

Fiction Guttled  
The Establishment and the Novel

PART ONE

As Gideon Lewis-Kraus notes, writing in the Los Angeles Times, James Wood is a writer who matters. People read him, people of the educated, monied, controlling part of the populace. That's why it's important that what James Wood writes does not matter – in central ways. Nowhere is this more on display than in *How Fiction Works*, the star critic's most recent book, a truncated politically-charged though aesthetic appreciation of fiction that is spectacular in its misrepresentation of reality, or "*the real*, which is at the bottom of [Wood's] inquiries." Ask Wood to annotate a novel, and he provides sometimes splendid views of narrative lines by way of an at times "uncannily well-tuned ear," as Terry Eagleton notes. He is eager to discourse at length, often with quick pith, on how to strive toward reality in fiction (or criticism), reality of the profound sort, the truth, a worthy aim. Unfortunately, HFW is resolute in not accurately representing central elements of reality in both fiction and, call it, actuality, life outside fiction. A few examples of these crucial misrepresentations show how such blindness chops understanding of fiction and life, and why it makes one safe to be a literary star of the status quo, of the establishment, of money and power. One must bury and falsify crucial reality. To that end, in *How Fiction Works*, James Wood has written an establishment polemic in the guise of aesthetics – a deeply partisan status quo account of the novel that is also pervasive in its misrepresentations of both reality and aesthetics.

The first dozen misrepresentations:

1 – the book; 2 – free indirect style; 3 – narrative puzzle as worth; 4 – qualities of narrative mode; 5 – the development of the novel; 6 – selectivity; 7 – the meaning of time and experience; 8 – Flaubert's "advance"; 9 – Flaubert's value; 10 – the visibility of the novelist; 11 – "shiny externality" and miasmatic internality; 12 – "juvenility" of plot

Misrepresentation 1 – the book: *How Fiction Works* is wildly mistitled. (Not, *How Fiction Works*, which would also be inappropriate.) A far more accurate title for the discourse actually written: *Purview in the Novel*. "The house of fiction has many windows, but only two or three doors," Wood opens, and in the course of the book goes on to say much about the windows, doors, and characters one may find inside but says little about the house and grounds itself, let alone the nature of the actions and events one

may encounter in and around the household. HFW includes chapters on narrating, detail, character, language, dialogue...but none on plot, which he dismisses as if in a fit of mental asphyxia as "essential juvenility" – plot, the grounds and motion of life – the actions and events, time and place of story. There is far more to fiction than any favored purviews of Wood might reveal.

Misrepresentation 2 – free indirect style: It becomes amusing, the repetitions of this bit of jargon: "free indirect style...or speech...or discourse" – a type of narrative mode presented in convoluted fashion as if requiring complex explanation, over the course of, initially, fourteen pages.

Wood posits at least nine labels for the mode he gives three names. "Free indirect speech or style...or discourse" is: "just authorial irony" or "merely another definition of dramatic irony" or "internal speech or thought" or "'close third person'" or "'going into character'" or "secret sharing" or "soliloquy...renovated" or "close to stream of consciousness" – or – "much like pure soliloquy" of character "simultaneously" consisting of authorial "omniscience...through the author's eyes and language." Readers of HFW are left sensing that whatever free indirect style might be, it is not anything exactly that Wood quite explains, and it comes off as either comically convoluted or professional "secret." Though all modes of discourse may be rendered with extraordinary complexity, the basics can be quickly known (even three as footnote).<sup>1</sup>

Misrepresentation 3 – narrative puzzle as worth: It soon becomes clear in HFW that Wood is most interested in a more complex sort of free indirect style which he flails to name (to no avail). He is captivated by what might be called: unstable multipurview meld (UMM). (Or, more simply put: *unstable purview meld*, UPM, but I prefer here the more suggestive acronym, UMM – as we might call Wood's favored version of "free indirect discourse.") This mode makes for a "game" or "puzzle" to figure out. What is attributable to whom? who is speaking? what are they saying? what does it mean? – an approach potentially engaging or valuable but too often mere fetish (and expounded as trivial

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<sup>1</sup> Wood could have simply overviewed the three basic types of speech he refers to: 1) Direct discourse, which presents the speaker verbatim: *She thought, I need prevail...* 2) Indirect discourse, which is the speaker reported: *She thought she need prevail...* 3) Free indirect discourse, which drops attributives (she thought, she said) and instead implies attribution, sometimes uncertainly, sometimes mixing and melding "speakers" (the purviews of referents): *Rosa worked the picket line as her friend Al came into view. She need prevail for the union.* Meaning is much destabilized in this third mode because especially with no context it's not clear to whom the thinking is attributed. The thoughts may represent Rosa's purview or not at all, may instead be entirely or partly that of the narrator/author, or of Al, or of the whole group, or...

Any aspect of these thoughts (whether it's belief, or vision, or sentiment, or principle, or diction, or voice, etc) may be shared to varying degrees with a wide variety of "speakers." Any or all of this uncertainly attributed discourse may more-or-less be clarified in context, or be indicated later, or not. Alternatively, in both direct and indirect discourse, the phrase is clearly attributed to Rosa (she owns it, or it owns her – though plenty of ambiguity may exist in these modes as well regarding actual purview and ultimate referent). One can sense the various paces, voices, and other differences in these three modes, each diverse in qualities. Obviously, where quick attribution of thought or speech is urgent, free indirect discourse may not be the best option. No mystery why.

puzzles, imprecision, bogus ambiguity, vapid indeterminacy, or sheer drivel – sometimes as vacuous narrative fixation with schizophrenia, multiple personality disorder, or general evasiveness and other displays of narrative dissolution and distraction).

Wood claims that this "game" or "puzzle" exists in every mode as "our basic novelistic tension: Is it the novelist who is noticing these things or the fictional character?" What an isolated game this. Wood cares far more for "who" is noticing "things" than for most anything else. Such "games" and "puzzles" are played by people who are bored with larger story. It's upscale soap opera – the "tension" of a blinkered shut-in – that ideal marketing target. Give the marks a game, distract them with toys and intrigue, however limp. What else might fill the void left by dismissing plot? Playing up such game as the "basic novelistic tension" is as marginal and eviscerating of a representation of the novel as one may find in serious criticism.

Misrepresentation 4 – qualities of narrative mode: Tagging Wood's favored narrative mode with "free indirect" misleads readers from the fact that it may be neither much free nor indirect in central ways, despite fitting the accepted technical parameters.

Wood's preferred UMM mode may be highly confined (to, say, two main views) and be free of little beside attributives. The mode may even present direct authorial commentary and direct speech, or if this is disallowed by definition, then the mode is scarcely free in that way too. So why not move on from the theoretical roots and call it more what it really is? After all, HFW is to be a book that "asks a critic's questions and offers a writer's answers" so as to "reduce what Joyce calls 'the true scholastic stink' to bearable levels." Why not give a precise yet plain talk name to the mode Wood prefers – unstable multipurview meld, UMM? Despite being more accurate, UMM mode does not sound nearly as sweeping and profound, one may suppose, as "free indirect speech or style...or discourse." UMM is one engaging yet limited narrative approach among others, far from a sweeping culmination, as "If the history of the novel can be told as the development of free indirect style..." The mode is often dysfunctional where precise clarity of meaning is needed. Even when well and fully employed, UMM mode is neither as free nor indirect as advertised.

Misrepresentation 5 – the development of the novel: While Wood's favored narrative approach can work as an intriguing aspect of fiction, it functions too often as a type of "puzzle" remote from any necessarily "basic novelistic tension." Wood says "our...tension" and if by "our" he means a longstanding establishment fixation then he may be accurate. Rather than a great source of wonder and vitality, wholesale fascination with such "tension" points to major debilitation in the capacity of the novel. It points to a mode of fiction that is a regression to gaming in excess, as Wood extols it. While Wood highly values this mode in part as mind-mix or meld of consciousness, he seems more fascinated by blinding or diversionary mind-melt, rather than a mode where melded thoughts and sensations may be understood as basic distinct purviews (as in, say, Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" 1729) that functions with clear point and purpose – along with any degree of ambiguity and open-endedness.

UMM stories can readily prattle on with great pretension or trivial focus and may push into schizophrenia or multiple personality disorder – modes which have long since been embraced by the establishment, much as the status quo also welcomes and encourages toothless (or repressive) busywork for other academics and intellectuals. Alex Comfort noted 60 years ago in his valuable book of criticism, *The Novel and Our Time* (1948): "We have a tedious mass of books by lunatics who think they are psychologists and by neurotics who think they are lunatics. The literary magazines are full of the praises of schizophrenia." This is a notable "modernist" tendency, though not only modernist in expression, a sometimes interesting and even useful exercise of the novel but far from central to a necessary development of the form, to imaginative work in general. Pushed beyond its capacity to give birth, this mode as "game" and "puzzle" marks, where universally revered, an end to history in more ways than one. Death by, say, juvenile gaming disorder.

Misrepresentation 6 – selectivity: Flaubert is the phony god of the literature establishment, whom Wood especially believes in. Flaubert's relatively small example is vaunted much like the fake Wizard in the Wizard of Oz, projected and distorted beyond its reality, an example probably not even as helpful to writers, readers, and literature as that of the kindly aged professor of Oz to Dorothy. It was Glinda the good witch who directed Dorothy home, not the bumbling professor, ostensible Wizard.

Wood's preferred "Flaubertian" purview gaming is a natural fit for what Wood also calls Flaubertian blurring of both time and meaning in narrative, "the insistence...that in some way *there is no important difference between* [even grossly different] *experiences*: all detail is somewhat numbing, and strikes the traumatized voyeur in the same way" – a style or approach highly useful to the establishment. Wood comments that post Flaubert such a blurring approach has often been used by nonfiction writers in reporting on war – which makes perfect sense for establishments conducting criminal aggressions. Flaubert with "intense selectivity of detail" and by great "authorial impersonality" focuses on "blurring the question of who is noticing" the world, "all this stuff," and what it might mean. Actually, if one wants to "blur" both the world and who might be perceiving it, one selects details randomly, not with "selectivity." The selectivity is meant more to "turn prose into poetry," however "impersonal." Obviously, one must do something with the random. Fashioning it as poetic is one option, but far from the greatest recourse.

Misrepresentation 7 – the meaning of time and experience: "No novelist pushed to such extreme the potential alienation of form and content (Flaubert longed to write what he called a book about nothing)." No fiction could be more serviceable to the establishment than books of "poetic" prose about "nothing." Flaubert's technique, much praised by Wood, "confus[es] habitual detail with dynamic detail" – so that as in "modern war reporting...the awful and the regular are noticed at the same time..." thus rendered "anti-sentimental" and "numbing." And so are served certain clear interests in randomizing reality, stripping it of select meanings.

For example, "a soldier dies while nearby a little boy goes to school," Wood writes, rather than: "The missile exploded the little boy on his way to school as the US jet flew

gallantly on." One sentence has the quality of jump, with vital trope, while the other is a yellowed museum piece, and in fact seems not "anti-sentimental" but grotesquely sentimental: do look at this plucky, pitiful child – a bit of life and school goes on, amidst the gore (for which, unmentioned, we are responsible). Such prose often is grotesque because negligent and vapid – "traumatized" or "numbing" – repugnant and dumbed down.

Misrepresentation 8 – Flaubert's "advance": Not infrequently while reading HFW, one must annotate sentence by sentence to correct falsehoods or record incredulity at what is written. The "great innovation" of Flaubert, Wood notes, the great model for novelists, American and English included, is due to the time-ambiguous properties of a verb form that does not exist in English and so cannot be employed: "...in English, we have given the game away, and are admitting the existence of different temporalities." Actually, an author would be *asserting* the difference, making it more precise, which Flaubert in French either cannot or chooses not to do, at times. Some advance – topped immediately by Wood's subsequent claim that the "loafing" and looking of a stroller is the "classic...novelist activity" of the modern novel, which is tantamount to saying the novel imploded post Flaubert, and to a great extent for well over a century "so strong is the post-Flaubertian inflection of our era."

Yet Wood insists, "Novelists should thank Flaubert the way poets thank spring; it all begins again with him" – the new "classic novelistic activity" of "loafing," looking, strolling; the acceleration of the use of the UMM "puzzle" as the "basic novelistic tension"; the "modern" "blurred" use of time and detail that is "traumatized" and "numbing" and said to be highly "selective" and also a "game," yet shown to be random and, via war reporting, anything but. The novel certainly has been encouraged to implode – the establishment seems to relish it, when not complaining about the inevitable results – tedious wastelands of poetic nothings and nowheres, garish frenzied fiction, status quo banality, thin enigma, and all sorts of fiction that help eviscerate much public and private reality. Not unlike such fiction, HFW is a partisan creature in aesthetic clothing, bearing the open wounds of wholesale misrepresentations and truncations, lurching on, cocksure in its broken myths and misprision.

Misrepresentation 9 – Flaubert's value: A century and a half on, Flaubert's main value in art is that he continues to be used by the literature establishment to bury his countryman Victor Hugo and the example of a far more wholly accomplished and world changing fiction that is liberatory. While Hugo (Flaubert's landmark, watershed predecessor and contemporary) is a greater artist and liberatory force in literature and history than Flaubert, the establishment is deeply invested in giving the basic opposite impression. In a neat inversion, and to the detriment of all but perhaps the most privileged, Flaubert is used to bury Hugo, by way of misrepresented aesthetics, norms, reality.

Flaubert is so lauded by the establishment evidently because his ideological line is a great fit for that which the status quo must work within – an orthodox ostensible apoliticism – the ideology that denies it is an ideology. In fact, Flaubert is the status quo's ideological apotheosis: a politically dismissive, politically disparaging artist who is narrowly

aesthetically obsessed, a figure whose work has anything but apolitical effects. Moreover, Flaubert's work is conveniently situated in time and place and style obsession to help downplay the work of the influential and far more socially engaged novelists in and around what has been called "the de facto world capital of literature," Paris, France – Balzac and Zola – but especially and primarily – Victor Hugo, whose achievement in both literature and life dwarfs that of Flaubert, and holds far more real and potential significance through years past, years present, and foreseeable years future. "We felt that simply by reading [Hugo's] works, we were contributing to some silent victory over tyranny,' remembered Émile Zola," as noted by Graham Robb, biographer of Hugo. Dostoevsky called *Les Misérables* "that great book." Tolstoy considered *Les Misérables* to be the greatest novel ever.

Rather than Victor Hugo's society-rocking fiction (and daunting aesthetic achievement), today James Wood and many a writing circle celebrate the wan and overstuffed, by comparison, writing of Flaubert as seminal and essential. The establishment shouts Flaubert and his example far forward, typically to the effective exclusion of the greater art and the greater figure of Hugo, and the great work and vision especially in (though very far from only) *Les Misérables* – "a work of serious fiction for the masses...one of the last universally accessible masterpieces of Western literature, and a disturbing sign that class barriers had been breached," notes Robb of the great work of liberty, justice, humanity. Hugo was born a couple decades before Flaubert and died a few years after him, thus eclipsing Flaubert in life as well as in art and society, though the literary establishment has for many decades functioned purposefully, habitually, and predictably, to no little success, to upend both reality and potential. James Wood is of his time and place in following suit.

Misrepresentation 10 – the visibility of the novelist: Wood's preferred UMM mode actually makes the author, if anything, more visible, rather than less, as Wood tries to have it, pointing to Flaubert again as primary example ("the author's fingerprints are...traceable but not visible"), then later retracts ("almost comically impossible"). Wood undercuts another of his own would be representations again not long after he says "Novelists should thank Flaubert" (rather than the "genre hardening" imperatives of the lit establishment and larger society) "the way poets thank spring; it all begins again with him." He then demurs: "As so often, the Flaubertian legacy is a mixed blessing[:]. . . a poet's obsessive excruciation" (visibility) – "rather than a novelist's joy...[which is] sometimes an obstruction to seeing, not an aid..." – also, sometimes "*studiedly* irrelevant." Mixed indeed, Flaubert – blessing not so much.

Flailing though it is, Wood's laborious obsession with "style" helps build up and prioritize a repressive proscribed narrative approach over all others. "If the history of the novel can be told as the development of free indirect style" as Wood states, positing purview game as "our basic novelistic tension," "it can not less be told as the rise of detail" of a particular type "characteristic of modern novelists" (rather than, one may note again, characteristic of any sociopolitical shifts and sectors, whether freeing or constrained) – a "cult of 'detail'..." Cult? No kidding. Who's cult, one might ask, and why? "There is the modern commitment to detail itself: the protagonist seems to be noticing so much,

recording everything!" and showing so precious little, beyond poetry, with great "nuance" and "subtlety" and "limning" and *style*. All that a "voyeuristic" "loafer" devoid of any larger plot or certain purpose (for that might be construed as *propaganda*) could stroll past.

"[O]ur basic novelistic tension: Is it the novelist who is noticing these things or the fictional character?" Quite a "cult." No wonder it morphs and flees into "hysterical realism," as Wood calls the hyperventilating of authors apparently bored or trapped into mania by the great Flaubertian spring. Such predilections for the novel represent a step back, an arbitrary limbing of narrative technique, a collapse of narrative substance and value. (Limbed by "*studiedly* irrelevant" limnings.) The invisibility of the author? On the contrary, one gets the sense that – apart from forsworn fealty to the status quo – the author and the author's style are about all that exist at the center of an establishment novel – an arty game vaunted as narrative abundance by that quintessential establishment production: HFW.

Misrepresentation 11 – "shiny externality" and miasmatic internality: Several decades ago, in language strikingly similar to that of Wood, critic and scholar Robert Alter deplored what he called puerile imagination, "the astonishing degree of puerility," much akin to what Wood calls "hysterical realism," though Alter is more advanced in his analysis of plot and its consequences. Alter critiques more the public element of story as involves the personal rather than private elements of the personal. Alter all but names a kind of "hysterical realism" phenomenon with his observation of puerile prose in speaking of authors (Pynchon, Barth, Barthelme... Vonnegut) who like today's "hysterical realists," if in somewhat different fashion, "finally [do not take] history very seriously," or at least scarcely represent it profoundly or even substantially, Alter concludes, "despite the overwhelming density of actual historical detail in the [novels]." (While I draw some of Alter's views partly forward to today's novelists, I don't know if Alter himself would do so.)

No matter that, Wood declares intense character immersion goes wanting. Wood has scarce need for plotting as critic, since he can simply follow the contours of the novel under review. Wood is a proud stylist, so it's interesting that his style immediately dulls when he attempts to write fiction, though no surprise since quality fiction is an originating document of life, whereas criticism of the sort Wood excels at is highly referential of text. In his criticism where Wood ventures into generalization and "theories," his thought frequently dims there also. That his original writing does not begin to approach the intermittent brilliance of his critical referential writing may result from an attempt to use one valuable tool for too various tasks, lacking the necessary others. He sometimes seems restless and impatient with his text-observant talent, worrying language and narrative as if anxious to be a novelist or a theorist above all else. As with "hysterical realist" novelists, he puts too much pressure on style and select other elements of fiction, pushing for more than can be birthed. And then pushing harder, with predictable results. In fiction, dullness. In theory, narrowness or vacuity, fronted by the misrepresentations of establishment ideology. Alter at least understands that bankrupt plot is a problem in fiction; whereas Wood regresses to the brute solution of gutting rather than engaging. He

substitutes gaming style and interior obsession, both of which, lacking much of any refreshing flow of plot, quickly turn miasmic: Flaubert, for example, and many another dried flower fainting from the sun, subsisting in pavement cracks, huddling in quite small corners of life.

