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recherches anglaises et nord-américaines

Contacts, Frictions, Clashes:
Modes of Construction of Anglophone Culture

PRESSES UNIVERSITAIRES DE STRASBOURG

Responsable de ce numéro / Editor for this issue
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Illustration de la couverture / Cover illustration
Photo credit: Martine Thomas, *Contacts, frictions, heurts*, 2014.

Éditeur
Presses universitaires de Strasbourg
5 allée du Général Rouvillois
FR-67083 Strasbourg Cedex
Tél. : +33 (0)3 68 85 62 65
info.pus@unistra.fr
site web : pus.unistra.fr

Vente au numéro
En librairie ou en commande en ligne sur le site des Presses universitaires de Strasbourg :
pus.unistra.fr

Abonnements
FMSH Diffusion / CID
18 rue Robert-Schuman – CS 90003
FR-94227 Charenton-le-Pont Cedex
Tél. :+33 (0)1 53 48 56 30 – Fax : +33 (0)1 53 48 20 95
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ISBN 978-2-86820-945-0

Université de Strasbourg

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N°49/2016

reading and preaching manuals, and in a still older tradition, the ancient treatment of Homer. But criticism seeks first to understand before applying or appropriating. Ruminating on a text is rather a process of first creating the full presence with the author, under his or her guidance.

Picasso is supposed to have said that when he was five he could draw like Raphael, but that it took him a whole life time to learn to draw like a child. Practical criticism is approaching its centenary; too adult for the wisdom of the child, it might now be adult enough to be childlike.

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Some Reflections on the Place of Aesthetics and Politics in American Studies

PHILIPP SCHWEIGHAUSER ♦

Allow me to begin with a personal anecdote.[1] In the early noughties, I participated in an intensive, week-long workshop on contemporary American literature that brought one eminent European literary scholar and four major U.S. writers and literary scholars to Austria to discuss recent developments in American literary production with a group of around fifty workshop participants. The title of the event promised that we would seek to do justice to both the diversity of the contemporary literary scene and the aesthetic dimension of literary works. As far as diversity is concerned, the selection of the American speakers was felicitous: they were two men and two women from the United States' four largest ethnic groups: Mexican-American, Asian-American, African-American, and Anglo-American. The European was a Frenchman. The division of labor was clear from the outset: while the Americans both represented and highlighted the cultural diversity of contemporary American literature, the Frenchman stressed aesthetic continuities. During the intellectually stimulating week we spent in Austria, one fundamental question about the present and the future of American Studies kept cropping up, leading to heated debates: what should Americanists study given the broad scope of American Studies? That expansiveness is due not only to the cultural diversity of the country but also to the multidisciplinarity of the field and the variety of theoretical frameworks, methodologies, and ideological convictions that vie for Americanists' allegiance. Yet in the discussions we had, the options at times seemed reduced to two. Doing American Studies, one either did politics in the sense that one critically engaged with the ideological subtexts of U.S. literary texts and focused on the cultural work these texts do—that was, by and large, the American scholars' choice—or one did aesthetics in the sense that one insisted on the differentness of literary language and valorized formally innovative texts that refuse to assimilate themselves to the

♦ Philipp Schweighauser, *University of Basel.*

1 This essay is based on my inaugural lecture of the same title, which I gave at the University of Basel on May 19, 2009. I am attempting to retain some of the oral quality of that lecture.

languages we already have for speaking about the world—that was, very roughly, the French scholar's choice.

