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Critical Virtuosity

90 Here's a beautifully written, familiar opening. "For a long time I would go to bed early. Sometimes, the candle barely out, my eyes closed so quickly that I did not have time to tell myself: 'I'm falling asleep.'" (Proust 1:1) You know the rest. Here's another passage, by another novelist:

Sloping down like an amphitheatre, submerged in the mist, [the city] spread out beyond the bridges, chaotically. And the featureless curve of open country sloped away up until it touched the far pale blur of the skyline. Seen like this from above, the whole landscape had the stillness of a painting; ships at anchor were crowded together in one corner, the river curved smoothly around the foot of the green hills, and the islands, oblong in form, looked just like big black fish, motionless on the water. (213)

The city is Rouen. The traveler is, of course, Emma Bovary. And Roland Barthes, who may have idolized Flaubert as much as he idolized Proust, has something interesting—and to my mind, beautifully written—to say about it:

In *Madame Bovary*, the description of Rouen (a real referent if ever there was one) is subject to the tyrannical constraints of what we must call aesthetic verisimilitude, as is attested by the corrections made in this passage in the course of six successive rewritings. Here we see, first of all, that the corrections do not in any way issue from a closer consideration of the model: Rouen, perceived by Flaubert, remains just the same, or more precisely, if it changes somewhat from one version to the next, it is solely because he finds it necessary to focus an image or avoid a phonic redundancy condemned by the rules of *le beau style*, or again to "arrange" a quite contingent felicity of expression; next we see that the descriptive fabric, which at first glance

seems to grant a major importance (by its dimension, by the concern for its detail) to the object *Rouen*, is in fact only a sort of setting meant to receive the jewels of a number of rare metaphors, the neutral, prosaic excipient which swathes the precious symbolic substance, as if, in Rouen, all that mattered were the figures of rhetoric to which the sight of the city lends itself—as if Rouen were notable only by its substitutions (*the masts like a forest of needles, the islands like huge motionless black fish, the clouds like aerial waves silently breaking against a cliff*); last, we see that the whole description is *constructed* so as to connect Rouen to a painting: it is a painted scene which the language takes up (“Thus, seen from above, the whole landscape had the motionless look of a painting”); the writer here fulfills Plato’s definition of the artist as a maker in the third degree, since he imitates what is already the simulation of an essence. (144-45)

David Trotter, in *Cooking with Mud*, has something interesting—and, to my mind, *not* beautifully written—to say about the Barthes:

This description neither advances the narrative nor tells us all that much about Emma Bovary’s state of mind. What it does do, by the proliferation of metaphor and simile it engenders, is draw our attention to the skill of the writer. We can, if we wish, suspend our eagerness to know what will happen to Emma, our rush ahead towards clarifying resolution, and savour the performance. It took Roland Barthes, a latterday *flâneur* if ever there was one, to slip unobtrusively through the cordon of significant details, and illuminate the writer’s pleasure, his narcissism. (205)

Of course, that’s what *virtuosos* supposedly do: draw attention to the skill of the performer. And that’s what *critical* virtuosos (like Barthes) do: draw attention to the skill of the writer—a function of both pleasure and narcissism. And probably of fetishism as well. You may have already noticed that I’m not drawing such attention here, for reasons I’ll describe.

So much for men. Here's what Naomi Schor—in a chapter of *Reading in Detail* that takes as its epigraph her subject's call for both erotic and aesthetic criticism, but in a passage (like the Trotter) I find both unerotic and unaesthetic—has to say about the Barthes:

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Critics are not done with Barthes's scandalous assertion that there exist in realist texts "useless," totally parasitical details that contribute neither to advancing the plot, nor to enhancing our knowledge of the characters and their physical surroundings. One need only recall that a long critical tradition condemns the superfluous detail as symptomatic of decadence in order to appreciate the importance of the question raised by Barthes: what is at stake is nothing less than the legitimacy of the organic model of literary interpretation, according to which all details—no matter how aberrant their initial appearance—can, indeed must be integrated into the whole, since the work of art is itself organically constituted. (85)

The jury's still out as to whether, and when, virtuosity is gendered: masculine mastery as opposed to feminine mystery. According to Edward Said, we associate it—in musical terms—with "dangerous effeminacy" (62). Not all virtuosos, however, are Said's Queen of the Night. Some are keyboard kings: Franz Liszt, Charles Rosen.

