learned (usually). They consist of all that is embodied in, and can be found in, the great writing of the past. Writing, as with the other arts, does not exist in a vacuum. Each piece is (whether it likes it or not) part of a tradition larger than itself. It behoves us as writers to understand this tradition as well as possible and our own work's place within it.

The best way to learn as a beginning writer is to find mentors--writers who have something special to teach us about our own talent (preferably writers from the previous generation (or age)--not our contemporaries or our own generation. We cannot grow as writers without such mentors.

The truly great, trenchant critic (Ford, Pound, Eliot, George Steiner, Cynthia Ozick) is a rare phenomenon--and only actual writers can criticize other writers effectively (in a way that helps them learn their trade). Pound's ABC OF READING is a masterful little book on the art of criticism for writers.

Read other writers on the art of writing (there is a rich body of work out there). Would you become a brain surgeon, a physicist, a composer, without studying the discipline (its tradition)--everything you could get your hands on that might help?

Criticism will not be (too) painful if objective and if it tells the truth. If you have nothing to say remain silent. Bad, insensitive, or misplaced criticism is of no value to the writer. Speak to the issue of strengths and weaknesses in the piece. Still, criticism is *never* pleasant and one must possess a strong heart (and a desire to learn) to undertake these workshops.

CORRIGAN'S PERORATION (Huma 4630)

1. Everything depends upon and devolves to technique + subject matter.
2. Know and master technique. You hone your technique by studying and restudying the writers who have struggled a lifetime at their craft and left us masterpieces (masterpieces

that have passed the test of time).

3. Seek and never stop seeking significant mentors from among the great writers of the past. Let them guide you. They have succeeded where you wish to succeed. If you copy writers who are mediocre you will be mediocre or less than mediocre yourself.

4. Find the significant subjects in your own psyche or in the world about you (significant to others & to your own best self); subjects larger than your own life and experiences. Most writers fail to publish because they cannot find the right subject matter.

5. Write for someone of your worth in some distant land and in some other time.

Andre Gide's remark: "to affect someone of my worth and sensibility [as deeply as I have been affected by reading Stendhal] . . . nothing greater is desired by myself as a writer."

6. Good writing is an art form. Not all writers are artists. Art is different from self expression and transcendent upon it. (Remember the old axiom: 'writing is rewriting.')

7. First and even second novels or story collections will usually be trial efforts, so don't expect too much of them. They are your apprentice works as writers. Gain the courage to set inferior work aside and to move on.

8. Be wary of false praisers. Few people know what constitutes truly good writing. Most literary critics know little about writing from the inside (i.e., how writing becomes good, what makes it work or not work, how it evolves from the writer's personality, etc.). This is true also of most publishers.

9. Be wary of your age and what it thinks it knows about itself and the past--not to mention its tastes in writing. Tastes in our age are particularly scattered (in all the arts). It's as though we have learned little from the past. We live in an age of 'Emperors and Empresses without any clothes'--fakes and poseurs of all kinds. Learn to see through your age and find what is genuinely true and valid in it. Flaubert's advice to the writer: 'stand apart or above your age, and treat it with suspicion and mild contempt.' If as a good writer your work appeals to your age, fine, consider yourself lucky (and exceptional), but don't actively seek such praise.

10. Truly good (great?) writing is the hardest, most demanding art--requiring, as one critic has put it, 'all of the right and the left brain and the pituitary gland besides.' This is why (relatively speaking) so few great writers exist within an age. The great novel is, arguably, the highest, most consummate achievement within human culture. This is why (relatively speaking) so few great novels exist within an age.

11. Conrad: "Above all to make the reader see!"

12. Language should be clear but it can also be beautiful. If the writer doesn't work to preserve the beauty of language who will? Clarity and truth are wonderful but they are not the sum of language's virtues. Beauty and felicitous style are others.

13. Ignorance of tradition, ego, and parochialism are the writer's enemies.

Finally (keep in mind):

An age has two kinds of serious artist, writer, thinker: those who work with and through the age, who give to the age the image of itself that the age wants (or thinks it wants). The best among such artists are the age's "greatest" artists, its success stories. This is as it should be. Their work belongs to the age of which they are a living part and serves that age in turn. (Balzac in his age, Updike in our own, would be examples.) Their work is important to that age (or so the age decrees) and will be important to any future assessment of it. But there is in almost every age (most clearly since the late eighteenth century) another kind of great artist: one who cannot work comfortably within the age; who works a private vision around and through the age (often antagonizing it); whose image is not what the age wants or can even be taught to want. Such an artist belongs to his age by default but he still belongs. In his work he wrestles with popular influences of every kind (styles and fashions particularly) though his stance is usually one of opposition. Usually, as a result, he is not "popular" (cannot be "popular"). On occasion, he may, like Vincent van Gogh, appeal to almost no one in his age; sell, like van Gogh, no work in his age (van Gogh sold one painting in his lifetime). Such an artist gains his reputation in time; becomes for a subsequent age a necessary image of that past, which has long since extinguished itself. A writer like Melville typifies this kind of artist, belonging not very significantly to his own age, but becoming for a subsequent one (our own, say) as important a spokesman of mid-nineteenth-century America as we have (Nietzsche, Munch, Mahler, Kafka, Woolf, Lowry, Olson are other examples). History, as it reshuffles its cards, finds significances, patterns, links an age could not have seen itself; in short, understands the past very differently from the way the past saw and understood itself. This is fairly self-evident. What is not so evident is how this knowledge can be put to use in the present; how it can inform our judgments of the present. In fact it cannot. For matters of taste and fashion are deeply fixed in our unconscious and cannot easily be dislodged from our prejudices, which prejudices largely constitute the very fabric of our lives (our consciousness). This is how history works, whether we like it or not. In the end we have very little control over how such determinations are made.

MC April 1997