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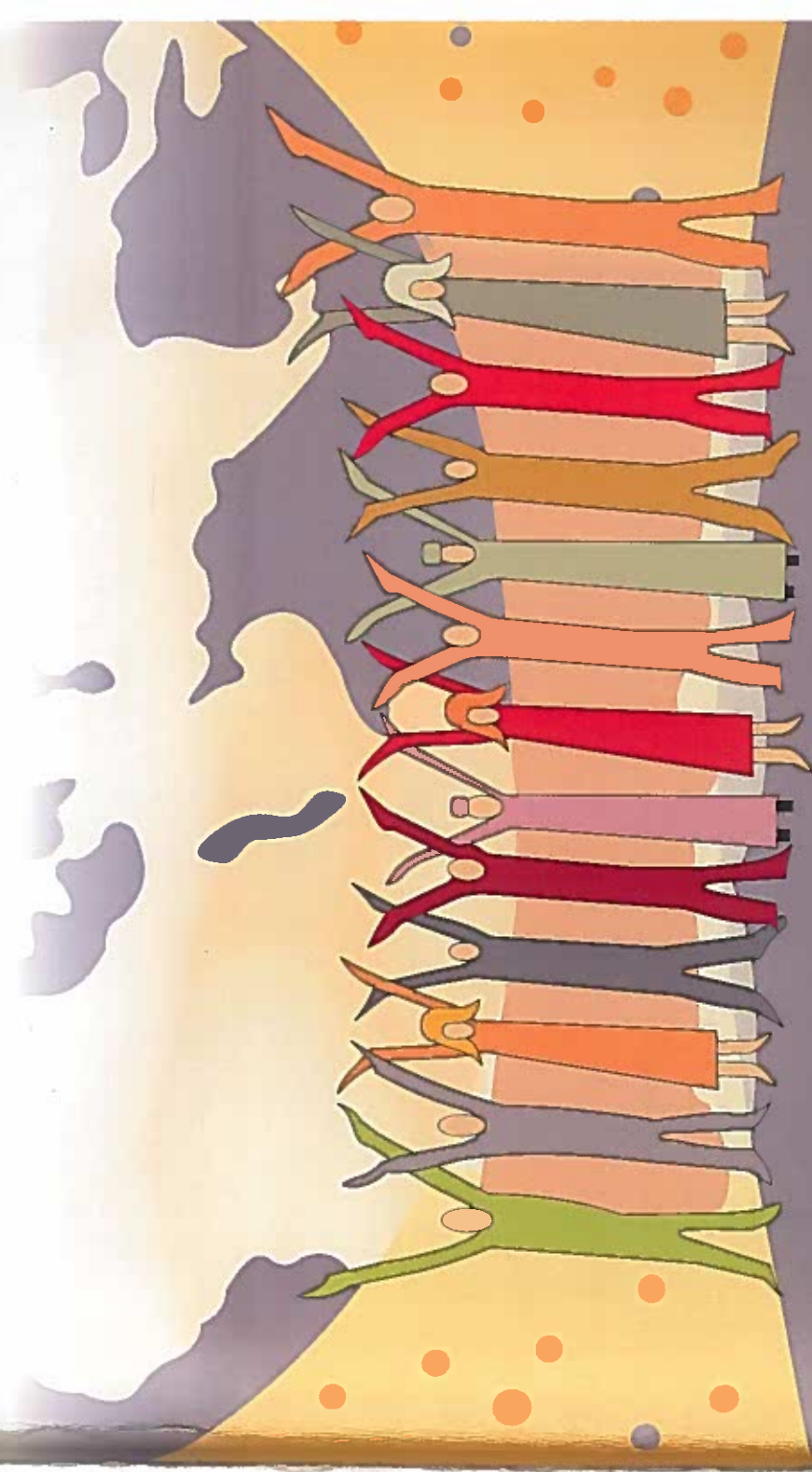
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THREE MEN, THREE MANIFESTOS: COMPARING CRITERIA DEMANDED BY WILDE, HEMINGWAY AND KEROUAC IN LIGHT OF LYOTARD'S CRITIQUE OF LEGITIMISATION

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Who is qualified to formulate the criteria by which a literary work is to be judged? Must we depend on the critic and the academic, or has the author sufficiently recovered from his delegitimation by Wimsatt and Beardsley and his eventual death pronounced by Roland Barthes to take his place alongside the other voices vying for authority over the text? It is the thesis of this paper, which draws heavily on ideas introduced by Jean-Francois Lyotard in Just Gaming (1985), that not only should contending systems of criteria be taught as legitimate, including those of authors, critics and theorists, but that one should also encourage students to participate actively in the game of formulating new criteria for themselves.