It struck me then, and it strikes me now that this binary choice—that between doing politics and doing aesthetics—is a false choice. At the same time, I must admit that if a gun was put to my head, say by Judith Butler or Wolfgang Iser, and I had to decide between politics and aesthetics—a position that I would find awkward not only because a gun is put to my head—I would opt for aesthetics. But what do I mean by aesthetics? And where does politics come in? Let me begin answering these questions with two caveats. First, in declaring a greater interest in aesthetic than in political questions, I do not intend to dismiss more overtly political approaches to literature and culture such as feminism, gender studies, Marxism, postcolonial theory, ecocriticism, and the important work that the New Americanists do. These various approaches not only allow us to see things in literary texts that we would not see without them; they have also sharpened our awareness of the costs of exceptionalism, melting pot ideology, and various forms of social discrimination. Moreover, they have greatly expanded the canon of texts that are appreciated, taught, and read. Both American Studies and American literature are all the richer for them. My second caveat is this: my preference for aesthetics over politics is neither apolitical nor covertly political in a liberal-humanist sense.

What aestheticians have taught me, though, is to pay attention to a dimension of literary experience that tends to be sidelined in the highly politicized mainstream of a field whose major academic institution, the American Studies Association, organizes annual meetings with titles such as "Beyond the Logic of Debt, Toward an Ethics of Collective Dissent" (Washington, DC., November 21–24, 2013) and "The (Re) production of Misery and the Ways of Resistance" (Toronto, October 8–11, 2015). Reading aesthetic theory side by side with New Americanists' latest interventions not only reminds me that studying literary texts means studying works of art. It also reminds me that any inquiry into the individual and social functions of literary texts that is worth its salt must tackle the specific forms in which these functions are performed. Aesthetic theory reminds me, in other words, of the inextricable intertwinement of literary form and function. In the valuable and necessary attempt to judge texts based on the extent to which they enact social protest, give a voice to the outcasts of American society or provide windows onto different, often marginalized ways of being, the complexity of this relationship between form and function is all too often ignored. Do not get me wrong: I fully share the indignation at social injustice that fuels the more politicized versions of American Studies. But I find that many of them subscribe, most often implicitly, to theories of the relationship between literature and what we call "reality" that fall behind some of the most basic insights reached by the Russian Formalists in the early twentieth century and the Frankfurt School at midcentury.

In their different ways, Victor Shklovsky's reflections on the defamiliarizing or enstranging power of art and Theodor Adorno's theorization of the negativity of art and of the paradox that the most hermetic literary works might actually be the most social remind us that art is neither a transparent window onto the world nor its mirror. Thinkers such as these remind us that it makes a great difference whether cultural critique is staged in language that aims at communicative transparency so as to be immediately intelligible or in language that is difficult and recalcitrant, and which refuses to conform to the languages we already have for speaking about the world. Moreover, Shklovsky and Adorno invite us to think hard about whether, just maybe, the second option—difficult, recalcitrant literature, in short, the modernist heritage and everything that had led up to it—might not be the preferred option. Clearly, Shklovsky and Adorno urge us to ponder such questions in highly different ways. Shklovsky's primary concerns were, first, the question of what makes literature literature and, second, the question of what the experience of art does with and to our perception of both artworks and the world at large. By way of contrast, Adorno's work is much more explicitly political in orientation. His clear-sighted engagement with both the Western philosophical heritage and the Marxist tradition has given us what are arguably the most sustained reflections on the intricate connections between literary forms and functions, and it seems clear that any talk about the relationship between aesthetics and politics must grapple with Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. At the same time, it would be wrong to draw too sharp a dividing line between the Russian Formalist and the Frankfurt School theorist. True, in contemporary American Studies, "formalism" has a bad name since it connotes ahistoricism and apoliticism.[2] As I see it, though, this is a misunderstanding, at least as far as the Russian Formalists are concerned. Let us consider a particularly prominent example: Shklovsky's essay "Art as Device."

