Fiction As Embodiment

By David Barker - April, 2006

This paper uses recent fiction as a tool to "eavesdrop" on a conversation which is framed in a particular kind of talk (a philosophy/culture talk that relies upon broad categories like "modern" and "postmodern") as it grapples with the dualism of spirit and body. This grappling stems from questions like:

• Where is the me I understand as being me? (identity)

• If there is an essential part to being me, what is it? Is it spirit alone? Or does it also embrace my body? (spirituality)

• Even if I understand myself as spirit alone, how do I relate to this body of mine? (embodiment)

I shall report upon my eavesdropping by proceeding as follows. First, I shall flesh out the major terms of the conversation. Second, I shall sample the conversation as it has been captured by a few noteworthy writers of fiction. And finally, I shall measure my samplings, perhaps like a meteorologist, to see which way the prevailing winds blow. In particular, how do more recent authors react to the ostensibly postmodern culture which is the emerging context for their writings? Does today's world allow for the possibility that spirit and body form an integrated whole, or do these authors portend no end to the alienation of spirit from the body which has been bequeathed to us by modern science and philosophy?

First, then, what do we mean when we speak of a "postmodern" condition? Kevin J. Vanhoozer suggests that any attempt to define the term "postmodern" is doomed from the outset, and he offers three succinct reasons which, happily, give us our first intimation of the term's import:

> In the first place, postmoderns reject the notion that any description or definition is "neutral." Definitions may appear to bask in the glow of impartiality, but they invariably exclude something and hence are complicit, wittingly or not, in politics. A definition of postmodernity is … likely to say more about the person offering the definition than it is of "the postmodern." Second, postmoderns resist closed, tightly bounded "totalizing" accounts of such things as the "essence" of the postmodern. And third … "there is no such phenomenon as postmodernity." There are only postmodernities.[1]

Perhaps it is more fruitful first to think of postmodernity as that multiplicity of responses which are not-modern and second to begin by inquiring what is meant by "modern."

Although modernity's emergence from the medieval hegemony occurred over hundreds of years, with a consequent blurring of competing world views, nevertheless, our long perspective allows us to discern distinctive changes.[2] Indeed, certain events have come to be understood as epochal. Most influential was the shift towards scientific methodology first introduced through the pragmatic empiricism of Copernicus and Galileo. This received philosophical support from the thoroughgoing skepticism of Descartes' Meditationes and, a century later, in the empiricism of David Hume. The possibility of a strictly causal explanation of the universe produced an optimism and an expectation of imminent mastery. If we could realign the physical universe to serve our needs, this would have the incidental effect of pushing the spiritual to the margins. We might even incorporate the spiritual into the modern cosmogony by assuming that spirituality is merely a complex set of phenomena which, once explained, will present itself as another layer of causally linked events which is governed by a set of laws unto itself.

In fiction, the paradigm of this world view, this valorization of nature's mastery, is reflect-

ed in the musings of Dr. Victor Frankenstein:

> One of the phenomena which had peculiarly attracted my attention was the structure of the human frame, and, indeed, any animal endued with life. Whence, I often asked myself, did the principle of life proceed? It was a bold question, and one which has ever been considered as a mystery; yet with how many things are we upon the brink of becoming acquainted, if cowardice or carelessness did not restrain our inquiries.[3]

Mastery is possible if only we suppress those habits which most impede the operation of reason: cowardice and carelessness. It is interesting to note that Shelley presents her tale as an ironic commentary upon Frankenstein's attitude. While it is thoroughly grounded in the aesthetic of English Romanticism, with its cloying didacticism (it is, after all, a parable), nevertheless it tests the limits of modernity and illustrates how, without more, the products of science can bring about our undoing. Frankenstein aspires to a godlike power over death itself, but his success produces a monster who destroys everyone who matters to him and draws him into a pursuit through a frozen wasteland where, exhausted and broken, he dies. At the risk of being reductive, one might say that Shelley functions as a cultural critic, counseling caution to those who are too enthusiastic in their embrace of science. Indeed, where science continues today to assert itself as a creature of modernism, we hear echoes of Shelley's critique. Thus, today's genetically modified and disease-resistant crops yield "Franken-food." Let us keep in mind the example of Frankenstein as a benchmark we can apply to readings of more recent authors.

