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*Patrick O'Brian and the Art of Fiction**The leaves of a tree delight us more than the roots.*

Tolstoy

Lovers desire to praise the persons they love, and with a similar ardor, readers desire to praise the books that have enchanted them. Patrick O'Brian's sea novels have enchanted many. Critical assessment of O'Brian's work, however, has varied widely, from Gary Krist's characterization of the novels as "potboilers, plain and simple" (Krist 300) to John Bayley's judgment of O'Brian's narrative and descriptive power as at times comparable to Melville's (Bayley, 1991, 8). Some critics of O'Brian disagree because they see different things in the novels; some because they value differently the qualities they agree are present. In either case, the strongly felt yet radically different assessments of O'Brian's novels by intelligent critics raise the question: what are these novels doing as fictions and how good are they? I propose in this essay to articulate more fully than has been done the nature of O'Brian's practice of the art of fiction. Each of the essay's four sections takes up a traditional "topic" of poetics which is important for understanding O'Brian's achievement: (I) genre, (II) character, (III) style and structure, and (IV) stature. I hope to make clear why his achievement in these novels deserves and repays such attention.¹

For clarity, I will focus my detailed analysis on a single novel which seems to me to reflect qualities common to them all, the fifth book in the series, *Desolation Island*, although I will refer on occasion to several others.²

I. The Poet as Historian

One way to illuminate the character of O'Brian's novels is to begin with a famous distinction from Aristotle's *Poetics*. This is

his distinction between the epic and tragic *poet*, who can compose his action as a universal pattern, and the *historian*, who must write at the level of particular, contingent fact.

It will be clear from what I have said that it is not the poet's function to describe what has actually happened, but the kinds of things that might happen, that is, that could happen because they are, in the circumstances, either probable or necessary. The difference between the historian and the poet is not that one writes in prose and the other in verse ...The difference is that the one tells of what has happened, the other of the kinds of things that might happen. For this reason poetry is something more philosophical and more worthy of serious attention than history; for *while poetry is concerned with universal truths, history treats of particular facts* (*Poetics* ch.9; italics added).³

The universality and particularity of any given narrative lies along a graduated range: most narratives mingle the universal and the particular in different degrees. It will help us grasp O'Brian's radical choice in this matter to compare how universality and particularity are reflected in the narratives of two great predecessors of O'Brian in writing fictions about the sea.

Moby-Dick contains an encyclopedic compilation of "particular facts" about the whale and whaling. But Melville does not leave these facts in their particularity. They are often narrative symbols, one might call them imaginative universals, reflecting a world which is itself symbolic, its visible appearances revealing and concealing invisible depths.

Thus for Ahab, *Moby-Dick* himself appears as a present embodiment, one might almost say, a perverse sacrament, of a transcendent agent of malice:

All visible objects, man, [he explains to Starbuck] are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event - in the living act, the undoubted deed - there, some unknown but

still reasoning thing puts forth the moulding of its features from behind the unreasoning mask... That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him (Ch. 36).

While for Ishmael, the sea appears as a metaphor for the hidden depths of the human soul:

Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure . . . Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began.

Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return (Ch.58)!

Whether the symbolic reference to a universalizing depth is inner or outer, Yvor Winters, one of Melville's most acute commentators, seems right:

The book is less a novel than an epic poem. The plot is too immediately interpenetrated with idea to lend itself easily to the manner of the novelist (Winters 219).

Conrad is closer to Aristotle's historian, with his brilliantly realized particular surfaces that are meant to be appreciated for their own sake. The purpose of the novelist, in his famous phrase, is "to render the highest kind of justice to the visible

universe ... to make us see," and he means "see" in its ordinary as well as extended sense (Conrad 162).⁴ But many readers, asked what *Lord Jim* is about, would speak first of the themes that open it onto the universal: Jim's hunger for honor, his infidelity, disgrace and redemption. Only then might they recount the details of the plot or point to the brilliantly particularized descriptions of the Arabian and South China Seas. And in *Heart of Darkness* the independent integrity of the surface is blurred both by the ramified algebraic network of thematic leitmotifs and the symbolist suggestiveness which depends precisely on leaving the narrative partly indefinite in order to create a space in which readers are invited to add their own imagination of horror.⁵

When we try to apply Aristotle's distinction to O'Brian, however, we discover a revealing paradox. O'Brian is a *poet* who radically imitates the particularity of the Aristotelian *historian*. Melville and Conrad offer a particular experience together with an intended interpretation of it, an interpretation that universalizes it, even if the means of universalizing are not Aristotelian. O'Brian offers the particular experience and the pleasure of participating in it as autonomous, as valuable for its own sake; his imagination rests in the well-seen appearances without asking "why?". Eva Brann catches this quality of O'Brian's imagination in commenting on his description of a pair of praying mantises mating: "In this romance the incident is *a metaphor for nothing at all* - just a well-observed piece of natural history" (Brann [1993] 108; italics added). To quote John Bayley, O'Brian's narrative world is "almost entirely ... a world of enchanting [particular] surfaces" (Bayley, 1991, 8).