Today's "Hysterical Realism," Wood notes in his aptly titled essay "Human, All Too Inhuman," of work like that of early Zadie Smith, "does not lack for powers of invention. The problem is there is too much of it" creating such a welter of details that "as realism, it is incredible; as satire, it is cartoonish; as cartoon, it is too realistic; and anyway, we are not led toward... consciousness..." but instead are deluged in narrative that "is all shiny externality," the too-often shallow or chaotic, driveled, and boring juvenilia that Alter finds in earlier novels and that Wood notes of a passage in Smith's *White Teeth*, which:

might stand, microcosmically, for her novel's larger dilemma of storytelling: on its own, almost any of these details (except perhaps the detail about passing the shit and piss through the cat-flap) might be persuasive. Together, they vandalize each other: the Presbyterian dipsomaniacs and the Mormon aunt make impossible the reality of the fanatical Muslim.

In a remarkably similar observation almost thirty years prior, Alter notes that Pynchon's highly acclaimed novel *Gravity's Rainbow* is also greatly marred, because:

If history is no longer a realm of concatenation, if there are no necessary connections among discrete events and no possibility of a hierarchy of materials ranged along some scale of significance, any associative chain of fantasies, any crotchety hobbyistic interest, any technical fascination with the rendering of odd trivia, can be pursued by the novelist as legitimately as the movement of supposedly 'significant' actions. The end of history, in other words, is a writer's license for self-indulgence, and Pynchon utilizes that license for page after dreary page of *Gravity's Rainbow* as he describes at incredible length varieties of turds in a sewer, varieties of revolting wine-jelly candies in a British cupboard, varieties of bizarre sexual combinations in a very long daisy-chain, and so forth. The lack of selectivity leads to local flaws; the unwillingness to make differential judgments about historical events results in a larger inadequacy of the novel as a whole.

Notice that Alter accurately speaks of the "lack of selectivity" rather than the "selectivity" that is actually more-or-less randomness, blurring detail and meaning. More recently, when Alter is not translating and introducing ancient religious texts, he still finds time to comment on classic fiction. In his book published 2005, *Imagined Cities: Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel*, Alter states:

Flaubert's breakthrough in the representation of the urban realm was to perceive the modern metropolis simultaneously as a locus of powerful, exciting, multifarious stimuli and as a social and spatial reality so vast and inchoately kinetic that it defied taxonomies and thematic definition... Flaubert's novel [*The Sentimental Education*] marks a moment of transition in which the stylistic unity, the syntactic coherence,

and the temporal continuity of realist fiction are preserved while the certitude of realist representation is rejected. The city begins to show a phantasmagoric face...

Then come Joyce, Ellison, Pynchon, DeLillo in part, but how much of Achebe, Toer, Mahfouz, Gordimer, Coetzee, Thiong'o, Updike, Philip Roth, Franzen? And which authors tend to be more visible in text due to their extra stylist gyrations than the others? The Flaubertian invisibles, seems to me. Bellow and Morrison may be more mixed, but let's say one can pick out two accomplished and somewhat distinct tendencies, both of some quality, both of mixed normative import – it seems to me that the potential of the latter tendency remains key and greater – largely because of its greater ability to clearly express and substantially communicate. Such fiction may still be extraordinarily appealing and intriguing of aesthetics, for those who value that above all. And this tendency may also incorporate modernist tendencies – no reason why it should not, to a degree.

Seen from this vantage, Flaubert stands as a landmark figure of what? He is celebrated for celebrating incommunicability, nothingness, and blurring meaning (not least by Victor Brombert in his keen study, *The Novels of Flaubert*). It's all so inspiring to the "moderns." That's quite an aesthetic turn, an esthete's turn, a turn for stasis, and not much more than a particular aesthetic emphasis but then there is the retrograde politicization (ostensibly apolitical) with debilitating normative and aesthetic effects. As such, Flaubert and the moderns are scarcely what Wood and others make them out to be: the leading lights of fiction. These are strains of fiction celebrated, vaunted, rendered iconic out of all proportion to their real value. Flaubert serves, even slaves, for the establishment by the establishment, and his example is near bankrupt for progressives, for popular efforts at social progress, even for revealing the full human condition, its reality and potential. There is only so much "nothingness," "incommunicability," and "blurring" a story can withstand before it turns miasmatic or resorts desperately to shiny puerility – no matter its "overwhelming density of actual historical detail," as Alter makes note, let alone an oblivious lack.

Misrepresentation 12 – "juvencity" of plot: Frequently in *How Fiction Works*, as Wood examines elements of favored canonical texts, one gets the sense of a man sitting in a closet folding his special clothes or, more literally, cloistered in den reviewing favored fictions as the only precious thing around apart from himself – all lines to the world cut off. Such is life without plot – the great mixing grounds of life – derided as categorically juvenile, the "essential juvenility of plot."

No wonder Wood attempts to reach "*the real*" in fiction by way of fastidious intimacies of "style...point of view...perception of detail, and...character." Unreal, not to prioritize action and events also, idea and purpose, the social and the public. Instead: styled purviews forever peering, sensing...themselves? Wood's semi-notion of the "essential juvenility" of plot might be insulting I suppose to such masters of plot as Victor Hugo in *Les Misérables* or Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *Wizard of the Crow*, if such a notion were not so marvelously blank, so replete of silly. No wonder Wood adores authors like Henry James, turning blinded eyes from James' voids and retrograde lines. To "[think] like writers,"

according to Wood, is to "attend to style, to words, to form, to metaphor and imagery," and HFW tries to "offer a writer's answers" to "critic's questions," "essential questions about the art of fiction," questions about "reality...metaphor...character...detail...point of view...imaginative sympathy..." and "why fiction moves us," while questions of plot are cast aside, derided as "juvenility," possibly because, as painter Ben Shahn notes, "Some [critics], more innocent and more modern, have been taught – schooled – to look at [art] in such a way as to make them wholly unaware of content...." Schooled by the establishment, and paid for reproducing it, faithfully. No plot past this line, says the headmaster. But the true truants are not readily schooled.

## PART TWO

The misrepresentations continued:

13 – "Our memories are aesthetically untalented"; 14 – preeminence of the "*subtle*"; 15 – plot in the novel; 16 – value of place; 17 – quality of plot; 18 – limited engagement; 19 – fiction no use; 20 – fiction no remedy; 21 – fiction "makes nothing happen"; 22 – writer as "good valet"; 23 – "No one is *literally* run off her feet"; 24 – the petty terrorist

Misrepresentation 13 – "Our memories are aesthetically untalented": After misprising purview in the first part of *How Fiction Works* and beyond, in section 39 Wood claims that "Our memories are aesthetically untalented" and implies that we have the modernist novel to aesthetically point this out. Fingers crossed that science has not already disproved the claim. Further down the Orwellian memory hole goes the fact that ancients wrote epics in aesthetic verse to make easy for bards to memorize.

Misrepresentation 14 – preeminence of the "*subtle*": "*Subtlety* of analysis is what is important," says Wood. Not *striking* analysis, subtlety, which is another word for *nuance* – the establishment's all-time favorite word for the truncated range of its preferred fiction. Nuance is even more cherished than "limn." *Subtlety* – that by which never have so many nuanced so much to limn toward so little. Wood portrays the novel as sort of subtle styled character sketches of great sensitivity – a basic misrepresentation of the nature and scope of fiction, imaginative literature in full.

Misrepresentation 15 – plot in the novel: Essentially banished from HFW is any semblance of prominent discourse theorist Bakhtin's "chronotype" – the space-time "matrix which governs the base condition of all narratives and other linguistic acts," or as scholar Radu Surdulescu describes it, "the specific sense of space and time (in other words the social and the historical components) which characterizes every genre, according to its specific ideology. If in the ancient works the social element played a background role, in the novel it has a direct, molding impact upon the characters: they and the society influence and change each other as it happens in actual history, and this accounts for Bakhtin's interest in the dialogic consciousness of the novel," including that of free indirect style. This "base condition" gets the opposite of emphasis from Wood in HFW. Adios, Setting. Goodbye, Plot. So long, Social. Goodnight, Public. It's intimate purview essentially first, middle, last. Form doesn't come from content, goes the

establishment creed, content comes from form: it matters not at all if everyone is writing about toads hopping along a road with a mirror strapped on; what matters is how and why the toads' mirror shines. Toads everywhere for all – why not? if form is the essence of the artwork.

While Wood disparages the narrative technique of plot as juvenile, it's really Juvenal he shuns, the pointed artist who does not at best blur meaning or outlook, time or detail (though such work like Juvenal's art is far from devoid of ambiguity). Thus in part the flatness, the precise fog of style that shoves not only plot but also distinct point, those great content carriers of the world, too far down, unrealistically so. What is plot? A kind of map of events or action, expanding from place and time, explicit or implicit. Plot, the mixing grounds of the world, the motion and stuff of life, is the furthest thing from "juvenility." While sensitive sketches of soaring subtlety make for an accomplished part of fiction, to essentially implicate this confined range as the whole is as false as it gets. Fiction works to proven extent far beyond style, view, perception, character, and voice – purview. Plot is where adults live, while children live relatively oblivious to its vast reaches. Plot is what adults especially can see and affect to varying extent, the goods and the bads that people often relate to one another, or might, the new and the old, the news, what goes on, what's happening, what might. While it certainly is true that there is plenty of juvenility and void in the plots of the establishment, not to mention falsity, plot is only as juvenile as one chooses to make it. Plot is for grownups. Plot is essential to the full human condition that is the novelist's job to convey, and reconfigure.

Goethe claims: "What is a novel but a peculiar and as yet unheard-of event? This is the proper meaning of this name; and much which in Germany passes as a novel is no novel at all, but a mere narrative, or whatever else you may like to call it." Or if Bakhtin and Goethe are thought to be so very far beyond the "common reader," one might turn to Mary McCarthy's suggestive essay, "Characters in Fiction" (1961) in *On the Contrary*:

The distinctive mark of the novel [as compared to other forms of fiction] is its concern with the actual world, the world of fact, of the verifiable, of figures, even, and statistics. If I point to Jane Austen...Eliot... Tolstoy... Faulkner, it will be admitted...different as they are...they have one thing in common: a deep love of fact, of the empiric element in experience. I am not interested in making a formal definition of the novel...but in finding its quidditas or whatness, the essence or binder that distinguishes it from other species of prose fiction: the tale, the fable, the romance. The staple ingredient present in all novels in various mixtures and proportions but always in fairly heavy dosage is fact.

McCarthy traces the early history of the novel, 'the birthmarks':

The word novel goes back to the word "new," and in the plural it used to mean news – the news of the day or year.... Many of the great novelists were newspaper reporters or journalists [and "students" of criminals and prisons] "confirmed prison-visitors"...Defoe...Dickens...Dostoevsky...and Victor Hugo ...Tolstoy.... Coming to the twentieth century, you meet the American novelist as newspaperman:

Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Hemingway, O'Hara, Faulkner himself.... Novels carried the news – of crime, high society, politics, industry, finance, and low life.... The epic, I might put in here, is the form of all literary forms closest to the novel; it has the "boiler plate" ["durable informative matter"], the lists and catalogues, the circumstantiality, the concern with numbers and dimensions. The epic geography, like that of the novel, can be mapped, in both the physical and social sense.... Whenever the chance arises, Jane Austen supplies a figure.

McCarthy's fact-struck essence is as central to the novel as Wood's notions of purview, and more substantial than what little constructive sense Wood can make of the ostensible Flaubertian "spring" of style-obsessed fiction. In HFW, the misrepresentations are so pervasive that the book would not be worth critiquing at length if Wood were not so relatively prominent, so typical of establishment views, and yet also frequently keen within a range when analyzing the works of Western authors as notable as Morrison, DeLillo, Pynchon, Wolfe, Coetzee, Rushdie, Updike, Roth...and Franzen somewhat. Wood's quality work is continuously undercut by his establishment ideologies: studied intelligence is warped by ideological commitments manifest as various prejudice, bias, ignorance willful or otherwise. Thus we see the public and society, history and the (f)actual in fiction poorly accounted for in HFW, in Wood's essays on the "social novel," and elsewhere.

Misrepresentation 16 – value of place: How important is place, for example? Every novel consists of at least two or three fundamental places – the imaginary place of the story (author sustained) and its connection to real place, and the new places co-created by reader imagination. A sort of levitating sense of place may be created in quality fiction, and some nonfiction. This sense of place may function directly and metaphorically and must work for story. (It should go without saying that place, as detail, may be extremely concrete or almost entirely implied.) Place in story may be illusory, even as naturalism. And though place is a key and central part of how fiction functions, it is only one part of the several key components of plot. Fiction does more than plumb the depths of style, or voice, or mind. It certainly explores those but also the world and nature beyond.

Misrepresentation 17 – quality of plot: Just as readily as plot, and just as falsely, can style and view and character be put down as "essential juvenility." Does not style mask the inherent, the more real? Are make-believe characters not for children? Are the views of such characters not at least two steps from reality and thus essentially not real? All may be made to function poorly. However when well done, these elements of fiction draw reality or nature out of itself, as much as plot may as well in challenging our understandings of the real and the possible – the nature of the human condition (biology and psychology...human will...environment and society). A cut to plot is a cut to fiction and life, a cut to the ever hungry always thirsty imagination. Plot is not only great apparatus but profound creation.

When Huck says, "All right, then, I'll go to hell" in deciding – against the mores to which he was "sivilised" – to oppose Jim's returning to slavery in Twain's classic novel, the moment is complex and compelling due to a wonderful intersection of plot, voice,

character. The world has gone against the truth, and so young Huck chooses to go against the world as it was instilled in him and as it looms and attacks. This moment is not only great as a function of plot (and more), it furthers all the key elements of story. In the moment, these elements are mature: plot, style, even the would-be adolescent character. (Of some note perhaps, the free-living boy who was the real life model for Huckleberry Finn, Twain recounts, grew up to become a judge farther west, after "lighting out for the territory," one may presume.) A perhaps more obvious example: Is the plot of the classic novel (the very grownup) *Middlemarch* "essential juvenility"? Or the sober and deft, vibrant and instructive grounds and motion of an adult world. If "modernism" has reduced plot to juvenility, or deemed it so, this is not plot's problem but modernism's false representation.

Misrepresentation 18 – limited engagement: Wood's too often slavish delimited devotion to the closet of his preferred linens contradicts his closing statement of the book, that "the true writer, that free servant of life, must always be acting as if life were a category beyond anything the novel had yet grasped; as if life itself were always on the verge of becoming unconventional." Yet even this is too weak. Not "as if" – is. Life *is* beyond anything the novel has grasped and life *is* always verging on unconventional, let alone the far-more gripping prospect of the revolutionary. Or why write? Why not just pass around copies of past masters? One would think the answer would be obvious, for as great critic Edmund Wilson made note:

The experience of mankind on the earth is always changing as man develops and has to deal with new combinations of elements; and the writer who is to be anything more than an echo of his predecessors must always find expression for something which has never yet been expressed, must master a new set of phenomena which has never yet been mastered...

Fiction and criticism should take as large task the responsibility of un"sivilizing" toward ever more liberatory ends. Fiction writ whole is experience, knowledge, innovation stretching through and far beyond voice, style, character, far beyond status quo limnits. "Free servant" we must reject. "Free writer" works – or "free explorer." Purview meld as "basic novelistic tension"? Actually, the basic "tension" of novels comes much moreso from the old standbys – conflict within and between character and plot (inclusive of setting: time and place), and imbuing those elements with vitality of imagination and empathy, insight and vision. Vitality – not merely in the aesthetic, not merely in the normative, not merely in the intellectual, not merely in the emotive, not merely in the experiential, not merely between any and all of these, not merely in any one thing but of the human condition, real and possible. Vital conflict, character, and plot. (Purview too.)

Decrying in reviews and articles what he sees as an excessive focus on the world beyond the human interior, Wood claims: "Some of the more impressive novelistic minds of our age do not think that language and the representation of consciousness are the novelist's quarries any more. Information has become the new character..." and "Zadie Smith is merely of her time when she says, in an interview, that it is not the writer's job 'to tell us how somebody felt about something, it's to tell us how the world works'." Smith and

Wood are both at best partly correct. To most fully portray the human condition, novels need lively depictions of both the internal realms and the external ones – the private and the public – because not only do both realms comprise the personal in the first place, the personal must also live within itself as well as out in the world. That is, the public and the private make up the personal, inherently and in action and consequence. This is the human condition. In diverse and profound ways, we are the world and the world is us, to extents far beyond any notions of private "language and the representation of consciousness." The most vast public realities infuse and help define, reveal, create the most intimate internal ones (including "how somebody felt"), and vice versa.

Misrepresentation 19 – fiction no use: Then there's the mental sinkhole of Wood's notion that "We don't read *in order* to benefit" practically, usefully. Wood claims people don't read fiction for educational reasons, such as improving one's vocabulary (is there a better way?). He claims people don't read fiction to gain experience, to be worldly, to enrich their other experiences. (One might as well claim that people don't live for such.) He claims people don't read fiction for ethical reasons, to foster principles, commitments, convictions. To hell with Horace and the Victorians. "Entertain and instruct"? Not over my status quo body of ideology. One must disregard plenty of novelists and readers, both literary and popular, to hold such a view. Not only Victorian scholars could cite an unending supply of belief-busting examples and analyses in this regard. We read fiction to learn about people *and* the world. We read to learn how others see, feel, and understand all sorts of realities and possibilities, as topical or as eternal as one can imagine. "We don't read *in order* to benefit" practically? Such mental chasms, throughout, undermine *How Fiction Works* and other establishment literature. Again, Wilson:

In my view, all our intellectual activity, in whatever field it takes place [including art], is an attempt to give a meaning to our experience – that is, to make life more practicable; for by understanding things we make it easier to survive and get around among them.

Even the most dynamic or somehow compelling contemporary novels typically fail to explore accurately or adequately the very topics, situations, and worlds they take up (or fail to, however crucially related). Such lack quickly guts even the most finely styled purviews, taking the reader for a ride rather than to many a revelation. All dessert and no meal, and about as appealing after a brief bit.

Renowned scholar Noam Chomsky comments:

I think the Victorian novel tells us more about people than science ever will...and we will always learn more about human life and human personality from novels than from scientific psychology.... In fact, most of what we know about things that matter comes from such sources, surely not from considered rational inquiry (science), which sometimes reaches unparalleled depths of profundity, but has a rather narrow scope.

