

Neural Neighborhoods and Other Concrete Abstracts (1974)

It was late at night (as some tales still begin), and I now know she was crazy. And through some collaborative release that I dismissed a moment later in that New Hampshire summerhouse surrounded by woods full of snow, I found myself telling her that what I was after in what I was writing was the relation between Outside and Inside. But then I saw in a motion of her mouth that she had understood me, and I wondered what I had meant. Was it anything beyond an owlish and possibly abstract formulation? I decided my miasma had slid across hers, and I let it go at that.

I hadn't, in 1957, read Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* or Ballard's *Love & Napalm: Export U.S.A.* I had only just read *Lolita* and hadn't yet seen a relation in Nabokov between love and science. And it was a long time yet before a friendly city oceanographer -- less through what he said about the Hudson no longer flushing itself than through what he said about marine Interface -- stimulated in my doubly attentive brain a sentence beginning, "Only define the interface, and ..."

Hark, hark, the shark! By stroking of its teeth I have found out electricity-- but no, not its teeth, its *back*, where long informations diagram out to my touch like a skeleton power raised to its body's surface.

I dismissed the Outside-Inside remark that winter night because I had been led to believe that this was no way for a writer to think about writing fiction. It wasn't just that one should think in scenes and images. I had done that when I was twenty-two or -three, recapturing the heavily freighted subway of my early nightmares. But in those turgid pages I all too calmly scrapped, where was clear motivation, where was integral personality and moral stability, what was the good of all these rich words greedily swamping whatever distinction might then have been visible between me and what was around me? I showed these beginnings to the wrong people too often. I was urged to write stories. Stories -- instead of these displaced passions.

There was good advice by accident in the not-so-good. But good advice is hard to take, and even the not-so-good emphasized a more rational view of what was possible or (in the closet-commercial piety of the phrase) what worked. Now that I try to think about it, all I see is my own lack of independence. If someone had organized a quest to find the cyanometer Ruskin invented to measure the blue of the sky, I would have gone along as easily as on a hunt for the Crystal Skull or the Lost City of Atlantis. A certain kind of regular, sensitive American novel was what I let myself think I ought to write, like those short stories which the often presumptuously clear John O'Hara said so many bad first novelists never had been able to manage.

Like the New York I had temporarily left, a remark of Saul Bellow's in *Seize the Day* haunted me -- that Tommy Wilhelm "reflected long and then made the decision he had rejected twenty separate times."

But what happened to me when I read Michel Butor's *Degrees* was a matter of confidence more than decision. It was much more than a grandiosity of obsession in Butor's hero from which I took a kind of leave to go back to my own deepest senses of disorder, and to accept them. But I know there was self-indulgence in the way I believed in *Degrees*; and whatever else I formulated in planning my own book, *A Smuggler's Bible*, I did not quite fairly judge the truth I told myself about this insidious, heart-entangling, tediously poignantly ambitious French book that turned such beautiful attention away from entertainment to achieve (at least in the translation of an old acquaintance of mine whom I had not seen in years but from whom I had always felt strangely might come one day a message important for me) a gesture almost American.

For at the origin of Butor's *Degrees* there is an impossibility: the Paris Lycée teacher Pierre Vernier, no matter how many energies, schemes, and spies he uses, can never assemble the record which is to be somehow equivalent to the lives of the schoolboys whose relations to each other, to him, and to their studies have been the releasing impulse for his odd project. And I wonder if Butor, amid his preliminary maps, diagrams, lists, and families, ever faced with the severity of retrospect the exact nature of the main action. He might have decided that -- whatever Vernier's failure could say about the impossibility of comprehensiveness and about the relation of this impossibility to energies of inference and schemes of inclusion -- this reaching out to other lives through widening rings of relation depended too much on an instability in Vernier, which may lead a reader to question the authority of what is presented and to sum up the book in the judgment that from the start we knew Vernier wouldn't make it and would be engulfed by the information he sought. This novel, so French in substance and subject, and in some of its precise surveys not so far from Alain Robbe-Grillet's prescriptions as it might seem when compared to Butor's more successful *Passing Time*, is close to whatever is good and bad in that American impulse Wright Morris deplores in *The Territory Ahead*: to set out to do more than can be done and then take credit for a grand and moving failure.

If one knew enough about the private minds of novelists, one could write a scandalous history of pretext. Still, the source of degrees was much more than the self-indulgence dissolved and embodied into the hero's desire to contain, describe, and measure; for Butor foresaw that even if his hero was to collapse, the structure increasing methodically from an idea which was a function of his incipient collapse would be at last its own defense -- dense in the fullness of attention given to a mass of life.