In this paper I would like to consider the point of view of three writers who have all found their way into the canon, into what is teachable English literature – Oscar Wilde, Ernest Hemingway and Jack Kerouac. I would like to look briefly at what these writers have delineated as processes which a good writer should follow in order to be good, as well as their considerations of how to identify good writing, in order to see if there is any similarity between them or consensus among them. I would then like to turn to a discussion of criteria, and specifically about some difficulties which arise when one seeks to legitimate criteria by means of consensus. The issue of consensus will be explored in light of certain notions raised by Jean-Francois Lyotard in his books *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) and *Just Gaming* (1985).

Though none of these three writers explicitly call the extracts I will here be quoting from 'manifestos' as such, I think that this is nevertheless a good description of these statements they have made about writing. Perhaps the main difficulty in calling these statements manifestos is that manifestos are most often compiled, or at least, presented by a group of people, a movement. And yet these three writers were certainly also affiliated to groups which endorsed and certainly also shaped their views. These extracts also comply with other descriptions of manifestos, such as their desire to make plain, to explain what appears obvious to the writers – to make manifest the latent. Perhaps the most telling similarity these extracts share with other manifestos is their very particular style. They all betray a certain confidence, even bravado, often displayed in terms of aphoristic imperatives.

For Oscar Wilde, I will consider the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945), which has also become known as the Aesthetic Manifesto. For Hemingway, I will be looking at extracts on writing from *Death in the Afternoon* (in *Ernest Hemingway on Writing* [1999]), and for Kerouac I turn to writings collected in *The Portable Beat Reader* (1992).

Wilde's manifesto begins with the simple, yet strident claim that 'the artist is the creator of beautiful things', and this does seem to be his 'bottom line' – beauty. Here are a few more of his pronouncements:

To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim...

Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are cultivated. For these there is hope. They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only beauty...

There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all...

No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy is an unpardonable mannerism of style...

Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for...art...

All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril...

and finally, his fairly pointed ending:

All art is quite useless.

(Wilde, 1945:70)

It seems that the type of model Wilde is emulating here is classical in nature. He seems to admire and endorse a superficial aesthetics, art for its own sake, created by a non-pragmatic, cultivated artistic elite. He is opposed to personal subjectivity and the overemphasis on feeling so heartily endorsed by the Romantics. Furthermore, what is valuable in art, in Wilde's view, is appearance and surface, not depth. The beautiful is equated with the good, and neither truth nor morality is relevant. What counts above all is if a thing is well designed; in other words, if it is harmonious, symmetrical, balanced, and so on.

Curiously, for someone so little concerned with the artist as person (if one is to believe the second statement on this list), Wilde does seem to mention 'the artist' a good deal. Indeed, 'the artist' is mentioned no fewer than eleven times in what is little more than a one page manifesto, and he does seem to contradict his opening effacement of the artist, by rather exuberant statements such as 'the artist can express everything', so it may not be altogether accurate to see him in the strictly classical paradigm of an anonymous worker labouring away on behalf of tradition and the greater good of the system.

Whereas in *The Importance of Being Earnest* Wilde satirizes the Victorian proclivity for duty and seriousness, it is these very qualities which appeal most to our other Ernest in this paper. In *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway introduces us to an entirely different way of thinking. Whereas Wilde despises utility and usefulness, these are the very concepts Hemingway interprets as virtues. For Hemingway the good writer is economical; he strives for clarity; and his competence is based on his ability to distil only what is absolutely necessary from what is extraneous or frivolous. For example, Hemingway states that for the writer:

No matter how good a phrase or a simile he may have if he puts it where it is not absolutely necessary and irreplaceable he is spoiling his work for egotism. Prose is architecture, not interior decoration.

