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(from Maps and Legends)

## TRICKSTER IN A SUIT OF LIGHTS THOUGHTS ON THE MODERN SHORT STORY

ENTERTAINMENT HAS A bad name. Serious people learn to mistrust and even to revile it. The word wears spandex, pasties, a leisure suit studded with blinking lights. It gives off a whiff of Coppertone and dripping Creamsicle, the fake-butter miasma of a movie-house lobby, of karaoke and Jägermeister, Jerry Bruckheimer movies, a *Street Fighter* machine grunting solipsistically in a corner of an ice-rink arcade. Entertainment trades in cliché and product placement. It engages regions of the brain far from the centers of discernment, critical thinking, ontological speculation. It skirts the black heart of life and drowns life's lambency in a halogen glare. Intelligent people must keep a certain distance from its productions. They must handle the things that entertain them with gloves of irony and postmodern tongs. Entertainment, in short, means junk, and too much junk is bad for you—bad for your heart, your arteries, your mind, your soul.

But maybe these intelligent and serious people, my faithful straw men, are wrong. Maybe the reason for the junkiness

of so much of what pretends to entertain us is that we have accepted—indeed, we have helped to articulate—such a narrow, debased concept of entertainment. The brain is an organ of entertainment, sensitive at any depth, and over a wide spectrum. But we have learned to mistrust and despise our human aptitude for being entertained, and in that sense we get the entertainment we deserve.

I'd like to believe that, because I read for entertainment, and I write to entertain. Period. Oh, I could decoct a brew of other, more impressive motivations and explanations. I could uncork some stuff about reader response theory, or the Lacanian *parole*. I could go on about the storytelling impulse and the need to make sense of experience through story. A spritz of Jung might scent the air. I could adduce Kafka's formula: "A book must be an ice-axe to break the seas frozen inside our soul." I could go down to the café at the local mega-bookstore and take some wise words of Abelard or Koestler about the power of literature off a mug. But in the end—here's my point—it would still all boil down to *entertainment*, and its suave henchman, pleasure. Because when the axe bites the ice, you feel an answering throb of delight all the way from your hands to your shoulders, and the blade tolls like a bell for miles.

Therefore I would like to propose expanding our definition of entertainment to encompass everything pleasurable that arises from the encounter of an attentive mind with a page of literature.

Here is a sample, chosen at random from my career as a reader, of encounters that would be covered under my new definition of entertainment: the engagement of the interior ear by the rhythm and pitch of a fine prose style; the dawning awareness that giant mutant rat people dwell in the walls of a ruined abbey in England;

two hours spent bushwhacking through a densely packed argument about the structures of power as embodied in nineteenth-century prison architecture; the consummation of a great love aboard a lost Amazon riverboat, or in Elizabethan slang; the intricate fractal patterning of motif and metaphor in Nabokov and Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*; stories of pirates, zeppelins, sinister children; a thousand-word-long sentence comparing homosexuals to the Jews in a page of Proust (vol. 3); a duel to the death with broadswords on the seacoast of ancient Zingara; the outrageousness of whale slaughter or human slaughter in Melville or McCarthy; the outrageousness of Dr. Charles Bovary's clubfoot-correcting device; the outrageousness of outrage in a page of Philip Roth; words written in smoke across the sky of London on a day in June 1923; a momentary gain in one's own sense of shared despair, shared nullity, shared rapture, shared loneliness, shared broken-hearted glee; the recounting of a portentous birth, a disastrous wedding, or a midnight deathwatch on the Neva.

The original sense of the word "entertainment" is a lovely one of mutual support through intertwining, like a pair of trees grown together, interwoven, each sustaining and bearing up the other. It suggests a kind of midair transfer of strength, contact across a void, like the tangling of cable and steel between two lonely bridgeheads. I can't think of a better approximation of the relation between reader and writer. Derived senses of fruitful exchange, of reciprocal sustenance, of welcome offered, of grasp and interrelationship, of a slender span of bilateral attention along which things are given and received, still animate the word in its verb form: we entertain visitors, guests, ideas, prospects, theories, doubts, and grudges.

