

A Conversation with Charles Baxter

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There is a kind of consensus among professional and amateur reviewers that Charles Baxter is a writer's writer. Everyone says so. Baxter, who has called himself a "former poet," is the author of five novels and four collections, including *Believers*, which he described to us as probably his best work. His novel *The Feast of Love* was a finalist for the National Book Award in 2000, and he has received National Endowment for the Arts and Guggenheim Foundation grants.

In an interview with the *Atlantic*, Baxter said, "I feel as if I'm in my family's house when I'm writing short stories since I know where everything is. I know the logic of them so well." But he didn't publish a collection of stories until he was thirty-seven, in 1984. It was his first book of fiction and came on the heels of three failed attempts at novels. Baxter's career is marked by this kind of persistence and flexibility and by a generosity that is evident in his teaching.

Unlike many writers employed at universities, Charles Baxter doesn't complain about his day job. For many years he directed the MFA program at the University of Michigan, and he now teaches at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, where he was born. He treats his teaching and mentoring of young writers as a natural extension of his vocation, and in the past twelve years he has published two exceptional books of essays on the craft of fiction, *Burning Down the House* (1997) and *The Art of Subtext* (2007). So the cumulative impact of Baxter's work is—like that of the literary giants he cites: Stein, Brecht, Barthelme—more than the work of a prolific writer. It is the work of an artist, teacher, and scholar. We met with him at the Spokane Club during Spokane's annual *Get Lit!* literary festival.

SAMUEL LIGON

In your writing about fiction, you talk about postmodernism and about Barthelme and about being enamored of postmodernism's ethic or ideal. But you're not a postmodernist writer.

CHARLES BAXTER

No, but I once wanted to be. I wanted to be one of the writers who flies way up there and looks down at people like little dots on the map. That's power: to think of people as little objects moving around on a chess board. That's what a lot of postmodern writers do, though it seems unfair to Barthelme to say so. The characters don't come to life; they have a kind of symbolic importance, but you don't view them completely as human beings. They're placeholders for certain ideas that the writer's moving around.

JONATHAN FREY

How's that different from Kafka? You mentioned at your reading last night that you think Kafka is one of the greatest writers of the 20th century.

BAXTER

In Kafka you don't even know what the system *is*. The characters are trying to figure out what they're enmeshed in, and there's an overflow of *feeling*—mostly claustrophobia, but it can be mixed with other emotions too. Kafka is down here with us, looking around, trying. His characters are always asking, "Where are we? What is this that I've gotten myself into?"

When I was trying to get my PhD diploma at Buffalo, I kept going to the registrar to find out if I was going to get my degree, the one on paper. And, though it's a trivial example, I thought: Kafka was right about this. Every time you go to an airport, it feels as if it's the Franz Kafka International Airport. You've seen that video thing in the *Onion*? The Franz Kafka International Airport? It's fantastically funny.

But that's fundamentally it: Kafka is always down here with us, and I don't get that feeling with some of Pynchon, and I don't get it with Gaddis or some of the others. They're snobs, saying, "I'm looking down at this, and I'm telling you how all this works. Oh, and by the

way, it's all chaos, or it's a system beyond our knowing. Did I forget to mention that?"

LIGON

But you use some of the structural devices that came into prominence in the time of the postmodernists—what somebody might call metafictional elements. I'm thinking of the structural devices in *The Soul Thief* and *The Feast of Love*.

BAXTER

Right, that's true. But in *The Feast of Love*, it just disappears. It functions as a frame, but by the time you're on page thirty, it's gone. I thought somebody opening that book and starting to read and seeing that there were these voices coming at them would say, "Where are these voices coming from? Who's listening to these voices?" In *The Decameron* you have a similar structure of people telling each other stories, hiding from the plague. In *The Canterbury Tales*, they're all on their way to Canterbury, so they're telling each other stories. And I thought, I can't just have these voices coming from out of nowhere. I have to have a reason for it. So there's a guy with insomnia, he can't sleep, he goes out to a city park in the middle of the night. And there's somebody else there who's got love trouble and can't sleep, so he says, "All right, I'll tell you my story." And the insomniac writes it down, and that's where the voices come from.

FREY

And the fact that the insomniac's name is Charlie Baxter is just play?

BAXTER

Yeah, it's play. But we're all used to that now. Philip Roth did it. It's something we can play around with. It's something we can do, and most readers won't be shocked by it. Naive readers won't like it. But it's not all that new, this device; it's as old as the hills.

