

Introduction: Anywhere but Kansas

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I WAS NEARLY TEN when my parents gave me a chemistry set for Christmas. It came in a handsome wooden box and contained a rack for test tubes, as well as niches where vials of powerful powders might be kept. There was a little packet of sensitive paper (litmus, I think), a knobbed glass rod, the obligatory manual, a metal loop for suspending a test tube over a flame, a conversion table (ounces into spoons), and suitably exciting poison labels. Dreams flew out of that box when its lid was lifted: dreams of bombs and poisons, of plots described in disappearing ink, of odors distressful to the weak. I set up a small lab in the basement and there I performed my experiments. "Performed" was the right word. "Experiment" was not. For I didn't follow the booklet where it led, or listen to its lectures. I slopped about, blending yellow with white and obtaining brown, mixing crystals with powders and getting dust, combining liquids with solids and making mud.

Later, in high school, I would take chemistry the way I took spring tonics and swallowed headache pills. Although I broke beakers and popped little pieces of potassium into puddles of water to watch the water fly, I did occasionally manage to obey tutorial instructions as well, repeating experiments which others had long ago undertaken. My predecessors had asked their questions of Nature with genuine curiosity, and waited, like an eager suitor, her reply. My method displayed a different spirit, which was to fudge my procedures in order to obtain the result already written in the chemmy books. I was not being taught to experiment, or even to repeat experiments. I was being taught to cheat.

An experiment, I would learn much later, when I studied the philosophy of science in graduate school, had to arise from a real dissatisfaction with existing knowledge. There was a gap to be filled, a fracture to be repaired, an opening to be made. Nature's interrogator had to know how to ask the correct question, and to state it so clearly that the answer would be, in effect, an unambiguous "yes" or "no," and not a nobby wobble. Every experiment required a protected environment and an entirely objective frame of mind. The results should be quantifiable, and the process repeatable. Every successful repetition spoke favorably for the quality of the

first occasion. Furthermore, experiments were never carried out against the rules, but were performed, like surgery, always well within them, otherwise they would not be recognized as experiments at all.

What is generally called “experimentation” in the arts, more nearly resembles my ignorant and youthful self-indulgent mess-making. I was acting out a fantasy, not learning anything about chemistry, and while every smelly substance I concocted had to have been made according to chemistry’s laws, I did not know those laws, nor could I have learned them from anything I was doing. And how many botches have been excused by calling them the results of the experimental spirit? We have to imagine an artist wondering what would happen if she were to do this, try that, perform a play in silence, omit the letter “e” in three pages of French prose, construct a world of clothes-hanger wire, color walls with cow manure. Having found out, though, then what?

A good experiment is as perfect and complete as the Parthenon, but the word, in popular speech, is derogatory, as if the experiment were going to be on the audience. Experiments, moreover, even if elegant and crucial, are admired for their results—the “yes” or “no” they receive—and (except for specialists) not for their procedures. We don’t want to read interrogations, we want to read results.

Critics, patrons, academicians, characteristically insecure and immature beneath their arrogant demeanors, are devoted to rules and definitions of decorum. Scarcely has an innovative form, a daring method, a different point of view, established itself than its codification begins: it must be given a catchy name (and labeled “experimental” perhaps, at least avant-garde, or something even trendier such as “existential,” “absurd,” “metafictional,” “minimal,” “surreal,” “post-mod”); next, its superficial qualities are catalogued (it looks to the future in this respect, remains unchanged in that, returns to the past right here, but seems, at another point, content with the status quo); its cultural links are then explored and evaluated (does it reveal the sorry *Geist* of the *zeit*? does it express malaise? is it symptomatic of some social sickness? is it toughly feminist? is it resolutely gay?); finally it will be given a fresh critical vocabulary, a new jargon to fit this latemost fad like a cowboy boot pulled over a golfing shoe. Since, and sadly, by the relentless use of commandments and plenty of otiose rhetoric, the latest craze can be put in place as quickly as an ugly tract gets built; it is therefore repeatedly necessary for writers to shake the system by breaking its rules, ridiculing its

lingo, and disdainning whatever is in intellectual fashion. To follow fashion is to play the pup.

Many fictions which appear to be “experimental” are actually demonstrations. When Galileo dropped his proofs from Pisa’s tower, the proof was purely in the seeing. To demonstrate an equal fall for both a lead and paper ball, he’d have had to put Pisa’s tower in a vacuum tube and monitor the competitive descent of his samples with instruments more precise than any he had at hand. But that was not the point: the point was the persuasion of the eye and the subversion of a backward principle. If Doctor Johnson claims you can’t write a satisfactory poem about a coal mine, the poet is, of course, called upon to write it. Disgracing one more rule won’t dissuade everybody of the view that art is made by recipe, because the constitutionally constipated will begin drawing up additional regs at once; but it will encourage the intelligent suspicion that neither by breaking nor abiding is quality achieved.