What I found for myself in *Degrees* was a theme that may not be in the book at all. I found it somewhere between the obsessional plan (which I would now try) and the massed actualities of ordinary life (which I would always be in the middle of -- jobs, games, lusts, fears, the hand on the edge of the tub, the father and son on a silent Sunday on the Brooklyn Heights docks staring up at the draping arc of a greasy hawser to the high rusty bow of a South American freighter). The theme I found between seemed to require a certain abstraction in the style of its statement: and this theme was the powerful and mysterious coexistence of continuity and discontinuity.

Easy to say.

Continuity, discontinuity, each in the other.

The attentive reader would be forced to have both. The eight segments of *A Smuggler's Bible* would be equal memories but sequenced chapters: islands but interpenetrations; fresh-found independences yet at the same time collaborative voices of the narrator's suppliant, tyrannical identity.

There would be gaps. There must be. And I had never liked all those natural, graceful transitions. I accepted gaps.

Was I confusing form with its chaotic subject? Almost, but not quite.

A near-mandala, someone said? Pieces of eight? Parody of a first novel? Why not.

But then -- and here is what may get me back to Outside and Inside if not to the girl in New Hampshire -- I began to fill the gaps. Not only with a very audible sort of dialectic fight inside the narrator, featuring the attempt of one manic and electronic-seeming part to rule the rest (and make the book go on and on, proliferate its sections and multiply the lurking coherences among them). More important, more risky, the style of these gaps in the design grew to contain among other languages a discursive idiom of explanation. This idiom seemed to go against all I had ever learned. It seemed an unlikely, undramatic idiom, of course confined to very small portions of the book. It seemed also to invite the charge that I was faking connections that were nowhere

nearly as much there as the reader was intended to think: i.e., *A Smuggler's Bible* didn't come together, so I had to explain it together.

Yet I acknowledged this all along: I never hid the gaps. Their fillings even advertised them. And these ambiguous interstitial attempts to bring parts explicitly together (or also to keep them apart as in Nicholas Mosley's *Impossible Object*) were not even undramatic in the context of a struggle for control of the narrator's personality.

But in one respect I didn't understand what I was doing; and so intense were the tentacles of aggressiveness and intimacy in these bridge sections that in 1964 I would have defended the discursiveness simply as being no violation at all of the very good old credo preached by my New Critic teachers at college, or by Yeats:

Art bids us touch and taste and hear and see the world, and shrinks from what Blake calls mathematic form, from every abstract thing, from all that is of the brain only, from all that is not a fountain jetting from the entire hopes, memories, and sensations of the body.

Now, insofar as this prescribes for image, for surface, for the substantial power of detail, I come close enough. My departure from that traditional-sounding but anxiously modern ideal of the wise Irish dreamer who wrote *A Vision* occurs in what I do with narrative or momentum. And when whatever in my work is sensuous, concrete, and organically immediate gets drawn into convoluted systems like the thrice-separate, truncated, framed portions of process that form the quest of my second novel, *Hind's Kidnap*, those palpable realities can seem atomized from one another. Recompounded. Trans-sequenced as if in some half-heard argument, so that they must sometimes seem like rhythms run across the lens of a schizophrenic scope.

A Smuggler's Bible was praised for some wholeness or totality in the midst of disintegration. I'm content with that estimate, especially when it includes comparisons with Malcolm Lowry and William Gaddis. But that hugely intriguing book with which it was often compared -- and which I at last read in '62 when I was well into *A Smuggler's Bible* and which encouraged me to see how far I could get with the smuggling metaphor I found in the emptiness of a tacky old hollowed book in a museum in Cornwall -- was a feat that I deliberately aimed to fall short of. *The Recognitions* -- as I scanned it then (even hunting up Clementine materials in the British Museum) -- follows its networks of forgery so as at last to organize itself into a convincing grandeur of completion and faith. And this is reflected not so much in many instances of truth imitating imitation and imitation coming true, as in a recognizably pleasurable and old-fashioned yarn. My story in *A Smuggler's Bible* was designed to fracture.

It was designed to break so that the reader would feel pieces reforming as if attracting and acting at distances from each other. But first and last it was designed to break. And as with the narrative, so with the metaphor: designed to break under strains and over distances most notable in the last chapter (which a friend told me was the one he had not read), where the narrator tries to smuggle himself back over months and miles of separation into the consciousness of his dying father now dead. Perhaps an ultimate stability in this smuggling metaphor with its designed failure (which I hoped would be the opposite of obsolescence) is in Richard Howard's definition of it as "a metaphor for metaphor."