Part II of *Don Quixote* begins with the false Quixote coming in. The first part of *Don Quixote* was such a success that another writer wrote *The Further Adventures of Don Quixote*, and, of course, Cervantes was outraged. So the false Quixote runs into the true Quixote, and so, to

some degree, metafictional devices are as old as the novel. Writers never quite get over the pleasure of reminding their readers that it's made up. That there's an author behind it.

FREY

Is that related to Brecht? Or is it different?

BAXTER

Brecht's idea was that we spend so much time in capitalism, being taken in by the systems of commerce—newspapers, commercials, political advertisements—that it's one of the tasks of art, to wake us up. To remind us that people are trying to sell us things. All the time. So, the alienation technique—as it's called in Brecht's term—is to make you aware of the techniques people are using to get you to think or do something in a certain way. My novel does keep reminding you that this is a novel. You are going to fall asleep into it. You are going to dream. And then I'm going to wake you up.

I think that we're all conscious of the fact that when we enter a novel, we are going into a kind of dream, like Alice at the beginning of *Alice in Wonderland* reading a book and then getting drowsy and then going down the rabbit hole. Reading is like going down the rabbit hole.

A French critic said to me, "You Americans fall asleep more easily into fiction than we do." There's more of a rationalist tradition in France, he was saying, and they have a harder time falling into the dream of fiction than Americans do. I think his argument was that Americans fall into a dream world fairly easily.

LIGON

I hear what you're saying about the dream, but it's not dream *logic* that governs a novel. So how is that different? What kind of a dream is it?

BAXTER

It's half-waking. When you're reading a book, these characters are in the scene and they're talking to each other, and you're reading it, and reconstructing something in your head in a twilight way. And if I write, "She walked in wearing a blue blouse, and a white skirt, and she had a red pin in her hair. And she turned to the right..." you're reconstructing

this. You're imagining it. You are *re*imagining it, and it's not a dream, but you're participating in the story, aren't you?

Jane Smiley and I had an argument about this a few years ago in Houston. I was reading a paper about how faces are represented in fiction, and she raised her hand and said, "I don't think you see anything when you read a book." And I said, "No, I'm sorry. I do." You say, "A woman wearing a blue blouse and a white skirt, wearing running shoes, came into the room," I'm going to see her with...a frown on her face. I'm going to reconstruct her.

LIGON

Unlike Barthelme's metafiction—like "The School"—yours is character-driven. I don't think "The School" is a character-driven story. Much of his fiction asks us to reconsider how fiction works. What *does* drive "The School"? What is "The School" interested in?

BAXTER

What drives a lot of Barthelme's stories is the way that we're caught in a world of representations. Everywhere you're surrounded by representations that are taking us over. It's like product placement has entered our lives. So Barthelme's characters are always asking, "What am I doing here? What am I doing in this school? What am I doing in this house?" Barthelme's always asking, "How did I end up here? Why am I in this world? Why am I wearing this Campbell's Soup can illustration on my necktie?" *Why?* Because the representation of the soup can is going on in this world, and I guess it's on my necktie.

What drives Barthelme is ideas—ideas and existential unhappiness. That's what motivates Barthelme's characters. They're ill suited to live in the world. Barthelme always felt as if he wasn't suited to life in the world. Not this world. That particular sadness animates his stories.

MELINA RUTTER

If you're not a postmodernist, where do ideas fit into the process? For instance, in *First Light*, you use the ideas of astrophysics, and I'm wondering if you made a conscious decision to have those ideas inform, in some ways, the structure of the novel. Or if that just arose.

BAXTER

It arose. Because the character I first imagined was Dorsey; I saw her

pasting stars—little adhesive stars—on the ceiling of her bedroom. And I thought, Oh, she's going to grow up to be an astrophysicist. Then I thought, That's too bad for me. I don't know anything about astrophysics. I had to go into research mode to find out about that. And then because that was what she was doing and researching, it made narrative sense for the book to go backwards in time. I could get this whole historical, cultural level into the book having to do with the atom bomb. In an odd way, physics was the grounding of that book and took you into a realm that was somewhat away from the family structure of Hugh and Dorsey together. It opened it up for me.

RUTTER

I felt oriented when I was reading it, but I would think that there's a risk involved with including such content.

