

RAYMOND SEBOND AGAIN:
REGARDING THEOPHILE GAUTIER

[being a manifesto, extracted from the book so called]

by
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Recognizing the importance of Learning, nevertheless it may be thought an item, as we used to say of any odd or surprising couple found to be 'stepping out'--that anyone, at least any unscholarly English-speaking person, might be curious about Theophile Gautier. So far as I know, pauvre Theo is out of fashion just now, or perhaps permanently decanonized, reduced even in French to an exemplar of style, settled finally in comfort as the historical bon Theo of the gilet rouge, the genial publicist of art for art's sake, the creator of some pre-modernist ghost tales and mentor finally of other, taller Parnassians, but not actually read. As such--read about, perhaps, especially in passing on from Balzac to Baudelaire. But not, and certainly by ordinary people--Why does anyone waste their time with these incompatible, disafinite, if not actually irrelevant minor authors? Perhaps not irrelevant, at least to anyone touched by that determinist heresy--of what name? all heresies have names--that graduate student's nightmare: with enough facts I might predict the end of the world, or read my fate in a drop of water. Minor! Theo of the merovingian hair and finger in the career of every significant artist and writer of the last century? Yes, ruthlessly, rudely: minor. Time moves on. Why should anyone waste it on something less than the best?

Change, which has swept on, leaving maudlin Theo behind. I'm tempted to take the other, uncharacteristic side: to elevate fashion, to find portent in these operations of taste. A moral, religious significance where we, or perhaps more honestly, I was taught a sneer, decorous but unmistakable, is correct. Perhaps the evolution, in the ateleological originally Darwinian sense--the going around of taste is no more than a necessary renewal of what becomes, inevitably, stale. It is not the decline and fall which offends; not staleness, which is a natural property of the stuff of life, but the acceptance of staleness implied in that world-weary, lying-down word 'inevitable.'

Tempted, but not sufficiently, for that position remains other and uncharacteristic, and no sweet-and-sour soup will make a meal out of an appetizer. In any case, what interests me is not the ideology of all this. What interests me is not this macro-cultural Brownian motion, but what it leaves behind, stranded like pungent ropes of algae, the exotic remnants of other times, other places, other minds, washed up here beside my sunburned foot, toes slightly crushed, conated with the impress of a too-elegant shoe.

So is it only a reverse snobbery, a determination to have do only with less than the best, which catches my interest? It is profoundly to be hoped not. Apart from its being so mean and

little, such a position would be a poor straw with which to command your valuable time, and be likely to break off in my hand before the end of the first movement.

Yet perhaps there is some sound bronze under this corroded surface. Do we really mean to put down discrimination? To promote the indiscriminate if not actually greedy omnivore? To suffocate culture under the roots of a thousand flowers, bury cuisine under the foundations of a million hamburger stands whose owners have enriched themselves on the indifferent palates of a billion no-necks?

We must distinguish first between the gourmet and the gourmand. The latter is an ideologue. But we must pity as well the gourmet who frets over spoiled pleasures, at the mercy of uncountable less refined sensibilities who admit too many grains of nutmeg and napkins the wrong shade of blue. We would ask for a more muscular religion than that. Like the aesthetic Oscar, Theo's spiritual child, we would aspire to an everyday enlightenment, living not *au rebours* but among common little pleasures. Many appreciate the pale jade of discreet jewelers; fewer have acquired the understanding to see beauty in a folded schist exposed on the mountainside; no one collects rhinestones. So you see I have made no progress at all, but only found in the once lowly the sweet-and-sour paradox of a higher and more refined discrimination.

And what of that? Do I object to taking pleasure in life? Perhaps, secretly, I do. Were I to be really enlightened, able to see the zen which is in all things, would I not be that enviable man who is alive every moment? Rhinestones, hamburgers, and all, even sometimes exactly that miraculous perfect shade of blue? Perhaps I should read that youthful, intemperate preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* again, meditate on the wisdom of the old romantic of *Captain Fracasse* and the *Tableaux de Siege*. The indomitable will to health of this man surprises me again, and the shallow stupidity of those who can see no politics where there is no ideology, no pain for the habit of pleasure, no struggle in such amazing fluency.

What it comes to is that if some such interests need justification then all do, and I am as much at fault for taking up your time with a book on Flaubert as on Frederic Soulie. The fact that, myself, I would prefer the Soulie does not compute. It is the interest itself: the struggle to understand it, to lay bare its sources, the peculiar resonance that causes a human being to pick just this mental object out of the vast welter of possible itches to scratch, to live this way and not that, which illuminates--whatever. Or ought to illuminate. Which justifies the ways of man to god.

Is there any explanation, then, but the personal and contingent? Is there really no honest writing other than confession? No escape from the fetid and airless self? Perhaps not. All external reality is exotic to me and the confessions of others, in whatever medium, reach me with the peculiar intensity of certain smells: barley harvest, sourdough bread, a nameless complex odor compounded of Oregon coastal forest and winter rain. Not all of us smell of toes, after all. Still--when I stopped off last month at the Los Angeles County Museum for an exhibition of contemporary Japanese sculpture, Sue dismissed the liner notes with a contemptuous remark about finding themselves in their art. Is this *passe*? Or is it just tacky to talk about it? This worries me--Sue generally has her finger on these things. Would we prefer to have no explanations at all than put up with these tacky ones? Perhaps so. And what are explanations, after all,

but more illusion, more self, more samsara? I'll never learn to use the no-mind, never free the first nen, never grasp the essence of mu that way.

The way I came to be curious about Theophile Gautier was this: when I was nine or ten years old I bought a subscription to Walt Disney's Comics and Stories. At that time I was fond of comic books of a certain type--Little Lulu, Mickey Mouse in such adventures as The Blot, which I later learned was lifted from Conan Doyle's story about the six Napoleons--and in particular the travels of Scrooge McDuck to exotic places. Mountain passes in the Andes guarded by truculent, square-headed peasants in the pay of the Beagle Boys, leading to hidden tropical valleys, various El Dorados and Atlantises derived, like "The Taming Of the Shrew" from "That's One," from Victorian traveller's tales. So when I read, some twenty years later, in Braudel's book on the Mediterranean of Charles V--I can't find the reference again--that Gautier, incomparable traveler and observer of Spain...

So Gautier was, it seemed, precursor of McDuck, an author to look into.