At some point, inevitably, as generations of hosts entertained generations of guests with banquets and feasts and displays of

artifice, the idea of pleasure seeped into the pores of the word. And along with pleasure (just as inevitably, I suppose) came disapproval, a sense of hollowness and hangover, the saturnine doubtfulness that attaches to delight and artifice and show: to pleasure, that ambiguous gift. It's partly the doubtfulness of pleasure that taints the name of entertainment. Pleasure is unreliable and transient. Pleasure is Lucy with the football. Pleasure is easily synthesized, mass-produced, individually wrapped. Its benefits do not endure, and so we come to mistrust them, or our taste for them.

The other taint is that of passivity. At some point in its history, the idea of entertainment lost its sense of mutuality, of exchange. One either entertains or is entertained, is the actor or the fan. As with all one-way relationships, grave imbalances accrue. The entertainer balloons with a dangerous need for approval, validation, love, and box office; while the one entertained sinks into a passive spectatorship, vacantly munching great big salty handfuls right from the foil bag. We can't take pleasure in a work of art, not in good conscience, without accepting the implicit intention of the artist to please us. But somewhere along the course of the past century or so, as the great machinery of pleasure came online, turning out products that, however pleasurable, suffer increasingly from the ills of mass manufacture—spurious innovation, inferior materials, alienated labor, and an excess of market research—that intention came to seem suspect, unworthy, and somehow cold and hungry at its core, like the eyes of a brilliant comedian. Lunch counters, muffler shops, dinner theaters, they aim to please; but *writers*? No self-respecting literary genius, even an occasional maker of avowed entertainments like Graham Greene, would ever describe him- or herself as primarily an "entertainer." An entertainer is a man in a sequined

dinner jacket, singing "She's a Lady" to a hall filled with women rubber-banding their underpants up onto the stage.

Yet entertainment—as I define it, pleasure and all—remains the only sure means we have of bridging, or at least of feeling as if we have bridged, the gulf of consciousness that separates each of us from everybody else. The best response to those who would cheapen and exploit it is not to disparage or repudiate but to reclaim entertainment as a job fit for artists and for audiences, a two-way exchange of attention, experience, and the universal hunger for connection.

Of all the means writers of fiction have devised for spanning the chasm between two human skulls, the short story maps the most efficient path. Cartographers employ different types of maps—political, topographic, dot—to emphasize different kinds of information. These different types are complementary; taken together they increase our understanding. I would like to argue for the common-sense proposition that, in constructing our fictional maps as short-story writers, we are foolish to restrict ourselves to one type or category.

Imagine that, sometime about 1950, it had been decided, collectively, informally, a little at a time, but with finality, to proscribe every kind of novel but the nurse romance from the canon of the future. Not merely from the critical canon, but from the store racks and library shelves as well. Nobody could be paid, published, lionized, or cherished among the gods of literature for writing any kind of fiction other than nurse romances. Now, because of my faith and pride in the diverse and rigorous brilliance of American writers of the last half century, I do believe that from this bizarre decision, in this theoretical

America, a dozen or more authentic masterpieces would have emerged. Thomas Pynchon's *Blitz Nurse*, for example, and Cynthia Ozick's *Ruth Puttermesser, R.N.* One imagines, however, that this particular genre—that any genre, even one far less circumscribed in its elements and possibilities than the nurse romance—would have paled somewhat by now. In that oddly diminished world, somebody, somewhere, is laying down his copy of *Dr. Cavalier & Nurse Clay* with a weary sigh.

Instead of “the novel” and “the nurse romance,” try this little thought experiment with “jazz” and “the bossanova,” or with “cinema” and “fish-out-of-water comedies.” Now go ahead and try it with “short fiction” and “the contemporary, quotidian, plotless, moment-of-truth revelatory story.”

Suddenly you find yourself sitting right back in your very own universe.

Okay, I confess. I am that bored reader, in that circumscribed world, laying aside his book with a sigh; and the book is my own, and it is filled with my own short stories, plotless and sparkling with epiphanic dew. It was in large part a result of a crisis in my own attitude toward my work in the short-story form that sent me back into the stream of alternate time, back to the world as it was before we all made that fateful and perverse decision.