O'Brian also writes as a historian in a more conventional sense. For one of his driving impulses is to show about the period of his interest "the way things really were." Given the manner in which his imagination embraces the world, this means for him exhibiting as many particular surfaces as possible; hence his delight in showing every aspect of his characters' activity in all its settings. This also explains the

apparent paradox of his writing fiction rather than formal history. For fiction has this superiority. It allows a fuller representation, more differentiated and continuous for the reader's imagination, than history. The novelist need not stop for the gaps in the record of an event, but can narrate something like an actual event in great particular detail.

If O'Brian writes as a historian, what is this nineteen-volume series a history of? The most telling answer is the name of an institution. These books celebrate the British Navy in the first two decades of the nineteenth century.

It would be hard to find a period in which this great navy played a role of more scope, weight, and interest. For in these years the British Navy was an agent of the three seaborne movements - military, scientific, and, in a supportive role, commercial that globalized the framework of human life.

Militarily, these years coincide with the first maturity of global war. The two wars initiated in Europe in the middle of the eighteenth century, the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-48) and the Seven Years War (1756-63), were fought in India, Africa, the Caribbean, Canada, and what became the United States as well as in Europe. The Napoleonic wars which form the scene of so many of O'Brian's novels were yet larger in scope and more fateful. The variety of locales which O'Brian brings to life in their double aspect for his characters of engaged matter-of-factness and reflective wondrousness has the fascination of such classics of adventurous travel as Kinglake's *Eöthen* and Francis Chichester's *The Lonely Sea and the Sky*.

Scientifically, in turn, these decades pointed toward the closure of the European voyages of discovery. The series almost touches the year of Darwin's departure on *H.M.S. Beagle* (1831). The following century saw the final European movement into the interiors of Africa, Asia, and South America, and with it the plenitude of observations in biology and geology which so enlarged the time scale of these sciences and supported the developing theory of evolution. By the time Conan Doyle published *The Lost World* in 1912,

it was hard to imagine a place so unknown that Professor Challenger could convincingly find there survivals of the age of the dinosaurs.

The Navy was the instrument of these great movements, as well as of the growth of international trade of which we catch glimpses, in the great square-rigged ships that appeal to our love of romance and visual nobility and to our love of skill. No less than Homer or the Native American narrator of Peter Nabokov's *Two Leggings*, O'Brian makes us feel the importance and enchantment of the technical mastery that is a part of heroic achievement, whether it is handling a ship or a horse, a cutlass or a bow.

It is this world in all its multifariousness that O'Brian is bent on showing us.

II. Aubrey-Maturin

To spread his narrative net wide enough to capture this range of experience, O'Brian frames his novels around two main characters. These are Jack Aubrey, who over the course of the books climbs the ranks of naval command, and his friend Stephen Maturin, a physician, ship's surgeon, and ardent naturalist. Maturin also reflects another important aspect of the period's military activity as a fiercely anti-Napoleonic intelligence agent.

Thus Jack Aubrey embodies in vividly individualized and historically exact form every aspect of a naval commander's life. So we see Aubrey handling internal naval politics of all kinds, the support and frustration that arise from the hierarchical command structure; see the mixture of practical intelligence and imagination that are necessary in rightly outfitting a ship and finding, training, and skillfully using the language and forms of authority to win the best from his crew;⁶ see him handling a ship in different waters and weathers and planning and executing the most effective strategy and tactics, often in the immediate press of danger. O'Brian frequently describes a kind of knowing

that accompanies such skilled performance. For example, responding in *Master and Commander* to a storm:

Jack did not hear it: he was quite unconscious of the tension around him, far away in his calculations of the opposing forces - not mathematical calculations by any means, but rather sympathetic; the calculations of a rider with a new horse between his knees and a dark hedge coming (76).

This is the nineteenth century, European version of the kind of immediate, connatural knowing that wedds spatial, kinesthetic and conceptual cues which the Puluwat navigators practice as Howard Gardner describes them:

To navigate among the many islands in their vicinity, the Puluwats must recall the points or directions where certain stars rise and set around the horizon. This knowledge is first committed to memory by rote, but then becomes absorbed into the intuition of the sailor as he spends many months traveling back and forth. Ultimately, the knowledge must be integrated with a variety of factors including the location of the sun; the feeling one experiences in passing over the waves; the alteration of waves with changes in course, wind, and weather; skills in steering and handling the sheet; ability to detect reefs many fathoms down by sudden changes in the color of the water; and the appearance of the waves on the surface (Gardner 202).