I suspect that most critics don't try to write like Proust because they know they can't; or because, if they can write like him, they know they'll be discredited (by critics who can't) as mere stylists; or worse yet, as *charlatans*. For where virtuosity is concerned, it can be extremely hard—and sometimes impossible—to distinguish genius from charlatanry. Consider what Rosen—a critical virtuoso in more than one sense of the term (notice the felicity of expression, and then listen to his recordings); one, moreover, who sees the responsibilities of criticism the way I do (it should arise from an occasion rather than from an obsession, and from the direct experience of art rather than from an abstract scheme; it should enlarge the reader's sympathies, while sharpening her focus; it should aid and inform judgment; and, above all, it should give

pleasure—to the *reader*, not the writer)—consider what he has to say about Liszt:

[Liszt's] arrangement of Schubert's "Der Lindenbaum"... presents the theme in the right hand in octaves simultaneously above and below a steady, delicate trill, which gives a continuously vibrant sonority, while the left hand imitates a *pizzicato* bass and, at the same time, realizes Schubert's simple flowing accompaniment as if it were performed by a trio of French horns. This is, one must confess, rather an awful thing to do to a Schubert song, but it would be churlish to refuse one's admiration for the grandeur and richness of the conception—or for the pianist who can play it and make it sound as vulgarly beautiful as it was intended—particularly the spectacular passage where the trill is transferred to the fourth and fifth fingers and the accompanying triplets must be played with the thumb and the melody by the left hand. To comprehend Liszt's greatness one needs a suspension of distaste, a momentary renunciation of musical scruples.

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This renunciation is not easy today, nor was it ever. Liszt was the great philistine musician. Right-thinking music-lovers looked with horror on what they considered his charlatanism. He was indeed a charlatan, and he knew it, and sometimes laughed at it. He was also a composer and pianist of the utmost refinement and originality. It is, unfortunately, useless to try to separate the great musician from the charlatan: each one needed the other in order to exist. (509-510)

Now, I know I've just discredited myself, not by any stylishness, but by my use of the terms "genius" and "charlatan." To call someone a genius is basically a gesture of admiring incomprehension. To call someone a charlatan may amount to one of derogatory incomprehension. I do believe, however, in the validity of these terms. Permit me, like some judge called upon to define pornography, to invoke an "I-know-it-when-I-see-it" test. Charles Rosen? Genius. Lee Edelman? Genius. Consider his analysis of another passage in Proust:

At this moment it is Charlus who is said to undergo a transformation, but that claim displaces the transformation experienced by the narrator himself as he discovers, in the course of observing this scene, the two-fold imperative of reading homographically—as he learns, in other words, not only that the appearance of similitude can conceal a disorienting difference (of “meaning,” as it were) internal to each of the sexed identities through which the symbolic articulates subjects, but also that a disciplined attention can recover the ideological coherence of identity precisely through the vigilance with which it seeks out and “reads” that category of person projectively constructed to embody, to signify by assuming as its characterizing identity, this destabilizing rupture in identity itself. (19)

D.A. Miller (another Proust idolator; another *Barthes* idolator—in addition to me, that is; and, in terms of gender, a *hyper-masculine virtuoso*)? Charlatan. Consider the opening of *Place for Us*:

Long before its kind was manifestly endangered, the Broadway musical took on a protective coloration. Thanks to the curious discursive exemption that it may have been alone among the forms of our mass culture in enjoying, the musical was already prevented—or perhaps spared—from being an object of serious thought. Its formal description had always been left to the handiwork of technicians and aspiring show doctors, and its history was no more likely to cease being written in playbill-style reminiscences than its sociology was to leave the bush leagues of boosterism intent on pushing the American way. Yet, as if this general neglect were somehow not enough, at a certain moment—say, in 1943 with *Oklahoma!*—the Broadway musical came to seek misrecognition even in its own limelight, and all the heralded breakthroughs of its so-called golden age consisted in embracing with ever greater rigor the “dramatic model” of a show whose musical numbers, no longer introduced by pretexts as diaphanous as the hosiery on the female chorus line that was losing promi-

nence in the same sea-change, now had to be strictly rationalized by the dramatic situation, which they had in turn the all but moral duty to advance. The musical thus let itself be colonized, or camouflaged, by the same narrative naturalism from whose tedium and tyranny its real merit was to keep alive, so long as it was vital itself, the prospect of a liberation. No doubt, we should all have been richer—less stupefied and better entertained—if the reverse procedure had been adopted, and instead of attempting to confer on *Oklahoma!* and its progeny the unremitting dramatic consistency of Clifford Odets or Arthur Miller, one had given to the work of the latter the formal structure of a Broadway musical, and so not only relieved us from its self-important earnestness but elucidated its latent sentimentality as well. But even as matters stood, the stranglehold of the dramatic model only better rehearsed the sense of suffocation that had always underlain the breathless pleasure that the musical, despite its new public relations, hadn't ceased to afford, but that had now acquired, through them, the more intense character of a secret. (1-2)

Since, at least with respect to Miller, you probably won't permit me to rely on that "I-know-it-when-I-see-it" test alone, allow me to demonstrate his charlatanry. Underneath a superficial felicity of expression we have some serious muscle flexing. The sentence structure, like Edelman's, is impressively Proustian, but needlessly so. The irony is impressively Socratic, but pointlessly so. (If it's a good thing for the Broadway musical to have been "spared" as an object of serious thought, what are we to make of the fact that Miller himself is treating it as one?) And whereas the criticism of the playwrights as stupefying and insufficiently entertaining is both impressively nasty and incapable of being redirected at Miller's own work, the criticism of their "self-important earnestness" and "latent sentimentality" should be redirected that way. (I like my self-importance flippant, my sentimentality blatant.)