Not easily done. No library where I then lived possessed a copy of anything by Gautier, and he seemed to be pretty well out of print. A year or so later I ran across the 1928 Black edition in a used book shop in Norfolk, between a movie theater and a coffee shop resembling one I'd written about in a story published a few years earlier in the Portland Review--but without any of his travel writing and also lacking, as I know now, the text of *Partie caree* translated I think by Lucy Arrington which some editions have following page 531. This book, with its bilious green binding and narrow gutter, went onto my shelf unread in anticipation of as yet unrecognized hankerings and a note on Spain went into the card file which I was keeping at the time, and which I threw out last year when I finally had to accept that I'd never read anything in it. This making of lists is a particular weakness of mine, part of a scramble to impose myself on experience rather than take it as it comes. Throwing out the card file was part of an unsuccessful phase of renewal, but by then Gautier's *Voyage en Espagne* had emerged into a roomier set of interests.

About ten years earlier, during a boring period at the reference desk, in search of something new to read, I went through Jacques Barzun's *Catalog Of Crime*, where I found a description of Eugene Sue's *Mysteres de Paris* and the comment (which I can't locate in the text now) that it had never been properly translated. A number of free-floating curiosities came together at that moment, like specks of instant coffee in the spoon's vortex. I have always (or it seems, always) had an interest in languages but, as with music and drawing and baseball, lack the facility to join in. Translating, however, is suited to my un-Rinzai, slow enlightenment mentality, allowing me to sneak up on the thing by infinitely prolonged stages of imperfection and failure. There is also the puzzling, puzzle-like quality of the activity: of looking for just the piece to fit here, or here, and the ontologically suspicious, golem-like status of a translation. It offered a way of writing without the invention necessary for a novel, and a more direct attachment to sensible, existential life. That is, an old novel which has become part of the external world, with its roots already spread through the semiologic soil. An established plant, not the imaginary tomatoes and snap beans which I waste my inheritance on every spring, vainly hoping the slips and seeds I bring home from the nursery will grow. But not too established

to stand being transplanted. And not some root-bound houseplant, translated a dozen times already--some bonsai tree flattened by a long succession of famous gardeners. An obscure wildflower perhaps, overlooked as a weed, newly botanized for a bare corner of the yard. I have long had a fondness for obscure things, the reason for which is not hard to imagine. For obscure (and frequently dreadful) novels, once-popular books become historical documents, dioramas of dead cultures, and of the obscurest parts of the life of literature: printers, paper-makers, hack illustrators and forgotten scribblers. And (now) translators. Journeyman, piecework translators of stuff for the mass market, books like *The Mysteries Of Paris* and *The Wandering Jew*, or one of the deceased genres, like travel writing. It appeared to be deceased at the time, anyway, though it seems it was only hibernating. I can claim precedence, however: I trace my own interest back to the early fifties and Carl Barks, but also to John Christie's book *Thoreau As World Traveler* (Columbia 1965), to Beaglehole's biography of Cook, to Darwin's account and the travels of Ch'ang-Ch'un (as translated by Arthur Waley), all read about the same time. These books fed a desire in me for exotic places which I was too poor and timid to see for myself. These excuses are now embarrassing, and so the exotic has become exoticism; that is, a taste for things always out of reach--China (Tripitaka), Tibet (Huc), Patagonia (Hudson)--made inaccessible by time as well as distance, as remote as the very ground on which I trod, commonplace Virginia, translated back two centuries through the travels of the Marquis de Chastellux. Exoticism is, I believe, a common determinant in the career choice of historians. The study of translations (as distinct from that of translating) is first of all historical. Every text bears, in the choices its translator has made, the marks of its time. Translations lie on the cultural ground like archaeological strata waiting to be excavated. Doubly, triply exotic; remote in time and place; the product of obscure, proletarian labor; these texts were yet again exotic in being rare. Like so much which was once popular, these books have proved to be also ephemeral. Being popular, they were quickly and cheaply made, and some have simply been read to death. Being popular, they were also disposable, not worth saving. Having been popular, they are still beneath notice. Two editions together in a library is uncommon; one in a hundred antiquarian shops is a find. To study this material you must be a collector--as with comic books, my first essay in this peculiarly satisfying hobby.

Like the pure metal jumping onto its anode, all these interests (proclivities, tastes) came together at once. This is the way all the choices of my life have been made: to become a librarian, to write a novel, to see Nova Scotia, to sell hardware or make paper. Yes! I could do that--with a rush of inevitably false self-understanding like that which follows long struggle with an obscure koan. This touch of the Buddha-mind has faded like all the others. No bodhisattva I, but one of those unfortunate beings, seemingly able to look into Canaan but not go there.

Well, I have yet to see what comes or does not come of this latest increment to my stock of karma. I bought a couple of editions, then a couple more. I started a bibliography, got a little travel grant, enlarged the project, got another little grant, sputtered out, unable to find or go to see rare copies. Happening on a cache of almost forty letters from one pseudonymous translator I took up the biographical thread; but soon that, too, frayed before the end. I translated a hundred

pages of this and that, annotated some of it. I gathered sources on the rise and fall of the travel genre, but grew bored and dissatisfied, like the frog who wanted to be as big as a cow.

What do we have here, then? Bits of essay, criticism, literary history, footnotes and commentary, fragments of translation, confession, parts of novels, photographs, unfinished biographies, incomplete lists. A mess.

I would like, however, not to give in so easily to this criticism, to this superseded aesthetics. I would like to put forward some moral, artistic, perhaps political justification for the mess, or what might more tactfully be called the mixed genre. Leaving the argument to what follows--I procrastinate, since a continuous reasoning is incompatible with my means, in order to bring out the more humble, personal reasons here. This post-modernist scribble is firstly a new attack upon a position I already laid under long and fruitless siege by a novel. That book (E, by name)--voracious, all-consuming, gobbling up every story, every thought, sucking away energy from an already feeble and debilitated being (like my house, where I can't flush the toilet while the lawn is being watered)--had reached its Proustian seventh volume and become somewhat Mixed itself.