Before proceeding to the traces of postmodern conversations, I must answer an obvious question: why the novel? Is there anything about forms of fiction which render them peculiarly

useful when we gaze through the lens of postmodernism at the relationship between spirituality and embodiment? The answer is a definitive maybe. Those thinkers whom we have come to identify with the postmodern label demonstrate an affinity for several specialized departments of knowledge which consider theories of language: linguistics, semiotics, psychoanalysis, to name a few. To the extent that many novelists have developed a mastery of language and its deployment in varied tasks, their work provides a practicum in the theoretical issues which their more academic counterparts set out in less entertaining terms. As an illustration of how the postmodern talk cuts across disciplines, let us trace the route that one contemporary sociologist, Janet Wolff, has followed in her account of the social dimensions of cultural production.[4] One signpost on her route is Roland Barthes' deconstruction of authorship, which transfers the locus of a text's meaning from the author to the reader: "The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination."[5] Another of Wolff's signposts is the notion of the "author function," an idea developed by Michel Foucault, who is not so ready as Barthes to dispense altogether with the author.[6] When discussing the collaborative nature of authorship, Foucault offers two propositions which point to yet another signpost. First, he states that the creative work is an ideological expression insofar as it reflects a world view and is the "personal mediation of a group consciousness." And second, the text itself asserts an autonomy which constrains the choices an author can make during its writing, determining, for example, its style and the conventions it adopts or rejects or satirizes. These ideas take Wolff back to the threshold of Lacanian psychoanalysis which has something interesting to say about the nature and function of narrative.

In developing a theory of psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan begins with the observation that

it occurs through the medium of speech, and that to understand the dynamics of psychoanalysis, one must understand the dynamics of speech.[7] First, then, there is no speech without reply, even if the reply is silence. And so in the therapeutic context, the analysand's free association finds its reply in the analyst's silence, the well-timed cough, the carefully chosen remarks, and this produces a dialogue:

> … [W]hat is important is not so much the historical accuracy of the analysand's memory as the intersubjectively intelligible narration of his past in the form of a tale or even an epic … of origins.
>
> The analysand's free association, punctuated by the analyst's replies – that is, the psychoanalytic dialogue taken as a dialectical whole – ultimately yields a coherent narrative that has the double effect of constructing the analysand as a subject and of revealing his truth. … In the psychoanalytic dialogue the analysand tells his story, and the very structure of this narrative assures that the narrated events come to have their true significance only in light of the story's conclusion.[8]

Unlike Barthes, who assigns responsibility for meaning to the reader's subjectivity, Lacan finds it in the discourse between speaker and listener. The free-associative discourse may, at first, have the appearance of incoherence, but as the conversation continues, the gaps in meaning are filled in by "the transindividual reality of the subject," by an "intersubjective continuity," by the "discourse of the other," or, not to put too fine a point on it, by the unconscious. However, for Lacan, the unconscious is not a vague repository of tendencies, but rather, a discourse which, until it is written out in full through the course of a psychoanalytic relationship, gives voice to its speech

in “the analysand’s bodily symptoms, in his putative memories of childhood, in his idiosyncratic vocabulary, and in the fragmentary “heroic legends” and other protonarratives out of which the analysand’s self-history is eventually built up.”[9]

The truth of our narratives does not rest in a factual correspondence between our words and their referents, but rather, in the measure that our narratives integrate our free-associative discourse and this other intersubjective discourse in a full and self-constituting speech. To the extent that an author accomplishes precisely this integration when writing a novel or a story, the author’s fiction ceases to be fictional; its truth is not found within the text, but emerges from the dialogue which arises when we, as readers (much like analysts), draw the speech to its conclusion through our own silences, portentous coughs, and incisive remarks. Lacan shows us, too, that fiction is not some marginal enterprise relegated to the tenants of our cultural garrets, but is essential to the process of constituting ourselves as a social body. We have no corporate existence without our stories.

Let us turn, now, to a selection of authors, to see if we can discern embodied in their speech the terms of a language in which, perhaps, we are already fluent. To begin, I offer up one of the most disturbing authors of the late twentieth century – disturbing not only for the content of his novels, but also for the life he led, as its details came to light following his suicide in 1991 (including the revelation that he probably hired someone else to write the novel for him). In The Painted Bird, Jerzy Koskinski tells the story of a child, separated from his parents at the beginning of World War II, who wanders through Eastern Europe, relying upon his wits and no small measure of luck or Providence or randomness to survive a harrowing gauntlet of violence. It is a world in which moral norms have been turned upside down - a dark recasting of the beatitudes - in which the only people who treat the boy with compassion are a Nazi soldier and a Stalinist

sniper, while the pivotal trauma, which leaves the boy mute until the end of the novel, occurs when an angry mob of villagers chases the boy from a church. One of the first people to "own" the boy is a woman named Olga who is the local healer. Their village is stricken by a plague which the boy eventually contracts.

