

# After Postmodernism: Performatism in Literature

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Consider the following case. We are introduced to a hero who was the sole survivor of a serious accident and had to fight for his life afterwards under adverse conditions. The hero describes his ordeal at great length to a second character. At first, his brave, uplifting story seems consistent and true. At the end, however, a host of clues make clear that parts of the tale must either be a fantasy or lie. There is no doubt that certain details contradict well-founded scientific knowledge of our physical world. After the hero has finished, the second character, who is professionally responsible for checking the story's truth, declares that it must be false. The hero denies this but says he will offer a second story. This one is short, brutal and to the point. It repeats the basic content of the first story, but in a way not contradicting science and all known evidence. When asked about the discrepancy between the two stories, the hero answers by saying essentially this: "I am the sole witness to an accident in which I have lost everything dear to me. I have two stories that tell about it. One is beautiful and one is ugly. You have no way of knowing for sure which one is true. Which story would you prefer?" In the end, the second character's report on the case is inconclusive. Based on the facts at hand, he says, he cannot determine how the accident happened. In wrapping up his report, however, he chooses to cite a detail from the hero's first, false story rather than the second, more plausible one.

Let's look at how this stripped-down story (the full version was first published in 2002) corresponds to narrative strategies usually associated with postmodernism. As in many postmodernist narratives, it first causes us to identify with a central character and then abruptly undercuts the terms of that identification. However, one thing about it is odd. Rather than leaving us in an attitude of skeptical undecidability regarding the hero, as postmodernist texts tend to do, it encourages us to revise our skepticism and identify with his story even though we know it to be false. Our response is evidently supposed to follow that of the second character, who, though unable to reach a final conclusion regarding the facts, decides to cite

the beautiful, untrue story. And, if we flesh out the story with more detail, things get odder still. For the hero is himself not just a witness to an accident, but also an ardent practitioner of Hinduism, Christianity and Islam (in later years he also studies the Cabbala to boot). When confronted with the contradiction involved in this kind of multiple allegiance, he says simply, “I just want to love God.” The point of the book is evidently to make us identify with and believe in a hero who wants to worship a central, unified deity at all costs.

By now many readers will have identified my trimmed-down tale as Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi* (Martel 2002).<sup>(1)</sup> As my summary suggests, this popular and critically acclaimed book presents something of a logical challenge to postmodernism. Where postmodernism revels in skepticism, *Life of Pi* encourages belief; where postmodernism offers competing, equally plausible worlds, *Life of Pi* gives us a choice between what is false and what is most likely true; and where postmodernism favors decentered, deceptive states of knowing, *Life of Pi* focuses on unity, willpower and love. While it’s certainly possible to deconstruct the latter position, it really isn’t much of a challenge to do so. The book itself makes clear that Pi’s belief is based on willful self-deceit, and it makes sure that knowledge of the true facts behind the accident will remain deferred forever. From a critical postmodern or poststructuralist point of view, the book seems to be pointless or trite. Why, after all, write a book making us identify with a metaphysical attitude that we know is demonstrably false to begin with?

If *Life of Pi* were an anomaly within current literature, we might be able to write off its unpostmodern features as a kind of quirk, a personal whim of the author deserving no further critical notice. The problem is that in many current works of literature, this odd preference for positive metaphysical illusions, for narrative authoritativeness and for forced identification with central characters has become generic. If this trend continues—and there are very good signs that it will—it would mean a turn away from postmodernism towards a new, as yet uncharted type of aesthetic sensibility.

As I have suggested above, this sort of sensibility is not accessible to the set of critical practices associated with poststructuralism. The problem is not so much that *Life of Pi* resolutely resists deconstruction; it’s that *Pi* deconstructs its own metaphysical conceit so completely that there is hardly anything left for the canny poststructuralist reader to do. This happens because *Life of Pi* shifts the framework of its argumentation from an epistemological plane to an aesthetic one. The book says, in effect: “given that we can never know for sure what is true, isn’t it better to enjoy what is beautiful, good and uplifting rather than dwell on what is ugly, evil and disillusioning?” The book doesn’t however just pose this question as an abstract postulate. Instead, it forces it on us in terms of a concrete choice: we are given a

long, beautiful story and a short, brutish one and asked to decide for one or the other. And this choice, of course, is part of a larger aesthetic set-up or trap. Readers opting for the more plausible, ugly tale will tire of it quickly and let the whole thing drop. Readers choosing the beautiful, untrue tale, by contrast, will continue to reflect on it while treating its precepts as something that *might* be true. This type of novel elicits a specific, aesthetically mediated *performance* from readers by forcing them to believe in a character or event within the frame of the fictional text. Indulging in this doubled suspension of belief might at first seem incautious or naive. However, it is a necessary precondition for all future acts of interpretation, which in themselves may be ironic, intricate and subtle.

Because I've found this performative pattern recurring in so many recent works of literature (as well as in the cinema and architecture, too) I've decided to call the type of sensibility associated with it *performatism*. Since the original formulation has been around for a while now, I won't go into it again in full detail.[\(2\)](#) However, because its premises are still alien to most critics and readers, I'd like to recall its most basic features before going on to discuss some specific works of literature.

## 2

At the core of performative narratives is an *inner frame*, which is often presented in the form of an originary scene. These scenes work by reducing human experience to a few simple givens that seem to bring us closer to the very beginnings of humanness itself. In the case of Pi, the originary scene is, of course, the lifeboat which he shares with a Bengal tiger (or a murderous cook, depending on how you look at it). Please note that these originary scenes are in no way *authentic*; they are neither entirely natural nor are they prior to semiosis. Rather, they expose characters to a radical, restrictive presence which they must transcend in some way (Pi, for example, must overcome the presence of the hungry tiger). Within the text, the originary scene or inner frame causes readers to identify in a certain set way with a character who is locked into a situation at the center of our attention. Because of their radical fencing-in of presence, originary scenes tend to be marked by the use of what Eric Gans calls *ostensive signs*.[\(3\)](#) These are simple, name-like signs that are used to designate present objects or states; in Gans's version of the originary scene the first ostensive sign creates belief and beauty by wondrously deferring mimetic violence.[\(4\)](#) In this particular instance, the ostensive sign is a whistle sound which Pi uses to train the tiger not to attack him (the whistle is made to stand for the rocking of the boat, which makes the tiger seasick). In general, there has to be a lock or fit between the inner frame and the text whole (or outer frame) for the performatist plot to work. In the case of Pi, the immanent, ostensively mediated act of training the tiger (the inner frame) allows Pi not just to survive, but also to confirm his love of a transcendent God—the beautiful story which, taken as a

whole, we have almost no choice but to believe (the outer frame). If, on the other hand, we accept the validity of a sober, disillusioned interpretation (the more plausible story about the cook), it would destroy the fit between the frames and lead to a deconstructive, though not very satisfying reading of the text as a whole. Once more, though, the choices we have here are very limited. This is not least because the ostensive way Pi that trains the tiger-by confronting him with something sickening every time he tries to attack-is transferred directly to the terms of reader response. The skeptic “attacking” the belief structure of the book gets an ugly story, the believer accepting it a beautiful one. Our doubts about believing something that is beautiful but probably not true are never eliminated; however, this self-doubt is now enclosed within the structure of belief itself. Although there is still a considerable irony involved in the way we are made to believe Pi’s story, this irony doesn’t vitiate the way we identify with him and his tale.[\(5\)](#) The ultimate frame of reference is performative, and not epistemological: it applies only within the confines of the particular text at hand. The point of the text is not to have us grasp a trace of truth by relating something in the text to something outside of it, but rather to make us believe and experience beauty within its own closed space. This is the common goal of all performativist fiction: it forces us, at least for the time being, to take the beautiful attitude of a believer rather than the skeptical attitude of a continually frustrated seeker of truth.[\(6\)](#) Hence our willingness to believe in Pi’s way of believing in God applies only within the peculiar world of the text. Outside its boundaries we can go back to being our old secular, skeptical selves again—if we so choose. The act of reading, however, has been turned toward an aesthetically mediated, closed act of believing rather than one of open-ended knowing.[\(7\)](#)

The kind of framing or forced identification described above doesn’t rule out intertextual citations or critical reflection. These external factors must however always be subordinated to the unbending outer frame of the text. The frame, in other words, fences the text off from the truth conditions of discourse in general—that endlessly shifting, infinitely open realm in which seemingly singular, unequivocal arguments can always turn into their exact opposites.[\(8\)](#) While it may indeed be possible to be very skeptical about certain aspects of what is going on in the story, we nonetheless accept it because we have been made to find it beautiful. This makes the aesthetic mode—something that has traditionally always been roped off from the conditions of practical everyday judgment—the privileged place of argumentation. The difference between this performativist type of aesthetic and the traditional Kantian one is, however, that this one works by coercion: instead of adhering to formal, presumably transcendental attributes of beauty, the text forces us to decide for beauty in terms of a relative, very narrowly defined scene or frame. Performativist aesthetics are in a certain sense “Kant with a club”: they bring back beauty, good, wholeness and a whole slew of other metaphysical propositions, but

only under very special, singular conditions that a text forces us to accept on its own terms.<sup>(9)</sup> The ironies and tensions growing out of this *quid pro quo* are incidentally more than enough to keep performatist reader responses alive and kicking. Readers are always well aware that their not-quite voluntary experiencing of beauty is part of a trade-off, and indeed one of the main aims of performatist literature is to encourage reflection on just what this trade-off entails. As the name “Pi” itself suggests, the problems raised by the hero’s story are not reducible to a whole, finite answer: the initially closed-off text raises a whole bundle of theological, ethical, and ideological issues whose discussion would exceed the scope of this essay. The point is not that *Life of Pi* resists being drawn into broader, uncontrollable contexts; it’s that the book enters into those contexts under its own terms and in a different way than was the case in postmodernism. Most notably, *Life of Pi* demands (and in a certain sense creates) a new type of reader who is willing to enter into the closed frame of the text and, at least for the time being, identify with its artificially rigged center before going off on his or her own. It would be going to far to say that performatist texts constitute subjectivity in the grand style that humanist critics of postmodernism have always been longing for. However, they do provide readers with a limited experience of identity-building under controlled, rather coercive conditions.