In this influential text, Shklovsky probes two different but related questions: what constitutes the specificity of artistic form? What is the function of art? The most condensed answer to these questions appears in the essay's three most often-quoted paragraphs:

> Automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war.
> If the complex life of many people takes place entirely on the level of the unconscious, then it's as if this life had never been.
> And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By "enstranging"

2 Note, though, the emergence, in recent years, of the New Formalisme (Levinson, 2007).

> objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and "laborious." The perceptual process in art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest. *Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artifact itself is quite unimportant.* (Shklovsky, 2009: 5–6; emphasis in original)

For Shklovsky, the forms of art—be it the linguistic structures of the verbal works of art we call literary texts or the configurations of paint on a canvas—differ significantly from the forms we encounter in non-artistic objects. Artistic form is difficult, "complicating form" in that it impedes the ready assimilation of what we see (or, we should add, hear, smell, touch, or taste) to what we already know. Thus, art interferes with our habitual processes of perception and renders objects that have become all familiar to us unfamiliar and strange again: from Dos Passos's New York to Jimi Hendrix's Star-Spangled Banner. Art, then, makes objects strange, "enstranges" them, removing them from our automatized perception so that we can really see and hear (instead of recognize) them again. Art gives us a strangely new perspective on the world, thus refreshing our sense of life. And in doing this, art returns to us the surprise and amazement we have felt as children when we saw a flower, sand, and snow for the very first time. By virtue of its difficult forms, art jolts us out of our conventionalized modes of perception to enable us to perceive and experience the world anew.

Considering the examples Shklovsky gives, though, we should not overemphasize his own comparison of aesthetic and childlike experience. After all, Shklovsky's first example is a passage from Tolstoy's brief essay "Shame!" in which the author adds a note after the description of a flogging: "Just why this stupid, savage method of inflicting pain and no other: such as pricking the shoulder or some such other part of the body with needles, squeezing somebody's hands or feet in a vise, etc." (Tolstoy, qtd. in Shklovsky, 2009: 6). Tolstoy here enstranges "flogging," making us aware of the excruciating pain that this practice actually inflicts. Thus, he strives to deautomatize our perception, allowing us a glimpse into a world of pain to which our repeated exposure to mass-medial accounts of torture may well have numbed us. Shklovsky's second example is also from Tolstoy, this time from a short story entitled "Kholstomer" that features a horse pondering the concept of property:

> The words "*my* horse" referred to me, a living horse, and this seemed to me just as strange as the words "my land," "my air" or "my water." And yet, these words had an enormous impact on me. [...] As my observations grew, [...] I became increasingly convinced that this concept of *mine* was invalid not only for us horses but also for human folk, i.e., that it represents nothing more than man's base and beastly instinct to claim property for himself. (Tolstoy, qtd. in Shklovsky, 2009: 7; emphasis in original)

Shklovsky's choice of examples in an essay written on the eve of the Russian Revolution is anything but innocent; it is certainly neither apolitical nor ahistorical. And this is true not only for Shklovsky's own Russian context of 1917 but also for early-twenty-first-century America, a nation that condones torture in the so-called war on terror and has never quite been able to disentangle its promise of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" from the origin of the phrase in Locke's triad of natural rights: "life, liberty, and estate" (Locke, 1988: 323)—the three elements that make up Locke's notion of "property."

The point I wish to make is not that Russian Formalism has a—however covert—political agenda comparable to that of more overtly political frameworks such as Marxism and critical race theory. What a focus on Shklovsky's choice of examples helps literary scholars understand, though, is two things: first, that the cultural work literary texts do is strongly contingent on their forms; second, that any political impact a literary text may have depends on the changes it effects in readers' perception of the world. And this brings us to the question of aesthetics. The term was coined by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in his 1735 *Magisterarbeit* (M. A. Thesis) *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus*, which is available in English translation under the title *Reflections on Poetry*. This slim book contains a brief sketch of a future discipline of aesthetics that is worked out more systematically in Baumgarten's two-volume *Aesthetica* of 1750 and 1758. In the first paragraph of the *Aesthetica*, Baumgarten defines aesthetics thus: "AESTHETICA (theoria liberalium artium, gnoseologia inferior, ars pulchre cogitandi, ars analogi rationis) est scientia cognitionis sensitivae" (Baumgarten, 1954: § 1, I: 60). In Jeffrey Barnouw's translation, which includes helpful glosses in square brackets: "Aesthetics, as the theory of the liberal arts, lower-level epistemology [*gnoseologia inferior*], the art of thinking finely [literally, beautifully, *ars pulchre cogitandi*], and the art of the analogy of reason [i.e., the associative or natural-sign-based capacity of empirical inference common to man and higher animals], is the science of sensuous cognition" (Barnouw, 1988: 324).