The vast majority of readers are far less fanatic about the aesthetic qualities of fiction than is Wood – whose favored aesthetics are in any case not always so wonderful, as he admits from time to time – just so long as it works well, or well enough. Even that modernist idol of the establishment TS Eliot noted that "The 'greatness' of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards" but need be evaluated by normative criteria as well. This assessment caused scholar Bernard Smith to comment in his valuable book, *Forces in American Criticism* (1939):

To this has esthetic criticism at last come – to a realization that non-esthetic criteria are the ultimate tests of value. Whether they be called philosophical, moral, or social criteria, they are still the ideas that men have about the way human beings live together and the way they ought to live. The quest of beauty had become the quest of reality. It had become, in essence, literary criticism as socially conscious and as polemical as the criticism of the Marxists.

Either by way of bias or prejudice, Wood belittles the novel much utility. This is the ideology Wood lives and breathes and works under. Fiction is too dangerous to established interests, too powerful, moreso than nonfiction because of its extra aesthetic appeals, and because it can contain nonfiction, in virtually every sense; thus, the ideological controls are tighter for fiction than nonfiction. Fiction is too useful, too popular, too influential not to be domineered and gutted in central ways by the status quo.

At all levels of accomplishment fiction exists and can be crafted to virtually any intention: reactionary, establishmentarian, revolutionary, and so on. Stories "do far more than entertain..." reports *Scientific American*:

...how do the emotional and cognitive effects of a narrative influence our beliefs and real-world decisions? The answers to these questions seem to be rooted in our history as a social animal. We tell stories about other people and for other people. Stories help us to keep tabs on what is happening in our communities. The safe, imaginary world of a story may be a kind of training ground, where we can practice interacting with others and learn the customs and rules of society.

If Wood thinks people "don't read in order to benefit" usefully then he may as well think fiction writers don't write to benefit anyone usefully, but who can be so dim? He's reciting ideology, having learned the lines well, having heard and read them often enough.

Misrepresentation 20 – fiction no remedy: In the midst of the all-but-everywhere-unpopular US invasion and occupation of Iraq, antiwar novels are maligned as categorically "belligerent," by reviewer Richard Eder in the *New York Times* – the great media cheerleader and enabler of the criminal aggression – and nobody blinks an eye at such Orwellianism from the establishment press. No one from establishment literature so much as peeps in protest, let alone correction. No wonder, since no explicit investigative antiwar novel about the crime of the current conquest has been produced by the establishment, and precious few exist from any time.

Even before release for sale by its publisher, the proclaimed (yet self-nullifying) antiwar short novel *Checkpoint* from established writer Nicholson Baker, was denounced in 2004 by the New Republic's literary editor Leon Wieseltier in the New York Times, in easily one of the longest "reviews" the book received. "This scummy little book" opened his review and set the tone of Wieseltier's screed, a fraudulent and hypocritical defense of capitalism and subservient literature. A number of other establishment reviews were much more sympathetic than the pitiful New York Times hatchet job, however, it was easy to be so, since Baker himself carried the establishment water, doing war resisters no favors by putting a sometimes meaningful criticism of the US conquest into the mouth of a homicidal lunatic set upon committing a murderous crime, the assassination of President Bush, which basically nullified any serious effect the book might have. (The protagonist assassination intent, not the "supreme crime" of state aggression, was greatly publicized and primarily discussed and the book sold poorly). Regardless, the status quo smears by Wieseltier (a "liberal thinker" and one of the "ideas men of the liberal intellegentsia") made sure that any other potential antiwar writers of the establishment would know the obloquy they would face in trying to bring out a more popular, more considered, more investigative antiwar novel. There has scarcely been a trickle since. What's the use? Not much, if at all, according to Wood and the rest.

Rather than "read *in order* to benefit" practically, usefully, Wood states, "We read fiction because it pleases us, moves us, is beautiful, and so on – because it is alive and we are alive." Not to learn about ourselves and the world? While people read fiction for the reasons Wood notes as well, they also read fiction – even the most complex literary sort – because they appreciate that quality novels may be experiences with much to teach, much to offer for use in very practical ways. In fact, Wood says as much himself, but only to a point. The "teaching" may only go so far, after which it is subject to dismissal, ridicule, or worse.

Fiction as useful, everyday practical, sociopolitical, momentous? "How quaintly antique this sounds," to Wood, to the establishment, even as their fiction massively and quite practically bulwarks the status quo. It could not be, could it, that the establishment fears readers – teachers, pastors, parents, youth, soldiers – might find such fiction too ethical, too alive, too real, too useful? The establishment surely knows and certainly functions more purposefully in this regard than Wood ever lets on, and likely that contributes to the high valuation of his services. Such is the menace of establishment criticism (whether of liberal, conservative, or reactionary stripe) – *The Menace of Liberal Scholarship*, as Noam Chomsky once put it in the title of a Vietnam War era book.

"For all its eviscerations of the administration, [Jon Stewart's TV news satire, which is at most essentially reformist ideologically and so a tolerable status quo player] 'The Daily Show' is animated not by partisanship but by a deep mistrust of all ideology," says Michiko Kakutani, leading reviewer for the New York Times, in a positive review of the show, ostensibly oblivious to the ideological line she implies as ideology free. If imaginative work is worthy to establishment eyes, typically it's not ideological, but in a neat coincidence, if work heads in an unacceptable line, then typically it is. As Terry

Eagleton notes in *Literary Theory*: "Radical critics...have a set of social priorities with which most people at present tend to disagree. This is why they are commonly dismissed as 'ideological', because ideology is always a way of describing other people's interests rather than our own." In establishment formulation, powerful modes of literature, such as the "partisan" or "polemic" are often wielded as scare words. Readers are advised against such fiction (often whether it's much divergent or not), for their own best interests in literature and life. Thus the establishment wars on, typically in denial of its powerful partisan lines and defining ideology.

When Wood claims that "We don't read *in order* to benefit" practically, he is specifically referring to a Mexican police chief's decision to have his officers read classic literature to build vocabulary, to gain enriching world experience, and to enhance ethical convictions and "commitments to the values they have pledged to defend" – that is, to help classically civilize them. Sounds refreshing, one would think. Hopeful logical. Useful practical. Educational ethical. Humanizing, at least somewhat. Better liberal and conservative works than totalitarian or reactionary ones, if progressive and revolutionary literature must be out of question in the moment. Wood and his primary readership hear auras very different, or at least profess to, marveling at the peculiar notion of utility in fiction – when not scoffing, or outright discrediting the real possibility in works of significant aesthetic achievement. The best they can typically come up with is that *the aesthetic is (by definition) not useful* – which not only merely begs the question, it falsely cheapens aesthetics – and has any number of the greatest thinkers and imaginative writers turning in their graves, if not laughing their skulls off.

Misrepresentation 21 – fiction "makes nothing happen": While Auden famously wrote "poetry makes nothing happen," Wood seems to have taken the literal notion largely to heart in regard to fiction, and yet fiction is far more censored than nonfiction, because it is more powerful. Nonfiction books explicitly condemning the US invasion of Iraq are far more facilitated and existing than any fiction counterparts. The same is true between nonfiction and fiction in video/movies/films. James Wood and his paymasters and their primary readership scarcely speak of or to such fiction. Anyway, it's "belligerent." So unthinkable or laughable, so vulgar or frightening (threatening) it seems to them. It's as if they are not allowed to touch it. Or dare not. Politely, they say, it's quaint or "antique," as it may also seem to them. Or naively, well schooled, they say it's in the "wrong form." There's no conspiracy. They are cultured. Such culture is used, consciously or not, as a type of social self-medication and anesthetic for the masses. Quite useful. So much that is vital, not to mention civilized, is missing in establishment fiction, and the privileged may not know but more typically know and don't care, and work against knowing. The greatest irony is that they may even feel oppressed by liberatory fiction – aesthetically, intellectually, in every way.

Typical reactions to crossing oft unspoken ideological lines are all over the map, and include fear or laughter or contempt – "belligerence" – or incomprehension, but then comes the "gate-keeping," the filtering, de facto censorship. The liberatory geopolitical novel of well known British comedian Robert Newman, *The Fountain at the Center of the World* (2003), his third novel, was spurned by dominant publishers because, as noted by

Richard Nash of Soft Skull Press (the novel's US publisher), "big corporate publishers [acted] like big corporate publishers," rejecting the novel on ideological grounds – sometimes by way of "five-page, single-spaced screeds about the book's politics," Suzanne Charlé reports in *The American Prospect*. In 2004, my Iraq conquest novel *Homefront* was very politely, even respectfully, declined by a couple of the most liberal of US establishment presses for ostensibly aesthetic reasons. US state criminals can be relieved that novels revolving overtly and directly around "the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself all the accumulated evil of the whole," in the words of the judgment of Nuremberg, are an aesthetic impossibility.<sup>2</sup>

Misrepresentation 22 – writer as "good valet": In *The Liberation of American Literature* (1932), one of the central buried texts of liberatory lit criticism in the US, VF Calverton writes of the establishment:

That the attempt to be above the battle is evidence of a defense mechanism can scarcely be doubted. Only those who belong to the ruling class, in other words, only those who had already won the battle and acquired the spoils, could afford to be above the battle. Fiction which was propagandistic, that is, fiction which continued to participate in the battle, it naturally cultivated a distaste for, and eschewed. Fiction which was above the battle, that is fiction which concerned only the so-called absolutes and eternal, with the ultimate emotions and the perennial tragedies, but which offered no solutions, no panaceas – it was such fiction that won its adoration.... Most of the literature of the world has been propagandistic in one way or another...

as Wood admits of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, but warns and argues against otherwise.

In a word, the revolutionary critic does not believe that we can have art without craftsmanship; what he does believe is that, granted the craftsmanship, our aim should be to make art serve man as a thing of action and not man serve art as a thing of escape.

VF Calverton is the now virtually unknown editor of the *Modern Quarterly* (for 17 years from 1923 until his death in 1940). Unlike Calverton above, Wood uses normative

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<sup>2</sup> A kind note from an editor at a leading liberal publishing house: "The conflict between personal politics and public policy can be a difficult one, and your choice to illuminate this schism through the thoughts and experiences of Senator Sam Washburn is apt. As a whole, though, I simply wasn't convinced that a novel was the right vehicle by which to explore this divide – much of the narrative seemed to be sacrificed in favor of ideological discussion and, as a result, didn't really hang together as a whole." Mine and every other "supreme international crime" novel, apparently. *Homefront* and all variety of excerpts of the novel were declined by literally hundreds of presses and journals. Publishers aside, the novel has been well received by readers... In *The Shape of Content* (1957), Ben Shahn notes that "we must look upon form as the shape of content... ..form is the right and only possible shape of a certain content. Some other kind of form would have conveyed a different meaning and a different attitude. So when we sit in judgment upon a certain kind of form – and it is usually called lack of form – what we do is to sit in judgment upon a certain type of content." What types we can often readily see.

metaphors for writers and writing that are tepid and servile rather than expressive of liberty, justice, equality: "good prose...maintains an unsentimental composure and knows how to withdraw, like a good valet, from superfluous commentary." What of human banter and individual expression? desirable in a valet? in an author? in one who "knows his place"? In Wood's metaphor, good prose services, as if in human hierarchy, rather than serves for sake of humanity, as with Calverton's trope. Wood calls "the true writer, that free servant of life..." tasked to reveal truth, yet he misrepresents and buries much of fiction's real use for all, as if a truth too far. These may be a mere couple offhand metaphors by Wood – writer as "servant" and "valet" – but study of HFW reveals too much the establishment's priorities and the full import of its "unsentimental composure" (often antihuman status quo limnits) to let these suggestive, indicative metaphors pass unremarked.

Misrepresentation 23 – "No one is *literally* run off her feet": Just listen to those darlings, the poor. They say such endearing things about being "*literally* run off" their feet. As if! Everyone knows, says Wood, that "No one is *literally* run off her feet." The very idea! of being harried or hurried by an assembly line, by another machine, by a manager, by a boss so that a worker might slip, trip, or collapse onto a chair, floor, the ground. It's literally unimaginable (to a status quo star), which makes Wood literally wrong. No one literally gets run off her feet by injury or to injury on stressful or dangerous jobs; no one is ever pushed that hard. How quaint! "Lily, the caretaker's daughter" was not really run off her feet in Joyce's famed story "The Dead," says Wood. Evidently so, yet Wood is blatantly wrong about "no one" being run off her feet in households and on other jobs – ask any soldier who may be literally launched and detached from her feet, or any other body part. Is it possible that Wood neither knows nor can imagine anyone like this? Has he never read Les Misérables? Has he never seen Charlie Chaplin's Modern Times? In both great literary works (also popular and useful), being run off one's feet is among the primary themes, and in Hugo's great novel of the people, little Cosette is one of the literal examples. Chaplin is swept off his feet by the assembly line and ground through the gears of a machine. Literal reality that impossible fantasy.

Even if we give Wood the benefit of the doubt that he is referring only to Lily in the story, he's still misrepresenting the situation, which is ultimately ambiguous with regard to Lily being literally run off her feet. Joyce opens the story: "Lily, the caretaker's daughter, was literally run off her feet. Hardly had she brought one gentleman into the little pantry behind the office on the ground floor and helped him off with his overcoat than the wheezy hall-door bell clanged again and she had to scamper along the bare hallway to let in another guest." "Literally" is intentionally and ironically "precisely the most inaccurate word," Wood claims. Not necessarily, no. The author is under no obligation to clarify all that happens to Lily, to fix it with utter precision. In fact, Wood typically lauds authors who do not, authors who "blur" meaning, "blurring the question of who is noticing" the world, "all this stuff," and what it might mean. Evidently Lily is not run off her feet, not with certainty. Rather, it's ambiguous. Wood's claiming that "no one is *literally* run off her feet" stands out as a blanket generalization, especially given how

unimaginable an actual "literal" fall seems to be to Wood: "precisely the most inaccurate word." Far from it. "Literally" is precisely the most ambiguous word.<sup>3</sup>

In *Les Misérables*, threatened by her "guardian," Cosette is ordered into the frightening dark to fetch water from a spring:

She emerged from the village...entered the forest at a run...no longer looking at or listening to anything. She only paused in her course when her breath failed her; but she did not halt in her advance. She went straight before her in desperation. As she ran she felt like crying. The nocturnal quivering of the forest surrounded her completely. She no longer thought, she no longer saw. ...she reached the spring... Cosette did not take time to breathe... She drew out the bucket nearly full, and set it on the grass.... She would have liked to set out again at once, but the effort required to fill the bucket had been such that she found it impossible to take a step. She was forced to sit down. She dropped on the grass....

That's literal enough, and no fantasy. Adding a slip and tumble in stride would have made it exact. Wood is wrong about people not reading literature "*in order*" to learn. He's wrong about plot being "essential juvenility," and on and on throughout *How Fiction Works*, until it scarcely seems a page goes by where he has got much of a pulse on the real, on the nature of the human condition whether in life or lit. Quality fiction of use? Moral bosh! Wishful thinking. Reductive. Unrealistic. Hugo Chavez should have passed

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<sup>3</sup> People are literally run off their feet in machine lines, on farms, in athletic training, in the military, and in some demanding or excited households. Regardless of Joyce's intent, and whether or not he uses "literally" "knowingly," its function is ambiguous in the text. It's as mistaken to claim that Lily fell as to claim, as Wood does, that she did not. Perhaps it's necessary to note that I agree that Wood is making an interesting observation. One could write books about the many acute observations Wood makes, as many people have piecemeal. Unfortunately he too often ties his insight with sweeping misrepresentations: it's "inaccurate" to be literally run off one's feet. I don't imagine it happens much in cloistered dens. Wood goes on to express a serious ignorance of not atypical features of low-income working conditions (at the least) and how they might be spoken of by workers, in presenting Lily as imagined example. Insightfully, he imagines well that Lily could tell a friend she was "literally" run of her feet while meaning it figuratively, the way in which rushed work events are sometimes spoken, but he misrepresents reality by entirely ruling out ("most inaccurate") that she might mean it literally. The larger misrepresentation is that Wood generalizes far beyond Lily. Yes, to be run off one's feet is a cliché. It's a cliché that Wood seems to mistake for unreality. Cliché, third definition: "something overly familiar or commonplace." "Run off her feet" may be either literal description of a fall or figurative description of rushed "scamper"ing work – as we hear via a meld of the purviews of Lily and the narrator. Wood rules out the literally possibility and thus badly misrepresents reality, even as he thoughtfully develops one half of an ambiguous passage. An establishment purview gets grand treatment (she couldn't *possibly* mean it "literally"), and the low-income workers' full reality is destroyed, by Wood not Joyce – since whatever Joyce's exact intention, it's a moot point in face of a passage that is far more ambiguous than Wood credits, a passage that is very much in the unstable multipurview meld mode Wood favors. Wood thinks he has figured out a "puzzle" within "our basic novelistic tension" and he may well have put some pieces together, but simultaneously he distorts reality, and inadvertently shows not only the expansive but the limited nature of his preferred UMM mode. Wood: "It is useful to watch good writers make mistakes. Plenty of excellent ones stumble at free indirect style." Critics too, and other readers. It's a stumble-prone style, for obvious reasons.

around spelling primers in Venezuela to help improve literacy, not the one million free copies of Don Quixote he distributed instead, nor the 1.5 million free copies of Les Misérables in 2006 when he "inaugurated the Second Venezuelan International Book Fair...[and] addressed the opening ceremony after having handed out copies of a massive edition of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* to workers of the 'Negra Hipolita Mission,' a social program aimed at helping Venezuelans in situations of extreme poverty," reports the Cuban paper Periódico 26. "The Venezuelan leader said: 'The Empire sows death with its weapons. In contrast, these are our guns: books, ideas, culture.' Earlier, participants had attentively listened [to] and applauded the reading of the poem 'Che,' by its author Miguel Barnet, to start off the Book Fair tribute to the historical legacy of Ernesto Che Guevara..." "Books Liberate" was the theme of the book fair.

Doesn't President Chavez know, like us, that lit is not for learning. We privileged people certainly have nothing to learn from it. Let the people eat primers! (One can imagine what good friends James Wood and the beloved Marie Antoinette might have been. Not that the point is them. The point is their either oblivious or willful establishment function.)

Writers of the literature establishment repeatedly disparage such insight as that of literary scholar Kenneth Burke in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941) where he notes that "The contemporary emphasis must be placed largely upon propaganda, rather than upon 'pure' art... Since pure art makes for acceptance, it tends to become a social menace in so far as it assists us in tolerating the intolerable." (To take Burke's import here, we can set aside for the time being whether or not "pure art" is a notion that can actually be realized.) To foster sociopolitical consciousness, build support for unions, Venezuela has distributed copies of Charlie Chaplin's classic film "Modern Times," in which Chaplin as worker gets caught in the gears of a factory machine. Venezuelan business leaders are "outraged." In the US, the establishment's "seemingly apolitically" yet actually supercharged (ironically) utilitarian political view that great art cannot be political in much of any practical sense serves business owners quite well, while many workers remain stuck or crushed in the gears, or trying to scrape by on sub-subsistence wages, with poor to nonexistent benefits. Chaplin was hounded away from liberatory filmmaking and for a time barred from re-entering the US as part of the political persecution. While some establishment mouthpieces may believe aesthetics and practical effect are incompatible, most are not so deeply in denial. Big money – whether corporate, governmental, or individual – suffers from no such delusions and predominantly either denounces or withhold funds from art that does not service it. Examples are endless. Nick Turse at TomDispatch notes: "In reality, the military has been deeply involved with the film industry since the Silent Era. Today, however, the *ad hoc* arrangements of the past have been replaced by a full-scale one-stop shop, occupying a floor of a Los Angeles office building. There, the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, and the Department of Defense itself have established entertainment liaison offices to help ensure that Hollywood makes movies the military way." Literary authors, and artists of all sorts, are cultured to follow suit (as we will continue to see here throughout).