Being enabled to share such knowing in detail outside the particular regions of one's own skilled performance is one of the great pleasures of reading these books.

We also see Aubrey's life on land, his brief periods with his family, his gambling and investing (the two are almost one: early in his career he almost spends time in a debtor's prison), his building his house, all detailed with the same narrative vividness and historical exactness.

Stephen Maturin, in turn, introduces the world of early nineteenth century science. "Dr. Maturin was much caressed in the physical world: his *Suggestions for the Amelioration of Sick Bays*; his *Thoughts on the Prevention of the Diseases most usual among Seamen*; his *New Operation for Suprapubic Cystotomy*; and his *Tractatus de Novae Febris Ingressu* were read throughout the thinking part of the Navy ..." (Island 85). In *Treason's Harbor* we hear about *Remarks on Pezohaps Solitarius* (26), in *Master and Commander* about his little work on the phanerogams of Upper Ossory (36). One wonders when he found time to practice. Yet (cast, again, as vivid narrative) one follows him performing a variety of operations, sharing cadavers with his colleagues for research, and observing fauna and flora around the globe.

Maturin's work as a naturalist reflects O'Brian's own love of the particular for its own sake. "I have already found fifty-three kinds of moss on this island alone," he remarks in *Desolation Island*, "and no doubt there are more" (288-9). This is the voice of the young Darwin in the Galapagos:

I have not yet noticed by far the most remarkable feature in the natural history of this archipelago; it is, that the different islands to a considerable extent are inhabited by a different set of beings. My attention was first called to this fact by the Vice-Governor, Mr. Lawson, declaring that the tortoises differed from the different islands, and that he could with certainty tell from which island any-one was brought (Beagle Ch.17).

So far Maturin reflects Darwin's joy in observing the natural world; but he is rarely drawn to probe beyond toward the kind of universal explanation that Darwin was already seeking and defending in his first notebook on the transmutation of species, written within the first couple of years of his return:

Before Attract of Gravity [was] discovered, it might have been said it was as great a difficulty to account for the movement of all by one law, as to account for each separate one: so to say that all Mammals were born from one stock, & since distributed by such means as we can recognize, may [falsely] be thought to explain nothing (*Notebook B* 196; punctuation normalized).

Beyond embodying the many-sided activities of the Royal Navy, Aubrey and Maturin are clearly stamped individuals who participate in one of the best realized friendships in this century's literature. As in many great literary friendships, the partners in this one are complementary figures.

In appearance, Jack Aubrey is a fair Englishman, his complexion pink-and-white beneath his seaman's tan, blue-eyed, yellow-haired. He is massively built - "an ox of a man" one of his enemies calls him. His father, General Aubrey, is a Tory member of Parliament whose radical leanings are sometimes an embarrassment to his son. Aubrey is active, strong in a world where his subordinates admire physical strength, a man of spontaneous sensuality tempered by decency. He is open and generous: he hates the lies that sometimes attend Maturin's intelligence work. Some of the qualities which are virtues in the context of the sea - his love of action, his large imagination of success, his confident strategizing, and, in contest, a sort of manic immediacy - become flaws on land, where he cannot read the signs of a situation. At sea since the age of twelve, he has an extraordinary knowledge of this world.

Stephen Maturin, by contrast, is dark: the child of an Irish father and Catalan mother, he can pass for Spanish or French. He is small and plain-looking; unagile, though very active intellectually and physically in his scientific pursuits; reflective and somewhat melancholy. It is to address his inclination to live at the edge of his physical energy and emotions that he investigates and suffers in withdrawing from laudanum and the consoling leaves of the tobacco and

coca plants. His intelligence work springs from a hatred of tyranny both by temperament and on principle.

Such a literary use of contrast can be simply a rhetorical device for making characters set each other off. But in this case the friendship is alive and, beyond the individual partners in it, itself one. Thus it shares, in its degree, in the mystery of the relationships between Achilles and Patroclus, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, perhaps Prince Andrew Bolkonsky and Pierre Bezukhov: all of these friendships, as if in accord with Aristophanes' myth about human nature in the *Symposium*, seem to form on some level a single soul whose complementary characteristics are distributed between two human beings, so it becomes difficult to think of one without the other. Each implies and completes the other and our imagination seizes on the whole they complete together.

Although the contrast between Aubrey and Maturin is more in evidence, their friendship also depends on qualities they share. Thus both wholeheartedly, even helplessly, love what they do; both are excellent at it; both appreciate such excellence in others; and both are men of active decency of character, willing to spend themselves unto death for the goods they recognize and hold in common.