BAXTER

Fiction readers want to find out about stuff. You tell them, as Philip Roth did, how gloves are made, leather gloves. People love to find those things out. If you tell them something about the nature of astrophysics or even certain kinds of fireworks, readers love that. The factual basis has always been part of the novel: how you do something, where something came from. Nicholson Baker's first novel, *The Mezzanine*, is full of this kind of material, and I wanted to give *First Light* a doubled kind of perspective.

But, at the same time, it's a very emotional novel. The material facts, I hope, balance out the emotion, particularly Hugh's idea of being lost in his own light. Dorsey has found her own light, but Hugh is married and has children. He's one of these guys who was a jock in high school and was popular with girls, and then he marries and settles down, and he doesn't know why this life hasn't been as good for him as it was in high school. Once he becomes an adult, it's a mystery. Dorsey had an unhappy life in high school. She's one of those smart girls who frightens everybody, but she grows into her life, and she's okay with it. For me, it's very emotional. It's soaked in feeling.

FREY

Why are so many of your books about love?

BAXTER

For some people, it's just not an important subject. It's something that they take for granted, and it's something that they can get past. It has not been something that I have ever been able to take for granted. My father died when I was a baby. My mother was unstable. I always knew where the next meal was coming from, but I developed what therapists call hypervigilance. The question of whom I would love and who would love me became almost a matter of life and death for me. Almost by necessity, given the nature of my early life, I got attuned, I got obsessed by it. When *The Feast of Love* came out, I made statements of this sort, and some readers said, "But this is not mature love in your novel." Well, of course it isn't. It's not stable. The kind of love that's portrayed in that book has to do with infatuation and *instability*, and that's the reflection of somebody who has never found that landscape to be particularly stable.

RUTTER

Brecht's idea of the destruction of the fourth wall is theater theory. Can you talk about how theater has influenced the ways you think about writing and literary theory?

BAXTER

One of the reasons theater has come into my thinking to such a degree is that I noticed that in the stories I was getting in my workshop, and actually, in some of the fiction written by contemporaries of mine, the stories are not particularly dramatic. As if drama were some kind of embarrassment. We can all talk about character; we can talk about setting; we can talk about dialogue; but if you begin to say, "Well this isn't very dramatic," it's as if you farted, and you've said absolutely the wrong thing. But I think that we have to get back to the idea that, if people are going to read these books and stories, we have to consider the dramatic elements that underpin the great books. I noticed, some years ago, when my students at the University of Michigan were taking corollary classes, the ones who were taking acting classes often seemed to improve their writing by having gone through the techniques of learning characterization, and scene-building, and the structure of the play. So I began to read the work of my students and think, You know, this is under-staged. We don't know where these bodies are in space. We don't

know whether they're turning to or away from each other. Often it's not even notated whether these people are listening to each other, whether they're looking at each other, what they're doing with their hands.

Now, it's true you can overdirect. I know of one writer, a friend of mine who's a very fastidious writer, but when you read her work, you're getting too much of the line readings, and you're getting too much of the tiny details. And you think, C'mon, get on with the story.

Focusing on that kind of minute detail only works when the psychological atmosphere gets really congested. If the couple is about to break up with each other and they're meeting for coffee, everything they do becomes important. Like Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants." He's trying to convince her to have an abortion, and she hates the way he's doing that. So Hemingway pays attention to everything they do in that scene. I mean, you could put it right on stage. I don't think that's overdirected because the emotions are so thick. If they were just talking about whether they were going to get on the train or not, it'd be unbearable. There has to be something big in the scene, emotionally, for that kind of thing to work.

LIGON

The kind of dramatic action you're talking about, that you see missing, is that plot?

BAXTER

Yeah, it's plot, and it's getting a character out there performing an action that may result in bad outcomes. I don't know about you, but I read fiction because I want to see bad stuff happening; I can't get enough of it. I want to see people misbehaving and getting themselves into real trouble, serious trouble. That's what I go to fiction for. That and the sentences and the sense that I'm learning something about people.

RUTTER

Is the antagonist that you see missing always taking the form of a person, a villain?

BAXTER

Oh, sure. You have an antagonist in you. I have one in me. We're all

self-divided. The antagonist within ourselves is that part of us that wants to indulge in an impulse of some kind that leads to various addictive behaviors. The antagonist can be located inside the self very nicely. I like it when it's externalized, but it doesn't have to be. When it's externalized, it's almost always easier to write because then the dramatic materials take over and you, the writer, don't have to explain everything. And of course, an antagonist can be a force in the world.