Misrepresentation 24 – the petty terrorist: It's bad enough in *How Fiction Works* that Wood misrepresents fiction. He also misrepresents people and the world beyond fiction, and thus distorts how reality corresponds to story and its subsequent effect in the world. For example, Wood thinks that "Terrorism, clearly enough, is the triumph of resentment (sometimes justified)" – that terrorists "dream of hard revenge on a society that seems too soft to deserve sparing," and that "perhaps a certain kind of Islamic fundamentalist ... hates ["Western secularism"] because he admires it...*because it once did him a good turn* – gave him medicine...." In fact, reality is essentially the opposite of Wood's description. While some psychopaths may think as Wood states, this Dostoevskyan "analysis" has no "great prophetic relevance for the troubles" the West is in, because the basic grievances and motivations behind the terror are the Western support and active participation in tyrannies, invasions, occupations, sanctions, outlaw threats, and economic oppression, which are rationally known by the terrorists and by the affected populations – as reported (if scantily) by even the *Wall Street Journal* and other establishment media. The terror – which is horrific and vicious – is intended to deter US aggressions and oppressions or at least to build strength, recruit, create revolution. These terrorists are rooted in far more rational realism than Wood comes close to conveying.

Whether or not the terror often works well, or leads to more eventual gains than losses is another question. While the 9-11 terror did cause the US to quietly withdraw its military forces from Saudi Arabia, it also brought on the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Yet the terrorism is wounding the US, in blood, economics and politics, and may hasten its decline, the easier to weaken or repel its control over the oil-rich Middle East and beyond. Directly related US meddling and bombing in nearby Pakistan has led to the ouster of its preferred ruler there, Musharraf, and may also likely lead to the ouster of a couple other US "puppet" rulers in the region. Is the US "too soft"? Excellent! may likely think the terrorists and insurgents. Does the US make medicines that might be used by them? Super! Why would they not be more than happy to use the West's strengths and weaknesses against it, to get the West to remove its talons from their lands? But regardless, the fact remains – given the fundamental reality – the plot – the basic causes of these current and longstanding "troubles" of the West are internal to the West, not external, which is the opposite of what Wood conveys. Moreover, misrepresenting the basic focus, grounds, and motivations for explosive anger and violence against the West makes a mockery of using "modernist" explorations of psychology to know let alone help resolve the current longstanding conflicts.

George Orwell in *The Lion and the Unicorn*:

Even among the inner clique of politicians who brought us to our present pass [World War II] it is doubtful whether there were any *conscious* traitors. The corruption is more in the nature of self-deception.... And being unconscious, it is limited. One sees this at its most obvious in the English press. Is the English press honest or dishonest? At normal times it is deeply dishonest. All the papers that matter live off their advertisements, and the advertisers exercise an indirect censorship over news. Yet I do not suppose there is one paper in England that can be straight-forwardly bribed with hard cash. England is not the jeweled isle of

Shakespeare's much-quoted passage, nor is it the inferno depicted by Dr. Goebbels. More than either it resembles a family, a rather stuffy Victorian family, with not many black sheep in it but with all its cupboards bursting with skeletons. It has rich relations who have to be kowtowed to and poor relations who are horribly sat upon, and there is a deep conspiracy of silence about the source of the family income. It is a family in which the young are generally thwarted and most of the power is in the hands of irresponsible uncles and bedridden aunts. Still, it is a family. It has its private language and its common memories, and at the approach of an enemy it closes ranks. A family with the wrong members in control – that, perhaps, is as near as one can come to describing England in a phrase.... They are not wicked, or not altogether wicked; they are merely unteachable. Only when their money and power are gone will the younger among them begin to grasp what century they are living in.

One wonders how much of Orwell, his partly establishmentarian, though sometimes dissenting, countryman Wood has read. *The Lion and the Unicorn* is subtitled "Socialism and the English Genius" and opens per below. If corrected for the mistakes (and the particular situations) which are also found in some of the rest of the book, this brief scene of WWII vividly foreruns 9-11 and everyday life under the US occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan and beyond, and indicates something more of the bombers' key motives than Wood appreciates:

As I write, highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me.

They do not feel any enmity against me as an individual, nor I against them. They are 'only doing their duty', as the saying goes. Most of them, I have no doubt, are kind-hearted law-abiding men who would never dream of committing murder in private life. On the other hand, if one of them succeeds in blowing me to pieces with a well-placed bomb, he will never sleep any the worse for it. He is serving his country, which has the power to absolve him from evil.

One cannot see the modern world as it is unless one recognizes the overwhelming strength of patriotism, national loyalty. In certain circumstances it can break down, at certain levels of civilization it does not exist...

The bombers feel they are looking out for their own people and consequently "doing their duty" whether by God or country, or both. And yet both the US bombings and the "terrorist" bombings are criminal (try getting that much past the NYT filters). Too bad modernist type fictions fixated with childish games of purview do not trouble themselves overly much to vivify such reality at great forensic length and power. And why not? It's no question of capacity of fiction, or even necessarily of unstable mix and meld narrative, for even great clearly and extensively depicted crimes may ride and wash on surrounding mystery, though not of the points of the crime that are well established, but of the related infinite even intimate esoterics of the human condition (and universe beyond) that are virtually inescapable, from any such events, and are appropriately compelling if handled well.

One may also think at many points throughout HFW of these additional quick cutting comments of Orwell in *The Lion and the Unicorn* about the phenomena of idiocy, and banditry, among the privileged prior to World War II: "The underlying fact was that the whole position of the monied class had long ceased to be justifiable... The British ruling class obviously could not admit to themselves that their usefulness was at an end. Had they done that they would have had to abdicate.... Clearly there was only one escape for them – into stupidity." [The ruling types could] "keep society in its existing shape only by being *unable* to grasp that any improvement was possible. Difficult though this was, they achieved it, largely by fixing their eyes on the past and refusing to notice the changes that were going on round them." And as a matter of course suppressing liberatory, progressive, let alone revolutionary, change in literature and life.

Too often in his criticism Wood is a "larcenous banker" (to repeat that considerable tautology) making bad loans under fraudulent terms, denying reasonable lines of credit, bailed out by cultured readers and critics. Wood is deft enough that we may admire what he does (trope along) while we deplore what his criticism too often is (retrograde, misprised): Flaubert as spring come again is too much a cadaverous notion, however deftly glossed.

### PART THREE

No end in sight, the misrepresentations roll on. Before we take up these next dozen, let's consider the relationship between liberatory lit and the establishment in more detail. Despite some contrary gestures and rhetoric, despite the exalted hopes of Flaubert, "often held to be the quintessential chronicler of nothingness," modernist and other establishment works do not lack meaning, far from it. On the contrary, such works are full of meaning, but establishment minds are naively well schooled or otherwise sense or know it is safest for their own status quo positions, and therefore preferable, and therefore all but inevitable, that in such a powerful form as the novel, meaning be not too liberatory, lest some establishment superior find excuse to filter out, censor, bar any modern liberatory perpetrator, for much besides "obscenity" or "lewdness." Random-type blurring "modernist" techniques are great for camouflaging, giving plausible deniability to any unsanctioned versions of reality, except that typically the camouflage and deniability become the thing itself (unstable purview meld is one of the more convenient ways to bollix, to entirely gut whatever one might be taken to mean – sometimes even no matter how devoted the puzzle decoder; fiction as academic or abstract game). Victorian novels typically toed establishment lines too, but, especially, with the rise of corporate demands in this age of power propaganda have grown the imperatives of "nothingness." Wholesale banking system illegitimacy and fraud is "nothingness." Criminal invasions of sovereign countries are "nothingness." Retrograde misrepresentation-laden criticism is "nothingness" – which is all an assertion of blindness, by way of what is falsely claimed to be ideology-and-propaganda-free art. It's withdrawal, disengagement, a repudiation of crucial artistic prerogative and responsibility, no less. How more to emphasize the calamity? As a shame? As a betrayal of art and life? It's fiction gutted.

Wood propounds an "aesthetic" of pursuing "*the real*," which is at the bottom of [his] inquiries," in *How Fiction Works* and his criticism generally. Yet he botches reality time and again. During the Cold War the CIA went to great lengths and expense to mold the "seemingly apolitical" normative quality of art in the US and abroad and met with no little success that resonates today through corporations and universities, society and culture. The CIA merely picked up on and encouraged a strain that had been established earlier: "modernism," the writing needed, encouraged, and employed, just as the mid-century abstract impressionist movement in painting was funded and driven by the CIA – art of "nothing" used to counter the engaged art rising from the ashes of World Wars I and II. As scholar James Petras notes perceptively in "The CIA and the Cultural Cold War Revisited" (1999), an indispensable review of Frances Stonor Saunders' limited though useful book "The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters":

The CIA and its cultural organizations were able to profoundly shape the postwar view of art. Many prestigious writers, poets, artists, and musicians proclaimed their independence from politics and declared their belief in art for art's sake. The dogma of the free artist or intellectual, as someone disconnected from political engagement, gained ascendancy and is pervasive to this day.... The issue is not that today's intellectuals or artists may or may not take a progressive position on this or that issue. The problem is the pervasive belief among writers and artists that anti-imperialist social and political expressions should not appear in their music, paintings, and serious writing if they want their work to be considered of substantial artistic merit.

Of course there has always been status quo work. It reaches one of its peak expressions in art about nothing much beyond endless interior vistas, basically of the private sphere, escorted by equally tranced criticism. Where again are the explicit antiwar novels about "the supreme international crime"? Many another sort of urgent novel has been destroyed in its cradle on these grounds. Much preferred by the establish is Flaubert, his sort of work, for as Wood notes, "no novelist fetishized the poetry of 'the sentence' in the same way, no novelist pushed to such an extreme the potential alienation of form and content (Flaubert longed to write what he called a 'book about nothing')." Something of the underlying ideal today, fiction about not *too* much. "And no novelist before Flaubert reflected as self-consciously on questions of technique. With Flaubert, literature" rather than too threatening life "became 'essentially problematic,' as one scholar put it." A great game. The supreme puzzle. The establishment dream – story neutered, destroyed – fiction drowned in the great Flaubertian spring.

During the cold war, the US establishment required its own Flaubert figure to try to control literature and naturally gravitated toward Henry James. When the highly accomplished and leading progressive literary critic, Maxwell Geismar, challenged the very quality and reigning adoration of Henry James' fiction, he was silenced, and rather prominently in one instance, on national TV by two high level functionaries of the CIA, representing the interests of the corporate state rather than the populace. The two men who played a key role: William vanden Heuval and Irving Kristol – the former a

"protégé" of the "father" of the CIA and the latter the CIA flack and "father" of neoconservatism who several years earlier had passed on his position as editor of Commentary magazine to Normon Podhoretz (a student of leading establishment lit critic Lionel Trilling, who was a sort of forerunner of James Wood). When William vanden Heuvel (father of the current editor/publisher of The Nation Katrina vanden Heuvel) tag-teamed with Irving Kristol (the father of current prominent Fox TV political pundit and New York Times columnist Bill Kristol, also editor of the Washington DC based political magazine, The Weekly Standard) – when these central figures of the political establishment hastened to appear on national TV over four decades ago to attack directly to the face of the silenced progressive literary critic Maxwell Geismar, on the occasion of the publication of Geismar's book of criticism about Henry James ("a primary Cold War literary figure"), Kristol and vanden Heuvel, two exemplars of the status quo, serving retrograde state interests, executed a prominent role in destroying Geismar's accomplished literary career and ending his run on a national literary television show, Books on Trial ("or something similar," in Geismar's recollection). Geismar posits William vanden Heuvel as "a rich, cultivated, charming, and liberal member of the upper echelons of the CIA [who] had a large hand in embroiling [the US] in Vietnam," while Irving Kristol "as it later turned out was almost always affiliated with many State Department or CIA literary projects in editing, publishing, and the academic world...a hired hand of the establishment."

From where does the public space for status quo favorites arise, the fleets of ostensibly disengaged critics (though in de facto service of the very public status quo), all the refined minions, sophisticated apologists, odious smear artists and hacks, Orwellian liars? Obviously there are plenty of institutional roots, less obviously including the CIA – which helped set the ideological line for literature decades ago, a line heavily followed and affirmed by the ongoing establishment – all the continual defensive claims to the contrary that enable the essentially status quo liberal establishment (let alone conservative and reactionary elements) to view itself as something other than a blight, whatever else it might be. We can turn to the silenced progressive critic for a better understanding of the establishment literature tradition which endures today. Maxwell Geismar details the ideological reality that still today shapes and underlies the establishment, aside from some partial and modest reformations:

What was the real truth, the true historical dimension, of the Cold War? As I said in opening this Introduction, a new group of Cold War historians have been giving us a whole new set of impressions, which, alas, most of those who lived through the period, and are so certain of their convictions, will not even bother to read and to think about. For if they did...the Schlesingers, the Galbraiths, the Kristols, the Max Lerner, the Trillings, the Bells, the Rahvs, the Kazins, the Irving Howes: all these outstanding, upstanding figures of our political-cultural scene today...they would have to admit both their own illusions for the last twenty years, and the fact that they have deliberately deluded their readers about the historical facts of our period. Since it was they who fastened the Cold War noose around all our necks, how can we expect them to remove it? – even though, as in the cases of Mary McCarthy and Dwight MacDonald, and the estimable New York Review of Books, they have

bowed a little to the changing winds of fashion today. Due to student protests at base, and student confrontations on Cold War issues, Professors Bell and Trilling have indeed moved on from Columbia to Harvard University – but after Harvard what? Mr. Trilling has even 'resigned' from contemporary literature, saying at long last that he does not understand it – but only after he led the attack for twenty years on such figures as the historian Vernon Parrington, the novelist Dreiser, the short-story writer Sherwood Anderson, and other such figures of our literary history. And only after the Columbia University English Department had taken the lead in setting up Henry James as 'Receiver' in what amounted to the bankruptcy of our national literature. The Cold War Liberals, historians, critics and so-called sociologists, also clustered around a set of prestigious literary magazines like *Partisan Review*, *The New Leader*, *Encounter of London*, *Der Monat of Berlin*, [also *Kenyon Review* and "many others"; Peter Matthiesson helped start the *Paris Review* as "a young CIA recruit...and used it as his cover"], which had in effect set the tone and the values of the 'Free World' culture. When it was revealed, about two years ago, that these leading cultural publications and organizations (the various Congresses and Committees for 'Cultural Freedom'), as well as some student organizations and big unions of the AFL-CIO, were in fact being financed and controlled by Central Intelligence Agency – the game was up... - (1969) Maxwell Geismar, "Introduction," *New Masses: An Anthology of the Rebel Thirties* (Ed. Joseph North)

The "game was up" for some individuals, but not for the establishment as whole, as has been documented in detail. The game had long since been up for Trilling's fiction, and doesn't look of much promise in Wood's fiction, and preoccupations. As historian Michael Kimmage notes astutely in an essay on Trilling's recently discovered abandoned second novel: Trilling is clearly "one in a long line of sensitive American novelists, eager to write a masterpiece out of American material and destroyed by the culture that is his subject." Trilling like Wood is a special case though, for as Geismar points out, Trilling was a prominent part of the culture beyond fiction that helped lead the repressive charge. It's more fitting than ironic, I suppose, that it led to the burial of Trilling's own aspirations in fiction. It was Leon Wieseltier (the hatcheter of Baker's antiwar novel *Checkpoint*) who introduced a recent large collection of Trilling's essays. The Trillings of past and present, such as today's star critic, James Wood stand shoulder-to-shoulder with establishmentarians like the liberal vanden Heuvels and the neoconservative Kristols in defending Henry James as grand author, in particular against some of the views of past prominent critic Edmund Wilson. Because Wood describes some of Wilson's views on Henry James as "a scandal" and "barbarous," he would no doubt also deplore or dismiss Geismar's book of criticism: *Henry James and the Jacobites* (1963).<sup>4</sup>

Wood's critical concerns in a sense unite the dominant strands of literary fiction (at least) of the past 200 years – Victorianism and modernism – some of their main preoccupations

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<sup>4</sup> Additionally, Wood's view is that Wilson writes with "coercion" in separate essays about Chekhov and Gogol, a "coercion of paraphrase" that "makes the essay on Flaubert dogmatic." -from "Mr. Literature," Wood's review of Lewis Dabney's book, *Edmund Wilson: A Life in Literature*.

as well as limited pre and post incarnations. Yet his criticism is ultimately very narrow, and often unreal, as noted. "James Wood's *How Fiction Works* sometimes misses the plot" – the lead into Chris Tayler's *Guardian* review of HFW: "Novel Tour Guide." Tayler: "Good novelists, Wood says shrewdly, often use the kinds of metaphor that the communities they're writing about would produce. His own similes and metaphors...tend to summon up leisured late-Victorian travellers" – meanwhile his "personal great tradition is a modernist one." Wood respects some of the literary standards of the Victorians and values mainly the modernists – two of the status quo bastions of contemporary fiction. Both the Victorians and the modernists (more so, it seems to me) fail the most liberatory tendencies in writing, "postmodernists" also. If we are to refer back to find regeneration in writing, far better to light upon Victor Hugo's work than that of Flaubert, or the work of Jonathan Swift than that of Joyce, or the latter work of Tolstoy (Ivan Ilych, Hadji Murad) than that of Dostoevsky. For now, much dominant literature looks, as if to fetish and icon, to the (partly manufactured) example of Flaubert for both his Victorian and "modern" qualities, for his literary criticism, often as expressed in letters, and for fear (originally, at least) of the far more towering example of Victor Hugo, at his most influential and liberatory.

Upon publication of *Les Misérables* in 1862, that worldwide renowned and liberatory example of what a novel could be, establishment retrenching commenced with a vengeance, and continues to this day, with Flaubertian style obsession the nearest-at-hand, most useful literary countercourse available – then modernism – then a sort of formal criticism, politically charged – then the "realisms" and absurdisms "...traumatized ... puerile ... hysterical" ... miasmatic ... intimatist – then the convolutions and misrepresentations of James Wood and the establishment. Retrenching began immediately in literary, social, and political realms all, upon publication of *Les Misérables*. As Hugo notes, "'The newspapers which support the old world say, 'It's hideous, infamous, odious, execrable, abominable, grotesque, repulsive, shapeless, monstrous, horrendous, etc.'" Democratic and friendly papers answer, "No, it's not bad.'" Robb adds, "Mme Hugo, who was in Paris giving interviews, tried to persuade Hugo's spineless allies to support the book and invited them to dinner; but Gautier had flu, Janin had 'an attack of gout', and George Sand excused herself on the grounds that she always over-ate when she was invited out...." Further:

...Perrot de Chezelles [a public prosecutor], in an 'Examination of *Les Misérables*', defended the excellence of a State which persecuted convicts even after their release, and derided the notion that poverty and ignorance had anything to do with crime.... The State was trying to clear its name. The Emperor and Empress performed some public acts of charity and brought philanthropy back into fashion. There was a sudden surge of official interest in penal legislation, the industrial exploitation of women, the care of orphans, and the education of the poor. From his rock in the English Channel, Victor Hugo...[exiled] had set the parliamentary agenda for 1862

– as he had set out to, in many ways. Flaubert described *Les Misérables* as "infantile," containing "neither truth nor greatness," showing "the fall of a God," his erstwhile icon. In reality, Flaubert and the rest never escaped Hugo's shadow, in more ways than one.

