

Barbarian(s) Within the Gates

by strannikov

I attended a university writers' conference in August 2014 (might as well have been the University of Virginia's, all events were hosted and sponsored by VQR: see more below). I'd've done well to've stayed home with a fresh copy of Edward St Aubyn's Lost for Words, too late now but I won't shop for St Aubyn's satire of Man Booker Prize productions until I've completed my own account (I think I found the academic cadence I wanted for the title—Closed Charmed Circles: Discourse Management and the Academic Captivity of American Letters): almost needless to say, St Aubyn's satire was not mentioned once within my hearing during conference proceedings.

Academic captivity, academic captivation, and the academically captive dominated the conference and its workshops (I attest on behalf of the fiction workshop and the plenary seminars, that is).

Venerable university lineages and fashionable academic affiliations were advertised in and out of workshops and seminars. Awards and fellowships and prize winnings and half-ancient award nominations were recited. Name-dropping was de rigueur and as free-flowing as a colonoscopy prep. Cults of contemporary literary celebrity swarmed with giggling devotees. Academic and professional insecurities could be glimpsed with little imagination. Longsuffering MFA candidates and MFA grads sat in most chairs around every conference table.

Lacking institutional academic affiliation and never having earned cherished MFA credentials and networking connections, I was sympathetically accorded an aloof status by my fellow attendees, who outnumbered me by something like one or two

hundred to one (granted, I had enrolled for the conference nursing the mercenary ambition of finding a print outlet for my non-commercial and anti-literary prose). We had been permitted to enroll in a single workshop—poetry, fiction, or “creative non-fiction”. Dramatic writers and aspiring literary critics merited no workshops of their own, while literary humorists, absurdists, and satirists such as yours truly were not made to feel warmly welcome. (My native misanthropy was aggravating my native dyspepsia that weekend, true, unless it was the other way around.)

Truth be told, I could not understand how and why either of the two chief classes of attendees—MFA students and authors published in print—were represented so numerous: four years later the understanding continues to elude me.

The MFA types (whether graduate students or lowly instructors with credentials piled high and deep) I can begin to understand, perhaps possibly maybe: but no, on reflection I still cannot claim to understand even the MFA types. Assiduously trained and coached to write within a narrow range of contemporary styles deemed commercially viable by however staid or progressive a university curriculum as informed by however courageous or cowardly its publishing industry contacts, the MFA types might've learned their lessons in composition already (e. g., as undergraduates): but as these university conference workshops showed, they continued laboring at their elusive craft mightily enough to produce, more times than not, reasonably well-edited samples of unexceptional and belabored “realistic” (and tediously serious) prose.

Likewise, I continue to have no good idea why any author recently published in print would find motive to attend such a university conference (but more on the marketing seminar later).

In the fiction workshop “intellectual appeal” alone was damned by the workshop leader (an accomplished fiction writer perhaps not fully engaged as the fiction workshop leader) at every

opportunity and “visceral appeal” was commended every quarter hour: never explained across hours of workshop ordeal, though, was just how a work could exhibit visceral appeal without commanding commensurate intellectual appeal. The fiction workshop leader also did not explain how it could be that effective humor writing could fail to elicit visceral appeal: I thought innocently that any piece of writing capable of eliciting laughter, perspiration, or uncontrolled flatulence exhibited all the requisite somatic, visceral appeal you could aspire to.

The fiction workshop leader also deemed narrative control essential to the composition of proper (commercial) “literary” fiction: he made no allowance whatever for works featuring unreliable narrators and no provision for overlays of absurdist narrators and their narrations. He expressed no thought and shared no reflection through the entire workshop proceedings concerning satire, satiric narrators, or satiric narrations. The only form of irony ever mentioned was dramatic irony: untrustworthiness and instability in the narrator's voice, competing concavities and convexities of irony woven into and through the prose, and implied or accumulated meanings were never explicitly addressed. (The assembled MFA types posed no strenuous objections to these omissions, and neither did I, though perhaps for different reasons.)

No conference, seminar, or workshop personage or participant—not one—ever mentioned or alluded to flash fiction—not once, and not even in the fiction workshop itself (again, this was as recent as August 2014).

What can anyone say for any convocation of High Seriousness that fails to recognize the domain or even pronounce the name “satire”? The piece I submitted for the fiction workshop (dutifully posted here at [Fictionaut](#) [after editing] under the title “A Circus Never to Return”) was and remains a work of fairly conspicuous humor, mirth, whimsy, and satire, a light, engaging, and entertaining piece the fiction workshop leader was pleased to see smothered in its crib.

Sigh alas alack! According to the fiction workshop leader, my tale featured “too many adjectives”: this was the full extent of his professional assessment, apart from his judgment that I had failed to perpetrate a convincing work of horror fiction. He may've had a point: reading Simenon avidly in the weeks and months preceding, I had begun excising adverbs assiduously and had not graduated to excising adjectives, too, no matter how helpful their deletion or necessary their retention. Because I'd also been enjoying reacquainting myself with Forman's Amadeus, the verdict “too many adjectives” sounded instantly like Joseph II's rebuke of Mozart for injecting “too many notes” into the score for The Abduction from the Seraglio, not that my tale smelled anything like Mozart's.

My work was conceived and executed as a *mélange* of style and genre: at 3600 words it succeeded to my provincial satisfaction as a flash fiction novella incorporating aesthetics of Grand-Guignol theatre blending horror with comedy, full measures of science satire, absurdist strands threaded through and through with identifiable Southern grotesquerie. I'd had the story idea for a while, and I did think I'd done a decent job throwing it together in the forty-eight hours I had needed to meet the fiction workshop submission deadline.

The atmosphere of the fiction workshop and the broader conference was thick and stifling with High Seriousness: the only permitted humorous readings (two) emerged from the “creative non-fiction” workshop. (My disgust for narrative journalism and the academic appellation “creative non-fiction” survives unimpaired.)

The seminar on marketing and publishing was equally predictable and inspiring. We were advised by the expert seminar leader about the importance of relying on internet platforms and social network connections, of “built-in followings”, the exploitation of captive audiences. The other panel members were keen to stress the perils and limits of self-publishing clearly and slowly enough to disabuse anyone who had paid the conference fees.

What might a New York literary agent think the market demands of fiction? Without betraying confidences: 1) narrative momentum; 2) characters of depth and motivation, likeable or not; 3) confident narrative voice; and 4) some conceptual premise (“the hook” or “the angle”). I will not confide just how many hundreds of dollars I paid for these four pearls. Oh, and neither literary agents nor publishers care one damn for a writer's versatility across genres: if agents and publishers cannot discern generic commitment and continuity in the crafting of literary reputation, the simpletons will never be able to recall what kind of writing got you your first contract, and without such strict genre identification, you quite likely will never get a second contract.

This writers' conference (sponsored by VQR, which had run its red-lettered banner ad atop the Fictionaut home page in the summer of 2014, which begins to explain both my attendance and this essay) revealed itself as an apt subject only towards its conclusion. My participation did yield one other insight in my capacity as a part-time epistemologist: it is one sorry body of knowledge that exceeds the demands of curiosity while diminishing them.

END