(www.sixgallerypress.com/afternoon.html)

Whereas Wilde (who, in his day, could be spotted flouncing across Hyde Park in shoulder length locks and with a lily gracefully draped over one shoulder) comes across to us today via his many very witty epigrams as flagrantly and unapologetically egotistical, one gets the impression that Hemingway, on the other hand, did his best to support a rough, unassuming, workmanlike demeanour. Hemingway is opposed to 'artificially constructed characters' whereas Wilde hopes for nothing more than sheer artifice. Hemingway is ever against one he calls 'the faker', the writer who pretends to know more than he does. He makes appeals to the 'depth' of a writer, going as far as to say that a writer should never reveal all he knows, but should always hold something back. Therefore, writers should deliberately restrain themselves, not reveal all, and be wiser than they appear. Hemingway uses the analogy of an iceberg to demonstrate what a writer keeps concealed, to define the strong emotions, experience and knowledge which writer's should keep below the surface.

Now, nothing could possibly be further from what Jack Kerouac encourages in writers. He exhorts them to reach

... as deep as you want - write as deeply, fish as far down as you want...

... the best writing is always the most painful personal wrung-out tossed from cradle warm protective mind allowing subconscious to admit in own uninhibited...language what conscious art would censor... Write what you want bottomless from the bottom of the mind.

(Kerouac, 1992:57-59)

For Kerouac, writing is a process of absolute vulnerability: He endorses an utter laying bare of the soul and the psyche, a complete lack of restraint. Certainly, this is very different from what we have seen thus far. Both Wilde and Hemingway seem to favour a very deliberate, well thought out and carefully crafted approach, whereas for Kerouac any hint of premeditation and forethought is a sign of dishonesty and he insists that work be 'always honest, spontaneous, confessional, interesting because not crafted'. So he is entirely against the idea of craft.

Hemingway also appeals to honesty, but for him this takes the form of clarity, and of careful consideration. On the other hand, honesty, I need hardly mention, is the furthest thing from Oscar Wilde's considerations for what is pleasing and beautiful as artifice.

In Kerouac one feels that the ideals of the English Romantics, and I think particularly of the manifestoes by Wordsworth and Coleridge, are taken to the extreme. Whereas Wordsworth also lauds spontaneity and feeling, he never quite goes quite as far as Kerouac in letting loose the reigns of inhibition and trying to write completely unedited. Even Wordsworth relies on 'recollection', whereas Kerouac wants only immediacy.

As for the process of writing, compare Kerouac's methodology, if it can be called that, to Hemingway's. Kerouac says:

Work from pitch middle eye out, swimming in language sea...write outwards swimming in a sea of language to peripheral release and exhaustion.

(Kerouac, 1992:57-58)

Compare this to Hemingway's statement that '...the dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one eighth of it being above water'. (A visual image springs to mind of a

rather joyful Kerouac splashing about in the waters of language whilst the austere Hemingway icebergs coasts by.) For Kerouac (1992:58), the artist is everything and he cries 'satisfy yourself first', and writes that one should write 'for your own joy', and to reveal 'the unspeakable visions of the individual'. 'Be in love with your life,' he says.. 'Write in...amazement for yourself....' The reader seems secondary for Kerouac. Lastly, all three of these writers have very different ideas about what it is that writing should represent. Whereas for Wilde art should reflect the spectator, for Hemingway, it should reflect reality; and for Kerouac it ought to reflect the writer.

Now, what are we to make of these extreme divergences? Is there any relation at all, any semblance of order or categorization which one could apply to these three radically different points of view? How is it that all can be contained under the name of literature? After all, each of these is a respected writer in his own capacity and yet there is no consensus whatsoever on their reasons for writing, the processes of writing, nor the virtues of writing. There is no agreement about writing's purposes, functions, or meaning. Perhaps the only thing which these three manifestos share is that their authors were all willing to invent criteria.