> One evening my face began to burn and I shook with uncontrollable throbs. Olga looked for a moment into my eyes and placed her cold hand on my brow. Then rapidly and wordlessly she dragged me toward a remote field. There she dug a deep pit, took off my clothes, and ordered me to jump in.
>
> While I stood at the bottom, trembling with fever and chill, Olga pushed the earth back into the pit until I was buried up to my neck. Then she trampled the soil around me and beat it with the shovel until the surface was very smooth. After making sure there were no anthills in the vicinity, she made three smoky fires of peat. Thus planted in the cold earth, my body cooled completely in a few moments, like the root of a wilting weed. I lost all awareness. Like an abandoned head of cabbage, I became part of the great field.[10]

The reader might interpret this scene as if it were a rite of passage or initiatory ritual that symbolizes a spiritual death to a former way of life and a reemergence into a new being.[11] But, like everything else in this novel, the symbolism has been turned on its head. Instead of being initiated into a new and fuller way of being in the world, the boy emerges from the ground to a life of relentless abuse and horror.

Most significantly, for the purposes of our discussion, we find in this incident an introduction to the problem of speech. While the boy is waiting for Olga to return and to dig him out, a

flock of ravens settles around him, approaching nearer and nearer. He screams at them and they leap back, but his next scream provokes no response and the ravens continue their approach. Although the burial has cooled the boy's fever, it has disempowered him; he cannot strike out at the ravens, and so he must rely on his voice. But even this loses its power. It is not a coincidence that the boy has no name. There is no need for a name since no one ever addresses him except to issue orders or to impose demands; he is merely the consciousness, the "I," recording all that happens to a body which does not belong to him in any event. And so, without the power of speech, and without a name, he is deprived of the tools he needs to constitute himself as a real subject.

As I have noted above, orthodox postmoderns would vehemently deny that it even makes sense to speak of an "essence" of postmodernity. Nevertheless, I shall risk heresy and suggest that something like its essence may be found circling just at the edges of the Kosinski corpus. Thus, for example, there were rumours that Kosinski relied heavily on translators and ghost-writers to prepare his manuscripts. While he was still alive, Bantam imprints of his novels included a biography which opened with: "To appreciate the violent, ironic, suspenseful, morally demanding world of JERZY KOSINSKI's novels, one must first acknowledge the random succession of pain and joy, wealth and poverty, persecution and approbation that have made his own life often as eventful as those of his fictional creations." In fact, biographers suggest that his greatest fiction was the fiction of his creative powers. And although The Painted Bird was published on the supposition that it was a fictionalized testimony of personal experiences, a claim which Kosinski never bothered to disavow, nevertheless Kosinski's childhood is emphatically unlike anything he "authored." With a litany of behaviour - sexual adventurism, compulsive lying, reckless driving, abuse of small dogs, thirst for fame, fabrication of personal experience,

secretiveness about his writing, denial of his Jewish identity – his biographer proposes that there was a "hollowness at the core of his being," and that "his whole life had become a race to fill in that hollow space before it caused him to implode, collapsing inward upon himself like a burnt-out star."[12] I would offer a different proposal. It might be fruitful to think of Kosinski as an analysand who dialogues with the reader/analyst, beginning to write in the free association of a chaotic life, writing into the "hollow space" the "intersubjective continuity" of his unconscious, and producing a narrative whose true significance only comes to light at its conclusion. Nowhere is this more evident than in the final sentence of The Painted Bird: "I spoke loudly and incessantly like the peasants and then like the city folk, as fast as I could, enraptured by the sounds that were heavy with meaning, as wet snow is heavy with water, convincing myself again and again and again that speech was now mine and that it did not intend to escape through the door which opened onto the balcony."

Finally, what can we say of this novel's position with respect to the postmodern culture in which it is grounded? Just as we can say of Shelley, so too of Kosinski: the novel itself is true to the discourse which characterizes its time. Frankenstein is orderly and structured, bent upon a didactic function; The Painted Bird is chaotic and relentless, despairing that resistance to Nazism may well be futile, not because Nazism is too powerful, but because the human spirit isn't worth protecting from the Nazi scourge. Shelly critiques the modern perception of orderliness; but what has Kosinski to say about the postmodern perception of chaos? I suggest that the mere fact of a novel belies despair. Its existence proves that meaning can be wrested even from the "hollow space" and this happens in the fullness of speech, as it does for the boy at the novel's conclusion.

