

*On the Theme of to Portray
is to Betray*

quartet

PAUL MAGEE

— NO. 364

Is a bit of white paper with black lines on it like a human body?

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel had obviously never heard of the experimental novel.

His *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, written in the 1820s, sets forth two possible approaches to the ‘science of art’. The first, the method of ‘art scholarship’, concerns itself with the history of particular arts, via an appreciation of the individual works that comprise them. Given that ‘every work belongs to its age, to its nation and to its environment’, such a method requires vast historical knowledge.¹ It is not overly concerned with ‘theorizing proper ... although no doubt it frequently busies itself with abstract principles and categories, and may give way to this tendency without being aware of it’.² The second approach is exemplified by the ‘abstract philosophy of the beautiful’ found in Plato.³ Objects, for Plato, are to be comprehended ‘not in their particularity, but in their universality’, and the truth of art does not reside in the individual work, but rather in the idea of art as such. Hegel describes this second method as ‘science abandoning itself independently to reflection on the beautiful’, and he, needless to say, feels no such abandon.⁴ *Why are you telling me this?*

Hegel argues that a properly scientific aesthetics traverses both extremes. True science is both empirical and conceptual. Just as he would elsewhere claim that the history of the world is the world, here he argues that art is nothing other than the particular works that comprise it. For however one understands Hegel’s ‘idealism’, his commitment to the actuality of the object is clear here, as in all his works. And yet this empirical focus on individual works is no mere art scholarship, for Hegel believes that the particular work is always and necessarily experienced as something more than itself. Hegel’s point is that art is artificial, and consciously perceived as such. Art does not deceive its readers with an illusion of reality, as the common-sense notion has it, but rather pretends to deceive them. For the communicative power of the work of art lies precisely in the fact that we recognise its artificiality, its status as a work within a given genre, following certain conventions, set in a particular frame. What the work really points to, beyond the page, is the existence and actions of a creative consciousness, as that consciousness works through a given set of symbols to express itself. For reading is all about experiencing another’s mind. In the lack. Which makes it a matter of desire.

The reason I borrow Hegel’s introduction to the ‘science of art’ to introduce my own is that his aesthetics is more than mere aesthetics. Through it, Hegel opens inroads into the fictive dimensions of reality itself. The innate artificiality of art, he argues, heightens one’s awareness of the necessarily symbolic, and desirous, nature of all lived experience. Art reminds us that conversations (just like poems, sculptures, portraits, essays) always point—*I hear what he is saying, but what is he really saying?*—beyond themselves. I invoke these registers of Hegel’s paranoid discourse because my purpose in the following is to use literature to

crack open the everyday, to write about neurosis and psychosis, how they write their way into the real world around us, the dinner table, this novel, a Greek tragedy, I mean Oedipus complex. Whole edifices of political and social beliefs begin to totter the moment you see that people have the same structure as works of art. One such belief, the Oedipus complex, is the opposition of science and art, an opposition Hegel cannot help buying into, for all his attempts to present his dialectic as somehow more of a science than science itself. But then, and this is my other reason for introducing Hegel's introduction, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel had obviously never heard of the experimental novel.

Write a novel and see what happens. *That* is the scientific way to learn what literature is. You form a hypothesis as to the nature of literature, test it through an act of novel writing, observe what happens and then write up the results. What better way to theorise the novel, than by witnessing it coming into being 'out of the necessity of its own inner nature', that is, in the creative activity of one's own body? This, the lived experience of artistic creation, is the empirical procedure of aesthetic inquiry that escaped Hegel in his rush to set the dialectic in motion. At least he had one. Compare the contemporary university, where the very question 'what is art?' is seen as too indifferent to the particularities of time, place and power to merit serious attention. This is the glory of (I invoke Hegel's category) 'art scholarship', a historicist endeavour whose hegemony, and post-structuralism has done nothing to alter this, is now such that whole literature departments exist whose members cannot even hazard a theory as to what literature is. The experimental novel, in such a thinking, is a historically specific entity of European modernism, its ideologies/discourses/phallogocentricities of progress, and so what? To my mind, the right to profess literature should only be accorded to those who have tried to produce it. Experimentally. Write a novel, see what happens, and form your theory of just what literature is in the process. Ha ha ha that's a fun way to lose all your academic friends.