Baumgarten here presents more than one definition, and these definitions are not easily compatible. As various commentators have pointed out, we may assume that Baumgarten uses the more traditional descriptions mainly to gently introduce his readers to a new science. Once one strips the definition from these, a two-part core remains: aesthetics is the art of thinking finely and the science of sensuous cognition (Barck, Kliche and Heininger, 2000: 326). Of these, it is the latter that has had the greatest impact on recent reflections on aesthetics. Clearly, this definition of aesthetics diverges from most laypersons' as well as many a scholars' understanding of the term. As Wolfgang Welsch points out,

> the answer given by the encyclopedias is clear. The Italian *Enciclopedia Filosofica* defines aesthetics as "disciplina filosofica che ha per

> oggetto la bellezza e l'arte." Correspondingly, the French *Vocabulaire d'Esthétique* determines aesthetics as "étude réflexive du beau" and "philosophie et science de l'art." The *Academic American Encyclopedia* says: "Aesthetics is the branch of philosophy that aims to establish the general principles of art and beauty." And the German *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* explains (a bit more complicatedly, because it is German): "Das Wort 'Ästhetik' hat sich als Titel des Zweiges der Philosophie eingebürgert, in dem sie sich den Künsten und dem Schönen [...] zuwendet." (Welsch, 1997: 18)[3]

Despite the formidable weight of these sources, I join Welsch, Barnouw, Dagmar Mirbach, and Eberhard Ortland in returning to Baumgarten's original definition of "aesthetics" as "the science of sensuous cognition." What does this imply? With respect to art—which is but one possible object of aesthetic reflection—a return to Baumgarten invites us to consider works of art as specific forms of cognition or specific forms of perceiving and knowing the world. Understood thus, art mediates, contains, and impacts processes of sensuous cognition. Based as it is on the Greek words *aistheta* (things perceptible by the senses) and *aisthesis* (sensation, both in the sense of external sense perception and inner sense or feeling), the very term "aesthetics" reflects those concerns (Summers, 1998). Thus, when we engage with works of art, we engage with processes of sensuous perception: the artwork's perception of the world as well as our perception of artworks and how those processes of perception relate to our perception of the world outside of our encounters with art. This understanding of art informs not only Baumgarten's aesthetic theory but also Shklovsky's conviction that "The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition." And the very same understanding of art also informs Wolfgang Iser's reflections on how the cognitive experiences we make as we take walks in the fictional woods of literature reflect back on how we see ourselves and the world we really live in (Iser, 1993). So this is what art, including literature, can achieve: it can change our perception of ourselves and of the world around us. Clearly, those changes may not always be political in nature, but the possibility of art to effect such perceptual changes lays the uncircumventable ground for any politics of representation. Aesthetic approaches to art allow us to think about that ground. Thus, in important ways, aesthetics comes before politics.

What consequences could a shift to questions concerning aesthetics have for the practice of literary criticism? Most significantly, such a shift can sharpen our awareness of two dimensions of literary experience: the forms and the functions of literary texts.

3 The Italian quote translates as "philosophical discipline that has beauty and art as its objects"; the French quotes as "study of the beautiful" and "philosophy and science of art"; and the German quote as "The word 'aesthetics' has taken hold as the title of that branch of philosophy that deals with the arts and the beautiful."