This basic device of performatist narrative-framing the reader so as to force him or her to assume a posture of belief vis-à-vis a dubious fictional center—can be found in so much contemporary writing that a comprehensive survey is hardly possible within the confines of a single article. To underline the ubiquity of this turn away from postmodernism, I’ve singled out four further texts differing greatly in theme, genre and narrative style: Ingo Schulze’s *Simple Stories* (an episodic novel about German reunification with a distinctly American subtext); Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (a classic of postcolonial literature); Bernhard Schlink’s *The Reader* (an erotically tinged treatment of post-Holocaust generational conflicts in Germany); and Olga Tokarczuk’s “The Wardrobe” (a programmatic short story by the most popular Polish writer of the postcommunist era).

## **Sad Sacks vs. Smiles: Ingo Schulze’s *Simple Stories***

One way of highlighting the difference between performatism and postmodernism is to take up a clear-cut case of intertextuality, which is to say one in which a narrative text deliberately cites—and modifies—a postmodern one in a way that runs counter to postmodern norms. Because in the logic of postmodernism any attempt to break out of its force field is already implicated in that field from the very beginning as a trace or quote, an explicit case of intertextuality should be a good litmus test of whether postmodernism can be cited and simultaneously turned in a direction that can’t be assimilated to postmodernism’s own self-fulfilling prophecies

about how texts work.

3

A good example of this kind of intertextual turn is the chapter “Lächeln” (“Smiles”) from Ingo Schulze’s *Simple Stories*,[\(10\)](#) which transplants the plot of Raymond Carver’s short story “Sacks”[\(11\)](#) from Sacramento to Munich, Germany. In both stories, a son meets a father who has broken with his family some time before; the father makes an elaborate confession to the son detailing why he left, and he gives the son a trivial gift—in Carver’s story a sack of candy (which the son forgets to take with him) and in Schulze’s a pair of handmade potholders.

Carver is sometimes considered no longer postmodern because of his “dirty realism” with its seedy milieus and lower-middle-class characters. However, many of his stories still use the basic postmodern strategy of first fostering, and then undermining, reader identification with central figures.[\(12\)](#) These shifts in sympathy are in turn a direct outgrowth of his characters’ radical dualism. The folksy, engaging characteristics we observe superficially or hear in his characters’ familiar Middle American diction form a kind of outer shell which effectively obscures the powerful, sinister forces roiling within them. Hence when evil, or brutality, or some strong emotion breaks out of Carver’s characters, it often seems to have no immediate cause (a good example of this is the story “Tell the Women We’re Going” in the collection *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*). Inasmuch as they resort to violence, Carver’s protagonists seem more like alien monsters than like the K-Mart patrons they outwardly resemble. If we identify with them at all, it’s because we enjoy the sublime thrill of uncovering some malevolent force lurking beneath the banality of lower middle-class American existence.[\(13\)](#)

In the case of “Sacks,” the father’s story, which is presumably meant to foster understanding in his son, reveals only the man’s thoroughgoing lasciviousness. His confession in fact resembles a traveling-salesman joke, with the father and his mistress being caught in bed by the cuckolded husband and the father jumping half-naked through the front window. Although in the process he seems to have experienced some sort of epiphany, as often happens in Carver, we never find out exactly what it is: the story breaks off before we learn how it affected the teller.[\(14\)](#) Similarly, the father’s gifts—jellybeans and luscious chocolates—are hardly more than tokens of his own petty lustfulness. The son—aptly named Les—comes away from this reunion diminished rather than enhanced. A traveling salesman himself, his own marriage is also on the rocks, for reasons he doesn’t choose to mention. At the beginning, though, Les says he “wants to pass along” (Carver 1989, 37) his father’s story to us—a story that turns out to be as empty and stale as a bad joke. In the end, the son does exactly to us what his father has done to him: he leaves us with his

own story, which is no less desolate than that of his father's. Having been thrust into the role of the narrator's ersatz sons, we as readers might expect some sort of positive identification to arise from this. Yet our relationship with Les remains uncannily empty: we get even less out of his own story than he got out of his father's, just as we are haunted by our inability to get a handle on exactly what he is talking about. In spite of its "realism," Carver's story works more on an epistemological level than a semantic one. Signifiers aren't there to transmit inner meaning from a storyteller to someone else; they simply pass their intrinsic emptiness on down the line. And what's even worse: once we've got them, we can't get rid of them, just as Les can't "forget" the sack of candy he has left behind at the airport bar. Communication appears not just as a process of endless deferral and endless diminution of meaning, but also as the accumulation of this emptiness in involuntary acts of recollection and narration—something well in keeping with the epistemological skepticism and metaphysical pessimism peculiar to postmodernism.

At first, Schulze's father-son reunion in *Simple Stories* seems to repeat Carver's fictional setup under even less auspicious conditions. The father left his family not two, but twenty-four years ago; the son isn't just having marital problems, but lost his wife in a traffic accident and has never recovered from it emotionally. To compound things there is also a typically German East-West divide. The father left his family to defect to the West, where he remarried and became a successful doctor. His contact with his son has been limited and condescending: first a card with a 100 mark bill congratulating him on the birth of his son, then a condolence card, also with a 100 mark bill, upon the death of his wife. The son, by contrast, is one of the losers in German reunification: a former student of art history, he was thrown out of the university and is now reduced to doing odd jobs—among other things, he works as a traveling salesman (as recounted in Chapter 4, "Panic"). The son isn't even too sure about why he wanted to look up his long-lost father in the first place. Maybe he was curious, he says, maybe he was expecting to get some money (Schulze 86/102).

At first glance, his father's story hardly seems designed to bring the two closer. As in "Sacks," the father has experienced an epiphany that he wants to pass along to the son. After suffering a sudden stroke ("just a lightning bolt, and you're left paralyzed" [89/104]) he becomes a fervent believer in Christ and the bearer of a comforting, self-serving message: "There's a purpose behind it all [...]" intones the father regarding his condition, "even if we can't see the purpose, or at least not right off" (90/105). The son, for his part, is hardly convinced of his father's sincerity: he has the feeling that "he had planned each sentence, had prepared himself for our meeting as if for a lecture" (90/105). The father's conversion, however, has an intertextual twist to it, for at its core is a scrambled version of the traveling-salesman story out of "Sacks." After the father's stroke, he and his wife are visited

regularly by what he in the German original calls a “Holy Angel”—a Bible-thumping preacher from an unnamed Christian sect. The preacher uses the opportunity to secretly court the wife; both then run off together to Portugal. In this case, though, the joke is on the two adulterers, as the father gets religion precisely because he has been betrayed:[\(15\)](#)

“So that’s what they’re like, I thought. That’s what’s behind all the sanctimony. The world’s that simple. I was an enthusiastic masochist. But,” my father said, squinting again as if laughing ahead of time at some joke, “do you know what, my boy? My life was only beginning. All alone? Anything but! Jesus Christ was never so close to me as in that moment! Who are we to be offended by those who bring us the message?” (93/109)

The father’s experience, it might be added, is social as well as mystical. After his wife leaves him, the “brother and sisters” of the sect help him regain his self-dependence and make the two potholders (embroidered with an eight-pointed star) which he gives to the son. The son, in turn, hangs them right next to his stove, “so that I just have to put out an arm whenever I need them” (95/111).

4

Like Carver, Schulze uses a kind of deadpan prose that makes it difficult to separate the banal from the sublime, the ironic from the heartfelt. When Martin, the son, says he realizes his father’s story is a real “Saul-to-Paul tale,” he’s using a common German figure of speech. Similarly, when patrons of the café smile at the son helping the lame father out of the restaurant to his taxi, it’s not clear whether this occurs out of embarrassed politeness or as a spontaneous expression of true sympathy. As in Carver, we have to carefully parse all minor details to find out how they work together as a whole. And the sum of these details suggests that, unlike in “Sacks,” the father’s story does make a positive difference.