E tells of (describes, ponders, picks over) the creation and inevitable demise of a galactic empire, a worldly-wise, world-weary, world-wide game which earthbound humans invented for their amusement, in consolation for the loss of the real, too-distant stars. How, thinking such black and humiliating thoughts, a weltanschauung lightless as the final frontier, black as an asshole as Celine says, could I find any spiritual peace? This is my personal koan: meat, in the presently preferred term; an accidentally heaped-up wad of stuff whose most exalted passages consist of chemical reactions of Goedelian complexity, too snarled to be unwound by meatish fingers. Viewed from within the wad of meat, this complexity accounts for the illusion of thought. From within looking out, it accounts for a certain insensitive, inscrutable quality in our surroundings. Meat does not scrute. This explains, gives some insight into, the notions of Tao and Mu as well as other more hysterical religions.

My project, this puzzle, this quest foundered on the demise of the novel as an effective rhetorical tool. From roughly Dickens to Hammett it was the discursive art form of choice. Now, for reasons there may yet be time to go into but probably not, we get our spiritual exercise elsewhere. Mute novelists turn away--to biography (Maxine Hong Kingston) or history (numerous pretenders) or journalism (Mailer, Arias-Misson) or mixed genres (Flaubert's Parrot, Robbe-Grillet's autobiography). The time is past when art (for art's sake) could directly alter the world in that way, a point first bored into me by Robert Hughes's The Shock Of the New. In its television avatar, significantly. Hughes, who has abandoned art for Australian history, to get more leverage perhaps. Bluntly, people who write novels these days for purposes other than entertainment are fooling themselves and wasting our time. Equally bluntly, I am seldom entertained.

What then? Why do I still re-read Moby Dick? The ability of dead novels to continue to address these questions suggests that the impetus which once drove that kind of storytelling can still be tapped. What is broken, used up, is the tool, the aesthetic: the idea of a unified, coherent, consistent, fictional world. Why?--when modern life is universally felt to be fragmentary, incoherent, and chaotic, would we suppose such an aesthetic would interest anyone? Why?--when the littlest child

is early schooled in semiotic deconstruction, in understanding the lies and deceptions against which she must protect herself, would we suppose that the Jamesian ethic of hidden manipulation, or the smarmy inside-out constructivism that tried to save appearances when we became too sophisticated for that pre-Stalinist Potemkin literature, would appeal to anyone? Why?--sickened and revolted as I am by the selfishness and stinginess of the last twenty years, would I embrace any Modernist ironical detachment in order to go on writing novels that I know are pointless, because that is the only thing I know how to do?

All honest explanations are personal and contingent. All honest lives are humble, messy (or at least I find it convenient to think so). There is no spiritual peace except in self-deception. I'm not finding myself here. There's nothing to look for, nothing worth finding. Perhaps Boccaccio would have been a better model: a heap of amusing stories surrounded by the plague. I did write something like that once, following the plan of Burton's introduction to *The Anatomy Of Melancholy*, but it didn't hold up.

What then? Why do I still demand of history, of poetry--the marks, the struggle to articulate a view, to impose a structure--more grand, more breathless, when I know the struggle is doomed, as doomed as I myself am, with my pitiful list of groceries, of things to do before I die--Why all this tacky clinging to Modernist inventions, to these illusions?

What do I want to write about Theophile Gautier for? What do I want to bother you for, busy dying in obscurity? How, honestly?

Signs of panic here. The origins of my interest in Gautier are typical, admit it. Comic books enjoyed as a child, a wistful desire to travel, a little snobbery and a taste for abasement kept in check by mere laziness (no Luther I), a need to stabilize and externalize these contradictions, to lose them, like fat, by some kind of spiritual aerobics--Admit it. Your own enterprises spring from similar broken rock, similar geological faults. Admit it: your own enterprises have as little to do with their ostensible subject as this one appears to, are only a hunt for a long enough stick to reach the itch with. Admit it: you are as weak and egotistical and self-indulgent as I am, locked in samsara, unenlightened.

And what of it? Does not humanity, courage, greatness consist of carrying on anyway? What does it matter the excuse to turn outward, to let in some air? The Sixth Patriarch went out to cut bamboo. I don't suppose he did a market analysis first.

Besides, this tack can be used only once, as a manifesto. It is amusing, slightly dada, to pick up a fat essay on Sebond and find Montaigne instead, a come-on which Montaigne can justify with his views on knowledge and human behavior. *Tristram Shandy* is similar: a giant digression, a refusal to come to the point. But doing it again is not principled. It's a trick, a quirk, a mannerism.

In any case, however much I borrow from Montaigne, the struggle between faith and reason, the conclusion that reason cannot be used as a tool to substantiate faith, the shortcomings of knowledge, the very essay form, which in my hands becomes a kind of thinking for thinking's sake, a zen exercise, a kind of zazen, serving the same psychological purpose as Michel's (and Blaise's) rejection of samsara for the Tao--

Poor Theo, reduced to a koan. Appropriated, by an amateur monk.

Well, the Sixth Patriarch was illiterate it is said, and there are an infinite number of possible koans, and it is written on the back of my box of breakfast cereal we all could use more exercise, and who knows? Maybe this time the chemistry will be just right and your candle will go out and leave you in final darkness.

ART

A discussion which, I see, I've already begun--neat divisions are not characteristic of the poetics I'm reaching for. Resisting the urge to impose an argumentative structure on these scribblings, a set of conclusions toward which it was tending all along, insights which justify the work you put in--a resistance made easier because it wasn't tending, in fact, and sprang from a mind by nature jumbled, tangled, indirect--craggy, we say of faces which we wish to compliment. I have put forward some claims: that one's relation to external reality (samsara) is a kind of history; that to plunge into samsara to escape the self (a plunge of which travel is emblematic) leads inevitably back to the self; that meditation on Theo and Theoana suggests a working relationship to the world which is personal, particular, non-ideological, unsystematic, sensual, not precluding intelligence (affinities, views, commitments, politics) but always partial, unfinished; that, holding such views, I might write something after all, have made a trial of expository writing in fact, a sample which could have, had I wished, been expanded indefinitely with more discoveries, elucidations, proposals, empathies, echoes, readings, words leading to ever more remote destinations, associations--and what about Art? That is: aesthetics, criticism, story-telling? A poetics to go with a hermeneutics? Or am I just repeating James's futile duality of style and substance, form and content?