Turning now to Lyotard, who states in *Just Gaming* (1985) that in classicism, very definite criteria apply, but that at any point when we have lost the consensus of criteria, then we are in modernity (Lyotard, 1985:15). He characterizes modernity as portraying precisely a loss of consensus; and, in particular, the loss of agreement about the value of grand narratives. If one did have firmly established criteria, then it would not be a difficult task for one to decide who amongst these three authors is right and who is wrong. If one were to adopt the criteria, for example, of Marxism, Feminism or Post-Colonialism, discourses which emphasize the marginalized and the oppressed, then one might be very tempted to see Oscar Wilde as misled, confused, or ignorant, if not downright imperialist. From our own 'enlightened' perspective a hundred years on, we might well sanction many of the suggestions made by Wilde, who seems to be enthusiastically endorsing 'the centre', or more specifically, an elitist Euro-centric centre. Should we disregard him as a result of his allegiances to the upper classes? Is what he says simply wrong, and, taking this line of argument to its furthest extreme - should he be silenced? Of course, such a position would be absurd. Even if Wilde's notions of élitism seem somewhat outdated, or at the very least, out of place at a conference such as this one, I trust that this will not cost him his standing as one of the greatest humourists in the language. The worst thing one could do would be to silence Wilde, to refuse him permission to play the game of inventing criteria. To exclude Wilde's point of view would be nothing less than an act of terrorism, according to Lyotard, who describes terrorism as the refusal to negotiate - to forfeit the game if the other does not play by one's rules.

And yet, as educators, as academics, as teachers, we crave criteria, we long for system, for order. When one is dealing with an academic discourse, especially with what hopes to be a sort of scientific process (being encapsulated as we are by the realm of the social sciences), then one is surely after some sort of discipline, one wants to draw up tables, to subsume differences into categories, some of which have inadvertently slipped into this discourse, such as calling Wilde Classicist, Hemingway Realist and Kerouac Romanticist.

Is it possible to do without categories? Can we do without these systems we turn to in order to legitimate criteria? If we adopt Lyotard's (1985:xxiv) 'incredulity towards meta-narratives', then where will legitimacy reside? How will one know what is bad without

criteria? In *Just Gaming*, Lyotard is specifically concerned with the question of what is just, and how one can tell it apart from the unjust. What Lyotard considers unjust is the destruction of the possibility of playing the just/unjust game. What is unjust is not the opposite of the just, but rather '...that which prohibits that the question of the just and the unjust be, and remain, raised' (Lyotard, 1985:67). The same can be said of the good, and of good writing. The question needs to remain raised as to what is good writing and how one achieves it and how one recognises it. There is no final conclusion; there are no final criteria we can turn to in the hope of illuminating the good once and for all.

Perhaps what one could teach students then is not a list of criteria, not a programme by means of which they could identify good writing, such as, perhaps, that it must have depth and be restrained and so on and so forth. Perhaps what one could rather teach them is to invent criteria; to learn to play the game of engaging with those who have invented criteria before, and to be critical of any hard and fast paradigm of criteria which they might encounter.

One could also teach students to approach texts descriptively, instead of prescribing criteria for them. This is another aspect emphasised by Lyotard's books. For example, when challenged by Jean Thebaud in *Just Gaming* that surely he must maintain some kind of criteria, Lyotard (1985:18) responds:

I have a criterion (the absence of criteria) to classify various sorts of discourse here and there...But this operation of classification belongs to a language game that has nothing to do with prescriptions: it is descriptive or denotative, as you wish.

Although the writers mentioned in this paper phrase their language in terms of imperatives – this is the nature of manifestos – it is up to the reader to interpret them as prescriptive or descriptive. If they are read prescriptively, one might very well rail against some of these statements. If, however, they are read as descriptive of each particular writer's oeuvre, methodology and biography, then there is certainly room to accommodate these writers, even if there is no single set of criteria which can be applied to all of them.

Finally, what is perhaps most valuable in Lyotard's text concerns his search for questions rather than answers. In the foreword to *The Postmodern Condition* (1984:xix), Jameson defines Lyotard's vision of knowledge as follows:

[It is] ... a search, not for consensus, but very precisely for instabilities, as a practice of paralogism, in which the point is not to reach agreement but to undermine...The rhetoric in which all this is conveyed is to be sure one of struggle, conflict...

Lyotard states that 'dissension must be emphasised. Consensus is a horizon that is never reached' (1984:61) and '...consensus is only a particular state of discussion, not its end'(1984:65) and finally 'consensus has become an outmoded and suspect value' (1984:66). What Lyotard suggests, then, instead of consensus, instead of sublimation to a norm, is parody – the development of arguments which cannot ever be entirely validated; and the search for conflict, for disagreement; as well as the use of the imagination in experimenting with the ability to invent criteria, instead of the search for an ultimate model to imitate. Instead of the mimesis of perfection, Lyotard would have us

ever striving, imperfectly, for what can never be attained, and yet keep on playing the game.

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