The most telling narrative image for their friendship in its interplay of likeness and contrast are the recurrent scenes in which the two play music together, Aubrey on his violin, Maturin his cello. It is an image of the way their friendship is *practiced*. In order to play together, each must enter into – anticipate, will and advance – the performance of the other. This spontaneous, often tender, appreciation and will by each man of the good of the other occurs again and again in the novels, in matters large and small. Jack may not himself delight in a wombat, but he delights in Stephen's delight in it, and will inconvenience himself to further Stephen's scientific pleasure. And, in the manner of friendship, each is allowed to live more fully through glimpsing the experience of the other: each is enlarged as the good of the other becomes his own. This foretaste in

friendship of charity is a major pleasure of these books.

O'Brian does not represent his two leading characters as developing, through education or the play of transforming psychological dynamics, although in the last books they feel the encroachment of the shifting perspectives and diminishment of age. They are psychologically and morally formed when we meet them and remain consistent. Their trueness-to-character is not only the result of a formula element which does at times limit the literary stature of the books, but also marks them as comic characters, in accord with the general spirit of the novels, which is comic and active (though with grim moments) rather than tragic and contemplative. This trueness-to-character is also a source of our affection for Jack and Stephen. It resembles the habitual behavior of family members, which (when it does not madden us) elicits a similar upwelling of affectionate delight.

III. Style and Story

O'Brian's prose resembles Prokofiev's *Classical Symphony* in its playful wedding of a classical form with a modern surface. In its syntactic lucidity and parallelism, it resembles the softened Johnsonianism of turn-of-the-nineteenth-century English prose, the prose, for example, of Jane Austen. But in its representation of sensuous surfaces with almost hallucinatory clarity, it follows twentieth-century canons for fictional prose. In fact, in its fidelity to the appearances of things, O'Brian's prose "edits" the reader's visual attention cinematically, in a precise analogue of film processes.⁷ Hence, its dignity, vividness, and beautifully varied movement; its air of being contemporary with the events it describes and at the same time its immediacy.

It is worth giving attention to O'Brian's narrative prose in detail, for it is one of his greatest achievements.

According to a rhetorical tradition that antedates Aristotle, the most fundamental way of describing a prose

style is by distinguishing the way the clauses of a sentence are related to one another.⁸

If some clauses are *subordinated* to others by conditional, causal, temporal or other subordinating conjunctions, or by such other mutually implicative relationships as purpose or result ("He ran so fast *that* he won the race."), the style is *periodic*. Since an "if" clause syntactically demands an answering "then" clause, or an "although" clause an answering "nevertheless" clause, a periodic sentence has a *climactic* quality. The enunciation of the answering main clause is like the musical return to the tonic or the statement of the conclusion to a syllogism, for it provides an anticipated completion, making the sentence an intrinsic whole.

Clauses can also be laid side by side and *coordinated* with one another by such coordinating conjunctions as "and" or "but" or by commas or semicolons without any stated conjunctions; such a style is *paratactic*. In a paratactic sentence, one clause opens out of the preceding clause *without any necessary connection*; any number of clauses can be added to a paratactic sentence just by tacking on another "and" or "but"; in this sense, each new clause arises as a surprise.

For the sake of example, I have framed my description of the periodic style as periodic and my description of the paratactic as paratactic.

Where does O'Brien stand in this scheme?

The answer is: everywhere, depending on what is narratively appropriate. There seems to me no substitute here for technical analysis, even if it be only of two representative sentences.

First, a primarily periodic sentence, the sentence which opens *Desolation Island*:

The breakfast-parlour was the most cheerful room in Ashgrove Cottage and, although the builders had ruined the garden with heaps of sand and unslaked lime and bricks, and although the damp walls of the new wing in

which the parlour stood still smelt of plaster, the sun poured in, blazing on the covered silver dishes, and lighting the face of Sophie Aubrey as she sat there waiting for her husband (5).

After an initial scene-establishing clause, the sentence brings us into the book in a single, long movement, a visual progress. In doing so, it performs a large number of tasks: it implies the temporal and geographical setting and social and economic circumstances of the participants, sets a mood, and creates a dramatic focus. It can perform so many tasks without confusion because the visual data are laid into the balanced and subordinated clauses in such a way that we perceive them and their relationships with perfect clarity. The disorder from building described in the parallel concessive clauses provides a contrasting foil to accentuate the cheerfulness of the pouring sun described in the main clause; and even these two concessive clauses are logically ordered, for the first focuses on the *outside*, the second brings us to the *inside* of the house. The two participial phrases which conclude the sentence follow the track of the sunlight as the more interior parts of the scene become visible to us; the second and longer of these phrases brings us to Sophie's face in what is simultaneously the climax of visual, syntactic, and dramatic movements. The movement of the period is like a cinematic crane-and-track shot, descending without a break from an external, comprehensive view of the grounds and cottage to a close-up on Sophie's face.