This difference isn’t a semantic one—the son doesn’t convert to Christianity or take his father’s homilies to heart literally. What does happen, though, is that he himself goes through a kind of “Saul-to-Paul” conversion in his attitude towards the father. As he discovers later, the father had always sought contact to his family and assumed they would follow him to the West; it was his mother’s second husband, a Party functionary, who made her send back all letters and packages from the father (201/220). The son notes this changed attitude in the introduction to his narrative, although—once more in the starkly elliptical fashion typical of Carver—he doesn’t tell us why:

It's hard for me to talk about meeting my father, about how it felt at the time, I mean, to give an account of the impression he and his story made on me. Not because my memory's poor—it was barely a year ago—but because I know more now. I might even say I've become a different person. (86/101)

This insight is not acquired entirely after the fact. After the father has told his Saul-to-Paul story, the son begins to tell how his wife was killed in a bicycle accident. Suddenly, he is moved to confess his own irrational complicity in her fate: "I wanted Andrea to die, and then it happened" (Schulze 91/106). Thereupon the father absolves him of his guilt ("You probably never really loved her, or at least not long enough" [91/106]) and, to make the ritual complete, passes him a cookie—a communion wafer of sorts, which the son places in his mouth and swallows. Once more, the situation in "Sacks" is reversed: instead of a string of self-perpetuating empty confessions, we have two "true confessions" that in spite of their trivial trappings allow a positive, symmetrical relationship between father and son to develop. The ostensive insignia of this relation—the bracket holding together the inner and outer frame—is provided by the two potholders Martin hangs up next to his sink. They stand not only for the human presence of the absent father, but also the transcendent presence of the absent Father, as embodied in the eight-pointed star. Whether we or the hero take advantage of the one or the other—as in *Life of Pi*—is a question of free choice. The posture of *believing*, however, has once more been thrust on us through the imposition of an exterior, authorially determined frame. The posture of disbelief—of thinking that all Martin has gotten out of the reunion are a pair of lousy potholders—turns into a trap that makes it well nigh impossible to read this part of *Simple Stories* in a satisfying or productive way.

## **Beautiful Otherness: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things***

At this point, the critically minded reader might be moved to ask whether the experience of being trapped by an author in beautiful, comforting frames of belief is not some insidious plot designed to keep us from interrogating the exploitative mechanisms of global capitalism. Pi, although hailing from India, is not exactly your voiceless, subaltern victim: articulate and precocious in the extreme, he leaves a cozy middle-class existence in the Third World for an even cozier one in the First. And, while *Simple Stories* doesn't exactly present a rosy picture of life after reunification, it tends to reconcile differences between the ex-communist East and the capitalist West by imprinting Christian symbolism and attitudes on the fabric of everyday life. Given these examples, you might conclude that performatism is best suited to preserving liberal bourgeois norms and values.

Performatism, however, works equally well when embedded in a radical critique of

ideology and power politics. The most prominent example of this that I've been able to find is Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (Roy 1997). Roy's credentials as a critic of global capitalism are beyond dispute: since writing her acclaimed novel, she has turned out a whole slew of polemical broadsides against such rewarding targets as the Indian Bomb, post-9/11 American foreign policy, and environmentally destructive development projects.[\(16\)](#) Like many postcolonial writers, Roy is, at least in theory, resolutely anti-essentialist: she has, for example, no patience with those of her countrymen who would separate an "authentic" India from a "corrupted" West. This steadfast rejection of all originary sources leads to a well-known problem of self-definition: if there is no essential, ultimate, or originary truth, how can you define your own critical position in an affirmative way? Unless you happen to be a convinced Marxist (which Roy isn't) the standard postmodern answer to this question up to now was usually this: you don't have to justify a single position because you have continually changing positions. By taking the essentialist conceits of a hegemonic Center at face value—and continually exposing their untenability as you move along—you leave behind a dynamic trail of discursive otherness that more than compensates for the loss of a hard-and-fast ideological credo. In theory, this sounds good, but in practice almost no one actually wants to live and write in this Nietzschean, peripatetic mode of endless epistemological interrogation. The result has been a repolitization of critical discourse, with explicit ideological agendas (often Marxist) existing uneasily alongside stinging critiques of essentialist truth and master narratives. Gayatri Spivak's term "strategic essentialism,"[\(17\)](#) which was originally supposed to make this sort of thing seem forceful and circumspect, inadvertently exposed the double standard lurking within it: the term sounds like a carte blanche allowing a discrete subject with a hidden agenda (a "strategist") to get away with doing something that he or she would deny to everyone else.[\(18\)](#)

At first, Roy's own solution to this problem follows a rigorously post-ideological pattern. In her essays as well as in her novel, she portrays not only India and the West, but also capitalism and Marxism as equivalent in terms of arrogance, despotic hubris and destructiveness. A salient case is that of the Indian bomb. By building its own bomb, India has in Roy's view "enter[ed] into a contract with the very people we claim to despise," which is to say the Western societies whose histories are "spongy with the blood of others," and who "virtually invented [...] colonialism, apartheid, slavery, ethnic cleansing, germ warfare, [and] chemical weapons" (Roy 1999, 144). But just because they're runners-up in the race to acquire weapons of mutual mass destruction doesn't make the Indians any better: "All in all, I think it is fair to say that we're the hypocrites. We're the ones who've abandoned what was arguably a moral position—i.e. we have the technology, we can make bombs if we

want to, but we won't" (Roy 1999, 145). This sort of hypocrisy is no less obtrusive on a personal level. In *The God of Small Things* the skirt-chasing Anglophile capitalist Chacko with his Marxist ideology and the wife-abusing Communist nationalist Pillai with his vested interest in a chutney factory represent two sides of the same dismal coin. And, as Roy's novel shows, when confronted by a threat to its hidden interests this sort of categorical thinking can even become lethal-as when Velutha is murdered for transgressing against the tacit "Love Laws" proscribing sexual relations between higher-caste members and untouchables.

Roy's reaction to the falseness of ideology is, however, radically different from those current in postmodernism and postcolonial studies. Although her positive program is not broadly formulated or very rigorous, it suggests that she regards love and beauty as *the* basic givens of human interaction:

Railing against the past will not heal us. History has happened. It's over and done with. All we can do is to change its course by encouraging what we love instead of destroying what we don't. There is beauty yet in this brutal, damaged world of ours. Hidden, fierce, immense. Beauty that is uniquely ours and beauty that we have received with grace from others, enhanced, re-invented and made our own. We have to seek it out, nurture it, love it. Making bombs will only destroy us. It doesn't matter whether we use them or not. They will destroy us either way. (Roy 1999, 159)

Roy, in other words, treats mutually shared affection and pleasure in matters of taste-two utterly traditional metaphysical precepts-as an irreducible point of departure and a last defense against the encroachments of a "brutal, damaged world." The result is an intersubjective free space, a minimal scene of love and beauty amidst what is otherwise an oppressive, violent, class-ridden, sexist, and generally threatening outer realm. It goes without saying that this free space can no longer be reconciled with postmodernism. For at its center-hidden, fierce, and immense-stand two metaphysical imperatives which, at least in terms of the novel, cannot be assimilated either to ideology or its never-ending critique. This is, as it were, "Kant with a sari"-Roy has transplanted the basic premises of Kantian aesthetics to the Indian subcontinent and made its focus a supple, ebony-skinned untouchable and a lambent, wide-hipped divorcée.[\(19\)](#)

I can't emphasize enough that Roy's originary scene of love and beauty is not entirely natural or prior to culture. In its most radical form, it is situated on the very cusp between nature and culture, at that place where distinctions between the two seem to blend most: in incest. When the emotionally ravaged dizygotic twins Rahel and Estha make love at the end of the book after a long, involuntary separation

they are doing nothing more than reaffirming the possibility of productive undifferentiation, of returning to an unregulated, discrete unity enabling them, at least in principle, to cancel out the oppressive world of Ideology, Law, and History. Their own private, sorrowful scene is not just a union of doubles but is trinitarian: Rahel is sister and mother in one, a genetic and psychological stand-in for the lost, martyred mother ("She moves her mouth. Their beautiful mother's mouth." [Roy 1997, 327]). The incestuous threesome holds forth the possibility of a transcendence which is however not realized in the book: what the twins share "is not happiness, but hideous grief" (Roy 1997, 328).

Roy could easily have ended her story on this depressing note. As any deconstructionist would be happy to tell you, Rahel and Estha's reinscription of gender relations, although an understandable reaction to the hypocrisy of an overdifferentiated, "ideological" society, can't bring back the mother physically and can't make the twins' psyches whole. And that is why Roy, rather than tarrying in a victimary stance,<sup>(20)</sup> chooses to place an affirmative performance at the book's end upholding the possibility of a love that is not just beautiful but also productive and sublime.

