Spring 2018

"Lily-Brick" Peripheral Documents

Benjamin Holda
bjh115@zips.uakron.edu

Please take a moment to share how this work helps you through this survey. Your feedback will be important as we plan further development of our repository.

Follow this and additional works at: http://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors_research_projects

Part of the Literature in English, North America Commons

Recommended Citation
http://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors_research_projects/652

This Honors Research Project is brought to you for free and open access by The Dr. Gary B. and Pamela S. Williams Honors College at IdeaExchange@UAkron, the institutional repository of The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, USA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Research Projects by an authorized administrator of IdeaExchange@UAkron. For more information, please contact mjon@uakron.edu, uapress@uakron.edu.
General Literary Analysis of *Lily-Brick*

By

Benjamin Holda

Submitted to the Williams’ Honors College

April 27, 2018
In this essay I will lay out everything I think I know about creative writing. The most difficult part of this essay is pretending that I have any concrete knowledge about anything. The following pages will be little more than my confused superstitions, presented as though I thought about any of these broad-blown concepts and ratios while writing (in reality I am throwing my fat fingers at a keyboard, pausing only to vent my supreme frustration).

A. Generalities

Here I will lay out the broadest opinions I have concerning creative writing.

I. Lesson and Beauty

Nabokov (who, despite being born and raised in Russia, is the only worthy writer to work within the English language) claims that a piece of fiction must have three well-realized components: magic, story and lesson. To my appraisal, the lesson end of the triangle, for Nabokov, was often withered and ill-used. The magic and the story, however, were brilliantly realized. Not honed, specifically, not slowly chiseled nor forged, but rather they were the ardent flourishes of an athletic, acrobatic and creative spirit. Nabokov did not write *Pale Fire* because he had both hands around the skull of truth, pressing his thumbs firmly through its eye sockets—mangling and strangling a singular sublime—no, much rather he wrote it because he was Nabokov, and Nabokov himself was a beautiful soul.

Though I do, obviously, idolize Nabokov, I think that his view of a triangle within which a story sits is a mistake steeped in history. I think that *Pale Fire*, and *Lolita*, and the rest of his works do not need that snaggletooth, standalone addition called the lesson. I do not believe that that component achieves distinction from the other two parts. There is no lesson without beauty. There is no hunger or sorrow or joy without beauty. There is no sight without beauty, nor life, nor death. There is a fundamental, faithful link between myself and the world—and yourself and
the world for that matter. It is devotion, belief, investment, whatever you want to call it—and it is beautiful.

What does this mean? I am appealing to metaphysics because in this hypermodern, cynical sphere, one must always be able to trace the roots of one’s argument to the quasi-Buddhist scalings of nothingness in being. Oh lord, what is that black beast of a sentence? Is this why I went to college? To achieve total incoherence, once and for all? To find more and more layers with which to shamefully secret my quiet, ugly opinions from the world? Let’s try again.

I mean to say that beauty in writing is its own lesson. The achievement of beauty is the whole object. Lesson is subordinate to magic—rightfully, lessons are only the masks that beauty wears. In fiction, if one is able to evoke feeling in a casually nihilistic reader, then whatever work they have produced is worthy, and there can be no more discussion.

Why is Nietzsche still read? He is only an amalgamation of Greek myth, Hume, Socratic dialogues, heavy metal poisoning and sexless frustration. I believe that the answer is that nobody before him had been able combine an eighth’s part philosophy with seven parts of pure, unadorned fury. Some aphorisms quiver with energy, as though his writing were only one necessary face of a supermassive core of unarticulated rage. We continue to study Nietzsche because his lessons achieved beauty. There is something miserable and queerly erotic about the destruction of a belief. It piques one’s appetite. It makes one want more, not because the first instance felt any good, but only because human beings have an idiot tendency to probe the unknown—and of course there is the vibrant, wry satisfaction of feeling one’s entire structure of beliefs shift in place then collapse.

II. Didacticism
Keeping the previous section in mind, morals must be discussed. Every writer is going to have something to say—were there no arder to authors, there would be no worth to their texts.

Many very smart people I know are woeful writers (An aside: I used to love the word “very,” but since Trump became president I feel it has been robbed of its simple, crude, unrhetorical flavor). Even the ones with pretensions towards literature have made the entire pursuit into a refined, complex form of masturbation. I knew a fellow who has long since graduated. He applied to several elite MFA schools before leaving Akron to go to a shockingly overpriced graduate program for something or other. He used to thrust his manuscript onto anybody that was known to write creatively—not with the innocent puerility of art-for-art’s sake, but with a mind towards oppression. The fellow clearly passed it around in order to crush the hopes of any dilettante novelist under the weight of his perfect story.