All kinds of things snug or loose inside that uncertain-lidded, hollowed-out bible.

But connections composed of disconnection.

The gaps weren't only between chapters. They were, in another and nonspatial sense, between modes of experiencing. And the recourse to explanatory language to make up for what the world, the book, and I collaboratively decided could not (or at least must not) be normally or

dramatically embodied and shown was a signal of this separation.

Again, the danger: in our life, dominant forces seem increasingly to depreciate the body and the emotions; yet inseparable from these forces are certain means of understanding that cannot be dismissed simply because their clarities are associated with what is called "de-personalizing."

On the one hand are warm fingers with a fine light of moisture glistening in the crosswise cracks, fine shades of age in the lengthwise wrinkles that belong to you or to someone whom you know and whom you now touch -- or if you wish, throw in the finger of a chief petty officer I once knew who lost it to a buzz saw and then to his dog, who picked it up and disappeared with it, clever animal. On the other hand are bones and nerves, chemical compositions, exactly connected to spine and brain in relations that can be diagramed and formulated with a clarity like that of topographical isobars on an ordinance survey map or of a coordinated grid containing an analysis of stresses. These are measures destined also for our contemplation.

Here and there in the languages of *A Smuggler's Bible* there runs an idiom of abstract formulation or theoretical explanation. I chose it as a necessary mode evoked by disorders and discontinuities which that first novel of mine grew to accept. What I could not then help doing was to infuse into this analytical explanation a satirical disclaimer. But by the time I reach the technological complexes and city streets of *Hind's Kidnap*, that defensive attack on system implicit in the clever voice computing the domination of my smuggler narrator in the bridge-gaps of the Bible has been absorbed into a more homogeneous language.

This absorption is not to be confused with what happens in the last bridge of the earlier book. There the manic-repressive-electro-enselfoid voice fails in its plot to be the narrator's "principal part." And it subsides or disperses into a silence that leaves David Brooke together ready to find and re-create and successfully fail to reach his dead father. But I wanted the reader to feel the voice was not dead, would emerge again and again -- this manipulative voice, grandiose, energetic, and (if in a different mood yet under a valuation quite like that of John Barth in *Giles Goat-Boy*) electronic.

Inevitably the terrain, traffic, neural neighborhoods, and systematic America of *Hind's Kidnap* would be seen as some form of satire. But the language of the book is subtler than that. And though in my notes (always just one step behind the next chapter, which opened in front like a vacuum pushing from behind) I jotted structures of images and words. I never formulated for myself the difference between satire and what I was doing. I could no more merely regret and attack systems of city separation and organizational metamorphosis and stultification than I could cast the reverse-simplification of my "city-pastoral" into anything that asserted the old pastoral imagery.

I was finding a way through some often neologically pun-corrupted Missing Persons Super Analodigitalexigraph. I wanted composition that would not deny the impersonal clarities of modern systems any more than deny what's really touched in Gary Snyder's "Some Things to Be Said for the Iron Age." And here in *Hind's Kidnap*, the defined edges and measured processes by which, between Kant and Kierkegaard, my hero set out -- to dekidnap places, persons, memories, memory, himself, and a real child different from himself -- were not a satirical target at all. One reader spoke of precise, detached shots of city existence; another of the language developing toward what could be called a mode of thought. These were what I was after.

My sentences got longer in *Hind's Kidnap*, my syntax more remarkable. I found myself trying to define scenes and objects and the addition of objects and people *to* scenes, with a coolness of precision while simultaneously surrounding them with --an ultimate undecidability." That was the phrase William S. Wilson used -- with the "undecidability" of the German mathematician Kurt Gödel somewhere in his mind -- in the catalogue of the 1969 Milwaukee show of New

Realist painters.

Understand: I don't reject the moral sign that J.G. Ballard puts upon his automobiles, rectilinear spaces, wounds, deserted technological areas:

His secretary's car waited by the freight elevator. He touched the dented fender, feeling the revised contours, the ambiguous junction of rust and enamel, geometry of aggression and desire.

(*Love and Napalm: Export U.S.A.*)

Nor am I saying Ballard goes too far in a passage like this one from the same book -- about

our ever greater powers of abstraction. What our children have to fear are not the cars on the freeways of tomorrow, but our own pleasure in calculating the most elegant parameters of their deaths. The only way we can make contact with each other is in terms of conceptualizations ..."