This love is at its very inception revelatory and transcendent. When Velutha first catches Ammu's gaze "centuries telescoped into one evanescent moment. History was wrong-footed, caught off guard" (Roy 1997, 176). Love is a *presence*, a scene transpiring between two humans in a singular, personal moment of mutually shared beauty and affection. This scenic conception of love is repeated at the very end of the book in an affirmative way, as a beautiful and sublime unity transcending Law and History:

As he rose from the dark river and walked up the stone steps, she saw that the world they stood in was his. That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars. He moved so easily through it. As she watched him she understood the quality of his beauty. How his labor had shaped him. How the wood he fashioned had fashioned him. Each plank he planed, each nail he drove, each thing he made, had moulded him. Had left its stamp on him. Had given him his strength, his supple grace. (Roy 1997, 333-334)

There is even something here that might, at least for a time, reconcile Marxists and Kantians. Unalienated beauty, it would seem, arises on the borderline between nature and human work upon that nature, just as the Kathakali Man—the ritual dancer of Kerala—is "the most beautiful of men" because "his body *is* his soul": it has been "polished and pared down, harnessed wholly to the task of story-telling" (Roy 1997, 230). Something similar occurs with words, which both the narrator and

her child heroes agglutinate so as to dissolve standard grammatical boundaries in a rhythmic, sensual way (“sourmetal smell,” “sariflapping,” “Orangedrink Lemondrink Man” etc.). Love, language-play, carpentry and Kathakali are all performances erasing the secondary boundary lines of culture, class, and caste and replacing them with a beautiful presence which, under the right conditions, can transcend its world of “small things” and reach up to the stars.[\(21\)](#) The deferral of this dream in “tomorrow,” the tragic last word of the book, isn’t meant as an ironic put-down, but as a promise: it marks the possibility of projecting love’s presentness into the future. The novel’s *story* shows that this projection doesn’t work (it ends with the act of grievous incest); the novel’s *plot* that it does (it ends with an act of sublime love). As always in performatist works, we are given a clear choice as to what direction our attitude can take. If we opt for chronology and the belatedness of the story, we will be left with grief and desolation; if we choose the aesthetically mediated presence of the plot, we have the inspiration of love and a future which we can act on in an affirmative way.[\(22\)](#)

6

## **The End of Posthistory: Bernhard Schlink’s *The Reader***

The problem of how to make history present and the future palpable is something that fictional works are now also starting to recast in performatist terms. Normally, the postmodern, posthistorical argument about writing history goes something like this: any attempt to construct a unified history will prove illusory, since the historical construct, inasmuch as it pretends to closed totality, will never quite achieve identity with itself. There will always remain what Jean-Luc Nancy (1990, 105) calls an “excess” of meaning that isn’t reducible to the original, central scheme. Rather than shrugging this off as an insoluble hermeneutic bind, postmodernism turns it into a positive program. Historical writing becomes a double strategy, combining critiques of traditional historiography with the representation of marginalized otherness. Instead of the neat furrow of a master narrative, history becomes a sprawling field of overlapping incisions whose goal is to unearth and empower the peripheral sources of historical experience—that of the everyday, the subaltern, the victimary.

Nowhere is the problem of representing victimary experience more acute than in discourse on the Holocaust. As Eric Gans has pointed out, the mass murder of the Jews in World War II (and, to a lesser extent, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki) shifted the focus of political thinking from the utopian center to the peripheral victim, whose fatal experience of exclusion from society became the point of departure for progressive political thought and action.[\(23\)](#) The goal of politics, in other words, is no longer to adhere to the right kind of ideology but to

continually position yourself anew in opposition to a hegemonic center-in effect, to take on the role of a virtual victim. In the case of Nazi genocide, the lethal relation between center and periphery leaves no room for ambivalence. Between victim and perpetrator there can be no real reciprocity and no underlying, humanizing unity: you're either One or the Other. The Holocaust experience, in short, has a double potency in postmodernist thought. It not only identifies Western culture as the center and source of unmitigated terror,[\(24\)](#) but also supplies a moral perspective that can be defined spatially and fluidly, as a position vis-à-vis that center, rather than as a rigid set of counter-rules and prescriptions. The result is a kind of soft-hearted Nietzscheanism, with the victim, rather than the *Übermensch*, acting as the jumping-off point for a peripatetic critique of bourgeois mores.[\(25\)](#)

The term “the Holocaust,” which came into currency in the 1960’s, is itself a belated, postmodern one; it grew out of the need to make victimary experience memorable in cultural, rather than in personal, terms. In recent years, though, an ever widening gap has opened up between these two kinds of experience. Little new has been added to the vast Holocaust literature in terms of personal documentation, and the visual and literary depictions of concentration-camp horrors are so well known that they have either become clichés or diminished greatly in their power to disturb us. In late postmodernism, this exhaustion of original victimary experience has given rise to works whose means of arguing are ultimately more aesthetic than didactic or documentary. Peter Eisenman’s Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, for example, has visitors wander through a maze of huge dark gravestone-like steles reminding them forcefully of the disorientation and vulnerability of the victim, though without any specific thematic reference to the Holocaust;[\(26\)](#) the slashed, jagged architecture and gaping spaces of Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum in Berlin do essentially the same thing.[\(27\)](#) In literature, a Swiss gentile named Bruno Grosjean (aka Benjamin Wilkomirski) identified with the victimary plight of Polish Jews so strongly that he in effect became one and wrote a critically well-received survivor’s memoir. The point is not so much that Wilkomirski/Grosjean was a deliberate fraud—he seems to have serious mental problems—but that a reading public accustomed to horrific descriptions of camp life was readily willing to accept a poetically embellished memoir which, to use Baudrillard’s phrase, was “more real than real.” In film, there have been attempts to stray from the well-trodden paths of victimary discourse by depicting concentration camp victims as life-affirming, comic characters (Roberto Benigni’s *Life is Beautiful*) or by emphasizing fragmentary, present-day acts of remembrance over a coherent documentary exposition (Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*). All these examples, although in their own ways successful works of art, take victimary discourse to extremes which are at the same time beginning to exhaust it. The fraudulent effectivity of Wilkomirski’s hyperreal memoir, the thematic emptiness of Eisenman’s Holocaust Memorial, Benigni’s “inappropriate” use of a comic genre, and Lanzmann’s staged

recollections of history all suggest a basic need to inflate, exaggerate and embellish the customary postmodern way of presenting the Holocaust, that is, as the non-reciprocal otherness experienced by victims of a relentlessly cruel, monolithic center. The simulatory effort required to renew that victimary experience has begun to compete with the very thing that it seeks to enhance; we are increasingly being confronted with modes of aesthetic excess that distract from the victimary paradigm at least as much as they renew it. In view of the rapidly fading sources of real experience, this increasingly excessive relation between art and victimhood is becoming an unavoidable fixture of all discourse on the Holocaust.

Given this reassertion of aesthetics, it's justified to ask whether there might be an alternative to victimary discourse that would open up a perspective towards the future without rewriting history to the detriment of its victims. Although the terrain is difficult and dangerous to tread, there are signs that books and movies are now beginning to focus on perpetrators, the ethical choices involved in their actions and, above all, on the possibility of atonement and reconciliation that these choices imply. Of these works, the most prominent English-language examples coming to mind are, in film, Spielberg's *Schindler's List* and, in fiction, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* and Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*; in German, these include such novels as Marcel Beyer's *Flughunde* [Flight dogs] and Ulla Berkewicz's *Engel sind schwarz und weiß* [Angels are black and white]. While I can't go into all the implications of this shift to a perpetrator perspective here, I would like to focus in on an example which treats these questions in a way that is eminently typical of literary performatism. The book I have in mind is Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser* [*The Reader*](28)—one of the few recent German novels to become a bestseller in America and unusual because of its sympathetic treatment of a former SS prison camp guard.

Although well received by the reading public and many critics both in and out of Germany, *The Reader* was met with icy reserve by those writers who noticed its deviations from the unwritten norms of victimary discourse (the book was often lumped together with Wilkomirski's as an example of "disturbing" Holocaust literature).(29) There is, however, a considerable aesthetic difference between the two works. Whereas Wilkomirski's book simply carries virtual identification with the victimary to its logical extreme, *The Reader* breaks with postmodernist norms by framing or artificially uniting victims and a perpetrator in closed, ritualistic scenes.