Better to use Wittgenstein's modus of family resemblances. Or, still more homily, lumps in the sauce. Knots of stuff more or less organized, of items bearing a family resemblance: words, paragraphs, skin cells, villages, grains of tapioca. I myself, after all, am nothing more than a momentary thick spot in the stuff, repeated on ever larger scales until the pudding, finally smooth, is too cold to eat. A salad instead, perhaps? With hard, dialectical peas and carrots, dressed in immiscible oil and vinegar? Cardiovascularly more edible, but--

You see how I fight it, resist the new looser, baggier fashion. This is what comes of learning to write in graduate school, in MFA programs. This is what the great poets maudit stand against--Bukowski, Spicer--or are thought to stand against by neo-Romantic advocates of guts (as in spilling of, beer, instinctual grasp of chthonic modes, and so forth)--against Modernism: Eliot and the rest of that classicising, intellectualizing, rule-crying fascist crowd. Still, I don't deny some good stuff came out of that. Ulysses, one of Hemingway's, Ford Ford, Absalom Absalom--but then I read also in the dead languages of Ouida, Dickens, Defoe, Sterne.

What was wrong with Modernism was its depersonalizing, distancing, instrumentalizing, ironizing way. Appropriate for the times, perhaps. Psychologically intelligible. Get you killed, nowadays. Alienation and angst are still with us but really, is there enough oat bran in the world to stand it? Something has to be done. With eleven billion people there are fewer and fewer high places to withdraw to. I've heard it said

that zen is the religion of the future because, of the world's creeds (if zen could be called a creed), zen is the only one to offer salvation on the spot. We can no longer afford heaven-pointing, world-denying religions. We need to be enlightened now, just as we are, in dirty hands and work clothes. We need to all go on, not just those few who have mastered the way of free indirect discourse.

How to change one's poetics? Like changing religions, I suspect it requires practice, a time of insincerity while one acquires new habits of belief. But really, does it matter which god one follows? Why all this fuss, when I've already repudiated historicist doctrines of progress in the arts? If the Way is neither true nor better, but simply different? Modernist doctrine taught me to distrust sentimentalism and cliché as manipulative--well maybe it wasn't clichéd and sentimental at the time, but fresh and new; I'm not trying to reconstruct a lost mentality--but I didn't learn that mistrust from art, I learned it as a piece of street wisdom to survive conditions which are, if anything, more so. Semiotic fencing. More insidious, more intrusive, more ambitious--to which the reply is not a superior Modernist smile.

But what is? What am I to practice at? At not, was the characteristic Modernist reply. That won't do.

But neither will some old shoes from the back of the shop which didn't fit the first time we tried them on, either. A new aesthetics is ugly, said Apollinaire of Cubism, so we must practice liking ugliness, but we forget that Picasso wasn't trying to paint ugly pictures, he wanted something else which had nothing to do with beauty, and he got it too, the others who saw he'd gotten it didn't have to practice because they already knew how, we can read that in Gertrude Stein's memoirs, and what Apollinaire said that was for the others, who need to unlearn something, who keep trying on the same shoes in hopes of getting to like squashed toes.

What then? How to bring up to the tongue what I like, to explain what is that taste?

Taste again: fashion. Fashion, or method of making. Wherever there is change, instinctively I look for history, for some quasi-experimental method of variables and controls, a sort of intellectual fork to separate more or less the meat from the sauce. So I turn again to versions of Theo--to the English translations, always making over and over the same fabric into new clothes, as translators do, always adding new bits to the sauce like a pot-au-feu which changes its taste after every meal.

Why are some texts translated again and again? Do we really need to do them over so often, wasting valuable literary resources regarding these dead idols? I discount cases like Celine, mangled in the first attempt, and incremental approaches like that to Proust. Consider the English-language history of Mademoiselle de Maupin. In addition to the now ludicrous arguments over the morality of the work which infect older translations, its ideological reputation has combined with the assessment of him as a master stylist (and Style, as we have seen in James's Modernist credo, is the untranslatable residuum of Art) to encourage in translators a certain languor. Attempts to capture Theo's word-play have been particularly inhibited, and no translation can be considered completely adequate despite the frequency with which it has been attempted. With the exception of the stories as rendered by Hearn, which are literary monuments in themselves, Theo has been very indifferently Englished. Yet no one has complained. Vizetelly's translation was made to take

advantage of a market. While Vizetelly's rights were in force, other translations were made to get access to the same market, a cycle which culminated with Sumichrast's canonical twenty-four volumes intended for the well-off and half-educated. The new cycle which began ten years later with Clarke's condensation (leaving off the too-intellectual preface first of all) was aimed at the next segment of the market down, leveraging the book's salacious reputation which previous readers winced at. This cycle culminated with a new carriage-trade edition by the Mathers, husband and wife who specialized in sniggering Orientalia. It didn't sell, and no wonder: the high point of this cycle was an anonymous paraphrase published twenty years earlier, just the juicy bits. Golden Cockerel had misjudged its audience. The present cycle beginning after World War II has been driven by the new norms of mass education, requiring cheap, reasonably accurate editions of the classics, and has so far achieved a 1937 pocket version by Selver which Random House had tried to commission as early as 1932, a mass market paperback "abridged for today's reading pleasure" but for all that remarkably complete and lively, a re-issue of the old Vizetelly translation in the Modern Library to compensate for the lost Selver, and Richardson's sympathetic, colloquial, Penguin version.

Why are some books translated over and over? Because they sell, for whatever reason, and tastes change, and publishers want to go on selling. The world's literary masterpieces must therefor be re-dressed and re-coifed to the new style. I wonder why native speakers are not put off by the sight of the beloved ancestors left in ancestral drow. Perhaps its like my grandmother, whom I would prefer to remember as I knew her--or some old books which I don't want to re-read for fear they will seem dull, and spoil my memories.

Actually, this respect for one's heritage is rather new with us. Recall Cibber's attitude toward staging Shakespeare, or the vogue twenty years ago for classics in modern dress. Anhouilh's Creon, who wears a top hat and black tie, except when I played the part in college they didn't give me the cape, which I was looking forward to swirling about ala Nosferatu. So is it only that we think translations are throwaways? There are a few which are treated as heirlooms--versions of the Christian bible, North's Plutarch--but this doesn't stop us from doing them over. Can you imagine doing Coleridge over? No, a translation is derivative, not of the same cultural importance, a product of taste. And tastes (stuffily referred to as literary norms by people who are trying to avoid Imputation) are notoriously each to one's own.