As late as about 1950, if you referred to “short fiction,” you might have been talking about any one of the following kinds of stories: the ghost story; the horror story; the detective story; the story of suspense, terror, fantasy, science fiction, or the macabre; the sea, adventure, spy, war, or historical story; the romance story. All these genres and others have rich traditions in America, reaching straight back to Poe and Hawthorne, our first great practitioners of the form. A glance at any dusty paperback anthology of classic tales turns up important genre work by

Balzac, Wharton, Conrad, Graves, Maugham, Faulkner, Twain, Cheever, Coppard. Heavyweights all, some considered among the giants of modernism, the very source of the moment-of-truth story that, like *Homo sapiens*, appeared relatively late on the scene but has worked very quickly to wipe out all its rivals. One of the pioneers of the modern “psychological” short story as we now generally understand it, Henry James (famously derided by critic Maxwell Geismar as merely “a major entertainer”), wrote so many out-and-out ghost stories that they fill an entire book. “Genre” short stories were published not only by the unabashedly entertaining pulps, which gave us Hammett, Chandler, and Lovecraft among a very few other writers now enshrined more or less safely in the canon, but also in the great “slick” magazines of the time: the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Esquire*, *Collier's*, *Liberty*, and even the *New Yorker*, that proud bastion of the moment-of-truth story that has only recently, and not without controversy, made room in its august confines for the likes of Stephen King.

Over the course of the twentieth century the desire of writers and critics alike to strip away the sticky compound of Orange Crush and Raisinets that encrusts the idea of entertainment, and thus of literature as entertainment, radically reduced our understanding of the kinds of short stories that belong in prestigious magazines or yearly anthologies of the best American short stories. Thanks to the heavy reliance of the new mass media (film, then radio and TV) on adapting and exploiting the more plot-centered literary genres—from *Star Wars* to *Pirates of the Caribbean*, every blockbuster summer film of the past twenty years, almost without exception, fits safely into one or another of the old standby categories—“genre” absorbed the fatal stain of entertainment. Writers—among them some of our finest—kept turning out short stories of post-apocalypse America or Arizona

gunmen or hard-boiled detection. But they could no longer hope to see their work published in top-drawer literary magazines, and in the meantime the pulps and the slicks alike dried up, blew away, or stopped publishing short fiction entirely.

And so as with our idea of entertainment, our idea of genre—one of those French words, like *crêpe*, that no one can pronounce both correctly and without sounding pretentious—is of a thing fundamentally, perhaps inherently debased, infantilized, commercialized, unworthy of the serious person's attention. The undoubted satisfactions that come from reading science fiction or mystery stories are to be enjoyed only in childhood or youth, or by the adult reader only as "guilty pleasures" (a phrase I loathe). A genre implies a set of conventions—a formula—and conventions imply limitations (the argument goes), and therefore no genre work can ever rise to the masterful heights of true literature, free (it is to be supposed) of all formulas and templates.

This emphasis on the conventionality, the formulaic nature of genre fiction, is at least partly the fault of publishers and book-sellers, for whom genre is largely a marketing tool, a package of typefaces and standardized imagery wrapped around a text whose idea of itself as literature, should it harbor one, is more or less irrelevant. "Science fiction," therefore, becomes any book sold in the section of the bookstore so designated. The handsome Vintage Internationals edition of Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*, or *Arden*—an extended riff on alternate-world and time theories and a key early example in the retro-futuristic subgenre of science fiction that years later came to be known as steampunk—would look out of place in the science-fiction section, with the blue-foil lettering, the starships, the furry-faced aliens, the electron-starred vistas of cyberspace. *Arden*, therefore, is not science fiction.

Accepting such an analysis sounds like the height of simple-

mindedness, yet it is an analysis that you, and I, and both those who claim to love and those who claim to hate science fiction, make, or at least accede to, every time we shop in a bookstore. Though the costly studies and extensive research conducted by the publishing industry remain closely guarded secrets, apparently some kind of awful retailing disaster would result if all the fiction, whether set on Mars or Manhattan, concerning a private eye or an eye doctor, were shelved together, from Asimov and Auster to Zelazny and Zweig. For even the finest writer of horror or sf or detective fiction, the bookstore, to paraphrase the LA funk band War, is a ghetto. From time to time some writer, through a canny shift in subject matter or focus, or through the coming to literary power of his or her lifelong fans, or through sheer, undeniable literary chops, manages to break out. New, subtlet covers are placed on these writers' books, with elegant serif typefaces. In the public libraries, the little blue circle with the rocket ship or the magnifying glass is withheld from the spine. This book, the argument goes, has been widely praised by mainstream critics, adopted for discussion by book clubs, chosen by the *Today* show. Hence it cannot be science fiction.