The first frame, in a Nazi work camp in Poland, is perverse and cruel. In what seems to be an act of childish narcissism, an all-powerful illiterate-Hanna-forces doomed Jewish bearers of written culture to make that culture present by reading to her out

loud. Hanna seems to crave *Bildung* but can acquire it only through the application of brute force; in doing so she aids and abets a genocidal system.<sup>(30)</sup> (You might call this Kant with a cattle prod: a natural disposition towards enlightenment is coupled with pure, murderous power over scapegoated victims.) In the second frame, Hanna repeats the reading relationship, but now replaces physical power (*Macht*) with a mixture of sexual power (*Kraft*) and maternal solicitude: she becomes a lover and ersatz mother for the underage hero Michael. Unlike the first frame, however, this ritualistic relationship, though still unequal, contains an element of reciprocity. The ritual enables Michael to continually reenact an ideal, incestuous initiation into manhood;<sup>(31)</sup> Hanna's sexual contact with an innocent allows her to repeat the camp ritual in a purified way (in symbolic terms, this is why the protagonists bathe *before* having sex and reading: they are both trying to preserve and renew what is for them a self-fashioning sacral scene). Although consensual, the affair nonetheless eventually deforms Michael; after Hanna's departure he is unable to enter into long-term relationships with other women. In the third frame, in prison, the ritual relationship is played out again in a desexualized and depersonalized way. Hanna becomes, at least outwardly, a morally autonomous, enlightened individual: she not only learns to read on her own, but also demonstrates civil courage (she engages in a sit-down protest when funds for the prison library are to be cut off). Eventually, she levies the severest possible judgment on herself by committing suicide at the very moment where she would have been allowed to reenter society in a well-organized and comfortable way. In effect, she resists resocialization by entering into a symbolic frame of a higher order—that of the dead victims, who, as she says, are the only ones who really understand her (Schlink 1997, 196/1997a, 187). Michael, by contrast, manages to rid himself of the frame in a symbolic act of reduction and restitution. Although the Jewish survivor of the church incident is unwilling to accept the money Hanna has saved up, she does take the tin it was kept in (replacing a similar one stolen from her in the camps and suggesting the symbolic undoing of a past injustice). This ending suggests that two autonomous subjects—a victim and a stand-in for a perpetrator—are larger than the frames that seem to enclose them. The frame, however, remains a real, indispensable means of symbolic communication between the two: even if they can't agree on the content of the frame—the survivor rejects the money inside it—they can tacitly agree on its mediating and consolatory power. This transaction, though without intrinsic value, confirms the originary mechanism of the ostensive and hence the possibility of a future, as yet deferred rapprochement.

Reviewing *The Reader's* main features we can discern without difficulty two major fault lines running between it and the usual postmodern treatment of the Holocaust. The first such fault line is marked by the book's metaphysical optimism. Schlink appears to see the world, or, more precisely, the frame at hand, as something that

is always open to betterment, albeit in an incremental or incomplete way. *The Reader* doesn't necessarily present us with a less damning picture of German complicity in genocide than postmodernism did—the book makes no attempt to excuse Hanna's crime or deny the suffering of her victims. *The Reader* does however suggest that people—and in particular perpetrators—are enclosed in ritualized frames at least partially of their own making, and that these frames can change (or be changed) for the better over time. This contrasts starkly with the metaphysical pessimism of postmodernism, which would condemn us to simulate endlessly a victimary condition now lying three full generations behind us. Using a fictional scenario, *The Reader* demonstrates the possibility of framed, individually constructed historical change rather than the Eternal Return of the Slightly Different.

The second radical break with postmodern norms is *The Reader*'s insistence on framed identification with a perpetrator as well as on the common origin (not the common moral status) of perpetrator and victim. *The Reader*'s postmodern and/or psychoanalytic critics were quick to point out that the book maneuvers us into identifying with a perpetrator and her lover, who is in a sense both her accomplice and victim.<sup>(32)</sup> From a postmodernist perspective, which allows no commonality or reciprocity between victim and perpetrator, this forced identification with a perpetrator is accompanied by a fatal *quid pro quo*. According to this view, Schlink causes Michael to usurp the victimary position usually occupied by the Jews, but only at the cost of encasing him in an obsessive, sexually charged shell that effectively shuts out all moral reflection.<sup>(33)</sup> In this interpretation, Michael is burdened by the "inability to mourn," which is to say by the inability to rid himself of his obsession with his narcissistic love-object Hanna. Michael, it would seem, is condemned to repeat the experience of the entire German people, who, in the sweeping vision of the psychoanalysts Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, redirected their libidinal energy after the war into "derealizing" or repressing the memory of Nazi crimes and their own self-serving love of Hitler.<sup>(34)</sup> The cure recommended by the Mitscherlichs in 1967 was, incidentally, precisely that drastic confrontation with images of heaped-up corpses that has since grown into a visual cliché.<sup>(35)</sup> This remedy is repeated in one form or another by *The Reader*'s postmodern critics, who urge us to reflect once more on "the incommensurability of the victimary perspective and the experience of the perpetrator collective" (Schmitz 2002, 311) or, in a more resolute Nietzschean mode, to grapple with the possibility that the defining feature of humanity is its ability to inflict an infinite amount of pain on others for no particular reason.<sup>(36)</sup>

As such, it is no surprise that postmodern and psychoanalytically minded critics reject out of hand a book that shows how a perpetrator develops morally in terms of closed, ritualized frames. In themselves, these frames—the work camp, the secret

affair with a minor, the prison—are at worst cruel and at best ambivalent. However, they help create inner scenes of self-fashioning which, though flawed and constricted, allow Hanna to transcend the previous frame that she happened to be caught up in. This sort of ritualized, spatially staggered individuation fits in well with the sociological concept of framing developed by Erving Goffman in the tradition of Emile Durkheim.[\(37\)](#) Goffman sees patterns of everyday behavior as transpiring within social frames or codes which enable individuals to maintain a modicum of dignity and selfhood under trying or embarrassing circumstances (these frames are in turn thought to represent the secularized remnants of what was once a universally binding religious experience[\(38\)](#)). This closed, face-to-face mode of individuation stands directly opposed to the Nietzschean-Freudian one, which demands that subjects forthrightly bare their psyches in a virtual, open-ended confrontation with the overwhelming terror of the Holocaust—a confrontation in which the subject can by definition never win. *The Reader*, it would seem, argues implicitly against the kind of over-intellectualized, self-accusatory type of discourse that has long characterized the Holocaust discussion in Germany.

The ultimate scandal associated with *The Reader* is, however, its “confusion” of victimary and perpetrator roles. Once more, *The Reader* never conflates these issues in a moral or legal sense: there is never any doubt about Hanna’s guilt, and in spite of Michael’s identification with her (which we share in a vicarious but guarded way) she never becomes the object of false, unmediated sentiment.[\(39\)](#) The true scandal from a postmodern perspective is that the illiterate Hanna’s actions are motivated by a fear of being socially stigmatized and scapegoated—precisely that fate that is visited upon the Jewish victims of Nazi genocide. Hanna is subject along with the Jews to what René Girard would call the victimage mechanism, an originary event in which societies seek to distract from the mimetic rivalry within them by lynching innocent victims.[\(40\)](#) The crimes perpetrated by Hanna (whose Germanic name is homonymous with the Hebrew Hannah) arise from her own private fear of that potential victimage; in fact, that fear is so powerful that it later causes her to incriminate herself in court in a wholly irrational, self-defeating way. In the same way, Hanna’s grotesque misuse of Jewish prisoners to acquire *Bildung* suggests that she is has no fear whatsoever of being contaminated by their racially defined otherness. Hanna’s ritualized, narcissistic framing of her own self makes her immune to pressure from the victimizing community, but also to abstract legal reasoning and racist ideology. In the end, as Bill Niven has pointed out, Hanna doesn’t even really become a morally autonomous individual, in spite of her immersion in Holocaust literature and the classics of bourgeois culture.[\(41\)](#) Rather, by sacrificing herself through suicide, she remains true to the victimage mechanism. In a final act of sacrificial hubris she

expels herself from society, in effect preferring to deify herself as a victim rather than reenter society as an autonomous, morally responsible individual.

*The Reader* doesn't try to justify Hanna's obvious moral deficits or her complicity in mass murder. It does, however, recast the problem of reckoning with the Holocaust in terms of frames in which a combination of love, enlightenment and coercion enable the slow, albeit incomplete restitution of an autonomous moral conscience. The book encourages us, along with Michael, to *believe* in Hanna's step-by-step redemption; although this belief is only partially fulfilled, it also enables us, along with Michael, to break with a cycle of endless mourning over a traumatic past. In spite of Schlink's metaphysical optimism-marked by his implanting an unquenchable desire for culture in an unlikely heroine—*The Reader* doesn't enthrone that desire as the linear, progressive accumulation of sweetness and light. This is because the frame is both a haven and a burden. While creating a ritualized free space in which a subject may develop more or less on his or her own terms, the frame at the same times cuts the subject off from the public domain in which that development could achieve general acceptance. In the long run it is neither the frame itself nor its content taken alone that are essential for progress, but rather a positive *performance* that transcends both. This performance is, I think, embodied in the symbolic transaction between Michael and the Jewish survivor. The frame—the tin-isn't discarded or denied, but instead becomes a concrete, unified (ostensive) sign of a perpetrator's desire for redemption and a victim's desire to undo the horrific experience of the victimary past. Projected onto a common object, these two mutually exclusive perspectives allow us to *believe* that we can transcend the past, for without this belief we are condemned to repeat it endlessly. The deconstruction of this double projection—which is once more not terribly hard to do—throws us back into a cycle of virtual mourning; its acceptance creates a framed, minimal moment of presence that would allow us to move forward into the future. The danger is not so much that we are going to succumb uncritically to old illusions, as the posthistorical critique insinuates, (42) but that we are going to miss out on the future by endlessly simulating an increasingly hazy, emotionally distant past. The performatist projection doesn't seek to blot out that past and plunge blindly into the future; instead, it offers a frame grounded in presence that mediates between the two. Given the rapid waning of real historical experience and the aesthetic excesses that inevitably accompany the simulation of that experience, the performatist projection offers a very real perspective for moving, frame by frame, out of the seemingly endless expanse of posthistory.