RUTTER

Like the capitalist system?

BAXTER

Yeah, or fascism. Or militarism. Or environmentalism.

Greed is probably one of the most powerful emotions. I think it's more powerful than lust, I really do. It makes lust look kind of innocent. They're related, but lust dies and greed goes on until... forever it seems.

LIGON

In *Burning Down the House*, you say that you're nostalgic, as a writer, for mindful villainy. What does that mean?

BAXTER

In Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove*, there are two characters who are down on their luck and poor. Over here there's a rich, beautiful young woman who's dying, and the poor woman says to her boyfriend, "I know what you should do. You're handsome; you should go over there, and you should woo her and get her money." That's mindful villainy. In a way it's rational, and people are deliberately making choices that they know are not quite moral. Those sorts of situations have an overtone of melodrama to them, but they're interesting because they reveal a lot about the way we behave.

In Elizabeth Bowen's *The Death of the Heart*, there's a character who reads her stepdaughter's diary, and thinks, I know I shouldn't be doing this, but nothing's going to stop me because I want to know what she's thinking. Oh Jesus! Look what she's thinking. Small things like that. You know, it's often the small things: We violate somebody's privacy. It's

really revelatory. You don't have to run somebody over in the street to practice mindful villainy. It's the small items that accumulate that are really interesting for the fiction writer.

We see less of it now, and I think there are two reasons. We have a form of self-righteousness that results in people thinking, Oh, I didn't really do that. Or, The outcome was good, so I really didn't do anything wrong. After all, if we tortured people and got information out of them to prevent more violence against us, it wasn't really wrong, was it? And I think the other reason is that young people going through writing programs right now are largely decent people who are kind of bookish, and very observant. And so, we're not used to action. We're used to observing. It's hard to get these mindful actors into our fiction because many of us are not like that.

This also goes to the question of plot. When you're young, you don't like the idea of plot because it seems to lead toward something that becomes inevitable after a while, and nobody likes the idea of inevitability when they're young. You like the idea of everything being open to possibilities. It's that progressive idea too: that things can always change. After a while you realize things can't always change.

FREY

So, do we like inevitability more when we're older?

BAXTER

You come to accept it. You don't like it. Trust me, you don't like it.

LIGON

But we do like it in story. You've said that the sudden recognition of inevitability makes a piece beautiful.

BAXTER

Yeah, but you don't want the inevitability to be built into it and completely predictable. Sam Shepard said about his plays that what he really was striving for was a combination of surprise and inevitability, that the best plots bring you to that particular combination. You think, What a surprise! I should have seen it coming.

LIGON

O'Connor talked about that inevitability with "Good Country People."

BAXTER

Her stories are interesting in that way. In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the story starts out when the grandmother says, "Look here in the paper. It says the Misfit has got himself loose." Then the family gets in the car, and they're headed out on the trip. And where are they? They're near Toombsboro. They're near *Toombsboro*! You can't say you weren't warned. Toombsboro, and the Misfit drives up in a hearse.

If you read all of Flannery O'Connor's stories in a row, some of them can look as if... I mean, their plots are great. Somebody's always being run over by a tractor, or having their legs stolen, or drowning in a river, or hanging themselves from a rafter in the attic. But after a while some of it does feel....

LIGON

Manipulated?

BAXTER

I'm not saying.

LIGON

You wrote in *Burning Down the House* that the truth writers are after can be dramatic only if it has been forgotten first. That the story, in other words, pulls something contradictory and concealed out of its hiding place. How does forgetting or concealment create drama or drive fiction?

BAXTER

Suppose Grandma is dying, and you have a scene in which she's in bed and she's dying. We have all read scenes like this. When she's dying, certain events of a sort are happening to her, but it's not dramatic until you bring up something important. So, in Katherine Anne Porter's "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," Grandma is dying, but actually

what's happening as she dies is that these layers are being peeled back. Suddenly she's four years old again, and it's a four-year-old who's lying in bed, dying. She never stopped being the four-year-old she once was. She never stopped being the sixteen-year-old she once was. Those things are still inside of her. We all forget that, and Katherine Anne Porter reminds us, so that scene becomes interesting and dramatic. We're all, to some degree, writing about things that are familiar to our readers, and what you have to do is find the off-kilter detail that makes it come alive again, the part that nobody else had noticed.