So “subversive” is often a good name for some of these fictions. Between my muck-about basement days and the discipline provided by my high school class, I enjoyed an interlude as a bomber. With sulfur from my then neglected set, a little potassium nitrate purchased from the pharmacist, and charcoal scraped from any charred board, I discovered that I could make gun powder. By filling pill capsules also obtained at the drug store with my gray mix, and slamming the whole thing with a stone, I could make a very satisfactory bang. It provided me with an exhilarating sense of power. It wasn’t long before I was coating wet string with my concoction in order to make a fuse. However, I was open to experiment: sometimes I wet the string and sometimes I made a paste and sometimes I soaked the string in the grainy mixture. Then a toilet tube packed with paper and powder was set off with a sound so violent it shouted of my success.

“Make it new,” Ezra Pound commanded, and “innovative” is a good name for some kinds of fiction; however, most newness is new in all the same old ways: falsely, as products are said to be new by virtue of minuscule and trivial additions; or vapidly when the touted differences are pointless; or opportunistic, when alterations are made simply in order to profit from perceived improvements; or if applied like a brand, and meant simply to mark a moment, place, or person off from others, and give it its own identity however dopey.

You may be the first to open a play with the word *merde*; or the first to write of America because you discovered it; or the first to detail the production of ball bearings; or be brave enough to say straight out that, actually, the emperor's new clothes are tacky; or be accounted a pioneer because no one had described, before you, how it is to die of a bad disposition. Perhaps your poem on the taste of sperm will cause another sort of sensation. However, innovation that comes to something is nearly always formal. It is the expression of style at the level of narrative structure and fictional strategy. When we describe a writer's way of writing as individual and unique, we are referring to qualities it is often impossible and always unwise to imitate—Beckett is simply Beckett, Proust Proust—but original as their voices may be, they are not, just for that, innovative, because innovation implies the beginning of a new direction, whereas the style of late James (which I have the good taste to admire) has realized its completion and signifies an end.

The style of *Finnegans Wake* was certainly new and inimitable, but it was the cyclical structure of the work which was innovative; it was the polyphony of the text, the principle of the portmanteau, the landscape of the dream, the text's extraordinary musicality, which provided that wealth of stimulating possibilities for other writers.

There is something to be said for just getting away from it all. Writers begin as readers of a driven and desperate kind. Over the hills and far away, Lady Castlemain is meeting her beau beneath a blooming . . . what? . . . chestnut tree; Horatio Le Paige is pitching his last game, the bases are jammed, his arm is sore, the crowd is on his case, the catcher has called for an illegal pitch, which may be his only way out; Baron Pimple has caught Miss Tweeze without her duenna. Readers begin by wanting to be anywhere but here, anywhere but Kansas, and, when those readers begin writing, a good many of them will want to write anything except what they've been reading, not because some of what they read wasn't wonderful, for once upon an unhappy time it took them anywhere but Kansas, but because such writing had become its own Kansas now, and represented dullness and repression and the damnably indifferent status quo. Anything if it's not normal narrative . . . anything but characters given sunken cheeks and a hard stare, yes, better the Tin Woodsman, better the Bert Lahr lion, but also anything other than the predictable plots and routine scenes, neat outcomes, and conventional values . . . anything but Oz. Transportive

fictions make sure of that. Their originality may be secondary to their denial of everyday; their subversive qualities secondary to their profound desire to be anywhere else, anywhere that hasn't Aunt Em, anywhere not over that sentimental rainbow, anywhere so long as it's not to a sequel.

Many times metafiction, because they caressed themselves so publicly, behaved more like manifestos than stories. They were more "explanatory" than "experimental." Instead of showing that something could be done by doing it, they became tutorial, emphasizing technique; teaching the reader how to read; admonishing him for his traditional bourgeois expectations; and directing his attention to art instead of nature, to the reality of the work instead of the reality of the world. That has always been a lesson more than hard to learn, for most people prefer to duck the difficult tedia of daily life, and ask that their experience of the wider world be filtered through layers of sensational detail and false feeling—hence neither living right nor reading well.

Exploding toilet paper tubes had been such a noisy success, I moved on to lead pipe. Into a piece I had found which was about six inches long and half an inch in diameter, I packed plenty of powder, tamping it down with the wooden handle of a small screwdriver, and then closing up both ends with thin, minutely folded, layers of cardboard. Set off by fuse alongside a neighbor's house where I stuck one end in some soft ground like a flare, it exploded with a smoky roar that could be heard for blocks, and fragments of pipe flew everywhere, a large shard penetrating the wall of my friend's front room. I ran as if riding the wind. I believed I heard sirens—police after me? firemen to the house? my father rising toward the higher elevations of his rage? Ah, we do like to fancy our books are bombs, but bombs, we need to remember, in order to make a great show—do their damage, prove a point, teach some slow wit a lesson—have to blow themselves to bits and pieces first.