## **A Closet Kantian: Olga Tokarczuk's *The Wardrobe***

One of the more dramatic historical developments in the last few years has been the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rapid assimilation of it and its former client

states into the global culture of what has been an increasingly robust-looking “late” capitalism. Contrary to what an outside observer might assume, this opening of the Soviet bloc countries did not suddenly set them awash in an alien, postmodern culture imported from the West. All Eastern European literatures I am the least bit familiar with—those of Russia, Poland, Czechoslovakia and the former Yugoslavia—had indigenous, thriving postmodern literatures well before 1990. Most of this was underground or in samizdat, as might be expected, but some was published with official approval, most notably in the culturally more liberal countries like Yugoslavia and Poland.[\(43\)](#) The advent of democracy simply legalized and popularized an aesthetic mode that was already well known to sophisticated readers; at the same time, it caused the book market to be flooded by middle- and low-brow works laying no particular claim to literary innovation. As in the West, serious, risk-taking literature in these countries tends to be postmodern and the academic discussions about it poststructuralist.

In the former Eastern bloc countries there are, however, several important younger authors who have been taking the basic devices of postmodernism and giving them a performatist twist. Of these authors, who include Viktor Pelevin in Russia and Miloš Urban in the Czech Republic,[\(44\)](#) I’d like to focus in briefly on Olga Tokarczuk, who is one of Poland’s most popular and critically acclaimed writers of the post-Communist period.[\(45\)](#)

The work I wish to touch on here is Tokarczuk’s signature story “The Wardrobe” (Tokarczuk 1998, see Appendix for English translation), which provokes postmodernist norms with its “impossible” decontextualization of time, space and gender and its forced identification with a higher, unified consciousness within a closed space.

The plot of the story is simple: a woman narrator and her male companion buy an ornate old wardrobe, kill off its woodworms with turpentine and place it in their bedroom. As they soon discover, the Wardrobe—it is spelled that way in the story—has the power to eliminate all differences—between man and woman, self and world, inside and out. The attraction exerted by the Wardrobe is so great that both characters eventually abandon their worldly lives to spend all their time inside it. At the end, only the faint sounds from a miners’ band are heard as their unused apartment sinks into dust and darkness.

The story is narrated by a female alter ego of the author in an everyday, matter-of-fact tone (readers familiar with Tokarczuk’s well-publicized home life on a remote farm near the Polish-Czech border will have no trouble associating her husband

Roman with the character “R.” or recognizing the Silesian local color). The narrator herself shows no signs of intoxication or incipient mental illness, and there is no ironic denouement revealing that we have been hoodwinked by a peripatetic, unreliable author-narrator. The story does, however, offer us a clear *quid pro quo*: by retreating into the ideality of a unified, closed space the characters make their life unlivable in practical terms. Read as an epistemological allegory, the story simply confirms the fact-obvious even to non-deconstructionists—that you can’t completely cut yourself off from the world and be a part of that world at the same time, even under ideal, rather preternatural conditions. From a postmodern perspective, the story may seem crude or simply slightly addled—why, after all, bother demonstrating something in fictional terms that is pointless or obvious anyway?

Before turning to the story, it’s helpful to know that Tokarczuk is an ardent admirer of C. G. Jung—and consequently also a closet Kantian.[\(46\)](#) This reveals itself more fully in Tokarczuk’s notions of literature and reader response outlined in *Lalka i perła* [The doll and the pearl] (Tokarczuk 2000), her book-length treatise on Bolesław Prus’s classic 1889 novel *The Doll*.

In her essay Tokarczuk presents what might be called a psychologized or Jungian version of Kantian aesthetics. She begins by describing the text as a “neutral space” enabling the psychological projection of an author and that of a reader to meet in a “mysterious exchange relationship” (Tokarczuk 2000, 13-14)—a personalized, but otherwise faithful reformulation of Kant’s “disinterested” aesthetic, which operates above and beyond the realm of mere norms or concepts. The reader remains superior to this “virtual world,” is aware of its conventional character and can maintain a distance to it, but is nonetheless led to identify with certain characters that allow him or her to experience extreme—you could also say sublime—states ranging from catharsis to pure transcendence: overcoming death, conversing with the gods, ignoring time, transgressing any kind of boundary, and so on. (Tokarczuk 2000, 14). As Tokarczuk notes—with a tip of the hat to Kant and Jung’s idealism—“the book [...] demonstrates that all reality is located in the human psyche” (2000, 14). Furthermore, this dream-like exchange of projections between author and reader results in a “new type of reality” which leads to a novel or text becoming a “psychological fact” for the reader (2000, 14); this state is said to resemble a hotel room or tavern which you frequent from time to time as a guest (a spatial metaphor realized literally in Tokarczuk’s story “Hotel Capital”[\(47\)](#)). Finally, Tokarczuk suggests that the author is him- or herself a projection of a larger entity that she calls the “observer” (*obserwator*)—a kind of transcendental, tutelary self that she links to Jung’s notion of the archetype as well as to traditional notions of the guardian angel, demon, muse and genius (2000, 18). The author is in this sense merely “a sensitive and delicate tool of the observer,” which for its part “cannot be

pinned down”; because the observer is “interested only in last things, to the point of tedium” (2000, 18) it presumably remains an unrewarding object of analysis. In philosophical terms, Tokarczuk returns to the Kantian concept of “I think” (which accompanies all our personal judgments as an originary, unifying principle) its archaic or originary personifications as guardian angel, muse, genius, ... [\(48\)](#) In short, we have once more arrived, by way of Silesia, at an indigenous variant of originary Kantianism.

Viewed in these terms, “The Wardrobe” is a living embodiment of the “neutral space” of the text in which an author’s and a reader’s projections converge in a guided, but not entirely compulsory way. The story makes us identify with the possibility of the radical interiorization of experience, of a retreat into a pre-semiotic, archetypal space in which even the contours of the archetypal are dissolved. The Wardrobe is in fact presented as a kind of an archetypal archetype, an originary space which also includes the exterior *observator* in the guise of a guardian angel: “When thought is alone by itself it starts to pray. That’s the very nature of thought” (Tokarczuk 1998, 7). Reflexivity, in other words, is next to godliness, even as communication is reduced to non-semantic, sensual perceptions shared with others living in enclosed, dark spaces (the miners). You could, I suppose, argue that “The Wardrobe” is simply presenting us with a virtual tour of an impossible interior state, a kind of weird exercise in narcissistic self-delusion that we are supposed to deconstruct as quickly as possible after we’ve been exposed to it. Here as elsewhere, though, this superior attitude towards the story’s epistemological insufficiency is bound up with a massive loss of aesthetic appreciation and affect. Even if we don’t accept the story’s *literal* message—that spending the rest of your life in a wardrobe with your mate is a desirable life-goal—we can accept on some level its *performative* one—that experiencing interiority and unity in an especially intensive way is a beautiful thing (even though it is by its nature “strange” and unviable in practical terms). And this is where the epochal divide asserts itself with a vengeance. Where deconstruction and the flip-flopping narrative strategies of postmodernism try to show that the performative and the literal are interchangeable functions of a larger discursive context over which we have no control, performatism makes the performative mode into a present, more or less compulsory aesthetic fact in the mind of the beholder. By coupling an incredible literal message with a beautiful performance, “The Wardrobe” and texts like it practically force you to imitate the attitude of a believer. If you staunchly reject this posture you’ll remain postmodern; if you accept it you’re a performatist by default.

The choice is up to you—almost.