FREY

This kind of critical approach—talking about antagonists and plot and drama like you do in *Burning Down the House* and *The Art of Subtext*—this isn't the way we normally hear contemporary writers and critics talk about writing.

BAXTER

What we're talking about this morning are critical terms that academics are not especially interested in using. This is formalist criticism, and they would all say the discipline has gone past that.

In formalist criticism, you're looking at a piece of fiction, and you're asking what elements it has in it formally: how it's shaped, how it's put together, how that shaping—that form—contains the subject matter. So: form and subject matter and the way that they define each other. To a degree, as a writing teacher, I'm a formalist. I'll ask, "How is this story shaped? To what degree is it made out of scenes, expository material, transitions? What seems to be its central trajectory? What are the subplots?" I mean, that's all formalist.

Now, mostly, our cultural studies are in the wake of Foucault and French theory, but even that's beginning to fade from the scene. The focus there—I can't summarize Foucault—but the focus there is how literature is a form of cultural production that mirrors or duplicates power relationships, how literature is an arm of power that has been deployed in culture.

FREY

Where does formalist thinking fit into the writing process?

BAXTER

You can't think about these matters when you're putting your draft together.

LIGON

You've said that, in the context of initial composition, the act of writing anything can be as much consent as creation. It sounds like you're talking about mystery there. What does one consent to?

BAXTER

The original act of writing, sitting down and trying to get a story or some characters on the page, is still to me a complete mystery. How it's done. How I do it. How anybody else does it. The more I write, the more I think that everything you've done up to the point that you're writing isn't much help. You always start out in the dark. When you sit down and you start writing, you agree with yourself that you're going to make mistakes, that you're going to blunder your way through the damn thing, and you're just going to give yourself a lot of permission to get it done any way you possibly can. The critical skills that you have, that all comes later.

When I'm writing I'm not thinking about anything. When I'm writing a first draft particularly, I'm not thinking anything but, Who are these people? What are they saying? What do they want? Where are they going? I don't even ask, Why are they interesting to me? I just write them. I have a friend who read two of my recent stories and said, "Why are you writing about these unpleasant people?" And I said to him, "Because they interest me. I can't help it who I'm interested in. If I'm interested in scumbags, those are the people I have to write about. I'm sorry if you don't like it."

FREY

It seems that young writers can become enamored of the initial creation, the mystery, that sort of unnamable aspect that you're getting at. They're enamored of that, and so they turn around and eschew formalism later in the process.

BAXTER

When you're a young writer and it's going well in your first draft,

it feels sacred; it feels holy; it feels like something that shouldn't be interfered with. It's hard to break through that and say, "Yes, I was in the zone, but I also made mistakes. So the first draft is not as effective, not as pointed, not as clear as it should be. I need to go back and fix it." To the degree that young writers don't like revision, it's because that initial state feels so wonderful, as if nothing could possibly be wrong in the way it was coming out, given the way you felt about it. Which is why it's a good idea to put it in the refrigerator, and then go back in a few days or weeks. You have to get away from the spell you cast over yourself.

You get some distance on it. Then if you go back and it's still casting the same spell over you, that's a good sign. You can start to muck around with it, but you have to pay attention to those moments where you think, You know, I'm a little bored. This scene is a little boring. I didn't think it was boring when I first wrote it, but it seems boring now. That's when it's time to go to work.

LIGON

In *Burning Down the House*, you write that "When writers over-parent their characters, they understand them too quickly. Such characters aren't contradictory or misfitted. The writer has decided what her story is about too early." Why is it a problem to understand characters too quickly, to decide what a story is about too early?

BAXTER

It makes the story over-determined and the character over-determined. Before very long, as a reader, you think, I know what this character's going to do. It flattens the characters. You say, "Oh, Jaime, she's the quiet one. She's the one who always worries things." So in the story all she does is sit in the corner and worry things. That's understanding her too fast. It lessens the interest in the story. It's not just over-parenting, it's bad parenting, because it stereotypes your own children and turns them into flat characters.

LIGON

And what about understanding a story too early? Do you ever understand stories?

BAXTER

We have undergraduates all the time who sit down and write stories,

and they attempt to prove that this fraternity boy, Jake, is a cheap bastard who really doesn't care about women. The story's there to prove that point. Most writers go through a stage in which they write stories that are point-making. One of the best things to ever happen to me was that I gave one of my stories to a poet I know, and she drew an arrow to the opening paragraph, and said, "Too point-making." Often you don't see it when you're doing it yourself.

