

Metaphysical Tales

The novelist deals with personality, with characters wearing their personae or social masks. He needs the framework of a stable society, and many of our best novelists have been conventional to the verge of fussiness. The romancer deals with individuality, with characters *in vacuo* idealized by revery, and, however conservative he may be, something nihilistic and untamable is likely to keep breaking out of his pages.

The prose romance, then, is an independent form of fiction to be distinguished from the novel and extracted from the miscellaneous heap of prose works now covered by that term. Even in the other heap known as short stories one can isolate the tale form used by Poe, which bears the same relation to the full romance that the stories of Chekhov or Katherine Mansfield do to the novel.

Northrop Frye, from *The Anatomy of Criticism*

The real represents to my perception the things we cannot possibly *not* know, sooner or later, in one way or another . . . The romantic stands, on the other hand, for the things that, with all the facilities in the world, all the wealth and all the courage and all the wit and all the adventure, we never *can* directly know; the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and our desire.

Henry James, from the Preface to *The American*

So Frye sums up the mode of the romance and the tale, and James suggests their essentially metaphysical nature. And *metaphysical* here does not mean merely Dr. Johnson's surprising and unnatural operations of wit and ingenuity. It takes its original sense: beyond external nature.

The three tales here had their genesis in the memory of places visited 20 years ago, 20 indispensable years no doubt, for Hobbes says that imagination is nothing but decaying sense and that memory is imagination with a sense of the past added to it—fractional truths worth keeping. When one thinks of places in fiction one immediately calls to mind setting, ambiance, symbolic backdrops, and the like, all important ingredients, but the critical aspect of place for the writer of metaphysical tales is its contour, its character as a medium. Space, Kant tells us, is not an aspect of external

nature; it is a mode of human understanding. No wonder space is never empty. Michelson and Morley's luminiferous ether. Who hasn't seen it on winter nights warping the light of stars in its delicate crystalline drift? And now Einstein's curvature. And black holes, cosmic Pirandello, every exit an entry. And what new hypotheses to come? The writer of metaphysical tales treasures them all, these ruins of scientific theories out of which he rummages evidence of undulant worlds.

So, 20 years ago a black cabby drove an American ensign out to an allegedly famous deserted chapel on the outskirts of Mombasa. And when the two had debouched and taken a dozen steps across the chapel yard, grassless under the shadow of huge trees, gibbons began to stream out of the windows by the hundreds. The ensign was amazed, because the monkeys scarcely touched the ground. They seemed to swim upward along invisible currents into the foliage of the trees. And when they were all out of sight again and their high chittering and echo in the ensign's ear, a banana floated down and landed at the ensign's feet with a gentle plop. Around it slowly rose a violet dust, like the excretions sea creatures use to hide themselves from predators—so thick was the air.

Robbe-Grillet and other modern writers have promised to restore objects to their original opaque innocence, bequeath upon them Husserl's phenomenological reduction—an enterprise of great interest to the writer of metaphysical tales, for it is the very opposite of his own. Recall the banana. Suppose the clearing had been littered with stems, peels, rotting fruit, etc. The ensign would have shuffled through them without notice. Or at most he might, being a nautical man, have remarked that African bananas are similar in shape to the hulls of the date-bearing *dhow*s that he recently saw making their year-long passage down the Red Sea. Bananas, dates, *dhow*s, and the oblong curve of the Red Sea—the stuff of Locke and his numerous associationist progeny. But into the chapel yard fell only the one banana. If the ensign interprets its gentle descent, as through a liquid medium, as signature of the amiability of the hand that cast it, then he is safely in the familiar world of the symbolists. But if he looks concertedly at the banana, and looks and looks, while the violet dust resettles, while the sinking sun alters the motley of the trees, and while the silent presence of the monkeys breathes down on him, then the banana will incandesce. And in its glow the ensign will sense a dark network of roots, a sun-shaft bole, a fat summer bending of limbs, and more, much more—Stephen Dedalus's *claritas*, radiance.