But I have felt, or hoped, that there may be something else in the styles of efficacy which machine and system open to the mind. I am trying to find a way which can use unsatirically the very styles of abstraction that are part of processes we are right to fear. What I am after is some sequence of contemplation that will use and transmute certain sources of our fears without merely rejecting them.

If I say that Donald Barthelme's rational, complete, and consistent *Snow White* goes beyond irony and satire to what I will call a chamber of contemplative equilibrium, I haven't lost sight of a central meaning of the book expressed at the end:

She was fond not of him but of the abstract notion that, to her, meant "him." I am not sure that that is the best idea.

Agreed.

But the names in *Hind's Kidnap* embody a different view. Pastoral or other, they are tokens, and their meaning (which itself is the surname of Cassia) is in part an abstracting, categorizing identity imposed upon people. Yet my Hind, my Sylvia, my Laura, my Hershey Laurel, my Ash and Peg Sill and Elder Plane (and too many more) are christened by the optical angles, perspectives, and films through which they are seen: and these are not only pollutions, they are also a secret means of revelation like the Hindu Maya of which I make in *Lookout Cartridge* what Roland Barthes might call "terrorist" use.

The narrator Cy in my third novel, *Ancient History*, recalls an "Anti-Abstraction March" led by the book's alternative hero, the great American celebrity Dom. And I want the reader to connect this with Cy sitting in Dom's apartment recording its tangible organization of personal evidences so carefully that Cy seems almost to parody descriptions in early Robbe-Grillet. However, Cy is interested also in parabolas. And Cy has discovered in the brain what he calls the Vectoral Muscle in a certain triangular arc of movement which is part of -- and an instrument for sensing persons in -- a field. Also, there is in the book a very immediate but also abstract field theory that is associated with the ultimate destination of the book labeled in its subtly but correctly spelled subtitle, *Paraphase*: a new time, or state like time, or state of being outside or beside time (*phase* meaning "a section of time," *para* meaning "beside," "parallel to," "substituted for").

But again I underlined my scientific invention with a tone of sharp wit. And this, coming as it did from a voice too much like some aggressively insulated Nabokovian narrator, slightly undercut what mattered most. Which was an absolute interest -- to be located in these inventions and in the formulative tendency of Cy's head.

Often here the focus turned upon almost distractingly exact definition, which unfolded in the contrary midst of an ambient space mysterious and potential. Now this contrast has in my work -- or in my temperament or digestion -- little to do with paranoia, a lot to do with discoverable causes, and much in turn to do with some relation between on one side often untouchable processes beneath appearance and on the other what Piaget calls the special role of mental life: "the achievement of complete mobility and reversibility which are untransferable on the organic plane."

Clarities: I do not know the meaning of the manned space program. But I do know that it can both mean less, and be more interesting, than some responses to it declare. When I wrote an essay called "Holding With Apollo 17," some readers told me they loved the big boom at the end but couldn't get with the more technical matters I had included. But the very idea of the essay -- the significance of the Hold, i.e. the delay, that night in December '72 -- was that it could turn one's attention from the big-boom countdown to another aspect of what was happening.

Exactly why the delay.

Also, a great field of process not confined to one narrative drama being watched from the Press Site.

Understand me: the night launch of Apollo 17 made me want to believe in God, made my dazzled eyes and chest imagine grand collaborations in our universe.

But if the delay made one look at that white rocket repressurizing out there on the pad lit up by a crisscross of xenon searchlights like waterstreams, it also disappointed one's theatrical expectations and could make one think about facts. This was what the astronauts were thinking about, and the people at the Launch Control computers, and the people servicing the rocket. The machines and how they work. The forces they enlist and the forces the machines counteract and defend against.

My point is that too often this central substance of space technology is ignored in favor of blast-off kitsch metaphysics (like Norman Mailer's instant Manicheism), or dubiously knowledgeable satire against the military fictions of the science-industrial complex. I put in this category, though the book professes brains not space, William Hjortsberg's *Gray Matters*, which brilliantly contrives not comic deflation that may come from real experiences but, instead, sensational humor released by an unwillingness to give further attention to a complicated subject. This unwillingness is akin to e.e. cummings's predictable "Space being (don't forget to remember) curved."

There is much to fear, and I don't dismiss Robert Lowell's doomsday phrase "Space is nearer" (the particular occasion of which is the excavation of an underground garage in Boston Common). But what is the immediate nature of this experience coming out of NASA, for a layman? Much of it is as tangible as the lunar divining rod on the Apollo service module, though much that is beautifully measurable is as far outside the capacity of our senses as the electronic soundings that the divining rod is there to take.