It's why translation has until recently been viewed as a craft, and translators as working-class members of the literary society. Ives worked at it (under the pseudonym I.G. Burnham) until he got a better job as a proofreader; that one aimed at (and achieved) a modest status as an amateur scholar with editions of higher-cachet Renaissance texts, including the Montaigne on which I stretch myself here. Sumichrast was an un-degreed college teacher who translated to keep from perishing; Hearn turned to teaching after very nearly perishing as a translator and a journalist. Edward Powys Mathers knew more fame as the crossword puzzler Torquemada, and Alvah Bessie as the least visible member of the Hollywood Ten, after years of scrambling to survive as an actor and occasional translator. The Grub Street translators include William Clarke ("G.F. Monkshood"), a specialist in anthologies and condensations, and

Curtis Hidden Page the same (six hundred unpublished poetry manuscripts in the Library of Congress, mostly written for the monthly meetings of a poetaster's club)--there is a wistfulness about these people that both frightens and depresses me, so similar to my own early hopes, mature pretensions, final end--Cyril Gull ("Guy Thorne") and Sarah Woolsey ("Susan Coolidge"), writing books for little men and women, and Andrew Lang who finally raised himself out of the sump by that means, and the constellation of Anne T. Wilbur-Florence Leigh-Annie Wood-Mrs. John Procter, a scrambling American woman it would be delightful to know more about. Then there are the amateurs, such as the Cat Lady, the titled Julia Charlotte Chance of Strachey line, or the dabbling Thomas Henry, Princeton class of 1879, late of the D.C. bar. And me too! me too!--librarian, ex tuba player, amateur photographer and computer programmer, writer, dilettante scholar and typographer, aspirant papermaker and casual translator, father, intellectual and gastronomic omnivore. What motivates us? Getting a living, hanging out with literati. Art? Maybe--who watches those painting demonstrations on Saturday morning television? You have to start somewhere. You go on from day to day and if you don't die maybe you do something. We have the idea that a professional is someone who gets paid for it, but there's more to it than that. We'd like to be called, some of us, I suppose, through it would mean trouble, and for my part I seem to be tired a lot lately. Still, it's out of my hands. The best I could have hoped for was a little commercial flurry.

And paid accordingly. At fin de siecle, when translation rights were typically \$150 for a magazine story and \$1000 for a novel (this is what Paul Bourget was getting from Scribner), Hearn was earning \$2400 a year in Japan and Sumichrast similarly at Harvard (he started at \$1500 in 1888 and finished with a pension of \$200 a month in 1933), Ripley was getting a couple of hundred for a translating a novel, Sumichrast got \$100 a volume for the whole Works (plus \$500 for the essays, for two years' full-time work), and Hearn got \$115 from Harper for dictating a translation to a typewriter. Hearn got \$500 for his three books, and Sumichrast also sold rights; Ripley got a fee plus ten percent royalty: \$14.10 from the sale of 94 copies of Chevrillon's *In India* from June 1902 to the end of 1913.

Do we really expect art from these people? Sure, why the hell not? Potters aren't paid any better, and I'm damned if I'll eat off ugly plates. The office secretary makes barely enough to get by, but she still has to do it over until she gets it right, though we don't insist on cheerfulness.

Perhaps its just that we English-speakers can't sustain these views any more, can't stand our literary insularity, that we've begun to see translation as an essential adjunct of literary communication. Without translators the boom in Spanish-American literature would have fizzled, Solzhenitsyn would have been executed, nearly the whole American literary intelligentsia of the last three decades would have been silenced.

But are fashions in translation really that volatile? Isn't it a matter of superficialities, of swapping this word for that? Here are two women, Virtue and Rosalind, amalgamated from the English avatars of Mademoiselle de Maupin.

It seems to me natural, it seems only natural to me to prefer, it seems to me natural to prefer to her, it seems to me natural, especially at twenty years of age, especially when one is twenty years old, especially when one is twenty years old, especially when you're twenty, to prefer some little immorality,

some little immorality, some little trig immorality, some immoral little thing, very spruce and coquettish, spruce, coquettish, coquettish to a degree, who is very sprightly, flirtatious, and very good-natured, and very good-natured, easy going, and obliging, with her hair a little uncurled, with her hair a little dishevelled, her hair out of curl, with her hair somewhat ruffled, her skirt short rather than long, her skirts rather short than otherwise, her skirt short rather than long, her skirt on the short side, an enticing foot and eye, an enticing foot and eye, with an ankle and a glance that draw the eye, her feet and eyes provocative, her cheek lightly kindled, her cheeks slightly flushed, a cheek somewhat aglow, her cheeks slightly flushed, laughter on her lips, a smile on her lips, a laugh on the lips, a laugh on her lips, and her heart in her hand, and her heart in her hand, and her heart on her sleeve, and her heart on her sleeve.

The knees were admirably pure, well shaped, admirably pure, admirably pure, wonderfully free from blemish...

What's the difference, really? It's just details of language, more semiotic fencing? Or so it would appear when read this way. Evidently the quality we're looking for isn't captured by the difference between hair which is crisped or crimped. Toasted hair. Well, we've found the spoor at least. But it's too easy to get caught up in analysis of the source text, in the deconstruction of sexist imagery and other pastimes.

Really, what is the difference? There are family resemblances here. The difficulty is to convey the cumulative effect of these little choices, to explain how it happens that all those good intentions could lead to such a dismal end. And then, one's impression of a book includes the binding (staid dark green Knopfian cloth, cheerful plaid, businesslike Vizetelly brown, half-vellum or garishly illustrated) and the rest, which the translator could hardly be held accountable for.

There's a gap here, which I can't get across, between the reality of the text and the poetics. A gap, a mutual irrelevance, like that between me and reality, samadhi and samsara, dharma and self. The text is grasped word by word while its poetics needs to be grasped whole, like a koan.

Well what is it then? Why is it that some days I read Les Gommès and some days Charlie Chan? It is possible to explain the Paris mysteries, the Dee mysteries, the Beck mysteries, the McDuck mysteries by the same poetics? Probably, but do I want to? Do I really need to reconcile (reconcile myself to) the poetics of bread shoes or this gimlet rouge plunged into the panting body of Virtue?

The Master clapped his hands, extinguishing the candle and plunging the room into darkness. At this Rinzai was enlightened.