By contrast, a primarily paratactic sentence occurs a few lines later:

The anxiety changed to unmixed pleasure as she heard his step: the door opened; a ray of sun fell on Captain Aubrey's beaming face, a ruddy face with bright blue eyes; and she knew as certainly as though it had been written on his forehead that he had bought the horse he coveted (5).

Here the narrative has shifted to Sophie's point of view. Perhaps the simplest way to see the effect of the parataxis is to recast the framework of the sentence as periodic: "When the door opened, a ray of sun fell on Captain Aubrey's beaming face, and *because* of this illumination, she knew ..." Here, as above, the periodic version emphasizes continuity and relationship. The paratactic sentence brings the structure of Sophie's process of perception to our attention: the perceptions are discrete, discontinuous stages of ever deeper realization; and each stage is realized in relative independence, with a vividness hard to achieve if the clauses had been subordinated to a whole. Nevertheless, there is a latent sense of sequence and wholeness: the discontinuity is a *broken continuity*. The arrangement of the last three clauses is an ascending tricolon, in which the increase in clause length, coinciding with the increase in Sophie's perception, creates a rhetorical, if not syntactical, climactic pattern. There is an abruptness caused by the lack of connectives between the first three clauses and this abruptness creates an effect of energy that a periodic structure does not possess. Again, the "edit" is cinematic: an establishing shot of the doorway with steps heard on the soundtrack, then a sequence of cuts: a medium or long shot of Captain Aubrey entering; a medium close-up of his face in the sunlight; and perhaps an extreme close-up registering Sophie's response. The classical prose articulations become the framework for sequences of sensuous images in ways that would be hard to parallel before the nineteen thirties and forties, for example in some of the early fiction of Graham Greene.

O'Brian's prose can rest at either stylistic extreme. Most typically, it has a loosened periodicity, in which the individual member is vivid, but always part of an articulated flow: a flexible prose, which can become more periodic or more paratactic, longer or shorter in its members, more continuous or more abrupt, depending on the immediate narrative needs.

As a narrative instrument, the prose has two faces, one turned toward the world which it represents, one turned toward the audience as the story-teller's voice, working to engage.

Some of what has already been said bears on the prose of the novels as a world-representing instrument. The world of O'Brian's novels is dense with things, with historical and anthropological data, with "facts." In representing this world, the distinct articulation of the individual members of his long sentences allows each thing to appear vividly as itself, while the graduated continuities within and between sentences keep the imagined world from falling apart and the explicit or latent periodicity suggests the underlying relationships. The loosened periodicity provides a tolerant orderliness. While retaining its civil shapeliness, it opens onto the ongoing flow; it also embraces the sharp juxtapositions of these concrete things and events in pathos or comic incongruity or wonder-provoking surprise.

This density of things and flexible orderliness of the prose support the representation of the world as fundamentally comic. Although O'Brian admits into the flow of delineated experience moments of appalling loss, they are never the final horizon. O'Brian's novels are, as Wye Allanbrook describes Mozart's operas, "a celebration of the social man, of reconciliation, and accommodation to the way things are" (Allanbrook 44). Even more apt to O'Brian are her words about Mozart's instrumental music: "it mirrors in the *chiaroscuro* of its surface the orderly diversity of humankind and completes that motion out of adversity toward the happy ending that should grace the universal comic narrative" (Allanbrook 44). This *chiaroscuro*, this orderly diversity of O'Brian's represented world, is reflected in and in part created for the reader by the structure of his prose.

The same structural features inform the narrator's voice. The long sentences, finely orchestrated within by commas, semicolons, and colons, whose graduated pauses allow degrees of separation between members without losing

continuity, permit a rhetoric of punctuational gesture that gives the narrator's voice an amazing variety of tempi, emphases, and pointings. The storyteller, unobtrusive while one is wrapped up in his tale, successively takes on the roles of confidence man, stand-up comic, salesman, sharer of secrets, confederate in an all-absorbing game, retailer of wonders, and seeing and sober assessor of misfortune - trustworthy, worldly, knowledgeable, urbane. The sheer narrative flexibility and power of this prose may be O'Brian's finest achievement.