Recently I attended a performance by the fantastic Nikolais Dance Theatre. In one dance several performers were enclosed in sheets of red elastic. By clever manipulation of their limbs they made of themselves various polyhedrons: pyramids, pentahedrons, cubes, and the like. In

the background the inevitable electronic music played, backwards of course, resonance rising to ictus. The effect was one of primal disorientation, the eye and inner ear conspiring to derange space. So in this case the characters of the dance actually helped create the angular medium in which they existed. However, in another composition from the same night's entertainment the relationship between the dancer and the dance was quite different. Some dozen performers in plain white were colorfully patterned by slide projectors in the pit: gorgeous striations, streaks of lightning, vortexes, spumes of color exhausted and returning upon their jets, etc. But the dancers were not merely screens to receive the images cast out from the pit; rather they moved—contracted until there was only the omphalic knot of the image, stretched until their hands slipped the veils of projected color, etc. Like both sets of performers, then, the character in the metaphysical tale is at once the geometric proponent of the medium and the human counter-agent who strains against it.

The language of the metaphysical tale is likely to present problems for the contemporary reader, who has been taught that the norm, since Dryden, is limpid flow. But the language of the metaphysical tale does not flow. It gathers into a large liquid pendant, swelling until it occupies the whole space of the tale and assumes its special curvature. In this round refraction of language the reader first sees the actions of the tale appear at the edge as thin vibratile crescents, then swell across the center into broad virtuoso blooms of gesture, and finally exit, concave again, upon the left—leaving, however, the suspicion that none of the events are really exhausted but form a laminous patchwork on the interior of the globe, like successive playbills on a theatre wall. And after that, just before it drops, the globe of words silvers so that the reader sees himself—elfin-eared, apple-cheeked, lynx-eyed—fat master of the sphere. Perhaps all the foregoing action has been only an elaborate preparation for this: the glance in the magic convex mirror.

But to what end these extreme strategies of space, object, personage, and language? It might be argued that the effects are not extreme, that they are the norm, temporarily in eclipse during the two centuries in which the novel displaced the romance and the short story the tale—the brief and anomalous reign of materialism and empiricism—and during which period the great writers, like Dickens and Dostoevsky, had to smuggle into the palace of realism secret elements of romance like ladies of the night. But set aside literary history. There is a more fundamental reason for the writer of metaphysical tales to push his material to the limit. For what is he essentially? A paradox: randy antiquarian and hopeful futurist. He rummages among ancient images—pits and maelstroms, labyrinths and gardens—shards perhaps that a now otiose deity once scattered over the

planet. He stacks them carefully, like the paleontologist who extrapolates huge structures from ossicles that look to others like faceless dice. But the skeleton the writer of metaphysical tales constructs leans ambiguously out of the fronded swamp of pre-history and into the sky of some future night, where Pegasus has overtaken the eagle, and Orion's great club is canted to the east.

Homage to Poe, Kafka, Dinesen, and Borges

The Melon-eaters

Somewhere, perhaps in a dream of starvation, you have seen such melons. They are called bread fruit. At first glance they look like huge breasts, ample to the hungriest mouth. How, you wonder, can the vines sustain them, or the thin bamboo pickets that bend precariously under the weight of the mother fruit? But look more closely. The pale rind is almost translucent. The interior is not so much flesh as a kind of veinal cloud. This conspiracy of sun and soil is decidedly ephemeral, nothing more than a decorative globing of air, a summer festoon against the dark jungle.

Nevertheless, it is true that on a board, under the single blow of a bulawa knife, the melon will split into succulent red halves. Furthermore, these hemispheres will continue for a long time to rock slowly to and fro like objects of great moment, or perhaps like the inconsolably divided androgynes of Plato's fable. You may even begin to imagine that it is not weight but appetency that keeps them rolling so long on their rinds. Ritually, the natives will not touch the fruit until it is still. Meanwhile the pale seeds glisten in the sun as though smeared with a placental fluid.

Now look at the natives. You find a plumpness that matches the melons. But again, look more closely. The hair, thatched elaborately in curious imitation of the construction of their huts, is brittle and frayed. The amber of their eyes is rheumy. The teeth are ramshackle. And note, the heavy breasts and bellies of the women are striated, as you have seen in the flesh of your own women just after delivery, with a kind of gristly separation of the subcutaneous tissue. These people are starving amid an opulence of bread fruit.

Our captain, a man of considerable presence, was a lover of photographs