If literary experience does something with and to our perception of the world and ourselves, and if the effect it has on us is contingent on the kinds of language writers use, we must stop reading literature as a vehicle for the communication of messages, voices, ideas or creeds. Instead, we should read literature as a specific language game that negotiates, intervenes in, affirms, and negates the language games that are played outside of literature. Literary works are neither mirrors *of* the world nor transparent windows *onto* the world. Nor are they channels for the communication of anything that exists prior to the literary text. Instead, literary texts invite us to ponder on the relations between the fictional worlds we enter in literary experience and our perception of the world as it already exists. This encounter is enabled by and takes place through the specific *forms* of literary works: their narrative strategies, their prosody, their tropes—in short, the arrangement of letters and words on the page. To my mind, one of the most exciting questions we can ask about literature is this: what kinds of cognitive and social functions do literary forms perform as they enter into a dialogue with other symbolic forms circulating in social space? Aesthetics allows us to ask this question in productive ways.

To illustrate what this means in the practical terms of literary criticism, let me turn to a specific literary text, a microstory by contemporary U.S. writer Diane Williams that I first encountered in the Austrian workshop with which the present essay begins. "There Should Be Nothing Remarkable" is told by an acutely intelligent, sophisticated, and disturbingly cold female narrative voice who begins her narrative with a report on reading "a lovey-dovey Hallmark card out loud" to her "old father." This is the action about which "[t]here should be nothing remarkable about" (Williams, 1990, 30) it. Yet the train of associations that follows upon the heels of this domestic scene is anything but unremarkable. Within one long sentence that takes up the entire first paragraph, the narrator transitions from what appears to be a moment of intergenerational care to a detached reflection upon the fate of an unidentified female "you" who is lured into the United States with the promise of a restaurant job but ends up "in a brothel, as a slave, in New York, San Francisco, or Colorado" (30). Then, the text briefly returns to the Hallmark card scene and ends with a childhood reflection on her father's jocularly absurd questions about "the difference between a duck" (31), which assume an eerie, oppressive quality in the narrator's recollection. The remaining three paragraphs alternate between the daughter–father relationship and the subaltern woman's lot. In the process, the initial scene is shown in a new light—eerily sexualized and with the power relations between the daughter and her old father reversed—and the narrator cynically brushes off the would-be-waitress's suffering as a sex slave: "Speaking for myself, the worst fate I can imagine would be a restaurant job of any kind" (31). As the story ends, the boundaries between the two scenes are fully erased: "or what is it which is the root of all evil—how you sign yourself away? physical beauty? *You be my slave*—you throw yourself at somebody's feet—*I am yours*—it is so cozy, what I have done. It is my idea of family" (31).

At first glance, "There Should Be Nothing Remarkable" cries out for a political reading. In its four short paragraphs, the story broaches issues of social stratification, racial discrimination, psychological violence, sexuality, and serious gender trouble. When we read about a woman "being smuggled into the United States" (30), we find ourselves involved in issues of migration, race, and ethnicity. When we read that the narrator can imagine no harsher fate than a restaurant job, we are confronted with questions of class and social distinction. When we read that the envelope that contains the Hallmark card and which the narrator presents to her father is "cocked, the card [...] on the way out," her "hand on it" and that through all this, she remains "positively demure," with her "eyes cast shyly down," we immediately realize that there is an uncanny performance of sexuality and symbolic violence at work. Finally, when we read that the narrator's father used to ask his daughter questions that she could not possibly answer, we recognize a specifically American form of absurd humor but also encounter a form of psychological violence that is based on the unequal distribution of power among the sexes to which the daughter's sexualized envelope-spiel is a twisted response that changes the power differential between parent and child.

For a political reading, what is especially intriguing about "There Should Be Nothing Remarkable" is the way in which different social categories are interlinked and reinforce one another. Thus, the woman that is brought into the United States to work as a sex slave is exploited on the basis of her gender, her ethnicity, and her social class. Similarly, when the narrator asserts that working in a restaurant is the worst fate she can imagine for herself, we are forced to realize that gender discrimination is all the more oppressive when it is linked to class oppression. Williams's story, in other words, forcefully illustrates what intersectionality theory discusses as an interlocking matrix of oppression in which several socially constructed categories reinforce one another to produce forms of subordination that function on a variety of levels simultaneously (Crenshaw, 1989; Nash, 2008).