Regarding my own stories, I don't always understand them. Sometimes I do. Sometimes I think, Well, this is about that particular subject, that particular trouble. But I don't think so until I'm halfway or three quarters through the story. Sometimes I'll come to the end of the story and think, What the fuck is that about? I don't mind that feeling.

FREY

If formalism is beneficial not in initial drafting but revision, is Foucault valuable to writers ever?

BAXTER

I think so. Foucault was always asking, "Who has the power here? How did he or she get it? How is he or she using it? And what bigger things does that person tell us about power in the culture?" The easy way to summarize this is by saying, "Do you think George W. Bush just happened to be this guy who was elected president, or was George W. Bush a symptom of something?" If we say George W. Bush was a symptom of something, then that sort of sends you in the direction of Foucault, who will say, "Yes, of course he was a symptom of something, and we need to talk about what. What is he a symptom of?"

LIGON

What was he a symptom of?

BAXTER

Oh, let's not go there. [Laughs.] For me they were the years of nightmare, his presidency. I was in France when he was elected and somebody interviewed me and said, "Oh, it makes no difference who the president of your country is." And I said, "No, you're wrong. This is a catastrophe."

RUTTER

How do you reconcile the reality of an individual being caught in a power structure with your idea of a victim narrative, where characters never take responsibility for anything?

BAXTER

It's irreconcilable. You can't. I'm saying two contradictory things at once. And both of them are true, I believe. We're individuals; we have agency; we can change things. That's a politically progressive idea: Everybody can do something. Barthelme said, "There are always paths, if you can find them, there is always something to do." I love that. I believe it's true. I also believe that we are inside a vast system, and the system has tremendous power over us.

I went to the Republican convention in St. Paul last summer, and if you've never seen the machinery of the state—and I don't mean the state of Minnesota, I mean "The State"—guys in riot gear and tear gas canisters and trucks. Guys on horseback with revolvers. I'm not naive, but I'd never seen it. I'd never seen guys look at me like that. It's a reminder that you're a speck of dust to them, a dangerous speck of dust, and they want to put you in your place—the dustbin.

I think all of us feel both things at one time or the other. Sometimes we think, This whole thing is too fucking big for me. There's nothing I can do about it. At other times, we think, I'm going out there. I mean, politically, I'm going to do this. I *can* do this; I can do that. I believe that I am able to shape my life.

Going back to the victim narrative, certain political or economic systems are more likely to breed that narrative. Totalitarian systems do it. The great fiction of the Soviet era is largely about people caught up in the Soviet system. To the degree that state power makes itself obviously felt or corporate power makes itself felt, the victim narrative becomes visible. *Catch-22* is a great novel of being caught up in a military command structure during war. Heller's next novel, also a great novel, *Something Happened*, is about being caught up in a corporate structure. People are paying a lot of attention to Bolaño right now because he seems to be interested in the kinds of political structures that were arising in South America.

RUTTER

Do you view your writing as a political act?

BAXTER

Sometimes. *Shadow Play* was a very political book. The novella *Believers* is political. There are parts of *Saul and Patsy* that I believe are political in the sense that the book, in its second half, is about the problem of who will take care of the kids who are under-parented, whom no one has taken care of. What's going to happen to these kids? That book is also about the political nature of grieving, and how important it is to grieve and not just react with violence. I thought that one of the things that happened to this country after 9/11 was that we went into attack mode without grieving first. That made its way into *Saul and Patsy*. I think that my work is political, maybe by implication, if not directly.

FREY

Last night you mentioned that your first three attempted novels were conceptual—avant-garde, you said—and that that was the problem. You said that the experiments of the avant-garde were fine at the time but they're over now. So is that whole movement dead, or is there space for that kind of experimentation?

BAXTER

There's a book by a critic named Paul Mann, called *Theory-death of the Avant-garde*. His argument is that the avant-garde has suffered a theory death, that every time people talk about experiments now, they're basically talking about modernist revival. The kinds of experiments that they do are no longer experiments. These experiments have already been done. Some of them have succeeded, others haven't. This isn't to say that there isn't something new that you can do with a novel. There is always something new you can do. But that particular idea of the avant-garde, stretching say, from 1900, before the first world war, to Samuel Beckett and the sort of allied experiments and abstractionism in painting, I think that's over. I think we're in a post-avant-garde era. I don't think you can do something to a text conceptually that somebody hasn't already done.