Robb notes that Flaubert, greatly inspired by Hugo's poetry, *Châtiments*, wrote Hugo an "admiring pastiche" in 1853 including this bit of rhapsody: "'Your poetry entered my body like my nurse's milk.' That same evening, before the stylistic effect had worn off," continues Robb:

Flaubert sketched one of the great passages of modern prose fiction – the Comices Agricoles scene in *Madame Bovary*, where the pillars of rural French society pontificate among the animals and the dung. The resonances of Flaubert's realism – a conscious blend of [two works by Hugo] *Notre-Dame de Paris* and *Napoléon-le-Petit* – go some way to explaining the political decision to prosecute *Madame Bovary* in 1857.

This is the side of Flaubert we don't hear much about from Wood and other fixtures. This engaging and instructive, pointed scene likely brought the establishment crashing down on Flaubert, teaching its own lesson. One may become quite "modernist" in blurring meaning and belittling political agency to avoid having that lesson taught again. Might even force one to be ever more innovative and obedient to avoid future prosecution. Regardless, Flaubert is an accomplished and valuable artist, despite many drawbacks, as modernist and otherwise. Unfortunately his work is falsely and excessively elevated, and is used to falsely demean vital liberatory alternatives, including Hugo's example not least (written in part in exile) an exercise that Flaubert himself sometimes participated in. Hugo's intellectual and quality artistic accomplishment dwarfs that of Flaubert. Meanwhile, Hugo's aesthetic qualities and achievements are at least equivalent to those of Flaubert, and in my view considerably greater. The schools (and the rest of the lit establishment) typically pass along a sort of doubly ignorant alternative view. A lot of writers can hope to match Flaubert's achievements in literature. Virtually none can hope to match what Hugo accomplished in literature, let alone otherwise.<sup>5</sup>

While advances have been made in literature in modernism, as in the contemporary novel – especially in the multicultural expansion – other basic and vast liberatory realms have been blocked, ignored, denounced, more-or-less wholesale in some ways. A more accomplished liberatory fiction – more fully human, with quality aesthetic and popular resonance – has been refused, buried, though not entirely. The establishment, typically denying it is partisan and ideologically orthodox to a severe degree, misrepresents itself and reality all the while, and writes against much that is urgent and liberatory in lit. The loss is to life and art both – to all manner of well-being, to aesthetics and imagination, to experience itself. The loss is to enlightenment ideals of liberty, justice, equality. The loss is to a greater art. The loss is to our greater humanity.

While "modernist" intimacies drip and fall elegantly into Parisian sewers, as it were, while puerile prose bounds typically slaphappy to paralysis, liberatory fiction goes

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix for more on Hugo and Flaubert.

public, blooms progressive and revolutionary in reality and possibility, outing fraud and thuggery, revealing resistance and opportunities for change. Like liberatory fiction, liberatory criticism exposes and advances. It points out that establishment criticism often not only apologizes for the status quo – especially by way of misrepresentations – it does something more and something less, like an oblivious lapdog or conscious functionary whose fangs come out on crucial occasions. Such criticism does more than defend the status quo, it attacks. For example, Wieseltier's screed about "This scummy little book" or Richard Eder's Orwellian obloquy in calling antiwar novels categorically "belligerent." This is shock troop criticism, intended to deter evaluation, examination, production. Wood can seem mild by comparison – some of the most vociferously critiqued writers (Zadie Smith, Jonathan Franzen, Tom Wolfe) differ variously but offer no threat to Wood's basic stance. On the other hand, some of Edmund Wilson's views are tagged in passing as a "scandal" and "barbarous." The establishment misprizes, ignores, or misrepresents much fiction and criticism, when it doesn't feel compelled to shock trope.

Wood is so relatively prominent that his mass of misrepresentations is especially harmful, though he is also merely one among many in the literature establishment who tread within a relatively narrow and often distorted and repressive range of ideology. Now that his "common reader" book HFW may be widely used in the universities, his work is particularly worth critical examination, not only for necessary debunking but especially to bring to the light of day far more liberatory realities and possibilities in literature, life.

It's not that nothing can be gained from establishment writing, of course; much can be, especially if one accounts for its oft subservient nature, past and present. While Wood at best cuts through the crap and actually says something of distinction with distinction, it's too often part and parcel of crucial misrepresentations. Though plenty of establishment writing has its qualities and worthwhile components, much of such writers' everyday work and would be greater works are "destroyed by the culture that is [their] subject" (and object too), as Kimmage notes in regard to Trilling's fiction. Such authors participate greatly in the culture's disfiguration and destruction. Trilling aborted his fiction and debased his criticism. Meanwhile Maxwell Geismar was prescient to see Norman Mailer's especially influential style as tending to cavort vacantly manic or obtuse, oblivious, away from too revealing depiction of a lot of the most urgent central realities of our time – an early strain of puerility displayed in *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), and in the up and coming puerile prose of the "black humorists" as Robert Alter notes, several decades before Wood's coinage and critique of "hysterical realism."

Status quo fiction is made up partly of self-imposed chains – also establishment approved and enforced. Establishment authors clank and rattle in their bondage, the "hysterical realists" and Flaubertian intimatists and the rest, whether miasmatic or fastidious, and otherwise status quo ensconced. The plight of fiction today, in many crucial ways, is a journey arrested, and misrepresented – not unlike the nation itself – not unlike the masses in this country and beyond, people bossed and betrayed by the establishment, by its power, by its literature, its criticism and fiction, its "necessary illusions," the misrepresentations of naivety, orthodox ideology, or outright fraud. Wood's ideologically orthodox book, for all its gleanings of purview, bears scant real account of how fiction

works, even basically. In its neo-scholastic ramblings, too often newly dull, if not at points also deft, the book distorts "Flaubertian" modernism, even and especially, and fiction in general. Because HFW in an inadvertent ironic account of fiction arrested, aspiring writers would do well to take a few pointers then get free of the reigning culture club and cuffs. Best to eat what the rulers know, excrete the malign, then prepare and share many a far more liberatory moment and work of change.

#### PART FOUR

The next dozen misrepresentations:

25 – fiction of the present is passé; 26 – the reactionary and status quo as preeminent literary political fiction; 27 – 9-11 as rallying cry for a turn inward, and worse; 28 – Henry James, TS Eliot, the CIA, and the cultural cold war; 29 – liberatory lit attacked, buried; 30 – fiction shrunk; 31 – the partisan orthodox nature of status quo lit; 32 – basic public realities denied, distorted; 33 – the immateriality of the status quo; 34 – the public chopped from the personal; 35 – ideology in guise of aesthetics; 36 – limits on the real

Misrepresentation 25 – fiction of the present is passé: Wood makes extreme claims of impotence, that fiction of the present is outmoded, necessarily behind the times. He trips all over his social novel laments in a recent literary journal interview (in *Salmagundi*, whose founder and executive editor is fellow establishment critic Robert Boyers):

In other words, the impulse to write big, to write ideologically, to write politically, to write socially, is not going to go away just because we're living in pretty extraordinary times. I have a slightly depressed feeling that a lot of novelists are going to think like Updike did with *Terrorist*, "I'm a novelist, it's my job to explain the times. I should have a crack at it, in the spirit of Dostoyevsky or Conrad."

Why depressed? Wood admires Dostoevsky and Conrad. "And partly because we have these great experiences of Dostoyevsky's *Possessed*, or *Notes from the Underground*, or *The Secret Agent*," he adds, "we think this is a colossal achievement of the novel." In fact, such "great experiences" of novels might very reasonably be thought of as "a colossal achievement." He does not dispute even as he bemoans, so one senses he must be aware he is protesting too much. Wood continues:

Updike fails the test, but if one could really imagine what it's like to be a depressed, raging, alienated 18-year-old Muslim, then that's worth heaps of journalism. It could become a sort of text for the Department of Homeland Security. Just say, "You don't know anything until you've read this." Frankly, I think we should be handing them *Notes from the Underground* and *Possessed*, saying "You want to know what the impotence and the underground feel like? Read this."

To actually know such phenomena, Wood says here that the government really needs to read a couple key works of fiction, two novels in particular, and that is what would be especially useful to "the Department of Homeland Security," even though, as we have

seen, Wood emphasizes elsewhere, "We don't read" or, by implication, write "*in order to benefit*" practically, usefully. Well damn, it looks like we had better. *Somebody* had better. And far from only in regard to terrorism. Sure, the stuff of life can be "slightly depressing." Or exhilarating in many forms. Either way, it's essential to knowing the full human condition, which is the novelist's job to convey or reconfigure. Pick your Wood. He speaks against himself sometimes comically – "We don't read...in order to benefit" practically, but "Homeland Security...should." One is tempted to say (mistakenly) he speaks against himself convincingly, given his enthusiastic runs and impassioned style.

The vacuity and unintended irony of Wood's admonishing novelists immediately post 9-11 is striking: "Surely, for a while, novelists will be leery of setting themselves up as analysts of society, while society bucks and charges so helplessly. Surely they will tread carefully over their generalisations. It is now very easy to look very dated very fast." It certainly is. Society hardly started to "buck and charge" helplessly on 9-11. Both long prior to that moment and from that moment on, particular writers have been explaining accurately the sociopolitical context, current events, and their well-known (to some) old and deep roots. Wood had no clue, obviously, and given his misguided understanding of sociopolitical conditions apparently still does not, seven years later. No wonder he has a "slightly depressed feeling" about the prospect of contemporary engaged social novels, to go with his discouraging, disparaging, and misplaced comments on the matter.

The importance of the relationship between imaginative literature and social and political issues has been understood in critical circles since at least the eighteenth century, notes Edmund Wilson in "The Historical Interpretation of Literature," nor are these understandings and explorations devoid of aesthetic concerns and qualities. When Wood brings up the social novel, he characteristically does so to dismiss it, or to encourage authors to deviate from it in meaningful ways, so as to get "stories, above all, about individual consciousness, not about the consciousness of Manhattan" or about, say, Ruralville. This seems to be dubious advice, as contemporary epic novelists obviously sense. It scarcely takes prominent twentieth century philosopher John Dewey to note in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) that "Even if 'consciousness' were the wholly private matter that the individualistic tradition in philosophy supposes it to be, it would still be true that consciousness is *of* objects, not of itself." Just so, many leading novelists apparently intuit that if they are to fully represent personal consciousness they had better dramatically incorporate not only people but places, things, and events on a global level in a world were by now entire societies and the persons within them are greatly globally interdependent and interactive, in myriad visible and invisible ways.

The main problem is that much contemporary sociopolitical, or public, reality is as incomprehensible or as out of bounds to the rest of the establishment as it is to Wood. Establishment writers are fond of quoting or following the near literal lines of Stendhal's famed prose in the *Red and the Black*:

Politics...is a millstone tied to the neck of literature, and drowns it in less than six months. Politics in imaginative work is like a shot in the middle of a concert. The noise is deafening but it imparts no energy. It doesn't harmonize with the sound of

any other instrument. Such political talk mortally offends half of one's readers – and bores the other half, who, in a different context, in the morning paper, find such things interesting and lively...

Stendhal's statement succinctly captures a certain literature establishment ideology, an orthodoxy, that typically denies it is ideology/orthodoxy. Stendhal's words are one famous version of the creed at least. Meanwhile the establishment virtually never quotes Stendhal's immediate next paragraph, nor makes note of what then follows:

If your characters don't talk politics, replies the editor, this is no longer France in 1830, and your book is not the mirror you pretend it to be...

The novel then dives into political speech and discussion for the next 9 pages. Surely politics are inherently as fit for story as any other topic. In any case, the mounds of ostensibly nonpolitical topics and fictions can easily come across as just as offensive (politically and otherwise) and white-noise-deafening and as boring as anything labeled political. Stendhal, Balzac, Hugo, Flaubert, Zola – a powerhouse line of (French) novelists. Flaubert is the least prolific of the five and the least socially engaged, especially in the work for which he is most renowned and especially by longstanding establishment reputation. He is the establishment's pet and model, and amulet against significant breaching of its control. He is a much venerated former "lover" to Wood whose most celebrated pair of works explore monied miasmatic "romances" and sentiments centrally. Meanwhile, Hugo's main novels reveal people battling social injustice and related despair – working up, out, and along rather than down, in, and arrested. Though one can learn from the latter work, amid its tedious and severe limits, Flaubert is no great "spring" of literature, certainly not moreso than his three great countrymen predecessors, and in my view all of them much less so than Hugo of *Les Misérables*, that novel of novels which knows well – lucidly, with liberation – in moving and profound utterance, what is what, both public and private, its empathetic and useful emphasis on the vital public realities of the societal and the personal, without which private realities and preoccupations (miasmatic or otherwise) can draw only limited breath.

Misrepresentation 26 – the reactionary and status quo as preeminent literary political fiction: "What I am writing now is a tendentious thing," famously wrote Dostoevsky about his accomplished novel *The Possessed*. "I feel like saying everything as passionately as possible. (Let the nihilists and the Westerners scream that I am a reactionary!) To hell with them. I shall say everything to the last word." Far from deploring this novel (and its kind) today the establishment loves such work. It's not threatening; on the contrary. The establishment has long embraced this sort of work because of its focus on retail pathology rather than direct overt focus on wholesale state pathology. It has long valued such works for their limited efforts to clarify much beyond marginal geopolitical realities or for their success in distorting reality – as in Wood's misrepresentation of terrorism in relation to the problems of the West. The new lords of the land in Iraq (US policy planners) are eating Iraqi babies for breakfast, as Jonathan Swift once discoursed in ripe literary fashion of the English devouring the offspring of the Irish. This is a far more

relevant understanding – actually, central – to the problems of the West in regard to terrorism and much else. If Homeland Security wants to know the situation and the anger contained in many Iraqis and many others across the lands as concerns the West, then they should read with all intended irony, "A Modest Proposal" by Swift, and also take a look at the ongoing polls of the people.

Which brings up another problem in reality: to know and to not act appropriately is to not care, enough, basically. Prior to the US invasion of Iraq, leading US intellectual Noam Chomsky wrote satirically about the at best farcical consequences of a US invasion, and he wrote prophetically, as it turned out (given the catastrophe and what else the US is on track to accomplish in the Middle East, unintentionally shifting regional power to Iran, at the least). Chomsky wrote that the US might as well as urge Iran to invade Iraq. The US invaded and today we see Iranian power has grown, and Iraqis continue to want the US out. Should anyone not now expect Bush or his successor (Barack "Half Withdrawal" O'Bomba or John "100 Years" McPain) to announce a globally implemented and Western regulated policy of commercial trafficking of children for pacifying the Middle East and the world. Has not the time long since come to officially sanction the body parts trade – with its many corporate byproducts and fiscal derivatives heretofore untapped? the up-and-coming global growth industry – children as prolific cash crop? Would not such a move be as rational and ethical as the US invasion and occupation on whole? Need one wonder how the literary establishment would view such "A Practical Policy" as literary text? Too voicey? A nondescript style? Lacking much substance or any point of view of interest? Too weak or suspect in character? So goes the politics, the ever politicized aesthetics of establishment fiction. Progressive and revolutionary work is marginally tolerated or buried, in actuality if not in rhetoric. Status quo and reactionary work is enabled, advanced, glorified, contrary flourishes aside.

Not for Wood and the establishment are certain movements of progressive or revolutionary writing that touch too close to home, progressive and revolutionary writing and writers who, "As a group," as VF Calverton notes:

are convinced that present-day industrial society is based upon exploitation and injustice; that it creates distress and misery for the many and brings happiness only to the few; that its dedication to the ideal of profit instead of use is destructive.... More than that, [these writers] believe that their literature can serve a greater purpose only when it contributes...toward the creation of a new society which will embody...a social, instead of an individualistic ideal. Unlike Ibsen, they do not ask questions and then refuse to answer them. Unlike the iconoclasts, they are not content to tear down the idols and stop there. Their aim is to answer questions as well as ask them, and to provide a new order to replace an old one. Their attitude, therefore, is a positive instead of a negative one.

Such liberatory fiction contains "ideology" for which the establishment is too pure to engage in. Such liberatory lit is too "reductive" since we all know that literature

deals in no particulars whatsoever. Such liberatory movements are impossible, for it must be that the poor will always be among us. And in any case "poetry makes nothing happen" nor fiction too – countless concrete and well documented examples to the contrary, which we must see as mere mere illusions, entirely unpredictable, forever uncertain, uncontrolled accidents, stemming from badly flawed and shallow literature. In reality, the great works of Victor Hugo and Jonathan Swift, for example, thoroughly disprove every aspect of this establishment line, this orthodoxy, this belief, this creed, so we soon run into sweeping problems of credibility, which are then ignored, rendered "*studiously* irrelevant," exactly as the establishment knows very well how to do.

It has long since gotten to the point where even Victorian type work that is particularly socially engaged is far too threatening to the establishment, which has exerted pressure to kill such work for over a century now (let alone more revolutionary works). Why did Tolstoy not win a Nobel Prize? Likely because he had become far too much an activist, dissenter, too progressive in face of the status quo, as shown somewhat in his posthumous great short novel Hadji Murad (1904/1912), about a Chechen rebel leader in relation to Empire. It's a novel that should be front and center today, and of a sort we should be reading and writing, especially given the particulars of today's long-standing freshly-explosive crises, especially given the cultural and institutional bigotry of the US (and West) in this regard. Wood cites Hadji Murad in HFW merely for a stylistic brilliance. It's a novel Homeland Security and others should better read, along with contemporary liberatory novels.

Instead, both bizarre and predictable, as we've seen, is this recurring underlying theme in the criticism of James Wood, only slightly exaggerated: Don't bother to create great highly useful fiction of the world, dear contemporary novelists, the masters have done all your work for you. Go shuck peas, or do anything, but please don't presume to work at your art in relation to society. History ended more-or-less, at least in the novel – Dostoevsky and Conrad took it all down. There is no future direction or tendency we can remotely point to. [Liberatory revolutionary – balderdash!] Back to sleep with you now, dear writers. Or do run along and practice your style (whether "free indirect" or whatnot) on something less threatening or less difficult than sociopolitical, engaged fiction for an establishment critic to speak meaningfully about. The thought of which, after all, is "slightly depressing." The loafing about of fly-eyed young men has long represented "the classic novelistic activity" – the flaneur, you know. They are "traumatized" and "numb" so let us partake of their great visions.