In May 1973 I went back to Cape Kennedy for Skylab. If there were fewer pictures and magnificent charts for the press this trip than for Apollo 17, and fewer press observers (and far fewer sightseers), still the people I talked to seemed more knowledgeable than the crowd in December 1972. They seemed to have done their homework in the main Skylab manual, so much more complexly detailed than any of the handouts for Apollo 17. Excitement seemed more precise, as if a tone had been partly set by the nineteen students whose experiments had been picked for Skylab out of 3,400 high school entries.

Gallium arsenide is a crystal semi-conductor used in solid-state electronics; in the vacuum of space we may be able to grow crystals whose perfect elasticity and conductivity will

revolutionize timing devices, for instance in hospitals. But also, contemplate the crystal as an emblem of the kind of attention I am urging: for crystallinity is the extent to which the outward and visible form of this solid has been controlled by its atomic structure. And let true imagination grow from truth.

Yet imagination here must jump such ineffable distances of faith and instrumentation that we will often find ourselves losing the full authority of our physical senses. And perhaps the greatest single thing at Cape Kennedy, the Vehicle Assembly Building, can seem as elusive as it is gigantically present. In the VAB (525 feet high, 518 wide, 716 long, on piles 160 feet deep) we may look around for a verger or a revelation; the VAB is perhaps the building of the century. In the light of its grids of 70,000 square feet of muted translucent panels, the sizes and scales of low and high bays may seem to cloud function with magic or some intimation of ecclesiastical history, and from the concrete ground or down through the steel mesh along a thirty-fourth-floor catwalk the transfer aisle may look like a nave.

However, what interested the English sculptor Christopher Sanderson in his quest for valid structures were certain real relations between equipment and space. Three magisterially mobile bridge cranes -- two with a hook height of 462 feet, one with 166 -- ride their overhead tracks like giant coordinates. Service-platform enclosures -- infinitely adjustable up or down -- house rockets like ballistic barrels, or truncate so that from above a booster becomes a stack for a factory or a liner. As if the designers recalled (and reversed) the human tapering of pueblo doors, each 456-foot high-bay door is an inverted T to accommodate not only the vertical rocket moving out toward the launch pad but the vast crawler that carries it. The VAB in its own crystal clarity is the inner and visible structure of an outward and limitless conception.

I gaze at a maplike color print whose pocks and variegations, shores and veins, create a cold painterly abstraction independent and beautiful. In fact, however, this is a composite photo taken by a multispectral scanner -- i.e., a sample of what one of Skylab's six kinds of remote sensors were designed to do -- and can do even better when calibrated and selectively sighted by a crew.

I run into a textile designer. He comes to all the launches. He takes pictures of the VAB, the hardware, the blast-off: and then in some edge-softening translation he makes silk-screen prints from the developed images. I am more interested in the idea than in what I gather he really does -- which is to produce some kind of representational illustration. Which isn't what I had in mind.

What do I have in mind? That girl situated in the New Hampshire night didn't wait. She went off to be confined. But, hell, she knew what I'd meant. How formulate the space which the words of our collaboration occupy?

Insert: from Rilke's notebooks:

And there is almost no space here: and you feel almost calm at the thought that it is impossible for anything very large to hold in this narrowness. But outside, everything is immeasurable. And when the level rises outside, it also rises in you, not in the vessels that are partially controlled by you, or in the phlegm of your most unimpressionable organs: but it grows in the capillary veins, drawn upward into the furthestmost branches of your infinitely ramified existence. This is where it rises, where it overflows from you, higher than your respiration, and, as a final resort, you take refuge, as though on the tip of your breath ... Like a beetle that has been stepped on, you flow from yourself, and your lack of hardness or elasticity means nothing any more.

Oh night without objects. Oh window muffled on the outside, oh, doors carefully closed; customs that have come down from times long past ... Oh silence in the stair-well, silence in the adjoining rooms

Commenting on this passage, which he quotes at greater length, Gaston Bachelard praises the

power of the images by means of which “Inside and outside are not abandoned to their geometrical opposition.” But he also formulates a meaning whose notable immediacy comes out of its abstraction:

... to experience this passage in the reality of its images, one would have to remain the contemporary of an osmosis between intimate and undetermined space. (*The Poetics of Space*)

Formulation is especially suspect among American fiction writers. Explicit formulation of a theme can shoot its energy. Better to keep secrets even from yourself -- your fiction will be more natural, more real, organic. Even the novel’s new lawyer Robbe-Grillet can say somewhere that he writes in order at last to find out what it is he is writing about.