FREY

So experimentation is sort of like a closed system that happened for a while and now it's....

BAXTER

So you're Gertrude Stein, and it's around 1914 and you're interested in what happens if you free sequence structures from narrative necessity and some of the words from their word-locks. You sit down and you write *Tender Buttons*. And people are shocked. Actually, you can go into an undergraduate class today with *Tender Buttons* and the kids will still be shocked. That's kind of great. And you can take William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* into an undergraduate class, and they'll get upset. You can take *Lolita* in, and they'll be upset.

But for those of us who have sort of tried to keep track of what's happened, somebody comes along and says, "I'm going to write something experimental," and it looks like Gertrude Stein. I just think that's like redecorating this room in the form of art deco and saying, "This is contemporary." It's not contemporary; it's art deco. So, I just don't think that the forces that gave the avant-garde its particular energy, aesthetically, are there. And it's partly of the nature of capitalism to absorb everything you can think of and use it to its own purposes.

LIGON

What forces were driving the avant-garde?

BAXTER

In the early part of the century it had everything to do with the freeing of words from sequence structures and what we took to be their obligations to meaning, in the same way that figurative painting gave way to non-figurative painting ideas of what the picture plane is. It also had to do with freeing narratives from actions and events.

The last section of *Tender Buttons* begins, "Act so that there is no use in a center." And then it goes off into this giant coda. Stein concludes that with "all of this makes a magnificent asparagus, and also a fountain."

"To know to know to love her so. Four saints prepare for saints. It makes it well fish. Four saints, it makes it well fish. Four saints prepare for saints it makes it well well fish it makes it well fish prepare for saints. In narrative prepare for saints. Prepare for saints." Which is from *Four Saints in Three Acts*. It's great. It's music, and it has nothing to do with fish. Well, maybe it does.

LIGON

And it has nothing to do with rational meaning?

BAXTER

No, it comes to you in some other way. The last time I taught *Four Saints in Three Acts*, I had two kids in the class who were in a relationship, and they were painting the apartment they lived in. Over the weekend, he would sit on the floor reading *Four Saints in Three Acts* to her while she was painting, and then she got tired and she would sit on the floor and read *Four Saints* to him. It's like the radio going in the background. It's really nice to have words used like that. It's a release from "John came into the room pointing a gun at Maria." You get tired of shit like that. You want to hear something like Gertrude Stein. "For a long time being one being living, he was trying to be certain whether he had been wrong in doing what he was doing. And when he couldn't"—this is Matisse, "The Portrait of Matisse"—"and when he could not come to be certain that he was wrong in doing what he was doing, when he could not absolutely come to be certain that he was wrong in doing what he was doing, then he knew he was a great one. And he certainly was a great one."

I love it. I just love it. But she did it. She did it and it's kind of unreproducible.

LIGON

Is she saying to release yourself from the rational coating of the language?

BAXTER

Yes. Yes.

LIGON

And one can still do that....

BAXTER

But it's not an experiment anymore. We've got it. It's ours. You can do anything with it that you want to. Gertrude Stein has started to be incorporated the way that all the other great writers of the past have

been incorporated. I used a lot of Stein in *The Soul Thief*, and I used her in that story called “Winter Journey.” The ending is right out of Stein. I couldn’t go on my whole life writing like that. But I’m so glad she happened. She’s like this crazy aunt who gives you things.

RUTTER

How do your teaching and writing inform each other?

BAXTER

I think they feed into each other. I don’t think that I would teach books in the way that I do if I hadn’t also written them and thought about how they’re put together. I don’t think I would be able to go into a workshop and help my students critique each other’s manuscripts if I hadn’t also written and thought about the problems they’re up against. I don’t know that I could become a full-time writer anymore. I once thought that was all I wanted to do, but I like going into classes. I like talking about books. I like teaching workshops because I think they’re worthwhile. I know there’s a line of thought that says we’ve all crippled ourselves by doing all this teaching, that we should have written many more books than we have. But I don’t think productivity is a value in and of itself. I just don’t. In America, in capitalism, you often think, the more the better. I don’t think so. I never did.

RUTTER

So, is this approach to the writing life an act of dissent? A response to the capitalist culture?

BAXTER

It can be. But it’s not the solution.

It’s not a solution, but I’m not sure art can ever be a solution. It’s a place where you go for what you can’t get elsewhere. But I don’t think art will save us. Art will not save us from capitalism, or, really, from anything. I’m sorry, but it’s true.