Or, to take another example, consider the opening of *Bringing Out Roland Barthes*. (As if Barthes really needed Miller to bring him

out: his idolization of Proust alone made his homosexuality abundantly clear.)

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Twenty years ago in Paris, long before I, how you say, *knew myself*, a fellow student told me he had seen Roland Barthes late one evening at the Saint Germain Drugstore. Not the Americanized mini-mall where I would now and then swallow much disgust to go satisfy my palate (also Americanized, unfortunately for my ego syntony) with a hamburger or an ice cream? But on reflection: what better scene for Barthes to make than this curved, staggered dream space, where the density of merchandise, marketing, and anonymous masses of middle-class people must have presented so sharp a goad to his thinking about the status of the sign in a consumer society? Although in frequenting the Drugstore by night (as soon after this intelligence I began to do), I may initially have hoped to see Barthes, I eventually contented myself with *doing* Barthes, experiencing this promiscuous emporium as I imagined he might. Now the various displays of luxury would provoke my hot imitation anger with their repulsive evidence of bourgeois *myth* in the process of naturalizing an oppressive class bias; now they would lend themselves to my cool imitation appreciation as so many relaxed *signifiers* stiffening in no hierarchy but the continually flexible one instituted by desire, whose only trajectory in any case conformed to the defiles of a labyrinth. I'm not sure when, how, or even whether I understood that others liked to loiter here of an evening quite as regularly as myself, but I gave up the habit—to do justice to the emphasis of my renunciation, one could say I kicked it—shortly after the moment when one such *flâneur*, who could hardly have been in a hurry, considering how many times I had already passed him, whose determination to be friendly on the contrary seemed to me to suppose all the leisure in the world, stopped me—*Monsieur!*—and said, almost as though it weren't a question at all, *avez-vous l'heure?* (3-4)

Here, Miller is (still) “doing” Barthes’s prose style, not Proust’s—and, I have to admit, doing it pretty well, and for a pretty good reason. After all, one point of the book is Miller’s eventual (gay) identification with Barthes. The problem is that his “imitation” anger and appreciation are doubly false. For not only were they derivative (assuming they’re what Miller was really doing back then—I have my doubts), they aren’t very Barthesian. The strategies learned by truly attentive readers of *Mythologies* (and Miller wants us to know that he’s become one, or at least one now sufficiently attentive to its gay content) do not reduce to—are far more subtle than—finding either “repulsive evidence of bourgeois *myth* in the process of naturalizing an oppressive class bias” or “so many relaxed *signifiers* stiffening in no hierarchy but the continually flexible one instituted by desire.” Which Miller *must* know. What we have here, in other words, is not irony at Miller’s own expense (showing that Miller used to be as ignorant about Barthesian criticism as about his own sexuality)—irony, moreover, that would support the book’s point—but rather nastiness at Barthes’s. What we have here is Miller “topping” Barthes, implying that *Mythologies* isn’t very subtle—and for no good reason other than that he likes to be on top, or that he likes to flex his muscles just to show them off. Call it deliberate, as opposed to merely derogatory, incomprehension.

None of which is to say that I don’t identify with Miller. In fact, I identify with him far more than I identify with Edelman. (By “identify,” I mean to connote what Miller himself, with reference to Barthes, calls the “usual vicissitudes of adulation, aggression, ambivalence” [8].) And so I worry about my own sentence structure, my own Socratic irony, my own desire to entertain (as opposed to stupefy, or even to “please”) the reader, my own needless desire to top people (including, needless to say, Miller). My own privileging of insignificant detail, my own “decadence.” I also worry about my own narcissism. (I’ve often claimed that my narcissism is merely performative, or that I enact it in order to encourage similarly situated readers to identify with *me*—but the claim, I must confess, is somewhat disingenuous.) In other words, I worry about my own charlatanry. Consider two pederastic incidents (one real, one imaginary) the Miller reminds me of. (We’re back to the “I-know-it-when-I-see-it” test; figure out the charla-

tanry, if not the virtuosity, for yourselves.) The real one appears in my first book, *Love's Litany*:

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I was in Greenwich Village, waiting on line to see Visconti's *Death in Venice*, when a man *d'un certain âge*, a member, as it turned out, of NAMBLA (the North American Man-Boy Love Association), an organization I had never heard of, handed me a flier extolling Thomas Mann's story as the greatest "affirmation" of man-boy love known to the western world. Having already read the story, and knowing both that Aschenbach dies and that Tadzio (to whom, not incidentally, I was then close in age) never loved him, I deemed this claim to be rather dubious. I did not yet know that it was also pitiful. And having found the NAMBLA pamphleteer, like Aschenbach himself, to be decrepit in a sexually repulsive way, I decided that the whole idea of "man-boy love" was essentially disgusting. (50)

The imaginary incident opens the "Pianist Envy" section of *Beethoven's Kiss*, my second book. Here we have Barthes stalked, not by Miller, but by Gide (a writer I'm pretty sure he *didn't* idolize):

Roland Barthes, a writer I can't but love, never met André Gide, a writer I can. But imagine what might have happened if he had. September, 1932. Gide, out for a late afternoon stroll, notices a young *lycéen* reading *Le Temps retrouvé* and, emboldened by the concurrence of fine weather and good health, decides to cruise the boy. He takes an adjacent seat, sighs, pretends to notice the book's title, and mentions that he'd known the author personally. Barthes, who recognizes Gide but thinks better of saying so, asks whether, in light of that intimacy, he has reason to believe "Marcel" has been less than honest about his sexuality. Gide, impressed by the boldness and cunning of the question, as well as by the charm of the feigned ignorance (for it's clear the boy *must* know who he is), suggests they continue this discussion at his home, over tea and cookies. Barthes accepts the invitation, of course—in

large part because, oddly enough, he finds the old man somewhat attractive. (7)

So—I've had to consider *renouncing* critical virtuosity. I've considered kicking the habit of creating passages impressive—or “spectacular”—enough to invite critical dismissal, but also enough to withstand critical scrutiny. In other words, I've considered trying to write more like Trotter. (Unlike Edelman, he's no genius—but neither am I.) Not that I know what I'd produce that way. But I have *wanted* to know. After all, it might even be good.

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Of course, I'm not the only one to have renounced virtuosity. Liszt didn't devote his entire life to the piano, much to the dismay of his audience. He retired relatively young from the concert stage, never again to play in public—indeed, never again to practice (except for some double octaves here and there)—and devoted himself to his mistress, to giving master classes, to promoting other composers, to founding conservatories, to learning orchestration, to editing the Beethoven and Schubert sonatas, to conducting, to writing terrible books, to composing choral and orchestral as well as piano music, and to prayer. Nijinsky renounced his mastery of Romantic ballet in favor of “primitive” choreography. Racine, after writing *Phèdre*, the last of the secular plays, renounced his mastery of the Alexandrine in order to become Louis XIV's historiographer. Heine gave up writing lyric poetry in order to write journalism. Lorca gave up poetry in order to direct a theater company. True, none of these performers worried about charlatanry. They renounced virtuosity for reasons unrelated to mine. Either their skill no longer posed a challenge; or it was too demanding—too difficult—a mistress, both physically and mentally; or they feared, or sensed, a kind of impotence; or they succumbed to shyness; or they succumbed to negative criticism—or even to the very notion of criticism; or they succumbed to religious scruples; or they simply succumbed to the concept of simplicity. Their examples do, however, point toward something else I've had to consider—something *you* should consider: that you can never really renounce virtuosity, or that the question virtuosity invariably poses—“Just because you can, should you?”—also invariably demands the response, “Yes!” After all, Racine's last two plays—the religious dramas *Esther* and *Athalie*, first performed in a convent—are as virtuosic as *Phèdre* (perhaps inadvertently so).

Heine's journalism has a certain panache. (Perhaps inadvertently so.) Lorca's directorship was also the major period of his playwriting. Nijinsky's choreography is as difficult as ballet, in some ways more so. As for Liszt: not only did he continue to work out technical problems at the keyboard and not only did he continue to compose virtuoso music for other pianists, he also treated the orchestra as a virtuoso instrument—much like Berlioz, who was better at it.

You should also consider that there are at least three reasons—apart, that is, from the pleasure of either narcissism or fetishism—*not* to renounce critical virtuosity, so long as it isn't tantamount to charlatanry. There's the pleasure (for both reader and writer) of playing with language. There's the pleasure—how can I say this simply?—of playing with form. Critical virtuosity, moreover, can have a substantive rigor of its own. In "Pianist Envy," for example, I rehearse an undoubtedly futile attempt to top both Gide and Barthes in order to enact, if not to demonstrate, my (our?) eventual gay *disidentification* with them. And so any bravura—or irony—there, although not exactly hyperfeminine, has nothing at all to do with Miller's muscle flexing. Or so I'd like to think.