The shape of the prose is reflected in the larger narrative structures, scene, sequence, and book.⁹ The Aristotelian plot with its beginning, middle, and end, the parts articulated in proper proportion to the whole and connected by necessary or probable relationships, is comparable, to the periodic sentence. O'Brian's loosened periods with their large accommodation of parataxis, blown up into narrative size, suggest a looser, more episodic structure. It is probably exact to say that this is an adaptation of the earliest structure of written history, the chronicle or annals, elaborated by the episodic adventures and wonders of the picaresque tale. What gives the books their shape as stories is an undertaken mission. The interplay of intention with fortune, purpose with circumstance, in any long naval mission will lend a random element to the narrative progress: unprefigured episodes arise as a surprise like the unforeseeable clauses added onto a paratactic sentence. If the picture on the tapestry unfolds in enchanting variety, however, there is always an impression of the orderly weave of warp and woof which underlies. O'Brian's is a world marked by a vivid *thereness* and a shaping (if sometimes unpredictable in detail) way things are.

IV. Surfaces and Depths

How good, finally, are these novels?

In addressing this question, I would like to look briefly at sea stories in general. What features of sea stories make

them so compelling? What aspects of life do they bring especially to the fore?

Without attempting to be systematic or complete, let me list three.

1) *The shipboard world is a closed world.* Like a country house in an English mystery story, it is cut off; self-contained, if not self-sufficient; persons of diverse types are forced together in interdependence and interaction, in circumstances that screw tight emotional intensity. This raises questions of right order, indeed of the claims of order and freedom, public and private goods, of authority.

2) *The shipboard world is a vulnerable world.* The separation from the resources of land and frailty before the instability of wind and waves highlights the element of precarity and the response to precarity that is a feature of all our lives. Ordinarily we close our eyes against this essential precarity, but at sea it is always to the fore; so, too, therefore, are the human technical skill and endurance that attempt to overcome it and their limits.

3) *The shipboard world is a world of passage.* Hence, it provides a patent example of the larger experience of passage through life. The connotations of destination, progress sustained or thwarted, the interplay of intention and luck, the experience of test and transformation, of new sights in pleasure, wonder, fear, or danger, all support the analogy of shipboard passage to life in general.

In all these ways, a sea story can hardly help having deep overtones, universal resonances, archetypal suggestions, a sense of myth, no matter how matter-of-factly told. Sea stories offer a primary opening in our literary experience onto fundamental questions.

O'Brian uses the enclosed and vulnerable character of shipboard life for the sake of narrative intensity; but he steadfastly resists pursuing such openings - at least, if the pursuit of fundamental questions means abandoning the surface for presumed depths. If I may borrow Jungian language here, O'Brian's narrative consciousness shows a

radical preference for sensation over the significance-seeking depths of intuition.

What does this mean for his stature?

John Bayley, a great critic of the novel, is emphatic about what he takes it to mean for the caliber of O'Brian's fictions:

The reader today has become conditioned, partly by academic critics, to look in Melville and Conrad for the larger issues and deeper significances, rather than enjoying the play of life, the humor and detail of the performance. Yet surface is what matters in good fiction, and Melville on the whale and on the *Pequod's* crew is more absorbing to his readers in the long run than is the parabolic significance of Captain Ahab. Patrick O'Brian has contrived to invent a new world that is almost entirely in this sense a world of enchanting surfaces, and all the better for it (Bayley, 1991, 8).¹⁰

My quarrel with this standard of merit in fiction is with Bayley's phrase "rather than," which pits the fictional surfaces *against* the deeper significances, preferring the former and discounting the latter.

Let me intimate an alternative vision of the novel which embraces a surface *informed* by depths. Such a novel invites the reader to experience the represented surfaces of things in two ways.

First, it invites the reader to experience them naively and for their own sake; paradisiacally, as with the freshness of the first morning; with the *story-teller's wonder*, which holds one in the appearances in love and amazement.

Second, it invites the reader to something akin to the *philosopher's wonder*, which looks beyond the immediacy of the appearances to what they may bespeak; to see the surfaces also as arising from or in accordance with deeper sources or patterns, cognized, tasted, or felt.

Such a fiction, whose surfaces are simultaneously revelatory of themselves and (sometimes enigmatically) of

their significance, is intrinsically *sopbianic*, exercising, nourishing, expanding and providing a resting place for the fullness of the reader's powers of appreciation and knowing.

The kinds of depths and the ways they are represented can take many forms. The notion of depth need not be tied, for example, as Isaiah Berlin tends to do in the context of his argument in "The Hedgehog and the Fox," with the notion of an "unchanging, all-embracing ... unitary inner vision" (Berlin 22). But there must be some degree of universalization. Thus Tolstoy intends to represent a *typical* aspect of human experience in his relentless, detailed, penetrating exposure of egoism and illusion and the slow shaping by experience which gives some human beings the wisdom to orient themselves by an obscure awareness of the meaning of life.¹¹ Every imaginative act that builds *War and Peace* simultaneously represents the surface texture of experience and its significance. If one could imagine (it is impossible) the amazing precisions of Tolstoy emptied of his continuous moral and psychological interpretation of private and public life, *War and Peace* would drop for all experienced readers to the second rank.