The Painted Bird is the limit case. It almost overwhelms with the hallmarks of postmo-

dernity: its succession of contingent events, its moral ambiguities and complexities, its silence when explanation seems called for. And so, in the words of Fred Ebb and John Kander, "If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere." If, even here, I can detect the traces of a countervailing movement to an integrated way of being in the world, then the task will be all the easier when I consider other works written in the same idiom.

Such a work is Alice Walker's The Color Purple which presents a series of diary entries and letters from the point of view of a poor black woman living in the American south during the first half of the twentieth century. It opens much like The Painted Bird with a relentless succession of physical and sexual abuse which is told with a disturbing, almost clinical, detachment. This is the account of a body alienated from itself:

> He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man.[13]

This is compounded by a kind of spiritual abuse, or at least of a manipulation of belief in ways that do more harm than good:

> I can't even remember the last time I felt mad, I say. I used to git mad at my mammy cause she put a lot of work on me. Then I see how sick she is. Couldn't stay mad at her. Couldn't be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what. Then after while every time I got mad, or start to feel mad, I got sick. Felt

like throwing up. Terrible feeling. Then I start to feel nothing at all.[14]

However, while it is easy to name the husband as the person who inflicts physical abuse, it is more difficult to discern the identity of the agent who inflicts this latter form of abuse.

Unlike Kosinski's boy, who is merely a recording consciousness, Walker's Celie offers her account to an Other, either as God in her diary entries, or as her sister, Nettie, in her letters. Again, returning to Lacan's psychoanalytic model, Celie's story cannot be told as a full story because her husband, like the repressive Censor, hides Nettie's replies. Celie does not know that the replies exist until her friend, Shug Avery (her husband's lover), helps her to locate them. Celie has always regarded her sister with admiration, as the younger, prettier, more literate and more competent woman she wishes she could be. Once Celie discovers the letters and reads about her sister's mission work in Africa, it is almost as if the act of reading itself effects a kind of recovery. The sister returns to America and restores to Celie the children she had borne as the result of ostensibly incestuous rapes and had given up for adoption. At the same time, another recovery occurs, perhaps as a reply by the Otherness whom Celie calls "God," a presence to Celie even in silence. As the novel concludes, we see how Celie discovers in herself a beauty and intelligence and competence which she had so admired in her sister. It is tempting to call this grace. No longer is the speech a fragmentary free association, but rather it is a full speech which offers the reader a sense of wholeness.

To round out this study, I should like to offer for consideration Michael Ondaatje's The English Patient. As the title indicates, the novel revolves around the care of a patient, a man who, for want of a better moniker, is identified as "the English patient," a man burned beyond recognition, without a name, left in the care of a nurse, Hana, at the end of the Allied campaign

in Italy. The novel unfolds alongside the patient's drifting consciousness, from memory to memory, in what might best be described as a self-constituting narrative, for it is only in the telling that we learn the patient's identity. Like the patient, each of the other characters in the story's present time has experienced a loss: for David Caravaggio, it is the loss of his thumbs during the course of an interrogation, and for the others, Hana and Kip, it is the loss of comrades in separate explosions. All three hover about the abandoned monastery which serves as a temporary hospice, as if seeking a boon from the English patient before he dies. Indeed, the patient's salvific potential appears on the first page:

> Every four days, she washes his black body, beginning at the destroyed feet. She wets a washcloth and holding it above his ankles squeezes the water onto him, looking up as he murmurs, seeing his smile. Above the shins the burns are worst. Beyond purple. Bone.
>
> She has nursed him for months and she knows the body well, the penis sleeping like a sea horse, the thin tight hips. Hipbones of Christ, she thinks. He is her despairing saint.[15]

Perhaps the patient holds out for the others the promise of wholeness: with his broken body he will bear away their pain, if only they can name him.