## Notes

1. The citation quoted immediately above is from p. 69. [\(back\)](#)
2. Interested readers may refer to Eshelman 2000/2001, Eshelman 2001/20002 and Eshelman 2002/2003. [\(back\)](#)
3. Gans coined the term in *The Origin of Language* (Gans 1981); for his most recent definition of the term see Gans 1993. [\(back\)](#)
4. Cf. Gans 1993, 53: "The truth of the originary sign is the birth of the human. The sign is what protects the human community against its potential self-annihilation in mimetic conflict. In the face of this danger, its truth as a gesture of representation rather than a gesture of appropriation is not a foregone conclusion. It is only because the members of the originary community accepted this truth as the revelation of central Being that we are here to speculate about it. They drew back from conflict because they were able to interpret their own acts not as spontaneous movements toward the center but as ostensive signs designating the agent that prevented this movement." [\(back\)](#)
5. The book leaves the question of whether there really is a God open by resorting to the Cabballistic doctrine of Tsimtsum, in which God creates the world and retracts back into Himself (the Japanese ship carrying Pi and his family is named "Tsimtsum" and Pi himself studies the Cabballa). The doctrine suggests that there is a single origin but that we simply have no way of corroborating it anymore. [\(back\)](#)
6. In this sense performatism reverses the basic procedure of the phenomenological epoché: a situation is bracketed off to experience beauty and not to acquire knowledge. [\(back\)](#)
7. While performatism is an epochal, and not a general theory of literature, it is in keeping with the growing relevance of theories concerned with aesthetics, ethics and positive reader response rather than with linguistic or epistemological misrecognition. For more on this turn in literary theory see Fluck 2003. [\(back\)](#)
8. In other words, it does the opposite of the Derridian frame, which mediates in an undecidable way between inside and out. For a comparison of this closed notion of frame with the Derridian one, see Eshelman 2002/2003. [\(back\)](#)
9. As Eric Gans has pointed out, Kant one-sidedly valorizes the cognitive aspects of aesthetics and ignores its physical and communal aspects: "The ultimate source of our pleasure in the 'formal finality' of aesthetic representation is not our 'cognitive faculties' but our intuition that the community's shared participation in this finality

or representational intentionality will protect us from mimetic violence. The aesthetic performs a function analogous to that attributed by Durkheim to religious ritual: it reinforces our solidarity with the sacred center and, through its mediation, with our fellow members of the human community" (Gans 2003, 344). Gans also suggests that "the pleasure in the moment of sharing exists only against a constantly renewed background of 'painful' desire that Kant does not mention"; hence the aesthetic experience "can best be conceived in Kantian terms as an oscillation between the pleasure of beauty and the pain of sublimity" (2003, 343). Performative texts in effect guarantee this oscillation by placing around a beautiful center coercive, "painful" frames that remind the reader of the limits of beauty while at the same time making the experience of beauty possible in the first place. [\(back\)](#)

10. Quotes refer first to the English translation (Schulze 1999), then to the German original (Schulze 1998). [\(back\)](#)

11. First published in 1974; cited according to Carver 1989. [\(back\)](#)

12. This applies above all to stories written before the collection *Cathedral*, which is widely thought to mark a turn towards optimism in Carver's work. [\(back\)](#)

13. This apprehension of menace is in fact often mentioned in connection with reader reactions to Carver's fiction, and it would seem to account for a good deal of its success with upscale readers; see in this regard Meyer 1995, 22-23. [\(back\)](#)

14. Presumably, Schulze was aware that "Sacks" is a heavily trimmed-down version of Carver's story "The Fling," which uses the same plot but supplies much more detail. In "The Fling," for example, we learn that the cuckolded husband committed suicide in a particular painful way. [\(back\)](#)

15. In Carver's story, it is the adulterous wife who gets religion at an expedient moment: "She got down on her knees and she prayed to God, good and loud so the man would hear" (Carver 1989, 45); in "The Fling," the cuckolded husband goes so far as to commit suicide. [\(back\)](#)

16. See such polemical non-fiction works as *The Cost of Living* (Roy 1999), *Power Politics* (Cambridge, Mass. 2001) and *War Talk* (Cambridge, Mass. 2003). [\(back\)](#)

17. Spivak first used the concept in Spivak 1996 (orig. 1984), 214-215. [\(back\)](#)

18. Spivak, who mixes Marxism and deconstruction, eventually stopped using the term herself, which she said "simply became the union ticket for essentialism" (Spivak 1993, 35). As Boris Groys points out in his witty essay *Unter Verdacht*

[Under suspicion] (Groys 2000) this poststructuralist obfuscation of subjectivity eventually leads to its restitution: the less we have a handle on what the agent or subject is up to, the greater is our suspicion that he or she is really there-and pulling off something devious behind our backs. [\(back\)](#)

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19. The two characters, in other words, combine appealing physical qualities with the status of social otherness. For an incisive reinterpretation of Kant's concept of beauty as one of otherness see Siebers 1998. According to Siebers, this focus on beauty-as-otherness need not be unpolitical: "Admittedly, beauty provokes otherness on a small scale—a human scale in fact—but perhaps this is where otherness has the greatest political value, since the small scale forces individuals to confront otherness within their world rather than referring it to an external reality" (1998, 37). Roy takes this a step further: at some point, her beauty-as-otherness turns into sameness by allowing an identification across all boundaries of culture and ideology. The "God of small things"—the God of sublimity and beauty—is a global One. [\(back\)](#)

20. As Eric Gans has pointed out repeatedly in his internet *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, postmodernism's focus on decentered otherness (as opposed to utopian master narratives) leads to an ethical mindset privileging peripheral victims. From Gans's neoconservative point of view, this attitude is productive in its rejection of centralized authoritarianism but unproductive in its reliance on resentment. Roy certainly wouldn't agree with Gans's notion that we should all warmly embrace global capitalism and bourgeois democracy, but her position is consistent with Gans's in that it stresses reconciliation, love and beauty—and a break with the guilt-producing mode of victimary discourse. See also the discussion of *The Reader* further below. [\(back\)](#)

21. This universalist pretension has been noted by numerous authors. For those still obligated to postmodern norms this can only appear as a sellout: Marta Dvorak, for example, criticizes Roy for addressing not her "own community but an allogenous one" and for engaging in a "dynamics of domestication and familiarisation" (Dvorak 2002, 61) rather than playing up the non-reciprocal otherness of her own cultural experience. [\(back\)](#)

22. In terms of reader response, performatism leads to a reaffirmation of contingency, since we are left with an ending suggesting open choice rather than belated, know-it-all-after-the-fact irony. Unfortunately, one of the few critics interested in reestablishing contingency as a positive aesthetic category—Gary Saul Morson—has made his own criteria so restrictive that they would appear to apply

nowhere outside of a small subset of 19th-century serial novels (see Morson 1998 and Morson 2003). Morson's crucial demand is that novels mimic real-world, open time *literally*. Hence the stipulation that "processual" novels, as he calls them, should make us sense a "more or less regular heuristic" and not "an overall structure" (1998, 305); that they be "properly interpreted without imposing a design" or being reread (1998, 306), and that they incorporate real-life events and reader reaction into them as they are being written (1998, 305). Performatist works, by contrast, impose openness on us through their explicitly felt constructedness and artificiality. This paradox is in turn only possible in the autonomous aesthetic realm, which Morson is trying to open up to what he grandly and perhaps also rather prematurely calls "life." [\(back\)](#)

23. Gans (2002) describes this postideological scenario in the following way: "Where modernist politics is cruel, postmodern politics is victimary. Its scenic imagination, haunted by the image of victimization, conceives an ideal scene without a sacred center, where all is periphery. [...] Postmodern politics has an infinity of tasks; it sees every form of human relation as at least potentially victimary. Where the postmodern esthetic shies from constructing a center, postmodern politics finds in every mode of human interaction a center to deconstruct, construed as the locus, not of sacrifice, but of power." [\(back\)](#)

24. As Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe (1987, 63) puts it, the Holocaust is, regarding the West, the "terrible revelation of its essence" ("L'Extermination est à l'égard de l'Occident la terrible révélation de son essence."). [\(back\)](#)

25. For more on this see Gans 1997a. [\(back\)](#)

26. Eisenman's plan was widely criticized in Germany for being too abstract. Eventually, the German government made him include an information center in the concept so as to provide at least some form of historical documentation. For a full account of the debates regarding the Memorial see Niven 2002, 194-232. [\(back\)](#)

27. The museum, which was open to visitors while it was still empty, proved to be a popular attraction solely on the basis of its architectonic effects. [\(back\)](#)

28. Citations are provided according to the English translation (Schlink 1997), then the German original (Schlink 1997a [orig. 1995]). [\(back\)](#)

29. See in particular Schlant 1999, Bartov 2000, Long 2000, and Schmitz 2002. [\(back\)](#)

30. Schlink, whose is a professor of law and a practicing judge, "frames" his heroine in a very exacting way. Hanna's guilt is made explicit by confronting her with an

extraordinary situation requiring an easily made act of free choice; the crime is however mitigated somewhat because it is unpremeditated and passive. Also, it remains unclear whether Hanna was simply doing her duty or whether she was “cruel and uncontrolled” like another guard called “the Mare” (Schlink 1997, 118-119/1997a, 115). The weak circumstantial evidence of Hanna’s brutality is evidently meant to make us decide *in dubio pro reo*. [\(back\)](#)

31. This initiation is symbolically sanctioned by his mother, who sends him to “Frau Schmitz” so that he may thank her for helping him after he was sick in public. [\(back\)](#)

32. See in particular Long 2000, 55: “By accepting the proffered identification with Hanna, the reader can abdicate responsibility for engaging with the vexed moral questions that any serious discussion of the Holocaust necessarily raises.” [\(back\)](#)