I instinctively prefer passages of another sort: "He had reached this point in his meditation when he felt a hand on his shoulder--like a little dove alighting on a palm-tree. There's a hitch in the comparison since d'Albert's shoulder bore only a slight resemblance to a palm-tree; that doesn't matter, we'll keep it out of pure Orientalism."

Richardson has captured the pertness, the throwaway aspect of the original, which has been waiting all this time for the colloquial word 'hitch' to be invented. Compare the lumbering speech of the Victorian peasant, burdened by his great books: "He was at this stage in his meditations, when he felt a hand place itself on his shoulder, like a little dove descending on a palm-tree. The comparison halts somewhat inasmuch as D'Albert's shoulder bore a very slight resemblance to a palm-tree; but, all

the same, we shall keep it in a spirit of pure Orientalism."

All those sententious commafied throat-clearings, that dignified tolerance--all the same we shall keep it, it does matter, the resemblance is slight but significant--that suffocating rationality (hands, attached to bodies as they are, can't just appear out of the air but must be placed there, on the shoulder)--and no breathless, rupturing dashes.

But really, this is a meat-based (pre-rational) preference for the snotty, everyday Theo, much like my instinctive preference for the Beagle Boys over Magica DeSpell, who is too literary. My preference for mysteries, as with all genre writing, is the same: the conditions of experience are fixed by the genre, in advance, as the conditions of childhood are by grownups, and by this means made safe. This amounts to saying I like what I like and doesn't help much. There is something here, but it has to do with the poetics of superficiality and right now I'm not ready for that yet, it will come up later I'm sure.

Or again, what about the sensibility behind such phrases as "There are fairies at the bottom of our garden." This sentence was the object of a recent reference question, I was asked to identify the source which is a book of children's poems by Rose Fyleman published 1920. The Modernist successor to this sentiment is Marianne Moore's "gardens with real toads in them." For a long time I thought the word, because I had never seen the line written down, was "toes"--which I like better anyway. That's the new voice I'm looking for: brittle, elusive, earthy, packed with reference, and with a slight maniacal tingle. The literary form which most consistently embodies these qualities is the zen koan. As the shaggy-dog story was Sterne's model, so the koan will be mine.

Perhaps I can't get across this gap because it isn't there. Because there is no difference. No difference between a text and a poetics, or any between at all.

So where have I got to, with these sentences? Was I going somewhere? No, but I've got somewhere nevertheless, as a result of putting one foot in front of another.

Well then if not art, how about appealing to some ideal of craftsmanship? I mean this as a technical word, as in David Pye's *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968) and which I wrote about myself before, in a long story published in *The Volcano Review* as "Squinting Into the Sun" about this disagreement between Henry and Georges over the construction of a table, and some other things which go down to the root of being and which are hard to look at closely sometimes, a running argument I used to have with a friend of mine who has kind of drifted away now, or perhaps I from he, who gave me Pye's book. Pye distinguishes between the workmanship of risk and the workmanship of certainty as an alternative to the conventional and obstructive distinction between handwork and machine work. In writing this I notice one is not at liberty to join work with machine, whereas handwork can be written any way one pleases--which underlines our cultural values and reinforces Pye's complaint that we wrongly demean craftsmanship under industrial conditions. Anyway, Pye equates the traditional ideal of craftsmanship with the workmanship of risk, and while he is interested in pointing out what is admirable in the other, industrial, kind it is risk which concerns me because the result is not predetermined, which of course is what makes traditional craftsmanship useless to industry, and that is where art comes in, if one is not too fussy about what is art, and just as importantly truth since truth is not predetermined either else if

we all knew what it was our species would not have needed this trick of passing messages back and forth concerning states of matter in the immediate vicinity, the dispositions of objects and so forth, but mostly brain circuits.

Is there such a thing as truth? This notion of a thing is not helpful here; it makes sense only from a distance like a pointillist painting. Are there true things, then--craftsmanly objects we could say, among which we could include bolt holes and sheets of paper and statements: true, workman like words. Probably, or at least it seems not worth the energy to oppose this intuitive notion except perhaps as a way of inquiring why is it intuitive which is an interesting question but not helpful here. What is helpful is there are true statements but is it possible to say them and to that the answer is no because truth-telling is a workmanship of risk. Sometimes there are true things and sometimes there aren't. That's what zen training gives to artists in dynamic media like ink-painting and spontaneous haiku: a power of concentration and an ability to directly express the first nen, learned from hours of zazen and countless dharma battles with masters and other students. Even so, sometimes it's a true things and sometimes not. But even when it doesn't come out quite, which is sometimes for a master and most of the time for the rest of us, there is a standard of craftsmanship, of careful speech, which can be met.

What are the marks of careful speech? Well this is a big subject, too big for me right now in the space of an ordinary manifesto, nothing less than the whole of literature and criticism, but one mark is authenticity as Lionel Trilling explicates it in *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972) which is why I say a tao of living entails a tao of writing but more importantly the other way around since many people can and ought to live without writing.

Speech careful in another sense also. I seem to have a preference for understatement, and find sentiment and emotional manipulation distasteful. The rational man is uppermost here. No demagogues with little green bibles.

But here is a nettlesome patch, because careful and cautious are too easy to mix. Caution is a Modernist procedure, an instance of that deplorable cover-your-ass irresponsibility which is so rhetorically handy when you want to pass off selfishness as regard for the common weal and the dignity of humankind or, more cautiously, not to risk choking on such a big bite, some particular human, let us say you the reader. We all want to talk we haven't given up talking just because modern life has cowed us with these new demonstrations of the inevitability of lies and evil, it's in us to go on talking anyway, when Virginia Woolf said now we will have to have a new art she didn't mean no art at all but went right on talking up to the end. But really, what is there to say? This is the problem, or part of the problem, that Harold Bloom meant by the anxiety of influence in his book on why we misread books on purpose, in order to find mistakes and missing parts and lies in order to make room to breathe, reason to go on talking. But cautiously, which is a good tactic in a culture so loaded with hidden agendas and so streetwise to the self-serving verbal tactics mercilessly exploited by peddlers and politicians. Irony, understatement, coolness are good tactics for covering your ass when nobody says what they mean and nobody believes what anyone says, even themselves.

It's this sort of thing drives me to prefer Romantic excess sometimes, to look for excuses to like Victor Hugo and stories about dying little boys who have no shoes, but also and more

legitimately the evidence of craftsmanship, of mastery of a genre so evident in books like *Les Mysteres de Paris* and *The Maltese Falcon*. Three nettles: a superficial similarity of taste shared with the Moderns, a standard of craftsmanship which appears to supersede taste, and a tendency to petulant revolt.