It's the tall buildings at UTS that make me feel so dizzy.⁵ Ever since enrolling in this Doctorate of Creative Arts, I have known that I would be exploring the edge of science and literature. I came upon the idea of creating an experimental novel and treating it literally as an experiment. In the same instant I realised that it would be set entirely on the fourteenth floor. This coincidence intrigues me, for I have always suspected a radical similarity between the scientific and the creative act. Where do such intuitions come from? *Intuition* is from the Latin *tueri*, to look, meaning 'to look within', and implying that there is already something there, readily formed, in your head, for you to observe. And then? Having settled upon 'the length, the province and the tone' of the work, 'I betook myself', Edgar Allen Poe writes of his poem *The Raven*, 'to ordinary induction'.⁶ The poem, Poe argues, 'proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem'.⁷ So too with my novel; having stumbled upon the fourteenth floor setting for the work,

the conclusion that this premise led me to (that the novel would take the form of a multiple personality disorder) impressed itself upon me as if with the force of logic. I will detail this process at greater length above but for the moment the intimation that artistic creativity may well be an observational science suggests that not only my novel, but indeed all novels are experimentally generated. But let me leave all the questions my literary investigations will occasion suspended for the moment, and as if in mid-air.

Splat.

What is science? 'It is the enforced element in the history of our lives', writes Charles Saunders Peirce, defining *experience*, the concept at the heart of his theory of experimental practice.⁸

The act of observation is the deliberate yielding of ourselves to that *force majeure*—an early surrender at discretion, due to our foreseeing that we must whatever we do be borne down by that power, at last. Now the surrender which we make in *Retroduction* is a surrender to the insistence of an Idea. The hypothesis, as The Frenchman says, *c'est plus fort que moi*. It is irresistible, it is imperative.⁹

Science involves a yielding, a voluntary passivity to the force of what one observes. And yet what one observes in all its *force majeure* is not brute nature, but rather the 'insistence of an Idea'. Peirce has no time for the equation of science and dogma. He tends to view the efforts of philosophers in that light, and suggests that the two terms—*science* (from the Latin for 'knowledge') and *philosophy* (from the Greek for 'love of learning')—must have been swapped in the cradle.¹⁰ The scientist, for Peirce, is the one who yields, in love of learning, to 'the lesson that the universe has to teach'.¹¹ Yet Peirce is no sensationalist either, for what the senses perceive in nature, at the 'insistence of an Idea', is a universe of symbols. So what is reality, then? 'Perhaps', he argues, 'there isn't any such thing at all ... it is but a retroduction, a working hypothesis'.¹²

— A HISTORY OF MIRRORS

The university is in the central Sydney suburb of Ultimo, its high-rise tower visible as you come up from the tunnels of Central Station and into the light. My pilgrimages here have two main resonances for me. The word *ultimo* (in Latin the last, furthest, most extreme, in both time and space) makes me think of my last academic work, my first book, *From Here to Tierra del Fuego*, an ethnography of the travellers I found at the 'Uttermost part of the Earth'.¹³ As if I have opened that distant book of travels onto the street and walked right into it. Only this is Sydney. And the extreme I walk into in Ultimo is as close to me and my own

as Tierra del Fuego is far away. For it's in the shadow of that huge brutalist tower, the windows of the higher floors shut tight against potential suicides, that, late one night back in November 1998, in a laneway, and for no known reason, was beaten to death. She was thirty-one.

No-one knows who did it, or what for. I don't even know exactly where the laneway is. Somewhere in Ultimo, a place small enough for me to have walked down that lane many times already. I don't know. Every time I return to UTS I remember that I have yet again forgotten to ask which one. I wander around Ultimo like a lost memory, not knowing, wondering, concussed.

But what I have known, ever since I enrolled at the university in the last month of 1999, is that I would be paying for it in funeral rites. For it always seems to me that it is which casts a shadow on the tower, and not the other way round. A shadow from nowhere, from I don't know where, from a laneway, a gutter, a call to the police.

But if utterly conditions the sort of novel I can write in these premises, it does so as a mirror directing me to other sites and other selves. I want to write just for her—she was a woman of such rare colours. But I find myself directed, like a law of optics, from to the deaths of others I've known. It is almost geometrical, a question of 'lines, planes and bodies', as Spinoza put it in *The Ethics*, his formalisation of the passions.¹⁴ A history of mirrors

Merri Creek is she happy, washed-up, plastic?