But O’Hara was wrong to say he was “no hairy philosopher.” Any fiction writer is one in some sense by virtue of the words that make the laws that tell the tales.

However, to formulate a position is not necessarily to put it explicitly on view. In the making of fiction, Henry James’s principle is still healthy and useful. Yet his formula, “Dramatize,” shows itself at least as much in the master moralist’s melodramatic storytelling linkage of events and moments as it does in individual phrases. Reading Von Dodderer’s *The Demons*, where the historian Stangler finds essential truth not in anecdote but in a crowd of images filling up a space, I think all over again what William Gass in “In the Heart of the Heart of the Country” reminds me I know: that narrative is itself an abstraction. Moreover, James uses language that is not quite what he thought he meant in his word “Dramatize.” His is a language of ratiocination -- call it abstraction, not in the sense of withdrawing attention from human feeling but rather in the sense of concentrated understanding withdrawn from the multiplication of phenomena.

Precise contemplation stirred by modern materials: consider the fragmented revisions of perspective in Uwe Johnson’s *The Third Book About Achim* (a bicycle racer in East Germany). Or the tight assemblage of separated takes in Charles Newman’s *New Axis*, in which the normal elements of social panorama compose into a serial fixity as far beyond lament or satire as it is beyond *Winesburg, Ohio*. I mean a poise of emphasis in which one is even more conscious of pattern than of the mass of life yet not through any lessening of that mass. Consider Cormac McCarthy’s *The Orchard Keeper*, a strange balance of resolved disconnections in which magically separate lives are held close in a system of parallels that equals as if in a chemical sense the solution of Nature. Or Aidan Higgins’s *Langrishe, Go Down*: neutral but urgent phenomena of decline held in a rhythm of energy loss that is also continuity between (a) the powerful but united responses of participants and (b) a mode of existence independent of an observer -- an existence physically absolute in a pattern that feels like a formula of final forces.

In Isak Dinesen I love the awful grace of the final test yet also around that center, as “The Roads Round Pisa” find folds of pattern where life comes true like an imitation of thought. My favorite work of fiction might be Kleist’s novella, *Michael Kolhaas*: the plainest historical chain of momentum shifts one degree into another curve, and the energy released by the determined rebel expands geometrically and his chosen power joins larger collaborative power not his own.

That story could just have dreamed its way out of some American madness. It has almost nothing to do with the limited, exact reality dreamed by Robbe-Grillet in *Project for a Revolution in New York*. But we are not that austere, and shouldn’t be. We had something to learn from Robbe-Grillet, but our novelists have seldom been theoretically thoroughgoing in his French way; and the much vaunted plasticity and precision of *Jealousy* were never understood over here except as a scholastic exercise that looked thin next to the warm, stunning strokes of intimacy in the prose of any number of American writers, James Agee, John Updike, Flannery

O'Connor -- and thin as well next to the sheer whole alive alarming intelligence in such work as the stories of Hortense Callisher or Leonard Michaels.

Can it be that there has been too much good writing in America? Maybe this is why we have little patience with fiction that is not at once out of (to corrupt one of our better critics) "the one bright book of life." The French novelist Leonie Bruel tells me the trouble with American writers is that we write about our own lives too much. If I answer commonplace with commonplace -- to wit, that my life is what I have -- I find still a point of agreement with her in that locus within the self's own history where some curiously accidental-feeling collaboration can turn attentive fantasy into a form of freedom. Read Paul Metcalf's *Patagoni*, where a short history of North American Henry Ford and River Rouge is coupled with a rambling trip into South America under a weird metaphor of brain and body.

I have imagined myself, in the spirit of my divisions, somewhere between Nabokov and Mailer. Why Mailer? I guess American hangups, the pursuit of embarrassment, American Matter. Mid-50's nerve-house bulletins in *Advertisements for Myself*, half buried in dreck and energy. Then the American glut, the blurt -- and post-adolescent pride sometimes messily and flailingly richer than the Hemingway weighing-in ceremonies it is forever invoking. Mailer the writer of pages rather than complete books. Mailer who needs money and whose haste we are therefore to forgive as we slowly get through the volume of his prose. Mailer whose meditation is impulse and whose impulses can't speak except in reams of other stuff. Mailer who is not quite the risk-taker he'd like to think -- particularly in the work itself -- but who bugs the century to entertain him, who asks to be ambushed by experience, and whose celebrity performance is not only an embarrassment of greed but also an open assault on his own privacy, so that, through some freak frequency in the urine-sparkling night of missed connections, Inside Norman might come to equal America. I've liked some of his ideas; leave it at that.