Well these are big subjects too, how to tell the shamelessly popular from dishonest kitsch and such, but it all comes down to this standard of careful speech, to what is owed the reader: no gimmicks, no strings, no expectations, no truths. This will entail some changes in our ways of reading and writing, I imagine, which is what I take to be the import of this reference to post-Modernism which is talked a lot without anyone seeming to know what is meant by it except that we have to do different somehow. In a minute I will have something to say about that, there is always something more to say and this time I will try to say it.

So I have two standards respecting myself and the reader who are the beings at either end of this stream of semiotic messages going back and forth continually. Semiotic in the literal sense of half-seen, darkly understood between us. If there is no truth nevertheless there is understanding because otherwise how could the dharma be passed on by talking nonsense like this? Samsara is polysemous. The best strategy is to maximize referentiality, to pack in as many readings as possible: not to mean, or to not-mean if I can talk that way. To mean is to cling to illusion. Not to mean is to cast off all that, to enable one's freedom. Not to mean is a political principle, a standard respecting the content of messages. Not meaning is the basis of public morality. One talks in order to not mean anything: that is what one owes one's fellow-creatures, in the same way as craftsmanship is the basis of private morality (what one owes oneself) and reticence of personal morality, or what I owe to you. These are debts. They are payable. Not to not mean is immoral, not to talk is irresponsible.

Finally, I like eloquence: a punchy style. Why? For fun? And what's wrong with that? Do we always have to have dull, serious food? That's what comes of getting into the grip of doctors, and middle-aged people who haven't yet solved the koan on dying, the one about Nansen cutting the cat in two. The Modernists found eloquence repugnant, one of those Romantic traits an obstacle to the appearance of naturalness, but times have changed and mere appearances aren't authentic enough so we will have either the real thing, the actual nump as Walt Kelly says, or else honest eloquence again. It's the basis for my admiration of Adlai Stevenson, Everett Dirksen, the Charles Laughton character in *Advise and Consent*, and such folk we haven't heard much from lately, in these low-sodium, oat-bran times.

What I am claiming here--asserting, staking a claim to--is a way of life. A tao. I am claiming that this is what the world is and this is my place in it. And a way of life implies a way of writing.

Observe an adolescent boy. He is inexperienced; he has little idea of how to behave; he continually risks making a fool of himself--and he knows this. But he can't help taking risks--the women, the money and fame will be gone if he doesn't. So he swaggers some. He struts some, even though he knows how hollow it is. He's jealous of his dignity, too, of that fragile amour propre, so that every time he blows it the pain chews on his guts like the story of the fox hidden under the Spartan's shirt. And he's naive. He still takes all this seriously. He still

believes that the game is worthy of the player, that playing well is as important as winning, and maybe even that you can't get to heaven in shoes of bread.

That's the boy I wanted to be, when I was a boy, and wasn't. And he resembles Theo remarkably, now that I think of it. An old boy with a distinct family resemblance.

That's the tao, or at least the beginnings of one.

How to write like that?

HUMANISM AGAIN

Humanism, eh? That old idea. Doddering, senile idea...

Well, what about it, then--Humanism? And what have Michel and Raymond got to do with all this?

Actually, it's difficult for a modern to project, to live into, a belief system which is not human-centered, so far has this idea spread since the days of the Original Essayist. The situation is exactly reversed in fact. Environmentalism, perhaps. See the difficulty of getting our fellow inhabitants to think in terms of skunks first, or (harder yet) the tenets of some intellectual creed involving the mutual salvation of interdependent life forms.

Michel could not have imagined, as his essay on Sebond shows, the possibility that a real, hard-core humanism could appeal to anyone, much less become common. That is, that we should live fully and entirely as humans, as beings consisting of matter temporarily animated by forces of nature: electricity and chemistry, that exchange of electrons which has gone on continually since there were electrons, a fraction of a second after the big bang, skunks or no skunks, mind or no-mind. Horrifying idea. Reminds me of Mrs. Moore's experience in the Marabar Caves. Say anything you like, she discovered, but it all turns to boum in the end. Some kind of overcooked mush, boum, that primitive people eat with their fingers. Couldn't go on after finding that out.

Is it possible to live by, to make art out of, such a view? The two are the same: it isn't possible to make art out of something you can't live and the ability to make art of it proves you can live by it if you can find out how to. Setting aside the obvious importance of zen to the arts of Japan, and Buddhism to the East generally--Buddhism especially has an afterlife component, of course you would have to have that, several cracks at the problem because no one is born an arhat the first time, especially in these latter days when the first times around are all used up, people would get discouraged otherwise. Me, I mean.

Michel would have said not. Did say not. It's a consequence of the famous Que scay-je? But then there weren't eleven billion of us in Michel's time, either. He could afford to be humble and stupid, whereas we have no choice.

We have our two projects, Michel and I, of enlightenment. Michel's has since been capitalized.

Like mine, Michel's essay sprang from previous work which was, moreover, translation. There is something about the effort of transferring a system of ideas from its original setting, perhaps. But this is as artificial, or witty, parallel. How "spring from"--what has this to do with Theo? My project is not a Romantic one, nor a Parnassian, however hard I might work to make over Theo as a precursor, he didn't start this, reading him started no chain of reflections as Sebond did; I don't even acknowledge the existence of chains. Merely as an excuse, or

pretext? Why should one need to be excused? and moreover, probably every one of my words could be found somewhere in Theo's writings, especially in view of that fact, or probable fact. Simply because he happened to be there at the time? This the best explanation.

Like me, Michel was a self-regarding author of a self-conscious text--but this is what happens at times of change and doubt. We are surfeited on self-consciousness of a kind in our time. Bored with psychology, especially in fiction, which is why we escape to the genres so readily, which explains my taste for Moby Dick and Bleak House and Heart Of Darkness and such books. Explains in part anyway. Like me, Michel tries to see through himself--through in the sense initially of a lens, to see by means of, as a focusing aid, but finally just through. This is a koan I've set myself: a spiritual exercise, to pass through the gateless gate. A misleading phrase, to see through. Through something which is not there, to see something which is not there. And so it was with Michel, Enlightenment, and Raymond Sebond.