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33. See Bartov 2000, 34: “[...] metaphorically, Michael *becomes* the Jewish victim, both by virtue with his association with Hanna as the reader, and thanks to the grace of his late birth, which prevented him from becoming a perpetrator. Yet, even as he tilts toward the category of victim, Schlink contextualizes his tale within a framework of emotional numbness and sexual obsession, both of which are above or below morality, since the former is a blank and a void, and the latter is involuntary and uncontrollable. Thus numbness and obsession are a means to avoid responsibility and reject all ethical categories.” [\(back\)](#)

34. Both Schmitz and Bartov diagnose Michael as suffering from the syndrome defined by the Mitscherlichs. [\(back\)](#)

35. See Mitscherlich 1988 [orig. 1967], 82: “[...] we must broaden the insight into ourselves so that we recognize ourselves in those horrifying scenes [...] in which 100, 500 or 1,000 corpses lie before us-corpses of those we have killed. That would mean an insightful, empathetic acceptance of victims long after the time of terror has passed.” [\(back\)](#)

36. See Bartov 2000, 40. If I understand Bartov’s use of a Primo Levi quote correctly, this direct experience of Holocaust terror—akin to looking at the Gorgon’s head and turning to stone—is impossible anyway; all we can do is belatedly cobble together our ravaged post-Holocaust identity in a quasi-fictional, simulatory way. Hence Wilkomirski’s fraudulent memoirs, which mourn virtually, are more acceptable to Bartov than Schlink’s inability to mourn at all in the postmodern mode. [\(back\)](#)

37. For more on Goffman's concept of framing and performatism see Eshelman 2002/2003. [\(back\)](#)

38. See in particular Goffman's essay "The Nature of Deference and Demeanor," in Goffman 1967, 47-96, esp. p. 95. [\(back\)](#)

39. Even *The Reader*'s harshest critics, such as Bartov and Long, agree that Michael's representation of Hanna cannot be taken at face value; both suggest however that Schlink has not distanced himself enough from Michael's perspective. [\(back\)](#)

40. For a full discussion see Girard 1987, 3-30. Bill Niven (2003), in a similar argument, has linked Hanna's behavior with a "culture of shame" (as opposed to a "culture of guilt"). [\(back\)](#)

41. See Niven 2003, 395: "It is as if she [Hanna] had hoped to slip back into the role of passive recipient. Realizing that this will not be possible, she escapes, in carefully stage-managed style, into suicide." [\(back\)](#)

42. Typical of this is the line taken by Nancy (1990). According to this way of thinking, any "humanist" or "democratic" attempt to project a feeling of social community or hope is an unconscious repetition of the fascist project (1990, 115). The only tenable alternative to this kind of self-delusion is the critical act of "taking history to its limit"—with that limit being marked, apparently endlessly, by our attitude toward events now lying three generations in the past. [\(back\)](#)

43. For example, a celebrated work of postmodern literature, Milorad Pavić's *Dictionary of the Khazars*, appeared in Belgrade in 1984; in Poland there seems to be a general consensus that postmodern literature began in the 1970's (cf. Galant 1998). [\(back\)](#)

44. For more on this see Eshelman 2004. [\(back\)](#)

45. Only one novel, *House of Day, House of Night* (Evanston 2003), has appeared in English. [\(back\)](#)

46. Jung, among other instances, follows in the Kantian tradition when he assumes that archetypes are a transcendental given embedded in the human psyche. [\(back\)](#)

47. Originally published as "Numery" [Room numbers] in Tokarczuk 1998; available in English in *Granta* 72 (2000), pp. 35-54. For an in-depth analysis see Eshelman 2004. [\(back\)](#)

48. See Kant's explication of this in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Book 1, Section 2, § 16. In his voluminous cultural history of intimate inner space, the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (2000, 422-423) has noted the use of the word "observator" in conjunction with the Roman notion of the genius or tutelary god as well as the derivation of Kantian and Jungian concepts of self from the notion of tutelary doubles in general (2000, 426 and 454). [\(back\)](#)

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15

## **Appendix: "The Wardrobe" (Olga Tokarczuk, trans. Raoul Eshelman)**

When we moved in here we bought the Wardrobe. It was dark and old and cost

more than the transport from the store to our house. It had two doors decorated with a floral ornament. The third door was made of glass, and when we drove it home in a rental truck the whole town was reflected in its pane. We had to tie a cord around the Wardrobe so that the doors didn't open during the drive. Back then, as I stood in front of it for the first time, I for the first time had a feeling of just how senseless my existence was. "It'll fit in well with the rest of our furniture," said R. He stroked its body tenderly, just as if it were a cow that had been bought for a new farm.

At first we put the Wardrobe in the hall—it had to be quarantined before entering the world of our bedroom. I squirted turpentine into the barely visible holes, a reliable inoculation against the ravages of time. During the night the Wardrobe creaked and groaned in its new site. The dying woodworms were lamenting their fate.

In the course of the next few days we put our old apartment to order. In a crack in the floor I found a fork with a swastika engraved in it. Out of the wooden siding protruded remnants of an old yellowed newspaper. The only legible word on it was "proletariat." R. opened the window wide open to hang up the curtains, and the sound of a miners' brass band marching through town in the evening intruded into the room. The first night, in which the Wardrobe shared our dreams with us, we couldn't sleep for a long time. R.'s hand, unable to rest, wandered back and forth over my stomach. And then we dreamed. From that time on we always dreamed together. We dreamed of an absolute quiet in which everything was hanging there like the decoration in a shop window, and that we were happy in that quiet, because we were everywhere and nowhere. The next morning we didn't even have to tell one another about the dream—all we needed was a single word. After that we never spoke to one another about our dreams.

One day it happened that there was nothing left to do in our apartment. Everything was in its place, orderly and clean. I warmed my back by the stove and gazed at my cloth napkins. There was no order in their woven patterns. Someone had made holes with a crochet needle in the dense material. Through those holes I looked at the Wardrobe and remembered the dream. It was from the Wardrobe that the quiet came. We stood opposite one another. I was the one that was fragile, unstable and mortal. The Wardrobe was simply its own self. In a perfect way, it was exactly that which it was. I touched its smooth handles with my fingers and the Wardrobe opened before me. I saw the shadows of my clothes and R.'s two tattered suits—in the dark everything had the same color. In the Wardrobe there was no difference between my femininity and R.'s masculinity. It didn't matter whether something was smooth or rough, round or square, far away or close, alien or one's own. The Wardrobe smelled of other places and another time that was strange to me. But, my God, it reminded me all the same of something familiar, something so near to me

that there were no words to describe it (words always need a certain remoteness in order to designate things). My form entered into the space reflected by the mirror on the inside of the door. I was reflected as a dark outline, hardly distinguishable from a dress hanging on a clothes hanger. There was no difference between the living and the dead. That was me, in the single mirror eye of the Wardrobe. Now I had only to lift my leg and enter into the Wardrobe's midst. And that I did. I sat down on plastic bags filled with wool and listened to the sound of my own breathing, amplified by the closed space of the Wardrobe.

When thought is alone by itself it starts to pray. That's the very nature of thought. "Angel of mercy, my guardian"—I saw my angel before with a face so beautiful that it must be dead, "may you always be with me..."—its waxen wings lovingly embrace the space around me. "In the morning"—the smell of coffee and the bright windows hurting your sleepy eyes, "in the evening"—when time slows down as the sun sets, "in the daytime"—being becomes the same as experience, noise, movement, millions of meaningless actions; "in the night"—the powerless, lonesome body in the dark; "always come to my aid"—the angel guarding children walking along the abyss. "Guard me, protect my soul and my body"—cardboard boxes with the legend "FRAGILE: HANDLE WITH CARE"; "and lead me into eternal life, amen"—the clothes hanging in the half-darkened Wardrobe.

From that time on the Wardrobe drew me into itself, it was like a gigantic funnel in our bedroom. At first I only spent late afternoons sitting there when R. wasn't at home. After that I did only the most necessary things—shopping, turning on the washing machine, calling someone up. Then I would go into the Wardrobe, quietly closing the door behind me. Inside it didn't make any difference what day it was, what season, what year. Everything was velvety. I fed on my own breath.

One night I woke up from a dream heavy as a humid storm and yearned for the Wardrobe as if it were a man. I had to wind my arms and legs around R.'s body and hold tightly to him in order to stay in bed. R. spoke in his sleep but his words made no sense. Finally, one night I woke him. He didn't want to leave the warm bed. I pulled him after me and we both stood before the Wardrobe. It was unchanging, mighty and tempting. I touched the smooth handle with my fingers and the Wardrobe opened before us. In it there was enough room for the whole world. Inside the mirror reflected us both, freeing our forms from the surrounding darkness. Our breathing, at first uneven and halting, found a single rhythm. There was no difference between us. The hanging clothes covered our faces. The Wardrobe closed the door behind us. And that's how we began to live there.

At first R. went out sometimes to buy something, to go to work, that sort of thing. But after a while that effort became onerous. The days grew longer. From the

streets the dampened music of the miners' bands could sometimes be heard. The sun rises and disappears, and the windows try to draw it inside, without success. The furniture, napkins and dishes are covered now by a thick layer of dust, and our apartment sinks more and more into darkness.