It is the natural experience of the fully alive reader, not the bias of academic critics, that raises fictions which are simultaneously enchanting on the surface and significant in their depths to the highest rank.

O'Brian's books are a wonderful achievement. They embody amazing erudition in recreating the many faces of a particular historical world. The sheer abundance of invention in this richly elaborated secondary world is a sign of power and vitality and is a source of joy for the reader. O'Brian is a master of narrative, as fine a narrator as Stevenson. One could write a book-length rhetoric of narrative on every level from phrase to sentence to sequence to scene to book which would draw examples of excellence from his novels. The brilliant and varied surfaces of the novels have rightly been praised by every reader. The characters and friendship of Aubrey and Maturin become as real to us in reading as our friendships with our own

friends, and a huge cast of secondary characters possesses well-differentiated life. The secondary characters include dozens of animals, domestic and wild, lovingly observed and rendered each with a convincing individual personality; this is a feat for which I cannot think of a parallel in the literature I know and is characteristic of O'Brian's particular generosity. It is probably true that quantity becomes quality in O'Brian's work, because it allows for the full manifestation of the exuberance and variety of his represented world. It finds room for candid portrayals of loss and even tragedy, but in its amplitude, *chiaroscuro*, and orderly diversity this is finally a comic world: a world of secular comedy; there is no hint in the world's structure of the divine comedy of the resurrection.

Nevertheless, the commitment of these wonderful novels to a non-universalized, unthematized representation of the world makes them *truncated* fictions, *in principle* incomplete. This is so because, for most readers, a world so exclusively wed to the particular surfaces of things is itself an abstraction. For in most ordinary experience the world does not appear to us merely as sensory surfaces, but as sensory surfaces weighted with intrinsic, sometimes more and sometimes less evident, significance. On rare occasions O'Brian allows this glimpse of a depth in things to his characters, but does not organize the experience of his books in this way for the reader.

O'Brian's rightly celebrated novels brilliantly embody primary aspects of the art of fiction. In what Bayley calls their play of life, in their model narrative skill, in the characters of Aubrey and Maturin and the other realizations I have tallied above, they carry on into our own time a measure of the robustly present and subtly differentiated life that marks, for example, the great, popular novels of Dickens (although their specific flavor is not especially like Dickens). In fact, it is the stature of O'Brian's novels that make them open onto the question: What constitutes greatness in fiction? Once this question is asked, it illumines their central limitation. This is precisely, *contra* Bayley, that the

brilliantly achieved play of life, the enchanting, particular surfaces, are not complemented by a commensurately achieved rendering of the depths revealed and concealed in our experience. For the greatest fictions are those which render the contours of their worlds visible both to the outer and the inner eye.

NOTES

1. The epigraph is cited from Tolstoy's early diaries by Berlin (30). Citations from standard works are not by particular edition, but by chapter or other standard forms of reference; for other works, I have referred to the page number of the edition in the list of works cited. I would like to thank Rowan Taylor and John Person for deepening my understanding of O'Brian's works. I dedicate the essay to Eva Brann.

2. The later works have a somewhat less elaborated texture than the early and middle novels; in this respect, their fictional world is less fully realized. With this qualification, my analysis refers to the complete Aubrey-Maturin cycle.

3. My immediate concern is Aristotle's distinction between universality and particularity *as aspects of narrative*. For a discussion of the fuller distinction between history and epic or tragic poetry and the different character of what they imitate in the world, see Frede. In note 28 (218), she comments: "On the contrast between history and tragedy, cf. *Poetics* 9, 1451 b 1-11, where Aristotle stresses the particularity of history, and 23, 1459a21-29, where he focuses on *the accidental character of historical events* (italics added) (*synebe ... hos etucbe*). The question raised by Halliwell ..., why Aristotle does not treat tragedy as feigned history, finds its explanation exactly at this point: history can *by definition* not exclude the accidental or coincidental. This should also settle Nussbaum's query about philosophically minded historians like Thucydides ...: even he could not treat historical coincidences as if they had a *telos* (59b27; 29)." I agree

with all this. However, Nussbaum's query can be more generally framed. Are Thucydides and, for example, Plutarch, and other historical writers who consider their works to capture recurrent human types and events (Thucydides 1.22.4) simply deceiving themselves and falsifying what they write about? Or can one find a formulation that does justice to the ways the apparently universal is present in Thucydides and other writers whom the conceptual scheme of the *Poetics* cannot explain? Some such understanding seems implicit in any appeal to learning from experience.