At the same time, of course, there is a difference, right? and sometimes an enormous difference, between, say, Raymond Chandler's "The King in Yellow," and F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Crazy Sunday," even though they are both set in and around Hollywood in roughly the same period. A difference that consists not merely of details of backdrop, diction, mores, costume, weather, etc., nor merely of literary style, nor of the enormously different outlook and concerns of the respective writers. If that was all there was to it, the distinction would be akin to that between *any* two books, chosen at random, from the shelves in the tony part of the bookstore: say, Kathy Acker and William Trevor. (Keep that question

in mind, though. Ask yourself just how damned *different* a book has to be, on the inside, from its neighbors, to get it consigned to the genre slums at the local Barnes & Noble. More different than *Moby-Dick* is from *Mrs. Dalloway*?)

No, there are those *conventions* to be considered. These things—mystery, *sf*, horror—have *rules*. You can go to the How to Write section, away from the teeming ghettos, and find the rules for writing good mystery fiction carefully codified in any number of manuals and guides. Even among experienced, professional writers who have long since internalized or intuited the rules, and thus learned to ignore them, there are, at the very least, particular conventions—the shutting of the private eye from high society to the lower depths, the function of a literary ghost as punishment for some act of hubris or evil—that are unique to and help to define their respective genres. Many of the finest “genre writers” working today, such as the English writer China Miéville, derive their power and their entertainment value from a fruitful self-consciousness about the conventions of their chosen genre, a heightened awareness of its history, of the cycle of innovation, exhaustion, and replenishment. When it comes to conventions, their central impulse is not to flout or to follow them but, flouting or following, to *play*.

Whether through willfulness, ignorance, or simple amour propre, what tends to be ignored by “serious” writers and critics alike is that the genre known (more imprecisely than any other) as “literary fiction” has rules, conventions, and formulas of its own: the primacy of a unified point of view, for example; letters and their liability to being read or intercepted; the dance of adulterous partners; the buried family secret that curses generations to come; the ordinary heroism of an unsung life. And many of literary fiction’s greatest practitioners, from Jane Austen

to Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie to Steven Millhauser, display a parallel awareness of the genre’s history and conventions, and derive equivalent power and capacity to delight from flouting, mocking, inverting, manhandling, from breaking or ignoring the rules.

Like most people who worry about whether it’s better to be wrong or pretentious when pronouncing the word “genre,” I’m always on the lookout for a chance to drop the name of Walter Benjamin. I had planned to do so here. I intended to refer to Benjamin’s bot-tomless essay “The Storyteller,” and to try to employ the famous distinction he makes in it between the “trading seaman,” the storyteller who fetches his miracle tales, legends, and tall stories from abroad, and the “resident tiller of the soil” in whose memory are stored up all the sharp-witted wisdom tales, homely lore, and useful stories of a community. Benjamin implies that the greatest storytellers are those who possess aspects, to some extent, of both characters, and I was thinking that it might be possible to argue that in the world of the contemporary short story the “naturalistic” writers come from the tribe of the community-based lore-retellers, while the writers of fantasy, horror, and *sf* are the sailors of distant seas, and that our finest and most consistently interesting contemporary writers are those whose work seems to originate from both traditions. But that claim felt a little shaky to me—for one thing, it ignores entirely the work of experimentalists like Ben Marcus or Gary Lutz—and as I invoke the idea of playfulness, of mockery and inversion, the dazzling critic whose work I find myself thinking of most is Lewis Hyde, whose *Trickster Makes This World* rewards rereading every bit as endlessly as any work of Benjamin’s.