Flaneuring – what else is there for those "who belong to the ruling class...those who [have] already won the battle and acquired the spoils...[who can] afford to be above the battle"? More typically, establishment critics intone the ostensible "extreme difficulty" of writing novels about ongoing events, especially in such supposedly "confusing" times. In any event, not for nothing today are Dostoevsky's novels *Notes from the Underground* and *The Possessed* and Conrad's novel *The Secret Agent* safe for the establishment, because they are studies more in retail pathology and retail violence, demonizing of easy

targets, novels that fail to offer liberatory explorations of wholesale Western establishment oppressions and aggressions, blind to much progress and possibilities.

Misrepresentation 27 – 9-11 rallying cry for a turn inward, and worse: Less than a month after the terrorist attacks of 9-11-01, Wood speculated and hoped that the aftermath of the attack would "allow a space for the aesthetic, for the contemplative, for novels that tell us not 'how the world works' but 'how somebody felt about something' – indeed, how a lot of different people felt about a lot of different things (these are commonly called novels about human beings)." He then declared, "Who would dare to be knowledgeable [in a novel] about politics and society now?" One hardly needs socialist David Walsh to point out "Who would dare *not* to be knowledgeable about politics and society now? Wood's counterposing of 'human' versus 'social' novels is deeply false." Crucially, who should not have "dared" ever? Myriad people in general "dared" and have long proven to be sociopolitically discerning both within the US and without. Not the establishment though. Not its literary stars, or scarcely any of its stars, for that matter. Not then and not now. They can't dare, marginal exceptions aside. It would be dysfunctional to the ruling status quo. Thus, had they ever been publicly acute in this regard, they would not have been granted their positions of prominence. Get wise of a sudden, or even accidentally step out of line – they are quickly disciplined, sometimes by a pointed status quo critique, put "on notice," or, especially if they persist, simply "let go." Case studies abound (via reports in independent media and analyses by independent scholars).

Not only star critics, but leading liberal "political" novelists are atrocious in this regard (let alone conservative or reactionary writers). For example, in 2008, *The Nation* magazine published EL Doctorow's 2007 keynote address to a joint meeting of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society, in Washington DC, in which Doctorow states near its beginning that the leaders of "a religiously inspired criminal movement originated in the Middle East...[have] mentally transport[ed] their rank and file back into the darkness of tribal war and shrieking, life-contemptuous jihad. [This]...declared enemy with the mind-set of the Dark Ages throws his anachronistic shadow over us and awakens our dormant primeval instincts." In other words, until the terrorist attacks of 9-11, the primitive impulses of the US were sleeping soundly, only to be terrorized awaked by those "criminal" and "tribal" and "shrieking" war-mongers from the lands of the richest oil fields. That's quite a story. It leaves something out. Reality. The reality of decades-long US hopes, plans and efforts to control those oil fields, including support for the state tyrants of those rich kingdoms, not least Saudi Arabia, from where nearly all the 9-11 terrorists originated, which was considered to be an occupied country by terrorist leader Osama bin Laden, due to the US military presence there, subsequently withdrawn. Doctorow sends down the memory hole the reality of the murderous US-UN imposed economic sanctions against Iraq<sup>6</sup> that helped destroy that country and other inconvenient facts, such as decisive US support for the state of Israel and many of its militant endeavors against its regional neighbors, including longstanding invasions and occupations.

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<sup>6</sup> The sanctions were described as "genocidal" by former UN Humanitarian Co-ordinator in Iraq Denis Halliday, who resigned over their imposition.

After carefully inverting cause and effect of the current ongoing crisis, Doctorow pronounces to his intellectual audience about "knowledge deniers. Their rationale is always political. And more often than not, they hold in their hand a sacred text for certification." Shortly thereafter he goes on with brazen (and ludicrous) hypocrisy to both romanticize and all but deify the "sacred text" of the US Constitution and its history:

The ratification parades were sacramental – symbolic veneration, acts of faith. From the beginning, people saw the Constitution as a kind of sacred text for a civil society. And with good reason: the ordaining voice of the Constitution is scriptural, but in resolutely keeping the authority for its dominion in the public consent, it presents itself as the sacred text of secular humanism.

Meanwhile, some of the founders and states viewed the Constitution as likely inherently tyrannical, and so several states barely ratified it, and did so only by attaching lists of amendments and rights. Doctorow refers to the "sacred text" of the US Constitution at a time when it contained none of its amendments, thus, no Bill of Rights protecting many of the most important freedoms of the people. The Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights are far greater texts of liberty than the original and still highly flawed US Constitution. Doctorow eventually levels some fairly strong criticism of US policy and acts generally but mostly confines his critique to Bush and the Bush regime. Along the way, he neglects to mention "oil" or "occupation" and rather haplessly refers to two iconic establishment novelists, Herman Melville and Henry James (see misrepresentation next). Near closing, Doctorow calls the US a "democracy that is given to a degree of free imaginative expression that few cultures in the world can tolerate, [in which] we can hope for the aroused witness, the manifold reportage, the flourishing of knowledge that will restore us to ourselves, awaken the dulled sense of our people to the public interest that is their interest..." The US surely is in many ways a very free society. All the greater then is the delinquency, however predictable, of an establishment literature that cannot be troubled to create and produce topical anti invasion-and-conquest novels of oil rich lands in the spirit of what liberatory scholar Edward Said calls "the urgent conjunction of art and politics." Nothing might stop the established authors and publishers in this "democracy" of the free but their investments and ideologies, their false realities and illusions, their misrepresentations of others and themselves. And how ever much they care.

Misrepresentation 28 – Henry James, TS Eliot, the CIA, and the cultural cold war: The establishment's ideological commitments render it unqualified to comment with much insight on vast sociopolitical domains both within fiction and without. It's incapable. This may or may not be why Wood feels at least "slightly depressed" at the thought of social novels representing the times. If he's truly a perceptive guy, widely aware, he knows he's handcuffed in what he can write. Establishment pressure against speaking out creates fear of job loss, isolation, obloquy, and other disincentives. On the other hand, status quo ideological constrictions may either be readily accepted by Wood and establishment writers, or may likely have been long since internalized as reality. If they were to write strong, comprehensive, perceptive analyses, they would be vilified, including by publishers and owners, or quietly cut off, effectively removed from history, as was, for

example, once prominent literary critic Maxwell Geismar. Thus the need for independent writing and independent publishing houses. Currently: the few Davids against the many Goliaths.

Henry James – "a primary Cold War literary figure" – has been such a politically favored author of the establishment because he was a relatively prominent member of the privileged class whose stylistically accomplished sometimes labyrinthine writing hews to status quo lines at exhaustive length. Since, as famously noted, he chews more than he bites off, his novels function as elaborate upscale crossword puzzles for people of leisure and position. In a corrupt culture, the symptom of a corrupt system and vice versa, such fiction cannot fail to be revered for its charming, slight and "safe" qualities – ostensible or otherwise. Henry James and TS Eliot rate very high, or at the top, among the establishment's most admired American novelists, poets, critics. Both moved to England and became English citizens, as if geographically and geopolitically trying to go back in time, at least figuratively. They have been sort of wonderfully symbolic anti-revolutionaries, perfect for CIA purposes. The CIA in its propaganda efforts "airdropped translations of T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets into Russia," and its cultural emissaries hastened to appear on national television to defend James, as we have seen.

TS Eliot is still highly revered in writing circles, in poetry workshops especially. Yet how many writers actually know and understand the faith based line of his full thought? At the end of *Forces in American Criticism* (1939), scholar Bernard Smith puts Eliot's views in perspective:

“[T.S. Eliot wrote,] ‘There are two and only two finally tenable hypotheses about life: the Catholic and the materialistic [i.e., Marxist]. It is quite possible, of course, that the future may bring neither a Christian nor a materialistic civilization. It is quite possible that the future may be nothing but chaos or torpor. In that event, I am not interested in the future; I am only interested in the two alternatives which seem to me worthier of interest....’

“Eliot chose not only the Catholic hypothesis, but also its political corollaries. His literary opinions were thus given a firm philosophical base to rest upon, and from that fact he drew the reasonable conclusions...[that] ‘Literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint.... The ‘greatness’ of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards; though we must remember that whether it is literature or not can be determined only by literary standards.’

“To this has esthetic criticism at last come – to a realization that non-esthetic criteria are the ultimate tests of value. Whether they be called philosophical, moral, or social criteria, they are still the ideas that men have about the way human beings live together and the way they ought to live. The quest of beauty had become the

quest of reality. It had become, in essence, literary criticism as socially conscious and as polemical as the criticism of the Marxists.<sup>7</sup>

Eliot the partisan – but for the establishment.

Misrepresentation 29 – liberatory lit attacked, buried: This combined liberal/conservative and reactionary political literary attack against the increasingly progressive literary stalwart Maxwell Geismar, having occurred on national TV no less, is (in retrospect at least) one of the most significant moments in all of American literature in the second half of the twentieth century – and it remains virtually unknown. Details may be found in Geismar's decades-delayed, invaluable memoir, *Reluctant Radical* (2002). Sometimes entire careers are buried, other times particular books. Similarly shot down the memory hole are landmark works of progressive or liberatory literary criticism from the first half of the twentieth century. Sheer scandal is the burial of Upton Sinclair's studied book of economic literary criticism, *Mammonart* (1924). Other inexcusable great losses include VF Calverton's *The Liberation of American Literature* (1932) and Bernard Smith's *Forces in American Criticism* (1939). It's difficult to be ignorant of these three

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<sup>7</sup> Smith adds: "Eliot spoke of alternatives, not of choices.... He believes that one of the alternatives has greater value, is nobler, is in a sense more real, than the other. The question is therefore not simply one of personal taste. It is a question of evidence and reason. But the alternative he favors admits of no evidence and derogates from reason. His philosophy is, in the last analysis, wholly mystical. It is not capable of being tested and verified and improved. The alternative he rejects is, on the other hand, the one that is favored by those who are determined to be as scientific as one can be in a non-physical field.

"The literary criticism of the neo-classicists is a criticism composed of obiter dicta inspired by intangible emotions. The literary criticism of the materialists stands or falls by the findings of the social scientists, psychologists, and historians. Eliot's alternative involves a revulsion against democracy; the materialists are partisans of democracy. The literary criticism of his school tends to create a literature that will express the sensibilities and experiences of a few fortunate men. The criticism of the opposing school tends to create a literature that will express the ideals and sympathies of those who look forward to the conquest of poverty, ignorance, and inequality – to the material and intellectual elevation of the mass of mankind.

"To whom does the future belong? In January 1939 Eliot announced that the *Criterion*, the literary journal he had edited since 1922, would no longer be published. His Europe had crumbled; the culture in which he had put his faith was dying. The *Criterion* had served its purpose. Eliot had arrived at a mood of detachment. There was nothing he could hopefully fight for now. But those who believe in scientific methods, in realism, in social equality and democracy, are hopeful and are fighting."

Earlier, Smith comments: "There was one critic who apparently possessed all the virtues – fine taste, poetic sensitiveness, intellectuality, an experimental inclination. His literary scholarship was beyond dispute, his writing deft and memorable. He was, moreover, a poet of the first rank, which gave his criticism of the art an extraordinary authority. He was universally respected.... This critic was T. S. Eliot.... The reader will note that he is here described in the past tense. His works are many now, but *The Sacred Wood* [1920] alone is a consideration of esthetic problems. In the rest the emphasis is on the esthetic effects of moral and social beliefs...."

momentous works and yet be able to fully appreciate Kenneth Burke's tremendous collection of 1930s essays, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941), a book containing particular essays that consummate the progressive literary tradition, or liberatory tendency, of the preceding four decades at least. Ignorance of these landmark books makes it more difficult to understand the significance, isolation, and persecution of the once prominent (when liberal) accomplished literary critic Maxwell Geismar, as he was marginalized and forgotten through the sixties and seventies and today. It's difficult to be ignorant of these books of criticism (still almost entirely disappeared, despite much renewed interest in the 1930s) and yet be able to make full sense of the vital socially engaged criticism prior to the 1940s that was forcefully curtailed in subsequent decades, with corrosive effects very much evident today, despite some progressive gains, not least by way of the multicultural expansion.

The problem remains that establishment ideology continues to enormously disfigure fiction and criticism, as James Petras remarked.

Scholar Terry Eagleton notes in "Only Pinter Remains" (2007):

For almost the first time in two centuries, there is no eminent British poet, playwright or novelist prepared to question the foundations of the western way of life. One might make an honourable exception of Harold Pinter, who has wisely decided that being a champagne socialist is better than being no socialist at all; but his most explicitly political work is also his most artistically dreary.

The knighting of Salman Rushdie is the establishment's reward for a man who moved from being a remorseless satirist of the west to cheering on its criminal adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan. David Hare caved in to the blandishments of Buckingham Palace some years ago, moving from radical to reformist. Christopher Hitchens...[has] thrown in his lot with Washington's neocons. Martin Amis has written of the need to prevent Muslims travelling and to strip-search people "who look like they're from the Middle East or from Pakistan". Deportation, he considers, may be essential further down the road.

The uniqueness of the situation is worth underlining. When Britain emerged as an industrial capitalist state, it had Shelley to urge the cause of the poor, Blake to dream of a communist utopia, and Byron to scourge the corruptions of the ruling class...

In the US, the situation is not much better, despite playwright Tony Kushner's writing in Theater:

I do not believe that a steadfast refusal to be partisan is, finally, a particularly brave or a moral or even interesting choice. Les Murray, an Australian poet, wrote a short poem called 'Politics and Art.' In its entirety: 'Brutal policy / like inferior art, knows

/ whose fault it all is.' This is as invaluable an admonishment as it is ultimately untrue.

What is James Wood's role in all this? Maybe aside from his relative prominence, it's very similar to the overwhelming flood of establishment writers and publishers – conservative, reactionary, and liberals not least. They bulwark the status quo, more or less, often even when they think they do not or think they are progressive. Meanwhile, "liberatory revolutionary" is virtually altogether out of the realm of thought, let alone comprehension.

Misrepresentation 30 – fiction shrunk: James Wood shows and tells quite a bit of quality in his criticism, and of course one can learn a lot from view and voice, style and character studies – purview. Though he shuns the forest for love of the wood in many ways, there's no denying that the wood, even a solitary tree, may be impressive. Noam Chomsky is far from alone in claiming:

If you want to learn about people's personalities and intentions, you would probably do better reading novels than reading psychology books. Maybe that's the best way to come to an understanding of human beings and the way they act and feel, but that's not science. Science isn't the only thing in the world, it is what it is...science is not the only way to come to an understanding of things.... If I am interested in learning about people, I'll read novels rather than psychology.

Moreover, fiction can be used to illuminate or engage what Chomsky calls "Orwell's problem": How is it that oppressive ideological systems are able to "instill beliefs that are firmly held and widely accepted although they are completely without foundation and often plainly at variance with the obvious facts about the world around us?" The political refrain, "What's the matter with Kansas?" means more expansively, What's the matter with the USA, and the world? As Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian author and political worker notes, "Criticism, like charity, starts at home." Little may strike closer to home than the novel, a great and indispensable form for engaging Orwell's problem, terribly our own. Orwell's problem, in other words: How is it that people are persuaded to act against their own interests and values, often viciously, which they otherwise hold dear? Fiction can debunk harmful propaganda and taboos; it can help energize, motivate, inspire while maintaining vital literary and popular quality by staying focused on fiction's core strengths (and not excluding those emphasized by Wood and the establishment). Fiction can do, and does, far more than the establishment gives it credit for ad nauseam. Such novels, short stories, and satires intensely explore both the private and the public, those realities and their relations, not least but not only as revealed in the personal.

One cannot expect the status quo to abide liberatory fiction too far of course, for as Chomsky notes: "If Orwell, instead of writing *1984* - which was actually, in my opinion, his worst book, a kind of trivial caricature of the most totalitarian society in the world, which made him famous and everybody loved him, because it was the official enemy – if instead of doing that easy and relatively unimportant thing, he had done the hard and important thing, namely talk about Orwell's Problem [as pertains to the West], he would

not have been famous and honored: he would have been hated and reviled and marginalized" by the establishment, by the civilized. Reporter: "What do you think of Western civilization?" Gandhi: "I think it would be a good idea." Even the bright new prominent literary magazines and sites such as n+1, The Believer, and others distinguish themselves as little more than the flotsam and jetsam of the establishment. Meanwhile the overwhelming majority of academic literary magazine production is similarly tamed. It's not that they are of no value. It's that they primarily and essentially perpetuate the basic status quo. To gain at least a little more humanity and vitality, possibly they could create or far better augment "left" or particular "liberatory" sections. The establishment might tolerate that for some while.

Misrepresentation 31 – the partisan orthodox nature of status quo lit: If we are not *also* writing and reading novels "*in order* to benefit" practically, usefully, then surely it's long past time we started doing so. Wood may be depressed by the thought of a flood of novels that "explain the times" for any variety of reasons, but he has indirectly said as much for them in a quip (Homeland Security should read), maybe more, as he has argued repeatedly against. The ideological lines of establishment fiction and criticism are evident, revealing, and follow an instructive trajectory of plot. They sometimes appear (in Thiong'o's words) as "tragedy that manifests itself as comedy." When not worse. Clearly detailed or not in the minds or writing of star critics who may or may not wish, after all, to matter too much, this too is how fiction works, for real – and how does it ever.

Even Sean Wilentz in "The Rise of Illiterate Democracy" in the New York Times notes that "The nonfiction best-seller lists these days are often full of partisan screeds labeling Democrats as elitist traitors and Republicans as conniving plutocrats. But look over on the fiction side, and politics appears almost nowhere. ...the separation of literature and state seems to have become absolute." Wilentz is scarcely referring to progressive political fiction here; however, his observations apply beyond party politics, since many crucial and enduring public issues are not taken up in fiction from much explicit progressive let alone revolutionary perspective. Who would solicit or publish them? Who has? Hollywood? The publishing houses with money and clout? Even the liberal ones? The liberal magazines? The literary magazines? Many of these operations cannot beg off, as progressive operations often must, for not having resources.

One author has suggested that fiction writers could "tithe" some part of their writing time and talent to producing *nonfiction* political works. The notion of enlightening and moving and aesthetically accomplished political *fiction* of various sorts seems that which cannot be thought. Take award winning story writer Benjamin Percy, one of the first writers (sanctioned by the literary establishment, that is) to write in any way about the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, in "Refresh, Refresh" (which appeared in Best American Short Stories 2007 and was called the story of the year by novelist Anne Lamott):

I certainly have strong political feelings. But I try not to let them command my fiction. There is a difference between writing about a political issue — and writing politically — and I try not to cross that line in the sand. I don't want people to come away from my story as if they've come away from an editorial, with a ready-made

message shoved down their throat. An audience should feel betrayed by such fiction, because it's so obviously fraudulent and manipulative, the characters hollow puppets the author crudely shoves his hands into. Part of the goal of Refresh, Refresh was to write a war story that didn't say, war is good, war is bad. I instead wanted to say, this is war. And in doing so, I tried to show both sides. I can't tell you how many emails I've received from people who have read Refresh, Refresh and called me A, a liberal pantywaist, or B, a right-wing nut job. When you piss off everybody, I guess you're doing something right. On the other hand, I've also received emails from soldiers, from vets, from protestors, from politicians, all of them moved by the story for completely different reasons.