The aftertaste exists it's real

It was some other bridge

mirrors, daily

Put a knife

through the eye

of the Sun

with a twist that says

you're not real

but your death

the real recyclable

floating garbage

that you could build a house on

and swing from the rafters

like a creek-jumping child

with bottle-top treasures for eyes

blackened. Wandering Ultimo, trying to find, or at least the laneway, takes me into the part of my mind where, who killed himself, back in Melbourne, in May 1999, is missing.

Aged thirty-nine. We first met amid a group of tedious academic historians. I told him I wanted to do a PhD on the topic of repetition, which is usually too much for historians to deal with. 'Like in a *da capo* aria?' he replied, and I knew that we would be talking about opera and literature and life from then on. tumbled around him and a bottle of pills, the thousands and thousands of opera CDs literally holding the walls up collapsing, at least in this metaphor, I don't know, I felt, such was the fragility of my homeless head, that he had killed myself.

This is another poem I wrote round about then:

I ate the best minds of my generation, rot
dribbled down the sides of my chin
and not throwing up
To what sight
do you shut that eye off
do you dream it to death
do you drink it all down
to one black painting
that swallows the frame

I can't think of this project without folding back into the townhouse where drank himself down not far from here in Melbourne, nor, and here my train of thought races ahead of me daily, from Sydney Central and back to Melbourne again, to Malvern station, where my sister in 1992, and while I was overseas to myself, threw herself into, a train.

was psychotic at the time. She'd tried the night before to be voluntarily admitted, only to be told that if she was well enough to commit herself, she was well enough to look after herself. Beds were needed for the involuntary cases. Perhaps for cases like herself, involuntarily committed so often in the past which was suicide. Sometimes by me. I can't live with those betrayals, even more so because they were necessary. Who stole my face?

Have you ever betrayed someone? Once, after I had spent hours convincing her just to stay in the same room with me, to put the sewing scissors down, that the dog hadn't been programmed by our parents to spy on us, that I wasn't squeezed up against the wall like an eggwhite eyeball, that the television was our friend, that the police now arriving weren't the police, knowing full well by then that I had been deceiving her, that I was handing her over to them (that's called commitment) stopped on the threshold of the television room from which she was now being led, the prospect of yet more months in the sick heavens of psychotropic drug stupor ahead of her. On the threshold she looked back. I was a mess in a chair, my face in my hands. 'I love you, Paul', she called back to me, like the she now is, 'Do you love me?' And I, like the ghost I am, couldn't answer.

I was fifteen, half my age now. Give me my face back.

Or just tell me who. The mystery of 's suicide makes me realise that, in grieving, I was grieving a murder too. For who was *he* when he did it? Who killed him? The same unidentified person who killed? A person suicides. But who kills them? Who? Because I remember her, her craziness, often so gorgeous and inspiring, her capacity for friendship, her ability not to care what anyone thought about her being psychotic. I even remember, at long last, her love. But I have no idea who did it. And why does this question seem utterly linked to the fact that this is my third attempt since age twenty-six, my last degree, my Tierra del Fuego, at writing a doctorate? I have come to realise over that time that a thesis, whatever the topic, is basically an act of grieving. And I want it to end. But what?

Mirrors happen, daily

Who killed me?

— WHAT IS IT, TO BLOW UP A BOOK?

The poet Vladimir Mayakovsky writes of tending his new Soviet passport for the first time to Western border officials: 'They looked at it like a hand-grenade, like it were about to blow up.' Obviously poetry does not have quite the same effect as an exploding passport. That is to say, this anecdote about early twentieth-century international relations will only take me so far into a theory of the sort of books Mayakovsky authored, a theory of betrayal itself. Though then again ...

In January 1981, the Frankfurt Opera's staging of *Aida* opened with Radames, the captain of the Egyptian guard, the hero of the opera, alone on stage and dressed in a contemporary bourgeois business suit. Radames moved around the stage throughout the overture, as if in a dream, grabbed a nearby shovel, then proceeded, still in business suit, to dig a hole through the floorboards of the stage. He pulled out some sand, a sword, his Egyptian helmet and, finally, a sculpted head of Aida herself. With which the opera began. Only performances were interrupted nightly, with whistles, catcalls, and even bomb threats.¹⁵ There are buttons you should not press. Nightly. For if the past accessed in literature and the arts is a foreign country, the borders call forth their own defences.