He and Thomas Pynchon would understand the following comment on Magritte's *The Annunciation*:

This terrifying structure is neuronically totemic, its rounded and connected forms are a fragment of our own nervous systems, perhaps an insoluble code that contains the operating formulae for our own passage through time and space. The annunciation is that of a unique event, the first externalization of a neural interval. (Ballard: *The Overloaded Man*)

Unlike Pynchon, Mailer will never yield the patience to devise what Richard Poirier (their most interesting expounder) calls in an earlier book *A Place Elsewhere*. Poirier means less a place in the sense of Marquez's buoyantly unfolding village in *A Hundred Years of Solitude*, or Faulkner's own much-surveyed Hundred, than a radical linguistic consistency that displaces existing environments. It happens in *What Maisie Knew*. It happens grandly, if often miasmically, in *Absalom, Absalom*. It happens in Jerome Charyn's as yet unpublished *A Child's History of the Bronx*. To take another quite different example, it might have happened in *Why Are We in Vietnam?* But Mailer was afraid to wait.

Pynchon was not; and (wherever you are, Tom) the elliptical compendium of resultants is *Gravity's Rainbow*.

From so many foci to be found in this Ulyssean effort -- American *Dog Years* (here INSERT two neat Anglo-American notes: on Grass and Pynchon -- eels, bananas; on Mailer and Pynchon -- the facetious, jocular, hectoring, eventually a bit tiresome humor and irony of the don't-bullshit-me American voice, yet also the intuited loss of guts plotted, say, in the face which shows around "the eyes a ruinous system of burst capillaries" systematically reminding me that

Rockets are supposed to ... disperse about the aiming point in a giant ellipse -- the Ellipse of Uncertainty. But Pokler ... is not feeling too secure here. It is after all his own personal ass whose quivering sphincter is centered on Ground Zero)

I would instead here single out what for me is the central interest in Pynchon's paradoxical patience. I mean something beyond the rocketry's metaphorical connection with eventual unity and with the sexual arc of a death-wish that offers, but may anesthetize and erase the experience of, a whole reality fulfilled in death as Rilke conceives it in the Tenth Elegy which Pynchon quotes with uncertain force. No: beyond this, but using it, as he so often uses difficult knowledges -- binaries divided by interface, or chemistries divided by a human will to use them and their blank and secret power to use us -- is the deeper thing where metaphor dissolves into identity, and this huge narrative tries to show forth the process of which human life is an instance; tries to show that process not in order to turn away from our shallow or deep surfaces but to see (or, in some conceptual clarity that is also our own capillary collaboration with them, to break down) the plasmic structures of ourselves to find in their nonetheless continuing life and form their reality. I no more have "patience" with those who dismiss *Gravity's Rainbow* for its maze or its subject matter, than with those who would disparage the twelve-hour length of Robert Wilson's dance opera, *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin*. In that work, one of the greatest created for the stage in this century, certain movements often pass so slowly from one side to the other than they seem part of a system of energy which includes its own contemplation yet is but partly emergent somewhat as the mingled crescendoes of speech at some points in the work are unclearly overheard -- in turn like the atomized fantasia of scattered events that constitute Pynchon's characters in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

His patience is paradoxical in that it is a potent, intelligent will, yet always driven into some parallel or passivity of obsessional elaboration. The paranoia so explicit in all the elusiveness of *The Crying of Lot 49* is here both more analytically explicit and often not paranoia at all, but the feeling of terror and passivity bravely returning to their real causes in larger systems that control while being out of control.

INSERT. Dear Tom: Have you read Charles Simic's long poem *White*? What might be the relation between his use of Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle (the partial basis of the poem) and your use exemplified in at least one discussion in *GR*?

It may be that Pynchon is too humanly appalled, too much a would-be narrative entertainer, and too temperamentally much the apocalyptician to make a purer and fuller use of his technology and science. Sometimes in *Gravity's Rainbow* he can take those pleasures in the "iron age" so tangible in Snyder's simple, direct poem. Pynchon can even come upon that harmonious clarity of attention given to an activity as that experience of attention is defined by Robert Pirsig toward the close of his haphazard *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. But Pynchon seems restive with that sort of clarity.

Reading *Gravity's Rainbow* at last in the Spring of '74, I felt again and again that it could have been stronger if Pynchon had found a way to crystallize some quantities of chronicle and ambiguous humor into forces of contemplative form that would do more justice to all that he sees and knows. But *Gravity's Rainbow* goes very far.