What escapes Percy's regard here (and TC Boyle's and George Saunders' in similar comments, as well as that of central establishment writers like EL Doctorow and Philip Roth, and so on, who are often perceived as rather political) is the power and vitality, the value and art, of partisan fiction. Percy makes no note (and seems to imply the opposite) that "strong political feelings" can be expressed as liberatory overt partisan fiction in very accomplished and highly aesthetic ways far from "a ready-made message shoved down [a reader's] throat," as if ostensibly nonpartisan fiction is any less "ready-made," including Percy's own "Refresh, Refresh" given his decision to "show both sides": apparently meaning "war is good, war is bad." Partisan fiction, according to Percy, is "fraudulent and manipulative" but depictions of "war is good, war is bad" are even-handed, which must no doubt prove equally instructive and comforting to both the invaders and the invaded, occupied peoples of the smashed land of Iraq. And so it is that status quo fiction is far less upfront and often in denial – far less willing and capable of declaring what it actually is, ideologically. There are plenty of ways a literary subjective fiction can reveal objective criminal reality. Status quo art, however, avoids doing so, except marginally, in a great number of ways, even though it practically has to go out of its way to cheat reality, to vitiate it of urgent conditions, revelation or phenomena, let alone explore progressive or revolutionary realms and possibilities.

The criticism of James Wood further muddles the shallow sociopolitical component of the human condition as explored in fiction, and further impedes and discourages its badly needed engagement. Pathology in terrorism – Wood claims. In part, but it's largely tactical and rooted in injustice, the main problem by far. Jealousy of the West? Rather, justified outrage. *Them* as the West's "current problem"? *Our* (the West's) longstanding outlaw acts. How Fiction Works? How Purview Works, in Part. "Free indirect style"? Purview meld. The intimate human may be revealed in the novel? And the epic social and political too. Subtlety of analysis, nuance, limning – establishment sign language for toeing the line with style, for creating work nonthreatening to the interests (often criminal) of establishment power and control.

Misrepresentation 32 – basic public realities denied, distorted: The current crisis of the US in the "Middle East" are widely misrepresented by the establishment – fiction and nonfiction both. Take the Iraq war for example. The media is full of articles stating that Iraq war movies and films (the fiction features) have not done well at the box office, but compared to the relative lack of, say, Hurricane Katrina movies, or, say, the ongoing

national slaughter of the impoverished by the impoverishers movies, the growing numbers of Iraq war movies, by their very existence alone, are doing extremely well. Far more such movies have been made now than were remotely ever made about the Vietnam war at a comparable time. And far more people see most any of these movies than see most any such documentary. But it's no cause for celebration, far from it, because these movies are very careful not to be too "antiwar," if at all, not too revealing of the basic illegality and immorality of the US conquest of Iraq and surrounds.

Of course all wars are brutalizing in their everyday and peripheral realities (true of even justifiable wars), which is about as far as any of the movies go, and that typically isn't even as far into the fundamentals as Michael Moore's relatively circumscribed documentaries venture with the various issues he examines. The central reality of the US conquest of Iraq and beyond is distorted or falsified, or goes studiously ignored, the fact that the US has committed the supreme crime of aggression, "the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself all the accumulated evil of the whole," in the words of the judgment of Nuremberg. None of the dozens of Iraq war movies, shows, and novels I'm aware of renders this reality explicit and central. Instead, central reality is buried.

Very few of these various works of fiction even begin to approach that central framing context, and consequently they either greatly falsify or evade the crucial reality. On those grounds, those grounds that are central to the whole calamity, the movies and novels don't deserve a large audience, even if they do on other grounds. Until this "major and crucial point overlooked" is made clear in relation to the US role in the aggression against Iraq, as Noam Chomsky notes, "until at least this is recognized, all other discussion is merely footnotes, and shameful ones." And that's the shame of the Iraq war movies, and novels too; they are essentially about the "footnotes," however monstrous, rather than the "major and crucial point overlooked." And what's worse, overlooking the central point means that even the best intentioned films may more likely "act as cultural 'softeners' before the bombing starts again for real" or continues without end, as John Pilger notes of films like *Black Hawk Down*, in "Hollywood Hurrah." (Not that he regards *BHD* as well intentioned.) Pilger adds:

Even in finely crafted films like *The Deer Hunter* and *Platoon* that look as if they might break ranks, there is an implicit oath of loyalty to imperial culture. This was true of *Three Kings*, a movie that seemed to take issue with the Gulf war, but instead produced a familiar "bad apple" tale, exonerating the militarism that is now rampant. So dominant is Hollywood in our lives, and so collusive are its camp-following critics, that the films that ought to have been made are unmentionable. Name the mainstream movies that have shone light on to the vast shadow thrown by the American secret state, and the mayhem for which it is responsible. I can think of only a few: Costa-Gavras's *Missing*, which was about the destruction of the elected government in Chile by General Pinochet's puppet masters in Washington, and Oliver Stone's *Salvador*, which made the connection between Reagan's Washington and El Salvador's death squads. Both these films were quirks of the

system, funded with great difficulty and, in the case of Missing, dogged by vengeful court actions.

In sum, seen as a Hollywood meal ticket (make that, yacht ticket) the Iraq war movies are a commercial disappointment, while otherwise an extreme and growing success compared to their (virtually nonexistent) Vietnam war counterparts. But to call these movies a cultural success is an extreme overstatement, except as footnote. Most of the films I've seen have some limited worthwhile qualities, even though one sees these films for what they are and gets the antagonizing and sometimes intolerable sense that goes along with it. The most worthwhile thus far are probably, *In the Valley of Elah*, *Rendition*, *War, Inc.*, and above all, the relatively low budget *GI Jesus*. Even slimmer pickings exist among the novels, seems to me, though the relevant novels of Yasmina Khadra compare.

Hollywood and the literary establishment are as stark in their partisan nature as in their denials of such. "Multicultural" fiction is far more pronounced in recent decades than it has been traditionally and some of this is progressive or has progressive aspects, some even overt progressive and revolutionary aspects. But, for merely one example, how many recent antiwar novels can be named? The US has been smashing Iraq since 1991, taking a toll of over a million Iraqi lives through bombings and sanctions in the 1990s alone, long before the deeply unpopular ground invasion and occupation killing as many or more again, and creating millions more refugees. And the US for years has allowed corporations the use of patent laws, which have prevented HIV vaccines from reaching Africa resulting in millions of lives lost. Where are the exposé novels? Name the so-called muckraking novels or vivid polemic novels about the unconscionable US health care system, or poverty rate and the outrageous economic system. Or US global militarism and outlaw threats both military and economic. Or avoidable environmental catastrophes. Etc and so on. Not easy to do, though it's possible to come up with a few, including John le Carré somewhat recently in *The Constant Gardener* – an exception to the rule. Even le Carré recently said he underestimated, underportrayed the damage done in Africa by the unconscionable economics and policies of the West. Writing powerful quality liberatory fiction is in many ways unthinkable and disallowed in the circles of literature, exceptions aside.

Misrepresentation 33 – the immateriality of the status quo: As James Wood puts forth an "aesthetic" of pursuing "*the real*," which is at the bottom of [his] inquiries," there is every reason to believe his assertion and every reason to doubt what it might reveal, when his pursuit of *the real* is eviscerated by reality, the status quo stake, that long blade of ideology, manifesting itself via inane or hapless notions like "the essential juvenility of plot." Plot and purpose and the world be damned – not least for US novelists (or critics) writing about explicit investigations of the immoral and illegal invasions, occupations and other state crimes of the US. Conditions far too real for publication. Now, if *other* authors, not from around here, want to create epic masterworks of the real for publishing, review, and distribution in the West, then okay, to a point, especially if allegorical, or otherwise limited, and preferably *about them* (if not *to* the people), but don't subtly limn

the nuance too far, too explicitly, too purposefully so that we of the status quo cannot plausibly deny what must be denied.

Just so, we may review, we may praise an *other* masterpiece, either not from here or about *not* here, and we may write glowing analyses, including a genuinely illuminating one – though with a key flaw – as did Scott Esposito on Ngugi wa Thiong'o's accurately self-described "global epic from Africa," *Wizard of the Crow*. The ideological flaw in his essay (if not a simpler mistake), where establishment perspective, wittingly or not, gets the better of an otherwise astute work, is where Esposito, exactly, in much more detail than I quote below, assesses Thiong'o's vibrant fictive depiction of a particular sort of politics as "African" and, by misleading inference, not American – not quite, not remotely:

[In *Wizard of the Crow*] storytelling exemplifies the techniques and the architecture used by political actors in [the fictitious African country] Aburiria as they continually invent tales that, with breathtaking speed, become the new realities that the country must live by. Whether it is the Ruler purposefully creating realities with an iron hand, businessmen doing it in ignorance as they arrange deals, or even the resistance innocently slipping into stories that help them toward their goals, the creation of stories remains central....

In the space of just a few pages, a miraculous inversion has been effected. Marching to Heaven [an incredibly corrupt Tower of Babel building project] has gone from a boondoggle that has revealed Aburiria's desperation to a vision of national strength, fervently attended to by popular demonstrations all over the country. Significantly, the Ruler has not said a word to create this new reality. Merely by indicating his displeasure with the story that reality has given him, he has spurred his ministers to invent an entirely new reality, and to find methods by which to force it into existence. If Thiong'o is correct, and I think he is, this is how an African dictatorship functions.

Far more to point however: this is how centralized governments in the age of propaganda function globally, more or less, not least in the US (where Thiong'o has lived and worked for 16 years, since 1992, the beginning of President Bill Clinton's terms). The Clinton-Bush regimes in Washington DC were forced to "continually invent tales that, with breathtaking speed, become the new realities that the country must live by" whether to invade and occupy Iraq and Afghanistan indefinitely, or to demonize welfare, or to endlessly bailout high finance, or to flood prisons with non-violent drug-law offenders, or to continually prop-up pharmaceutical and insurance companies while demonizing Medicare for all, and on and on. President Bush II shoved the military into Iraq and Afghanistan with his "iron hand" and by way of "dealing businessmen" in the media and elsewhere (often not so "ignorant"). The Bush regime could and so it did, even though the majority public opposed it, even in the US except for a few months in the beginning of the invasion when the massive fraudulent propaganda deluge worked its effect, mentally cleansing the US majority ever so briefly. And now the Barack Obama incipient regime, only slightly less status quo aggressive and fanatic, has more subtly maneuvered, but in

just as wholesale a fashion, America's "desperation" in grasping at fake change "to a vision of national strength, fervently attended to by popular demonstrations all over the country" and beyond (hundreds of thousands gathered to cheer him on while in Europe prior to the US election). "Significantly, the [presumptive] Ruler has not said a word to create this new reality," not a word that is meaningful in any basic concrete way. "He has spurred his [PR] ministers to invent an entirely new reality, and to find methods by which to force it into existence" at least in appearance.

While not from America but Africa as Thiong'o points out, Wizard of the Crow is far more a global novel than Esposito indicates, far more an American novel than he hints. Commenting at Amazon.com, Patricia Kramer writes, "The satire is biting, the laughs come often but then the reality of our country's present policies sets in. We would be lucky to have a Wizard of the Crow right now in America." Such a pointed global epic from America rather than "from Africa" or Asia, et al, would preferably be one that advances well beyond even the mighty Wizard. Such a novel and any clear-eyed criticism will have to wait, and if and when that day arrives, will have to be fought for. That's the reality.

Misrepresentation 34 – the public chopped from the personal: As for "puerile" prose, Robert Alter clarifies in his critique of contemporary fiction, "I have no quarrel at all with fantasy or flaunted artifice in the novel but only with their deployment in ways that are ultimately self-indulgent and mechanically repetitious, that tend to turn the imaginative energies of fiction into a crackling closed circuit" where little meaning or sensibility escapes the smoke and sparks of the swirling (yet somehow dull) words. Five years later (1980) in "The American Political Novel," while critiquing Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*, Alter notes: "One may wonder why so many gifted and serious novelists have chosen to treat politics in such a fundamentally unserious fashion.... One would think that the political novel, perhaps more than other kinds of fiction, requires adult intelligence...."

Then sounding like Wood today, though both more apt and too narrow, Alter focuses on character, noting: "The novel's great strength as a mode of apprehension is in its grasp of character, and the political novel at its best can show concretely and subtly what politics does to character, what character makes of politics." Ah, "subtly"! for Alter too is establishment but like Wood sheds some light around his distortions. He critiques Norman Mailer's attempts to craft effective political fiction and concludes that (as of over three decades ago) he seems to come closest to this in *The Deer Park* where:

What he confronts centrally for the first time is the special power of American society to mask, sham, evade, forget reality, to seduce its individual members into giving up on engagement in the real world; and the ultimately political nature of his moral imagination is reflected in his effort here to show how this American style of cotton-candy insulation from reality allows a society to perpetrate horror and obscenity at home and abroad with hardly a twinge of conscience.

If only the novel did greatly reveal such reality. Unfortunately, *The Deer Park* seems to me to be far more focused on characters' private lives and relationships than on any public realms within which they exist. Perceptive mid-century critic Maxwell Geismar in *American Moderns—From Rebellion to Conformity* (1958) also found this novel to be largely if not wholly bankrupt, with weak sociopolitical gestures.

In the essay "Jonathan Franzen and the 'Social Novel,'" Wood restates a core complaint, a legitimate one, regarding current fiction: The "characteristic products of contemporary American fiction are books of great self-consciousness with no selves in them; curiously arrested books which know a thousand different things...but do not know a single human being." This statement is largely accurate, in my opinion, and as something of an echo of Alter is nicely stated, so much so that I find it difficult to resist turning the words partly back upon their author, in regard to what he slights, Wood, who "know[s] a thousand different things," as a literary critic, about the fictional portraiture of largely private and intimate psychological realms, "but do[es] not know a single" thing, it often seems, about the potential of portraying the public realms of what it means to approach "fully human."

Given this lack, it might be said with only minimal exaggeration that Wood himself, as critic, does "not know a single human being," lacks much clue as to what may make for any full human condition. Character (or the personal) may indeed be especially central to fiction – however, the personal is made up of the private and public both. Public and private realms inform and infuse character, let alone society, and yet Wood slights the public in both character and society, egregiously.

Misrepresentation 35 – ideology in guise of aesthetics: Even one of Wood's "favorite" critics of the novel, Roland Barthes, had the sense to note, "Why are we so slow, so indifferent about mobilizing narrative and the image? Can't we see that it is, after all, works of fiction, no matter how mediocre they may be artistically, that best arouse political passion?" Wood, distinctly lacking Barthes theoretical acumen (Terry Eagleton notes the obvious in a review of HFS), finds Barthes to be "interesting but wrongheaded," (generally?) and Wood who is likely to be half the essayist, or even literary critic, that Edmund Wilson demonstrated himself to be, remains locked in to his primary interest in fiction, its "special kind of aesthetic experience," so locked in that this fixation gives him tunnel vision, causing misunderstanding about aesthetics, fiction, life. False notions such as this plaint are the least of it: "a flat style [is] unfit for permanent criticism – which lasts, after all, only if it, too, becomes literature," a remark that is, first, false and, second, self-contradicting, given its mundane style. Exceptional substance overcomes stylistic flatness readily. Ideology, sometimes in guise of aesthetics, in establishment literature often functions as a strong arm of the US police state, as H. Bruce Franklin notes in "Inside Stories of the Global American Prison":

Despite the assault on the literature of the American prison [which Franklin documents in detail], it has been breaking into literature courses and anthologies. The 2006 edition of the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, which is used in classrooms around the world, actually included a whole section labeled "Prison Literature." Although this "cluster" consisted of a mere twenty-seven pages out of

the more than three thousand in the multivolume anthology, that was enough to provoke the disapproval of the *New York Times Book Review*, whose editor Rachel Donadio, complained that it took up more space than that given to "the great poet Elizabeth Bishop." Even more reprehensible, according to Donadio, is the fact that this prison literature section "includes works by Kathy Boudin, a former member of the Weather Underground who served more than 20 years for her role in a 1981 robbery and murder." Implying that the five authors included in this section collectively are not worth as much space as Bishop, Donadio names only Boudin, failing even to give the names of such widely celebrated poets as Etheridge Knight and Jimmy Santiago Baca.<sup>8</sup> Nor does Donadio say even a word about any of their actual work, including Boudin's three beautiful, extremely moving poems. Masquerading as literary criticism based on aesthetic criteria, this editorial commentary in the *New York Times Book Review* thus offers a minor but revealing example of how dominant cultural institutions collaborate with the political apparatus to suppress prison literature....

It is no surprise that modern prisoners [decades ago] helped lead the rediscovery of slave literature, because chattel slavery did not disappear in 1865 – it merely morphed into the modern American prison...merged...with the more modern [forms of slavery] pioneered by the American prison.... When the time came to globalize this institution, the men chosen for the job were some of its most notorious officials.[<sup>9</sup>]

The literature of slaves told the inside stories of antebellum slavery and thus helped destroy it. So too, the literature of prisoners tells the inside stories of the American prison and thus threatens its dominion and expansion. The deepest insights into the American global prison, including its culture and political logic, come from this literature it tries to repress.

So goes literature and the establishment – moments and sectors of liberatory expansion followed by repression, Vietnam War era dissent and the reactionary (also liberal and conservative) backlash. Maxwell Geismar noted an earlier instance:

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<sup>8</sup> Franklin notes: A torrent of prison literature was pouring out to the American public [over three decades ago] in mass-market paperbacks, newspapers, magazines, and major motion pictures. This era ended with the downfall of the Nixon regime in 1974, the final defeat of the United States by Vietnam in 1975, and the reactionary epoch that soon followed. In 1976 came the Big Bang, the spectacular explosion of the prison-industrial complex. As a necessary corollary to this prison cosmos, there began a relentless campaign to silence prisoners and ex-prisoners [by passage of new laws and implementation of other measures.... Moreover, today] gone from the so-called "penitentiary" or "correctional facility" is any pretense of reformation or rehabilitation [exceptions to the rule aside]. In the typical American prison, degradation, brutalization, and even overt torture are the norm....

<sup>9</sup> Franklin details: After the invasion of Iraq, Lane McCotter, who had been forced to resign as the director of the Utah Department of Corrections because of torture carried out under his administration, was put in charge of reconstructing Saddam Hussein's Abu Ghraib. John Armstrong, former director of the Connecticut Department of Corrections, who had been driven out of his position because of sexual and other tortures revealed by the ACLU and Amnesty International, became deputy director of operation for the entire Iraqi prison system....

Recently a group of American historians have been digging into, one might say, "excavating," the true facts of this Cold War Culture – the curious period from the mid-forties to the mid-sixties – and the results are very interesting. We have had almost a quarter of a century of conformity, comfort, complacency and mediocrity in American literature – this epoch of "instant masterpieces" – and only now can we begin to put the pieces together and find a consistent pattern...