Though, in truth, the borders I am approaching are rather more local: the defences of one's own body. Which are absolutely necessary. As are the arts themselves. Among the various 'processes of mortification' that Erving Goffmann identifies in the inductive and punitive procedures of 'total institutions' like the army, the church and the mental asylum is 'the unavailability of fantasy materials such as movies and books'.¹⁶ In Goffmann's list, depri-

vation of fantasy materials appears, alongside the withholding of food and shelter. This is quite a startling finding. That the absence of the arts may constitute ‘a violation of the self’s boundaries’ seems almost absurd; surely *we* and our fantasy materials are strictly separable entities.¹⁷ But then I think how my present life would look and sound without nothing to distract me from it.

Or I imagine it the other way round, which is the same thing: the dearth of fantasy materials suffered by the psychotic judge Daniel Schreber, by dint of the fact that all he could see around him was his own face. In reference to his realisation that ‘everything that happens’, viz. everything on earth, ‘is in reference to me’, Schreber writes that

[t]his completely absurd conception, which was at first naturally incomprehensible to me but which I was forced to acknowledge as a fact through years of experience, becomes apparent at every opportunity and occasion. For instance, when I read a book or a newspaper, one thinks that the ideas in them are my own; when I play a song or an opera arrangement for the piano, one thinks that the text of the song or opera expresses my own feelings.¹⁸

The more you read Schreber’s *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, the more you realise the horror of such complete narcissism, that is, idealism. You need to find your escapism outside of your own body. Or it will become a prison, a ‘violation of the self’s boundaries’ (or a work of art, something I shall discuss in relation to cosmetics).

Goffmann’s finding perhaps reveals why the Frankfurt audience could not bear to see itself, outside itself, as so many bourgeois (bourgeois dreaming of being Radames, and then starring in an opera). And why Mayakovsky’s poetic lifework, so *I*-bound in its reference, tended so unremittingly toward the suicidal. For people are walking books, really. And some of them blow up.

Inside:

Every sinner thus carries with him into the world beyond death the instruments of his own punishment; and the Koran says truly, ‘verily you shall see hell; you shall see it with the eye of certainty,’ and ‘hell surrounds the unbelievers’. It does not say ‘will surround them,’ for it is round them even now.¹⁹

In another place, another time. For surely that’s what art and literature is for: to transport us.

But is that possible? Turn to seventeenth-century Amsterdam, where Benedict Spinoza, the descendant of exiled Portuguese Jews, heretic and outcast of the Amsterdam synagogue, composed his *Ethics*:

[W]e can only distinctly imagine distance of time, like that of space, up to a certain limit, that is, just as those things which are beyond two hundred paces from us, or whose distance from the place where we are exceeds that which we can distinctly imagine, we are wont to imagine equally distant from us and as if they were in the same plane, so also those objects whose time of existing we imagine to be distant from the present by a longer interval than that which we are accustomed to imagine, we imagine all to be equally distant from the present, and refer them all to one moment of time.²⁰

Distant places and past times, once out of sight, all appear on the same screen, according to Spinoza. My mental image of Amsterdam is just as clear, from here in Melbourne, as my image of Sydney, 'equally distant from us ... as if they were in the same plane'.

Surely this is the truth of writing also; when I read twelfth-century Sufi texts like Abu Hamid Al-Ghazzali's (in modern translation) they speak just as vividly to me as Mayakovsky's eighty-year-old verse. All writers speak in the same 'one moment of time', whether they are writing from the nineteenth-century Leipzig lunatic asylum, the twenty-first-century Melbourne study, or the seventeenth-century lens-grinding workshop in which Spinoza worked, and doubtless made many of his most accurate observations. His optic is clear. There is only one other time, only one other place to the present: the flat screen of the imagination. You and your phantasy. The borders of the body between. There's no other way.

Spinoza could well—conceptually at least—have invented the television set. I say this, changing channels back to Mayakovsky, because of a statistic that haunts me. The single greatest cause of domestic house fires in Moscow, when I lived there in the early 1990s, was the random and periodic explosion of Soviet-made TV sets. This is not a logical connection. For people are walking books, really. And some of them blow up.