The issue was that his story was amazingly bad—even despite the plot’s being “inspired” to the point of outright plagiarism from a very good short story that he didn’t think I’d read. Every other word was an allusion (an adroitly capitalized “Tantalizing” was meant to evoke the memory of the punishment of Tantalus. In the text it was referencing a caramel apple. He said that the juxtaposition of tantalizing to a treat as traditional and familiar as a caramel apple was meant to evoke images of longing, of homesickness and homelessness. I nodded with pity, because I used to be the same way). An undergraduate novel is not meant to be scrutinized as though it were the Bible—and if you design your work that way, then you will be sorely disappointed. If my manuscript contains anything like these super-dense passages, it is not out of any sort of prideful ego-stroking—I only do not know how to communicate some things just yet.

I used to worship David Foster Wallace, but in the years since I have come to realize just how self-important and indulgent his writing style was. I am convinced that Good Old Neon was
an autobiographical story. Rather than confront the reader with a bizarre calculus of symbols and meanings (*House of Leaves*), I have tried to let my principles guide my writing implicitly. I believe a lot of things about people and our country—but in order for them to be true, they would have to be true of theoretical people, and therefor as characters. Thus I have set about creating interesting people. Could this be considered frustratingly opaque, as far as didacticism is concerned? Absolutely, but if I wanted to write philosophy I would give up this pernicious ghost and write philosophy. Real art may contain a lesson, but is never reducible to lessons.

### III. Style

This is the most important and frustrating part of literature. It is impossible to predict, and must be practiced. The creation and the reception of styles are separated by a great, inscrutable gulf of time and distance—and truthfully, I do not trust people to give me honest feedback about my writing style. I feel like when I ask if the writing was beautiful, people see me as a child holding up a mangled, middle-school art project, demanding transactional praise for my efforts.

Further, I have no style, only instances of style. I have written with simple language in staccato sentences when my narrator was a boy scout. I did it, and people liked it (perhaps, to be truthful, more than my present style), but it felt as though I were holding in a sneeze while writing it (I have a pedant’s passion for strange, specific and elegant words). This story has been written in a more complex style, and I will leave the discussion of that to the more particular essay.

### IV. Industry

Writing is an excruciating process. It is the most difficult thing in the world. At the end of this project I spent an eleven hour day trying to fix up the last eight thousand words. I found when I skimmed back over the affected text that I had made everything worse. There is no path
to good writing—for a fellow that thrives within definite systems, such as college, this is intolerable. Current philosophy has forsaken the objective corollary, which is terrific but all the same frustrating. When do I know that I have stumbled upon the perfect combination of words? I never will, and will only doom myself to an infinite process of editing, where I shear and suture sentences so many times over that I forget what it was I had been trying to say.

I have agonized over the minutiae of sentences—changing “it” to “that” to “this” and back again. Articles, the bones of sentences, can be artistically weaponized. “It” is a needle-like apparatus, and if the tone of a sentence needs to be flattened, but still reference something, “that” becomes preferable to “it.” But “that” is somewhat gothic and declamatory in tone—the narrator ushering the reader in to look at some universally understood entity, like a performer in a freak show.

One would here be entitled to tell me to shut up, and often they do exercise that right, but all the same if I am going to make something I want it to be perfect.

That being said I am still not very good, compared to my aims. In toiling over the minutiae I am certainly missing tremendous structurally important flaws to the actual story. Of course, these things cannot be rushed. I have been writing this story for three months, two of which I have found myself semi-occupied with other schoolwork. It will take me years to accomplish what I want to accomplish. For all my whinging, creative labor is still my favorite sort of labor. I am confident that I can apply myself to one project for years. I am less sure that anything will come of it.

B. Specific Authors

Here I will detail the specific contributors to my current writing.

I. Nabokov
A detail in *Ada*: the “structurally perfect stool,” mentioned twice. All of Nabokov’s lofty language, punctilious phrasings and gorgeous descriptions seem to be the aching arches between downbeats of toilet humor. I loved this more than anything I have read since. It is perfectly, smoothly strange.

Another detail, mentioned as a toss-away aside in *Pale Fire*: the thought of a fascist police office riding a ski-lift, two benches behind a fugitive prince dressed head to toe in violent red, as viewed from a third person perspective. Upon reading the utterly sublime section containing this detail I threw up my hands. *Non ultra.*

I have mentioned my deep veneration for Nabokov. He is flawed, of course, because one can tell that he is so concentrated on aesthetic craft that he loses what he is trying to say. For instance, I, a fairly close reader, was totally surprised to find that a character was all of a sudden dead, where I thought he had been loitering in some back room of the narrator’s world, ready to spring forth at a moment’s notice. He, in truth, had died about a chapter back, but I had missed this, as his death was communicated in a hurly-burly whirlwind of beautiful notions. I run into this problem constantly, and have had to sacrifice some of my favorite phrases for the sake of clarity—surely, there will be more that I have missed.