...it was the Cold War that brought about the downfall, in 1949, of one of the most brilliant journalistic enterprises in our literary history. At the war's end, a new epoch of repression was about to start. Another great achievement of the Depression years was the WPA Federal Theater Project; and Halle Flanagan's history of this, in her book *Arena*, ends with the congressional investigation and foreclosure of the Federal Theater by political figures who are, by Divine Grace or special dispensation, still active in Washington today...

Wood's well-known Guardian article takedown of "the false zaniness of hysterical realism...[and] the easy fidelity of social realism" functions ironically well as a simultaneous takedown of what Wood otherwise praises as modernism in HFW: the "blurred" and "traumatized" and "numb" and "random" view of life by way of a "loafing" and "voyeuristic" flaneur. It's not that Wood can make no interesting argument, nor that he offers no real and useful insight. The problem is the arguments are often so parochial that they are often not remotely convincing or broadly functional, when not outright false. Many of the arguments are persuasive largely only insofar as they are half-regurgitations of what the literature establishment instills ad nauseum. They are either self-contradicting, or given any slightly larger – more real – context, they implode. They may also be overturned on occasion by Wood's very own views presented elsewhere – contradictions that nullify.

Wood finds the flaneur figure "helplessly inundated with impressions" to be extraordinarily compelling, except when he doesn't, in which case he sometimes calls such writing "hysterical realism," which is apparently not styled enough to make up for its other distinct lacks. Apparently not enough prose-poetry – "a very careful ballet," a ballet that is not so very careful that it is not also largely random. Much of what Wood decries in "hysterical realism" – chaotic or essayistic excess – he otherwise praises as "Flaubertianism" – all the random ... "traumatized" ... "numbing" ... "excess detail" ... sometimes "*studiedly* irrelevant" of a "voyeurist" ... "loafer." How all this tells us "how somebody felt about something" let alone "indeed, how a lot of different people felt about a lot of different things (these are commonly called novels about human beings)," as Wood also requires, is less clear. One must presume all humans are not all traumatized, etc.

How is the Flaubertian *mélange* and "loafer" narrator on the street necessarily much different from a contemporary laptop whiz, of whom Wood complains, "nowadays anyone in possession of a laptop" can whip up, a novel full of "essaylets and great displays of knowledge. Indeed," Wood adds, with some annoyance, "knowing about

things' has become one of the qualifications of the contemporary novelist." Balzac, Tolstoy, George Eliot, Pushkin, etc and so on, even star modernists hardly wrote information starved fact-free literature. A case of wrong culprit. "Time and again novelists are praised for their wealth of obscure and far-flung social knowledge.... The reviewer, mistaking bright lights for evidence of habitation, praises the novelist who knows about, say, the sonics of volcanoes" and other arcane and variously extraneous information (apparently not "*studiedly* irrelevant" enough), so that "the result – in America at least – is novels of immense self-consciousness" (modernism, anyone?) "with no selves in them at all," (not traumatized or enough numbed?) "curiously arrested" (indeed) "and very 'brilliant' books that know a thousand" more or less random "things but do not know a single human being." Many of Wood's and Alter's criticisms of "puerile" prose are well taken (though "hysterical" of "hysterical realism" is a term one could take issue with). Twist the wheel a bit from HR's excesses of fantasy and verisimilitude to modernism's often busy vapidness of driveling detail and some "blurring" "phantasmagoria" and such criticism rides well against modernism too – which Wood half-admits at moments: too much detail, to the point of "excessive excruciation...an obstruction to seeing."

And yet Wood finally cannot evaluate clearly his beloved UMM style modernism, because what would he and the establishment be left with? Both an aesthetic and sociopolitical threat to their own stakes. And Wood, able to grasp nothing fully functional, is left to bemoan and hope and flail: "A space may now open, one hopes, for the kind of novel that shows us that human consciousness is the truest Stendhalian mirror, reflecting helplessly the newly dark lights of the age." In other words, white noise, or worse. Both modernism and "hysterical realism" and other establishment genres and modes do tend toward "reflect[ing] helplessly the newly dark lights of the age," which is almost a loss of consciousness, not its life. It can be that "damn thing" that Rebecca West speaks of in *The Strange Necessity*, this universe, this reality that is enough. Give us an other. "[O]ne of the damn thing is ample." She adds piercingly that "only an extraordinarily massive stupidity could keep [certain types of artists] in a position which the rest of humanity has left so far behind, so naturally their works have a disgusting quality as of a person too grossly fat to move." Obstructing details puerile prose constricted ideologies and worse. It's not that nothing can be learned from these novels; it's not that they are necessarily wholly unengaging. It's that they go about as far as Wood goes, a little farther in some ways, a little less in others, and that's it – the patio chairs at the country club or the loading dock are breathlessly, gymnastically, hyper-kinetically, self-reflexively, meta-be-bop-ing-ly rearranged...ta da! *Look!* It's boring, often because if in appearance expansive, in reality confined.

Victor Hugo is a giant in the world of letters, compared to whom, Flaubert is something of a toad. Flaubert though is the establishment's special toad, and there he sits. Flaubert is neither the fount of modernism, nor the cause of the squelching of much more liberatory fiction than exists. He is sort of an awkward figurine, grandly elevated, cherished by the establishment. Meanwhile, a whole more accomplished liberatory fiction – more fully human – and often quite aesthetic – in crucial part a more vital development of the novel – has been denied, if not entirely. Where puerile realists show the world all crazy lit up

and out, and flaneuring modernists show the world all fastidious miasmic within, liberatory novelists show the world more whole and forward looking, and moving.

Misrepresentation 36 – limits on the real: The more that Wood carries the term "realism" or "real" or "reality" the less water it holds. "...we are likely to think of the desire to be truthful about life – the desire to produce art that accurately sees 'the way things are'– as a universal literary motive and project, the broad central language of the novel and drama..." Here we see (a repeat of) "the way things are" as "reality" that stories "bring...to mind" – never "possibilities" that stories bring to mind, or even "real possibilities," which is the language not of the status quo. Fiction may reveal reality and possibility, both, in exploring the nature of the human condition achieved and potential – or what is the imagination for?

"Realism, seen broadly as truthfulness to the way things are, cannot be mere verisimilitude..." Well, yes it can. Some stretches of life actually do have a natural story shape, more or less, and may be encountered most pithily in flash dramas that occur in actual moments in time, where present, past, and future all but fuse in concise narrative. One might think of the anecdotal stories of a moment found in Reader's Digest features "Life in These United States" or "Humor in Uniform." Surely some people invent some of these supposed-to-be actual anecdotes to collect the hundreds of dollars that are paid for them – and who can tell the difference between what is fiction and what is actual? That's "mere" verisimilitude as story. Certain poignant autobiographical moments are stories in verisimilitude, as are certain autobiographies, if one allows some cuts for concision. Such stories are essentially "mere" verisimilitude. Some people actually do live storybook lives or at least story quality stretches of life. It seems to me that anecdotes show virtually everyone to live some such moments, at the least. "Realism, seen broadly as truthfulness to the way things are, cannot be verisimilitude"? On the contrary, one can say what the novel is (or may be) far more reliably than what it is not – as Wood himself can be said to point out much earlier in HFW – "The novel is the great virtuoso of exceptionalism: it always wriggles out of the rules thrown around it" – except that verisimilitude as reality in story and life may not be so exceptional after all.

Virtually all content, ideology, verisimilitude, fancy, and direct reference may work and be worked in story to great effect. All does well to both challenge and reaffirm afresh existing actualities and possibilities about the world or about fiction. And if any lively fiction aims to teach, and to be liberatory, and to bring people together, and to unmask any and all unjust conditions of life, and to explore their opposite, then fiction (or criticism) with all its great resources is perfectly free to do so just as well as do anything else. Fiction and criticism may reveal and catalyze forces of change – by way of experience, by way of understanding and vision. Misrepresentations of life and fiction obviously do not help, and too often function (wittingly or not) to support or propagate deplorable status quo realities. It is important to know how fiction works for the establishment, and often against the people at large, what myths and falsehoods it relies upon to convey its ostensible "liveness," its wooden or smooth jargon – that is often not so much lifelike or lively or even all that living let alone fully alive in crucial ways. Detailed here, these three dozen misrepresentations and retrograde delimited realities of

establishment literature show some of the nature and scope of the real eviscerations of fiction and life – and also how writers may work well beyond the broken views and repressive grasp. ...

#### APPENDIX – Hugo and Flaubert

Rather than Victor Hugo's society-rocking fiction and daunting aesthetic achievement, today James Wood and many a writing circle celebrate the (by comparison) wan and dreary writing of Flaubert as seminal and essential – "Novelists should thank Flaubert the way poets thank spring; it all begins again with him." Ignored is the complex more comprehensive and profound let alone liberatory writing of Victor Hugo in *Les Misérables*, and other works. Flaubert instead is pushed as a central writing workshop and establishment presence – a situation again that comes close to "tragedy manifesting itself as comedy."

Flaubert has long been the (would be apolitical political) tool of the establishment, the obsessive stylist and yet dull shovel who used to try to bury the literary and sociopolitical accomplishment and influence of Hugo and others. "It all begins again with Flaubert." It's laughable. Flaubert is a footnote to Victor Hugo (and Montaigne). Hugo writes in his great novel, "Geometry deceives; only the hurricane is accurate," as if he is already countervailing, one might imagine, the contemporary establishment endlessly trumpeting (heedless of the irony) nuance and limnits and the denned in closets of subtlety by those who chew in prose more than they take in of life, the fastidious intimatists and obsessivists of status quo sensibility. Geometry is excellent where not blown away by hurricanes of reality that often far more fully inform narrative and reveal the human condition, the timeless universal and the profound today.

Again, Robb, noting the ethical, normative power, as well as the aesthetic multivalent approach employed by Hugo:

*Les Misérables* etches Hugo's view of the world so deeply in the mind that it is impossible to be the same person after reading it – not just because it takes a noticeable percentage of one's life to read it. The key to its effect lies in Hugo's use of a sporadically omniscient narrator who reintroduces his characters at long intervals as if through the eyes of an ignorant observer – a narrator who can best be described as God masquerading as a law-abiding bourgeois....

The title itself is a moral test.... Originally, a *misérable* was simply a pauper (*misère* means 'destitution' as well as 'misfortune'). Since the Revolution, and especially since the advent of Napoleon III, a *misérable* had become a 'dreg', a sore on the shining face of the Second Empire. The new sense would dictate a translation like *Scum of the Earth*. Hugo's sense would dictate *The Wretched*. ...

Every character struck a chord and had such a profound effect on the French view of French society that even on a first reading one has a vague recollection of having read the novel before.

The establishment – anxious to bury Hugo at his most talented and progressive, determined to beat back "a work of serious fiction for the masses...one of the last universally accessible masterpieces of Western literature, and a disturbing sign that class barriers had been breached," devoted to fixing literary taste as not too liberatory let alone revolutionary – committed itself to defending the indefensible, and strained to clear its ignominious name.

The oxymoronic opinions of critics betray the unease created by Hugo – that the lower orders might also have their literature: "*a cabinet de lecture* novel written by a man of genius", according to Lytton Strachey half a century later, still fighting "bad taste". In other words, *Les Misérables* was a jolly good book, but Victor Hugo never should have written it.

Too potentially upsetting of the proper order of things. And so the establishment institutionally and individually does what it can to bury or, failing that, castrate Hugo's work, not least by turning "Javert, the tenacious respecter of authority, 'that savage in the service of civilization', into the villain [rather than the oppressive social apparatus, which] is to deprive the novel of its dynamite, to point the finger at a single policeman instead of at the system he serves." Again, there is no conspiracy; there is a vested culture that highly values the status quo. In literary circles, one hears or reads much about or of Hugo's countrymen and contemporaries Balzac and Flaubert, who like fraternal twin blankets, one of renowned substance the other of renowned style function to disappear Hugo, at least to great extent in prominent US literary realms.

Preferring excess style to excess content, threatened by the master writer who combined great content with great style, the establishment presents Gustave Flaubert and Henry James and their kind, and a somewhat different contemporary sort of interior obsessive Philip Roth as "literature" in the preeminent ideal. And the people? Are they "antique," "quaint," hopelessly partisan? Long live Flaubert! and Bovary! that great adulterer, and suicide. Should we wonder that students "joke" that they enter lit studies so excited to read great literature and then within a few years feel instead "suicidal"?

Graham Robb notes in his tremendous biography:

The "dangerous" aspect of *Les Misérables* is almost as evident today as it was in 1862. If a single idea can be extracted from the whole, it is that persistent criminals are a product of the criminal justice system, a human and therefore a monstrous creation; that the burden of guilt lies with society and that the rational reform of institutions should take precedence over the punishment of individuals.

Compared to *Les Misérables*, the prose, the plot, the intellectual and normative scope of Flaubert's most famed novels are often stultifying, petty, or worse, yet *Madame Bovary* "now stands virtually unchallenged not only as a seminal work of Realism, but as one of the most influential novels ever written..." to certain people. "A 2007 poll of contemporary authors, published in a book entitled *The Top Ten*, cited *Madame Bovary*

as one of the two greatest novels ever written..." such is the general conclusion at Wikipedia and within establishment literature.

Today, nearly a century and a half on, we might wonder why no novelist has so well created a *Les Misérables* for our time, if such is the case. Or we might wonder why no novelist has so well imagined Jonathan Swift's contemporaneously explicit brief masterwork "A Modest Proposal" at epic length, with its scathing criticisms, marvelous wit, and most especially the (landlord-despised) pointed "solutions and panaceas" (basic remedies) mixed with great touch – as literary as popular, as explicit as subtle, as clear-cut as nuanced, as cyclonic as limned, as elucidating as "mind-melding," a revolutionary work of epic fiction. Someday may such novels come if they have not already, thumping good reads that limn the hell out of nuance, in nontrivial ways that clarify and churn with power. Explosively subtle and subtly explosive, powerfully analytical and analytically powerful, emotionally charging and charging emotionally, with critics worthy of the contents and contents worthy of critics, epic liberatory works that may be transformed to film, video and stage, works that rally people and help force or engender change. This too may be the style and voice of the novel and criticism, at least outside the dens of the establishment. Such is the force and potential of fiction – fact rich to fuel hunger, metaphor drenched to intensify thirst for what may and must be. This is why it matters most how fiction works – and that it does.

In the *Great Deluge*, Historian Douglas Brinkley has closely researched and written (and partly lived) a remarkable nonfiction account of the week of the 2005 Hurricane Katrina catastrophe in the US, easily one of the great narratives of today. Fortunately, the prose not only limns aplenty and dances in nuance and subtlety, not least of analysis, but also necessarily spouts, even spouts off, and rocks and booms too. And it would have done well, done better, to do so all the more, in liberatory partisan popular fashion. After all, the phenomenon of Hurricane Katrina was not only a great event of nature (worthy of tremendous limning in its own right), the carnage, the slaughter wreaked, and waged, was far more crucially a great crime of the establishment that deserves to be emblazoned on the everlasting page as an orgy of essentially premeditated state-corporate killing, mass murder. That it was. And that is centrally how it must always be known. Novelists should be tasked to bring home this reality in far greater force than has yet been achieved.

Future creation of liberatory fiction involves nothing so simple as solely the documenting of history, or solely a reproducing of Classical, Victorian, Romantic, Enlightenment, Modern, Postmodern, or other forms, say, Progressive, Liberatory, or Revolutionary. Hugo was no partisan hack but a great artist in both his complexity and simplicity, and his works fomented liberatory, even revolutionary impressions and helped create progressive effects, at the least. Though his accomplished aesthetics and ground breaking roles are often slighted, not only noted establishment scholar Victor Brombert "finds in Hugo's novels" (as reported by the *New York Times* a quarter century ago, in an apparently unattributed article):

an anticipation of a distinctively modernist sensibility, at least insofar as such a sensibility presupposes a collapse of the distinction between history and myth,

thought and emotion, external perception and inward mood – the kind of world found in the novels of Joyce, Woolf, Kafka, and Proust. Far from being the late romantic he is conventionally thought to be, Hugo appears in Brombert's account as one of the first modernists...[especially] in the fascination with inscriptions, traces, effacements, mirror effects, and dissolving processes, and in the belief that not only history but reality itself is a "text". Hugo as "deconstructive" novelist? The suggestion is shocking, and in fairness to Mr. Brombert it must be admitted that he only *suggests* this thesis indirectly....[yet] a case may be made for Hugo as a postmodernist.

A case may well be made that Hugo's fiction was both more clearly pointed (or communicative) *and* more complex than Flaubert's work (or that of modernism and even much Victorianism, etc). Some of the work of Hugo – including his 1829 short novel *The Last Day of a Condemned Man* is described as "starkly modern" by Peter France, the editor of *The New Oxford Companion to Literature in French*, a work of fiction that "would have a profound influence on later writers such as Albert Camus, Charles Dickens, and Fyodor Dostoevsky," who called it Hugo's "masterpiece," a work that Hugo pitted contemporaneously against the death penalty, nothing quaint about it, an act of utility discouraged by Wood and apparently depressing to him, a state that suits the status quo. Rather than spring, Flaubert may be much more of a fall of fiction.

In *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel*, Victor Brombert notes that in Hugo's early novel, the condemned man's

imprisonment in a futureless present, the radicalization of a confined subjectivity, called for a special control of narrative technique. Well before modern writers had developed a rhetoric of existential immediacy, Hugo...created a disrupted yet associative mental discourse that allowed for no respite from the self...[which impressed] Dostoevsky, as it had impressed Flaubert.... The "diary" rhythm seems to point forward to the rhetoric of disjunction achieved by Sartre in *La Nausée*.... The structural and rhetorical complexity of this apparently simple account is evident from the very first chapter, which is locked in on itself by the verbless exclamation "Condemned to death!" ... [The novel] blurs all distinctions between object and subject.

A double metaphor transforms the image of captivity into an inner psychological space, as well as into the imaginary space of writing. The key metaphorical inversion, turning the prison image upside down, appears as early as the third paragraph: "my mind is imprisoned in an idea."

Brombert notes that in an 1852 letter Flaubert "expresses his admiration" for *The Last Day of a Condemned Man* and "praises the total absence of didacticism in Hugo's novel. Its impact, according to Flaubert, is directly related to the absence of authorial commentary," but Brombert points out that

Flaubert was not quite correct when he stated that only the preface – written several years after the novel – was didactic. For the text is reader-conscious, and reader-oriented, in morally committed terms. The Condemned Man explicitly hopes that the diary of his anguish will provide a memorable lesson...for all those who judge and condemn.

As Brombert notes "the pervasive voyeurism" in Hugo's famed 1831 novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* (*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*), one may wonder if there is so very much in the works of Flaubert that cannot be found in the early works of Hugo (*Notre-Dame* and *Condemned* were written when still in his twenties). One wonders further if "modernism" is not something of a neurotic or immature literature, a regression or reversion from presenting the real, the full human condition. ...

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NOTE: No time to finish this "essay" currently. I hope to return to it in a few months to extend the analysis to the works of a number of other authors, establishment and liberatory – past, and present in particular, to examine more the state of literature, the actual and the possible. (In the meantime, look for the first paper issue of *Liberation Lit*: <http://liblit.org/>)