When learning to play any instrument well, to wrestle, lift weights, dance, sing, write, it is wise to exercise. Try describing a hat in such a way the reader will realize its wearer has just had her dog run over. Practice putting your life into the present tense where you presumably lived it. Do dialogue—let's say—between a hobo and a high class hooker, then between an ambulance chaser and a guy who sells scorecards at the ballpark—let's say—about the meaning of money. Between pints, get the arch of the dart down pat. Shoot foul shots day in and rim out. Pick a sentence at random

from a randomly selected book, and another from another volume also chosen by chance; then write a paragraph which will be a reasonable bridge between them. And it does get easier to do what you have done, sing what you've so often sung; it gets so easy, sometimes, that what was once a challenge passes over into thoughtless routine. So the bar must be raised a few notches, one's handicap increased, the stakes trebled, tie both hands behind your back. Refuse the blindfold, refuse the final cigarette, refuse the proffered pizza. Do dialogue in dialect: a Welshman and a Scot arguing about an onion. Hardest of all: start over.

Of course, if you feel you have mastered at least some of your medium, you can improvise—take its risks and enjoy its pleasures. Now you trust yourself to go the right way like a roach to the kitchen, as if by instinct: taking off from an idle word, a casual phrase, a small exchange between disillusioned lovers, a notion about narrative time you got while reading Bergson, an item in the morning paper; then letting the music lead, a surprising association rule, or a buried meaning rise raw and green and virile as a weed, until the rhythm of the sentence settles in, the idea begins to unfold like a flower, time finds itself without hands, a character begins to speak in an unfamiliar tongue, and the shape of the scene is in front of you—nothing to it—you modify the metaphor, vary the normal flow of feeling . . . yes, it is certainly lovely, the facility between give and go, the rapport you have with your material, ease of flow . . . yet one person's grateful pee is not another's—that's a law about all calls of nature—accordingly, the improviser must be careful to make his modulations, like those riffy moments in music, so splendid they shall not seem contrived, and the best way to do that is to contrive them.

As the reader will surely see, some of the stories in this collection are honestly experimental, a few are demonstrations, others are designed for subversion, not a small number teach, one or two are truly innovative, and I detect signs of improvisation here and there, the energy of exercise, satire's smile, fantasy's furbelows and feathers, novelty's enterprise, the sweat of concision; and, of course, most pieces are a mix of this or that, with even a little of the calm and customary to cool the dish. The intention I rather prefer, among this quiver load of paranormal approaches, is the exploratory, although the word suggests surgery, and as a label is no more suited to the totality of its subject than “innovative,” “subversive,” or “experimental” are.

The explorer sees in front of him an unknown territory, an unmapped terrain, or he imagines there must be somewhere a new route to the Indies, another polar star, gorgons alive and well amid jungle-covered ruins, mountain views and river sources grander than the Nile's, lost tribes, treasure, or another, better, way of life; because he is searching, not inventing; he is trying to find what is already there: regions of life as neglected as his own history, themes as far from general attention as a cavern at the bottom of the sea, structures as astounding as those which show up stained in tissue slices. Explorational fiction records an often painful and disappointing journey, possibly of discovery, possibly of empty sailing; yet never toward what may lie out of sight in the self, since that is what improvisation discloses, but of what lies still unappreciated in the landscape of literature—implications unperceived, conclusions undrawn, directions everyone has failed to follow. The spirit of the explorer may be indeed to scalpel society and show its rotting organs, nor is every implication nice as toast with tea; however the key to this kind of fiction is that the chest, which the existence of the key suggests, must be (or be believed to be) there in six feet of sand beneath the bolt-scarred tree. In that sense, exploration is the work of a realist, however fanciful that reality may seem to those encountering it for the first time.

Maybe we can pun our way to another genre, in as much as labels seem to matter more than their jar. The prefix “ex-” apparently has to be there, since we already have the “explanatory,” the “experimental” and “exploratory,” as well as the sweat from “exercise.” Nevertheless, we ought not to be tied tamely to the past. How about “innoversive fiction”? I like the “metamusical” myself. “Excremental” belongs to Joyce. “Minnovative” describes a movement whose small moment has come and gone. “Exploramental” makes me think of “florabunda,” though I do fancy “post-cynical” and could easily find a use for “metafutile.” Remember when all we had to worry about were the Yellow Press, Blue Movies, and Black Humor?

I could see a plume of gray smoke when I looked back toward my imagined pursuers, and my legs grew longer through every lope (I had experimented, I had made my exclamation point, and I was now being taught), nor did I begin to gasp for breath and feel my blood beating hard in my head, until I had run right out of my neighborhood and saw a strange little shop and strange houses of one story, strange streets lined with

shallow ditches, lots of transplanted Christmas trees, a strange black boat-tailed bird, strange absence of lamps, and felt I had found a country where every noun began with “strange” and “and” was its only connective . . . my boom had blown me farther than the pieces of its pipe . . . to a strange, yes . . . to a strange strange lampless land.