But there is another character hidden in these pages whose suffering is greater and whose pain runs deeper. For six years, the world has been embroiled in war. Again and again, we find the body described as landscape: there is a "cliff of skin"[16] and "the valley of his fingers."[17] We even witness a blurring between cartography and anatomy:

> He traces his black hand along the Numi River till it enters the sea at 23o 30' latitude. He

continues sliding his finger seven inches west, off the page, onto his chest; he touches his rib.[18]

The English patient recalls a time before the war when he worked on expeditions sponsored by the National Geographic Society, exploring in the desert, seeking the legendary Cave of Swimmers, with ancient paintings on its walls. Engrossed in their maps and fueled by local legends, the expedition did, indeed, discover the lost cave. But it was in the cave that the patient left his injured lover while he journeyed to seek help, where his lover died before he could return. The cave was a womb, perhaps, to a prehistoric culture, but also it served as a tomb. And so we see how the particular wounds of individual characters reveal a corresponding affliction of cosmic dimensions.

Accompanying the English patient throughout the novel is his volume of Herodotus, the father of history, and into this volume the patient has pasted tokens from his own story, as if it were a scrapbook. Like the expedition in the desert, reading Herodotus for clues about the cave's location, we read Herodotus - or at least the scraps stuck between its pages - for clues about the patient's identity. Perhaps here, in Ondaatje's novel, we observe more forcefully than in the preceding novels how an utter lack – in this instance, a lack of identity – demands a narrative. We observe, too, how the narrative, once it begins, demands a reply. Here, the English patient draws his story from that vague neverworld of a morphine induced stupour, and as the account gains clarity, the others identify him as Count Ladislaus de Almásy. Meaning emerges. For their part, the others find in Almásy a reply to their particular fields of emptiness which they fill with stories all their own.

The English Patient is written in the idiom of the not-modern. There is no linear narra-

tive, only the freely associative consciousness of a medically supervised drug addiction. Nor is there a stated purpose for the novel, no certain destination towards which the plot ineluctably carries the reader. Just as the novel's form manifests no necessary orderliness, so too its content: it concerns the aftermath of war and the attempts of its victims to search out meaning. Nevertheless, little salvations do happen. By caring for the patient, Hana finds a way to work through her grief for the loss of a friend and for the general numbness that has crept over her through the course of the war. Similarly, by attending to Almásy's story, Caravaggio has learned the truth – contrary to his suspicions it was not Almásy who betrayed him to his interrogators. And finally, the reader, too, finds release from what has appeared through most of the novel as Almásy's reprehensible duplicity, discovering after all that his conduct was grounded in that most romantic, most utterly modern, of motives – love.

It is true that many authors - particularly those writing in response to the existential problems posed by two world wars – produced works devoid of integrative possibility, and did so principally by denying the Otherness of the Divine. Thus we read of overwhelming bureaucratic complexity in Kafka, an endless deferral of meaning in Beckett, and a sense of the absurd which renders affect irrelevant in Camus. Notwithstanding a widespread acknowledgement of the threats posed by complexity, indeterminacy, and contingent strings of events, today's authors nevertheless refuse to adopt these facts as the sole ground for their writings. These facts loom large, but they necessitate nothing. And so a boy who is brutalized by angry villagers finds the power of speech; a woman who is systematically beaten and raped finds within herself an unexpected creativity; and a man destroyed by the moral ambiguities of war asserts his identity even as he dies. In each instance, the author is unequivocal: it is impossible – perhaps even unintelligible – to speak of a reconciliation of protagonist to personal suffering. But even without recon-

ciliation, a wholeness is possible.

Notes

1. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity: a Report on the Knowledge (of God)" in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3.

2. Vestiges of medievalism persist today, with the knighting of rock singers, the publication of horoscopes in daily newspapers, and institutional forms still commonly found in churches, universities and fraternal organizations.

3. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein or Modern Prometheus*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), 36.

4. See Janet Wolff, "The Death of the Author" in *The Social Production of Art*, (London: MacMillan Press, 1981), 117-136.

5. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, (New York: Noonday Press, 1988).

6. Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 101-120.

7. Here, I draw upon Jonathan Scott Lee, *Jacques Lacan*, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990) 31 ff.

8. Jonathan Scott Lee, *Jacques Lacan*, 44.

9. Ibid.

10. Jerzy Kosinski, *The Painted Bird*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1965), 18.

11. Mircea Eliade provides a helpful exegesis of the symbolic burial as an initiatory ritual in *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1957), 188 ff.

12. James Park Sloan, *Jerzy Kosinski: a Biography*, (New York: Dutton, 1996).

13. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), 23.

14. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, 43-44.

15. Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, (Toronto: Vintage Books, 1992), 3.

16. Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, 4.

17. Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, 42.

18. Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, 167.