Once yet again, this business of throwing away the self by holding hard, of holding fast while not clinging, of breaking the bonds of desire by trying to live more intensely.

Why write, when it will all be lost in the coming crash? Why live, when it will all be eaten by worms? Why go on, when it's all boum? We've made heroes of authors by our collecting and saving, by canonization, but where is the Hero who will lead us out of the Modernist desert in which we have wandered these forty years? The Great Man who will destroy History and Art? The appeal of virtuosity is that of the Hero, the person who commands absolutely. The Navahos who weave mistakes into their blankets are on to something I could profit by. Heroism, virtue, history, hope, craftsmanship, art--all illusion, the consequence of desire.

"What is it for?" is not germane. Nor is it merely an objet d'art: the distinction between public and private art is not germane; it is a distinction. Amateur products are neither public nor private; they are not for anything but neither are they merely. Careerism, professionalism, spring from the desire for a particular outcome, are for something, in their worst manifestations for oneself. The great problem, the problem for me, here among us as I am, is how to be serious without being professional, how to take myself seriously without being serious, how to do art without taking myself seriously, how to live without art.

If engagee is to be associated with an instrumentalist view of writing, of words as tools, is degagee to be associated with the aestheticizing of words, of words as objects? With book collecting and bibliography, which is only intellectual collecting after all? With artists' books? Is degagee to be associated with the detachment of Modernism? But the famous Modernist reticence, the acceptance of ignorance and fallibility, was just a pose, a gimmick for avoiding responsibility, for attributing one's views to an external, autonomous and therefore unbiased reality--one's views are reified thereby as a property of the natural world. This is what gave Modernism its force, what makes it so hard to see through. Alternatives are too easy to characterize as superficial because we cling to the idea that it is possible to see through things, yet we're bored with analysis and psychology and self and "solidly motivated humanoids in stilted dramatic situations"--Ionesco? Robbe-Grillet?--and we flee to the genres or to the principled superficiality of

Wodehouse which is not the same thing at all, these are ways of writing and reading in which the form knows even if the author doesn't it's not the same thing because there is knowledge or thought to be, the comfort of thinking so. A real post-modernism, a real lived congruence between our art and our lives, would have to acknowledge ignorance and fallibility more sincerely than this. Would have to be a real humanist art, boum and all. Consider positivism, a Renaissance ideal of Montaigne's time which became so characteristic of the West in the nineteenth century, discredited by events in the twentieth before it was intellectually demolished by Goedel and Heisenberg. The Modernists knew it was no good but had nothing to put in its place and so their despair, and so their fierce clinging to Structure, to Art, and so our hysterical demand for control, for pulling everything together into a single net of meaning, an explanation, which falsifies all, a real fruit of the tree of knowledge and we Moderns true Adams, walking backward through the Modernist desert. Hence the fiction of real life, fiction in both senses, and the constant manic invention of new realisms. "I have resolved on an enterprise," Rousseau boasts, "which has no precedent and which, once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I portray will be myself." Impossible. What do these words mean, enterprise, purpose, nature, true, self? Jean-Jacques was like to Michel in this, though--the inventor of a genre, a new realism which he handles loosely and with few rules, as is typical of inventors, giving a falsely natural tone to the result. Otherwise they stand glaring at each other, Apollonian and Dionysian, honest soul and disintegrated self as respectively Hegel and Nietzsche have it; Rousseau the Modernist horror, the loss of self, the destruction of limits, the indifference to pain and morality which so obsess us, our obsession and horror implicit in the very words loss, destruction, indifference, the Modernist litany. Whereas Michel concerns himself, in the Sebond essay particularly, with salvation, enlightenment, with a new relation to the world--and so do I.

Violence and irrationality are common elements of contemporary life. A woman standing in line at the bank drops her purse, the gun inside goes off and kills an innocent by-stander. Children are raped because someone's attention is caught by a pink dress. The acceptance of irrationality and unpredictability in daily life has been common in the past (the pre-Enlightened past). One task of a successful, lived-into post-modernism will be to find and analyze the positive aspect of drive-by shootings. This is not as perverse as it sounds. The ironical detachment of Modernism which I so deplore, so like a primitive defense mechanism, yet released an unprecedented power of analysis of human character and interaction in such artists as Ford, Woolf, and Forster. These documents will not be superseded even though the circumstances which gave them rise have dried up and blown away. They have added to our stock of tools thereby. Our task is to make an equivalent contribution.

However, the real advances, the real discovery of how to live into a successor to Modernism, will not come from people like me who have to think themselves into alien points of view from positions of security. The real discoveries will come from people who just live that way, as Henry Miller and William Burroughs did, whatever way. Past instances can be found too, cases of irruption of new ways: Anne Bronte, Courbet perhaps. Then afterwards people like me come along to codify, analyze,

give common possession. What am I doing here now? Cezanne-like, the best I can hope for is an opportunity to struggle with the mountain, to struggle with integrity and to the end.

Art is not for anything. In this Theo and I are not quite in agreement, for he would have said it was for art and would probably have limited the stricture to art in any case, whereas it isn't so easy to see that history isn't for anything either, even history. Attempts to explain what Theophile Gautier has to do with this will all come to naught. He is just a thing in the world, and my (your) relation to him is an example of my (your) relation to the world, and it to me (you). We are all simply there.

Art is an illusory product of desire, like all of life, into which it fits like a tea ceremony. It is an aid to living well, to living for the sake of living, which is after all not for anything either. It is well to be reminded of this, that we make art for the same reason that we get up in the morning, because that is what we do, and there is no need to encumber it with more baggage, clinging to art as if it could save me from the worms. Instead, a poetics should facilitate living, facilitate going on; should be humble, world-embracing, personal, unsystematic, incomplete, moving through its material without resistance, as one with it as I am with the tao, the selfless no-mind.

What kind of writing might that be? None would be best. Failing that I prefer photography for the immediacy of its contact with the world and its resistance to explanation. Failing that, to write commentaries on real or imaginary photographs perhaps, like haiku. Failing that, the model of natural discourse, of casual talk about interesting things, in whatever language and style seem effective, without trying to make points, without theoretical justification. What comes next doesn't need justification. Its nextness is sufficient.

Some people find it hard to go on from one thing to the next, like Mrs. Moore after her experience in the Marabar caves. But I, going nowhere, go on easily until the end, when I stop.