Unlike the American in an English minimum security prison (called Wooten-Under-Edge, I think) passing time with a copy of *GR* which soon became popular and famous there, I have no one to pass my copy on to in the jungles and clearings and underground caves of Yucatán. Sitting

at dusk atop a suddenly higher and steeper pyramid and observing the still geometries of shade cast over the vast site by the ruins of a Maya city, I know that it will be a long time before I distill (if I ever even want to distill) the measures of my imagination into the curious wisdoms of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*.

INSERT. Why did the Maya invent zero? Because they needed it.

But meanwhile my next step -- a book called *Lookout Cartridge* -- has found a settled system of movement: between London and New York, between gravities, between the pearly stretch-marks around a woman's groin and the patterns of Stonehenge, between the slow formation of (possibly transformable and marketable) peat in the Outer Hebrides and the screaming tracks of a subway; between liquid crystals peddled to hobbyists and the structure of liquid crystals as they may point toward mind-projection through machines to other minds and as they may relate human being to explicitly formulable forces in nature.

INSERT also between the sealed chambers of lucky contemplation and the smell of an old man telling how wheelwrights used to work.

June 1974. Published in *TriQuarterly*, Fall, 1975; reprinted in *Exponential* (Selected Essays), trans. into Italian by Mario Marchetti, Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003

[Water Books]

River-Horse. The Log-Book of a Boat Across America.

WILLIAM LEAST HEAT-MOON

Penguin, 2001

A River Sutra

GITA MEHTA

Vintage, 1994 ,

Dead Pool. Lake Powell, Global Warming, And the Future of Water in the West

JAMES LAWRENCE POWELL

University of California Berkeley, 2008

A book, a boat, I am still grasping its scope, a journey in the mid-1990s from New York City 5000 miles to the Pacific – *inland*. A voyage through the land -- it sounds metaphorical but is endlessly particular this month-by-month navigating of unpredictable waterways in a 22-by-8-foot cross between a lobster dory and an old-fashioned harbor tug, its Osage name “Nikawa” which is *River-Horse*, in English, given by its Native American designer, skipper, compendious thinker, and writer, William Least Heat-Moon. Recommended by a fellow novelist who knew I was writing this time a *non-fiction* book about water, *River-Horse* came into my life when I was in the middle of reading other books (e.g., listed above, a novel about a sacred Indian river, a scientist’s account of the future of the great American desert). What is it to read several books at a time? I felt a curious permission hearing about all those books in Nikawa’s forward cabin for which the skipper finds time while fixing battered propellers, reading treacherous currents and shallows, dodging flood-borne debris, even uprooted trees coming at you like land adrift. To say nothing of chances, week after week, that you and your variable one- or two-man crew won’t make it and will have to give up. This northern coast-to-coast route, crucially including the Missouri, constantly reminds us of other closer, companionable and mysterious coasts of riverbank people, their 24/7 lives a continent of voices to stop and share experience with.

Rivers, as Pascal says, are moving roads that take you where you want to go (which means you are willing to *be* taken.) This book reminds me I might not want to rush through it but stay with it for weeks, *rereading*, meditating its passages which will be a little different the next time. Like the maps that are for Heat-Moon “holy writ” his

karmic space holds much of our own experience that comes to mind like threads that hold us together. Even as the world comes to you sometimes when you would turn away from it: one meaning, in fact, of Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*, where a retired civil servant now custodian of a remote "rest house" on the banks of the Narmada finds lives of others finding him, stories neighboring or inspired by an ancient river, stories within stories like an extended family. Parents seeking lost children, a daughter learning music from a difficult and famous father who calls a raga a riverbed, its grace notes the water, while elsewhere *we* are the "water washing over stone." Ascetic ordeals, river minstrels, a descant or debate all through this novel asks if this river that reputedly contains 400 billion sacred places is woman, god, medicine, window, holy release from the birth and death cycle, an ecology of the "interdependence of all life" -- or as one character, a secular archaeologist, sees it, "the individual experiences of those who have lived here."

Time narrows choices to emergencies and if water's various imaginings drew me into it, so did the exact analysis which is another form of story and as intense and attentive to event as any breathless page-turner. Such is James Lawrence Powell's *Dead Pool*, about the mismanagement of the Colorado River and Lake Powell, flood and drought, dams and silt, oncoming disaster. Ultimately it was lack of imagination in meeting successive emergencies decade after decade, and a politics weirdly not only of greed that helps me ask how all our individual experiences may find a communal intelligence of survival. Asks also, survival of what?

Tricycle. The Buddhist Review, Spring 2010