4. This "seeing" is not only for its own sake, but also for its effect, since the "high desire [of the writer's art] is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotion" (162). It is by rendering a moment of life so as to make us see, that the artist can "awaken in the hearts of the beholders that feeling of unavoidable solidarity in mysterious origin, in toil, in joy, in hope, in uncertain fate, which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world" (163). Conrad's focus is not on the *cognitive universal*, but on our *felt experience of universal solidarity with humankind*. It is hard not to see in this a transposition of religious into literary experience: the writer as prophet and priest offers the mutely speaking image as a sacrament to the readers, drawing them to feel their solidarity with humankind within the given world. Nothing illustrates this better than Conrad's original glimpse of the man who became Lord Jim. "One sunny morning in the commonplace surroundings of an Eastern roadstead, I saw his form pass by - appealing - significant - under a cloud - perfectly silent. Which is as it should be. It was for me, with all the sympathy of which I was capable, to seek fit words for his meaning. He was 'one of us'" (166).

5. In her illuminating appreciation of Paul Scott's *Raj Quartet*, Eva Brann writes, "But great treatments of human evil do not take refuge in indeterminate demonisms. They have the courage of their moral revulsion: definite crimes are

committed. Take for example that dark evil which preoccupies Marlowe in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, surely the greatest novelette of our century. For all its ineffable horror, there are also nameable misdeeds: Kurtz has allowed himself to be worshiped as a god, with human sacrifices" (Brann [1997] 359). I agree fully with the principle. However, Conrad's treatment of the worship and human sacrifices is so brief and the transformation of Kurtz's soul which allows it is so little portrayed (in contrast to Scott's extended and subtle portrayal of Ronald Merrick) that it does not acquire the status of a genuine human deed, but seems to me to remain part of the apparatus of suggestiveness.

6. *Desolation Island* is framed as a mission by Jack Aubrey to sail to Australia and bring back to England Edward Bligh, who is caught up in his post-*Bounty* troubles. For a detailed study of Bligh's incapacity to handle the language and forms of authority, see Dening.

7. I am not claiming that O'Brian was intentionally appropriating the techniques of cinema, but it is hard to believe he did not learn something from cinema and writers who were influenced by cinema in their manner of visualization.

8. Conceptual instruments for the analysis of prose have been preserved, elaborated, and sometimes radically reformed in the 2,500 year tradition since Aristotle. I will use a simplified but fruitful version of the classical scheme which is indebted to Barish (41-89). For Aristotle's seminal remarks, see *On Rhetoric*, 3.2-12, especially 8-9 on prose rhythm and periodic and paratactic structure.

9. O'Brian is master of an integral narrative unit intermediate between scene and book, which might be called a "sequence." In *Desolation Island*, see, for example, O'Brian's magisterial handling of the chase of Aubrey's ship, the Leopard, by the *Dutch Waakzaamheit* (203-36), which Bayley calls "weird and grisly ... , like something out of *Moby-Dick*"

(Bayley, 8).

10. Bayley's point of view toward fiction is more fully developed in *The Characters of Love*, especially in the epilogue (263-291). It might be described as a fresh branch from the trunk of Schiller's discrimination of the naïve and sentimental poet, with a strong appreciation of the powers of the naïve.

11. Berlin praises Tolstoy for perceiving and representing each thing he writes of "in its absolute uniqueness" (51). However, *Tolstoy understood himself as capturing the typical*. This is indicated by a characteristic mode of phrase, some examples of which I will quote almost arbitrarily from the first chapter of *War and Peace*. "He spoke in that refined French in which our grandfathers not only spoke but thought, and with the gentle, patronizing intonation natural to a man of importance who had grown old in society and at the court" (3). "Prince Vasili did not reply though, with the quickness of memory and perception *befitting a man of the world ...*" (7). "As is always the case with a thoroughly attractive woman, her defect - the shortness of her upper lip and her half-open mouth - seemed to be her own special and peculiar form of beauty" (8). "Here the conversation seemed interesting and he stood waiting for an opportunity to express his own views, *as young people are fond of doing*" (8). The "fullest individual essence" of each thing, in Berlin's phrase (51), is in large part conveyed rhetorically by appealing to the reader's recognition of its truth to a common type. This repeated rhetorical gesture also presumes that the reader is as knowledgeable and discriminating as Tolstoy about the typical features of a vast variety of human characters and situations; in this respect, it is an element of the working alliance Tolstoy sets up with his readers.

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