Another issue with my veneration for Nabokov is that I am not Nabokov. I, unfortunately, am me. Nabokov’s writing comes from a very special place within him. Though I can admire his style, I can never have that special warmth-in-composition that inhabits his pages. I can cobble together abstruse words based upon abstruse intuitions, but I cannot be Nabokov. Nabokov was also synesthetic, in a vivid, intrusive manner. Though I do not share the condition, I do invest words with weighty connotations and personalities, and there is a physical space that I sense, where they clash and melt into one another, out there, somewhere. This is not so unique,
of course, but my prejudices concerning words are stronger than some others. For example, I can still remember the exact time, two years ago, I read in a Melville short story the phrase “He surveyed the scene with splenetic disrelish” and was inordinately disgusted.

May I stop speaking about myself yet? No? Fine.

II. Viktor Frankl

At age twelve I was introduced to the possibility of God’s not being real. As a particularly anxious child I became worried that, were God not out there, then my earthly death would be the end, etc. etc. Everybody has had this thought. Death is banal.

But, more than anxious, I was spiritually prudent. If such a thing were possible, then it would only make sense to approximate it as much as possible, so as to make the end all the more bearable. Note that I was not a wise child, only obsessed with an interminable fear.

So I began to meditate, without really understanding that I was meditating. I would lay in bed, trying to extinguish my consciousness. Who knows why kids do what they do. I would do this for as long as it took to fall asleep, sometimes a few minutes, sometimes hours.

Some nights, after a while, I got very, very close. Some days I would touch it. But once you touch it, you understand that it is everywhere, and you cannot escape it. From twelve until I was seventeen I was consumed by horror, because I did not know how to understand these massive concepts. Nihilism extended to my schoolwork, my family—and eventually, when I was sixteen, to metaphysics. I could not lie on my bed without feeling as though I were dropping out of reality. I became acutely aware of the geometry of my bed, my bookshelf, the corners of my room, and once I was aware of it, I could not help but dismiss it. I fell through the lines and plains, into utter darkness.
In addition, without belaboring the point (and there is a point, I swear), I was failing every subject in school, save for English. Things were not fun. But I happened upon Frankl’s book at seventeen. It gave me a vocabulary by which I could understand myself—theretofore I had only been yelled at by every concerned adult in my life to buckle down and behave—not to blame them of course, they could not have known.

I understood that to an enquiring, rational mind, nihilism is the natural conclusion. Nothing existed, certainly, but the beauty of life lay in fictions. To really understand that the husband or wife you lay with every night is a barely mitigated empty space, materially speaking, is none too conducive to one’s happiness. Wellness, spiritually speaking, depends upon a kept, hallowed spark of belief.

Frankl’s logotherapy provided the basis for most of my post-secondary education. Nearly every paper I have written has used him as a fundamental source. As far as it pertains to my creative writing, it has led me to try and create characters that reflect real people—ones who are scared, ones that do not know what is going on, nor what they want. Life is bewildering. As beautiful as *Les Misérables* is, folks are not struck so often with the divine afflatus. Everything is strange and drenched in connotations. There are times where I do not succeed, where the ostent surrounding my characters wears thin, and they expose their basic mechanics, but I am working to correct them. It must also be said that characters must be obvious vectors if one is to organize a plot. Nonetheless.

III. The Canaille

Other writers I have found influential but do not warrant their own section are Bertolt Brecht (introduced me to Blue Blouse theater), David Foster Wallace (mentioned above), Victor Hugo (lovely, romantic stuff, and he has a talent for cadence. Long, intricate paragraphs end in a
short sentence of three, blasted notes, forceful enough to give one goose bumps), Robert Burns (I just like him), and Hunter S. Thompson—who must be mentioned at some length.

Hunter S. Thompson was one of the most depraved people that has ever lived in the modern United States. He is, I have come to understand, the model for one of my characters. There is a prevalent view in the United States that a man is an island, that a man owes nobody anything. That the rights of the individual cannot be infringed upon. That, counterintuitively enough, is slave morality. Hunter S. Thompson was a coward and a liar, though his prose was vicious. He did not understand the system in which he languished. He thought that the good life was in his unlimited freedom—and he was right, so long as he could rely on new and bestial horrors to pick up the slack in his personal narrative. People need other people. People need love.

I used to adore the man, in my childish yearnings for grace and violence. No longer. Not at all. The only element that separates us from the dust is pity, and Thompson was pitiless, and pitiful. To be untouchable is to be inhuman. There was an experiment to this effect, wherein rats were kept in an insulated utopia, free from strife and predation. It took very little time before the perfectly sheltered colony tore each other apart. There is something in the social spirit that craves conflict, but it is not so strong that the whole of mankind are doomed to inhabit this warrior mode of existence, always looking over-shoulder to see who is coming to replace them. It has taken a great deal of reading and writing to dislodge myself from the subtle indoctrination I have received to the contrary.

There is too much to say, and what I have said cannot cover a fraction of what is important. To recycle a line from my story, I will submit this inadequacy into my own shelf, my own little princedom in infinite academia, in the dead piles of thought and knowledge—in the
reservoir of concerted, commoted human thought. I sever the narrative. I cinch the essay bloodless. I vanish.