This is perhaps enough of an indication of where I want to take this chapter. Right here. Forget another place, another time, and literature is suddenly a mirror for the ego and its other, the reader and the words on a page. What words behind those words? This literature search will hence reveal itself as a quest for the being (the nature, the spirit, the 'You' as the Sufis would say) of literature itself. Who are you? Who killed me?

The question of betrayal—and the broader question of the arts in general, what they do and why—motivates the scientific experiment to follow. My hypothesis is that the literary work can be read like a book because people are themselves read like books.

A fact that is often simply out of their hands. Take the face. 'I felt as if it had nothing to do with me' writes a victim of massive facial disfigurement, of her new mirror reflection:

it was only a disguise. But it was not the kind of disguise which is put on voluntarily by the person who wears it, and which is intended to confuse other people as to one's identity. My disguise had been put on me without my consent or knowledge like the ones in fairy

tales, and it was I myself who was confused by it, as to my own identity ... It was only a disguise, but it was on me for life. It was there, it was there, it was real.²¹

The subject's face, now no longer hers, is 'only a disguise', and yet it is one she cannot remove 'on me for life'. It's utterly tragic. It is as if she has realised the arbitrariness of the symbolic function (the face as a mask, a token in a network of informational exchange and self-enactment, an artificial construct which 'had nothing to do with me') at exactly the same mirror moment in which she realises the immutability of the expression it has assumed in her. It's written into her very features.

This may seem extreme. Clearly people are not read just for their looks. But then again, when someone wants to read you the wrong way, isn't it similar? 'My disguise had been put on me without my consent or knowledge.' Isn't that what it is like, when someone reads you wrong, sentences you, in your very own words, to play out a part that you do not own as your own. They steal your face. It feels that physical.

Whereas the creative work attempts to put the best face on things. And if it is not literally the face I am talking about, then it is something like one's personality. Though a personality is rather more like a face than one might think. After all you don't choose your personality (nor your death mask). The word *personality* is derived from the Latin *persona*, which denotes the tragic or comic mask worn by the actors of classical drama. A disturbing thought: a personality may well be a mask in its function as a symbol of artifice and illusion, but it is also a mask in the sense of a face reduced of all gestural or semantic lability, the walled-up castle of an imprisoning ego. The *I* from which Mayakovsky shot himself in the head. You steal your own face. That's what a personality is.

These are just hypotheses, awaiting scientific verification.

Like the following: if the work is read like a person, it is because it is read for the impress it bears of its author's mind, of his or her personality. Hence the extraordinary opening to Hans Jurgen Syberbeg's film of Wagner's opera *Parsifal*, which presents the work's overture *via* a series of long tracking shots in and around a house-high model of Wagner's head.²² Tresses and buttresses come into view, revealing that the head is in fact a stage set, populated with the cast of the production to follow. What is the *Parsifal*, Syberberg seems to be asking, if not an insight into the mind of its superego-maniacal creator?

The creative work puts the best face on things literally. For there is a world of difference between being read like a book and being read as the author of a book. Beauty resides in consciously recognised artifice, which explains the extraordinary fact that cosmetics actually work. The suspension of disbelief runs right up to the beauty of the face itself, thank God. And it is this that explains how Hegel could include bodily adornment, alongside poetry, painting and playwriting, in his discussion of the various arts.²³

I would say that all of the arts are, ultimately, arts of bodily adornment, though again this claim awaits verification.

Illustration.

Expiation.

But what am I doing here, writing this self-portrait of books that explode like people, of missing faces, of me blown up—where are you my work I was given this doctorate to write?—in words and ideas all over the page, of cosmetics, of blood, of bodily adornment.

This is an exploded novel, a term I take from Maud Manoni, who in 1969 set up an ‘exploded institution’, an institution for mentally deranged, sociopathic and otherwise disturbed children, whom she sent out to places all over the French countryside, to reintegrate them into the community from which they were cast (as described in her *Words Have Weight. They Are Alive: What Has Become of Our ‘Mad’ Children?*).²⁴ Rather than locking them into a building. My novel is all over the place, an explosion, a scientific experiment gone wrong, a hand grenade, one me too many, a countryside of disturbed children, an attempt to try again.

Let me bury my dead.

Through the story of a science project, a doctorate that exploded.

The report upon which follows above

(or was that below?

Maybe all novels are exploded novels)

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 23. Hegel, *Introductory Lectures*, p. 49.
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