Hyde's masterpiece concerns the trickster of mythology—Hermes among the Greeks, the Northmen's Loki, the Native Americans' Coyote and Raven and Rabbit, the Africans' Eshu and Legba and Anansi (who reappear in our own folklore in slave stories of High John de Conquer and Aunt Nancy), Krishna, the peach-stealing Monkey of the Chinese, and our own friend Satan, shouting out who killed the Kennedys, when, after all, it was you and me. Trickster is the stealer of fire, the maker of mischief, teller of lies, bringer of trouble, upset, and, above all, random change. And all around the world—think of Robert Johnson selling his soul—Trickster is always associated with borders, no man's lands, with crossroads and intersections. Trickster is the conveyor of souls across ultimate boundaries, the transgressor of heaven, the reconciler of opposites. He operates through inversion of laws and regulations, presiding over carnivals and feasts of fools. He is hermaphrodite; he is at once hero and villain, scourge and benefactor. "He is the spirit of the doorway leading out," as Hyde writes, "and of the crossroad at the edge of town (the one where a little market springs up)." For Trickster is also the god of the marketplace, of the city as intersection of converging roads and destinies, as transfer point—as the primary locus of entertainment, that powerful means of exchange—and perhaps that is why cities, Indianapolis excepted, have always been built at the places where incommensurates meet—sea and land, mountain and plain, coast and desert. Trickster goes where the action is, and the action is in the borders between things.

In spite of the continuing disdain or neglect in which most of the "nonliterary" genres are held, in particular by our finest writers of short stories, many if not most of the most-interesting writers of the past seventy-five years or so have, like Trickster, found themselves drawn, inexorably, to the borderlands. From

Borges to Calvino, drawing heavily on the tropes and conventions of science fiction and mystery, to Anita Brookner and John Fowles with their sprung romance novels, from Millhauser and Thomas Pynchon to Kurt Vonnegut, John Crowley, Robert Aickman, A. S. Byatt, and Cormac McCarthy, writers have plied their trade in the spaces between genres, in the no man's land. These great writers have not written science fiction or fantasy, horror or westerns—you can tell that by the book jackets. But they have drawn immense power from and provided considerable pleasure for readers through play, through the peculiar mingling of mockery and tribute, invocation and analysis, considered rejection and passionate embrace, which are the hallmarks of our Trickster literature in this time of unending crossroads. Some of them have even found themselves straddling that most confounding and mysterious border of all: the one that lies between wild commercial success and unreserved critical acclaim.

It is telling that almost all of the writers cited above, with the notable exception of Borges, have worked primarily as novelists. This is not, I firmly believe, because the short story is somehow inimical to the Trickster spirit of genre-bending and stylistic play. There are all kinds of reasons, some of which have to do with the general commercial decline of the short story and the overwhelming role, which I have only touched on lightly, that business decisions play in the evolution of literary form. But among our most interesting writers of literary short stories today one finds a growing number—Kelly Link, Elizabeth Hand, Aimee Bender, Jonathan Lethem, Benjamin Rosenbaum—working the boundary: "sometimes drawing the line," as Hyde writes of Trickster, "sometimes crossing it, sometimes erasing or moving it, but always there," in the borderlands among regions on the map of fiction. Because Trickster is looking to stir things up, to

scramble the conventions, to undo history and received notions of what is art and what is not, to sing for his supper, to find and lose himself in the act of entertaining. Trickster haunts the boundary lines, the margins, the secret shelves between the sections in the bookstore. And that is where, if it wants to renew itself in the way that the novel has done so often in its long history, the short story must, inevitably, go.

## MAPS AND LEGENDS

**I**N 1969, WHEN I was six years old, my parents took out a Veterans Administration loan and bought a three-bedroom house in an imaginary city called Columbia. As a pediatrician for the Public Health Service, my Brooklyn-born father was a veteran, of all things, of the United States Coast Guard (which had stationed him, no doubt wisely, in the coast-free state of Arizona). Ours was the first V.A. housing loan to be granted in Columbia, Maryland, and the event made the front page of the local paper.

Columbia is now the second-largest city in the state, I am told, but at the time we moved there, it was home to no more than a few thousand people—"pioneers," they called themselves. They were colonists of a dream, immigrants to a new land that as yet existed mostly on paper. More than four-fifths of Columbia's projected houses, office buildings, parks, pools, bike paths, elementary schools, and shopping centers had yet to be built; and the millennium of racial and economic harmony that Columbia promised to birth in its theoretical streets and