

A History of Criticism

The art of representation bristles with questions the very terms of which are difficult to apply and to appreciate; but whatever makes it arduous makes it, for our refreshment, infinite. . . .

— Henry James

I The Big Ten

I'd come to my teacher's office to explain
 That my life was blank and boring, a dream.
 How could I write what I knew? I knew nothing,
 Yet wanted to write stories like him
 That distilled experience, bristling with truth.
 I see myself on a rickety straight-backed chair
 In my Peter Pan collar, my hair curled,
 My polished loafers crossed, one swinging,
 As I lean forward to catch Mr. L.'s answer,
 Noticing how empty his office is, no books
 On the shelves, no posters, fern or typewriter.
 His hand trembles as he sips cold coffee
 From a paper cup. He smells of sour whiskey.
 The nap is worn on his corduroy jacket,
 His tie's flecked with ash. His cigarette burns
 In the shell ashtray. I watch the smoke rise
 As he keeps silent, frowning, looking at me
 Almost with hatred. He blinks his reddened eyes
 Then reaches into the drawer of his desk
 And pulls out a gold ring, a wedding ring
 I see at once, engraved inside with names:
 "The undertaker took this off my wife,"
 He whispers. "He thought I'd like to have it,
 But I was shocked, furious. When I left

Her casket by the graveside in the rain,
 Surrounded by gladiolus and roses,
 I believed she wore it on her folded hand.
 That night I drove out to the cemetery
 To give it back to her, but they'd already
 Piled a ton of mud on top of her,
 Tamped it down, rolled up the canvas tent,
 Carted off the folding chairs — God,
 Even the flowers!" His voice cracks and breaks.
 Why tell me this? The ring shines in his palm
 As he holds it out. I draw back in my chair,
 Embarrassed and speechless. "So you mean,"
 I ask at last, "I've got to suffer?"
 He laughs and laughs until I rise and flee.

II *Virginia Baptist*

Years later, a teacher myself in the South,
 I stood in my office in black cap and gown
 Watching a long procession winding below me
 To Chapel, refusing to join, near tears.
 I wanted to open the casement window and scream
 Obscenities at all the tasseled professors
 But instead lifted the square cap off my head
 And flung it into the trash can with a thwack.
 The gabardine was heavy and relentless
 In the heat, the padded shoulders stiff —
 I pulled off the gown and stood there in my slip,
 Fanning myself with a paperback *Macbeth*.
 When a student knocked on the door I shivered
 And waited until the footsteps moved away.
 I remembered Mr. L., how I'd avoided him
 The rest of the year, frightened by his passion
 Or grief — but at least his was real.
 Nothing had happened to me yet but boredom,
 Committees, convocations, and the empty buzz
 Coming from classrooms — Write about *this*?

I wondered if Mr. L. still held the ring
 In his sweating palm when he sat down before
 The blank, pure paper. Oh, I envied him.

III *Arizona*

After my divorce, I bought a notebook
 And tried to write a story. Surely now
 I'd suffered and the right words would come.
 Over and over I tried to describe Joel's laugh,
 Capture his little ironies in dialogue. . . .
 I tried to be honest about the girl, too,
 Her mini-skirt, her long, ironed hair.
 I saw him kissing her until my eyes burned
 But when I read my sentences to myself
 They expressed nothing. I crossed them out,
 Wrote a few more until my head ached.
 I glanced at *To the Lighthouse* on my shelf
 Thinking of my dissertation, all that labor
 To explain Mrs. Ramsay, though she bored me so.
 I tore my scrawled sheets in half, then quarters,
 Opened the drawer of my desk, and took out
 The neat stack of papers that I'd always meant
 To expand into a book on Virginia Woolf.
 Now my sentences covered the whole page,
 Dissecting the text and sub-text until I had
 Exposed the secret heart of creation.
 While I typed, my dog sat at the window
 Watching a hummingbird sipping nectar
 From the gnarled cactus in my desert yard.

IV *Cal State*

My first night in California I saw
 A brawl in a restaurant. One biker pulled
 A set of brass knuckles from his jeans
 Just as the police poured through the front door
 In poses I'd only seen in movies, guns out,

A wall of cloud behind them — the fog
That went with violence, dense and cold,
Eliminating the view, and swallowing hope
Though this was a new job, far from my past
And I was published now, and even quoted
By graduate students and younger faculty.
I used to pet the cat that lived inside
The old theater, where three nights a week
I drove past egrets for a double feature,
My only life the one up on the screen,
Lauren Bacall more real than my students
Mellowing out from the L.A. hustle,
Wearing their harem pants and down vests.
Once I came across my wedding ring
Deep in my underwear drawer, and a shock
From the cold metal tingled up my arm,
Surprising me. But Joel wasn't dead.
I hadn't wept above his exposed grave.
Twice I'd even seen him in New York
With his new wife and their adopted son.
We'd had a drink together and discussed
Some tenure case. I didn't miss him.
Then a friend arrived from back East
And on the desolate beach I heard the news
That Mr. L. had died on the verge of fame,
His books back in print, some talk of movies.
I told my friend about his violent grief
That day he'd shown me his wife's engraved ring.
She looked surprised, then laughed. "Oh, no!
His first wife only left him. She's alive.
I met her at a party with her husband,
Some painter — I forget his name — a Swede,
Big and handsome once, pot-bellied now.
She wore too much makeup, I thought, and long
Streaming scarves like Isadora.
And his second wife's that pretty writer
Who rediscovered him — too late, it seems."

V *MLA*

After I read my paper on Mr. L.
I sat down. The stuffy meeting room
Had caused my face to prickle and burn,
Though my hands, in my lap, were cold.
I listened to the next scholar drone,
Deconstructing Mr. L.'s last novel,
But I hardly heard, thinking of myself,
My Vita with its long, distinguished list
Of scholarly publications. I pinched
My grey wool skirt convulsively the way
I used to pinch myself as a child to see
If I was really alive, really me.
Of course I was. I wore the convention badge
Printed with my name and Ivy League school.
The applause for my paper on the ring scene
In Mr. L.'s early story had been loud,
Satisfactory. But I felt weak and strange,
More like the girl I'd been in his office
Than the plump, confident woman I'd become.
I thought about the ring in the story
Which the husband holds, weeping, in his hand,
And then about the real ring I'd seen
That day in L.'s office. Why had he lied?
He'd sounded so sincere. I'd believed him.
And all I once I saw — my eyes blurred,
I coughed to cover my unusual emotion —
He'd ruined my life. How I hated him —
Hated all writers with their tangled stories.