An additional aspect of Williams's story that a political reading might focus on is its politics of representation. Who is this narrator, who glibly introduces the story of a woman who ends up as a sex slave with the words "please bear with me" (30), who imagines her father in the same position as the slave being worshipped by "prospective eaters [...] before, during, or after being led off" (31), and who cruelly comments on the subaltern woman's fate by giving expression to her own revulsion at the mere idea of working in a restaurant? One may speculate that the narrator is a deeply troubled, well-educated, middle-class Anglo-American woman who is keenly aware of social injustices but appears to lack any kind of empathy for the disadvantaged. Again, we are reminded that gender and class intersect to produce complex forms of oppression. And we may ask, what gives this narrator the right to talk about another woman's fate in that manner? Such a question may in turn lead political readers to reflect on their own position of advantage *vis-à-vis* the slave

woman and the ethical quandaries of speaking about and for others. In Gayatri Spivak's terms, how can we unlearn our own privilege to gain the right to speak not *for* but *to* subalterns (Spivak, 1988)?

In important ways, then, "There Should Be Nothing Remarkable" is a story about the interrelatedness of various forms of social oppression along the lines of race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and class. Yet while such a political reading does partial justice to Williams's story, it also largely ignores both the text's formal qualities and its status as a literary text. What could an aesthetic reading add to our understanding of this text? Such a reading might start by noting that it was published in its author's first collection of stories, entitled *This Is about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate*. What is important to realize about Williams's title is that its megalomania is tongue in cheek. Lifted straight from R. B. Onians's magisterial history of ideas *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate*, Williams's title gives expression to an exasperation with a seemingly innocent question that writers are often asked by readers and publishers: so what are your stories about? William's answer is this: they are about the body, the mind, the soul, the world, time, and fate. The verbal irony at work here—the mocking of the idea that literature must be *about* something—gestures toward an understanding of literary texts that considers them neither the representation of pre-existing objects, events, and situations nor political protest in literary form. Such an understanding of literature radically departs from the traditional understanding of literature as mimesis, which has dominated Western reflections on art since Plato and Aristotle.

As Iser reminds us, the function of literary fictions is not mimesis of what already exists but the staging of that which does not exist yet, at least not in our own lives: "Why have we created this mode of staging, and why has it accompanied us throughout our history? The answer must certainly be the desire, not to repeat what is, but to gain access to what we otherwise cannot have" (Iser, 1989b: 282). How would such an understanding of fiction allow us to read Williams's microstory differently? It would prompt us to read it not as a more or less ethically viable comment on social inequality in the United States but as a world of make-believe, a world of as-if that allows us to experience, in our minds, other ways of living—be it that of the aloof narrator, that of the old father or that of the sex slave. And by allowing us to experience other ways of being in the world, Williams's story also invites us to experience the relationships obtaining between those other ways of living and our own since, in reading, "we are both ourselves and someone else" (Iser, 1989a: 244). To enter a fictional world is not to escape from our own world but to experience living in two worlds at the same time. Literary fictions, then, allow us vicariously to explore alternative ways of living our lives and are thus "means of overstepping the given, which is bound to cause a transformation of what is" (Iser, 1989b: 268). Literature enables us to model alternative possibilities of being, thus

allowing us playfully to undermine the limitations of our existence—which may in turn change the way we perceive the life we really live. Thus, our walks in fictional woods may well have tangible real-world effects. Veering away from an explicitly political reading of "There Should Be Nothing Remarkable," then, has not led us away from politics entirely. But it has helped us grasp what enables fiction to have real-world effects in the first place.

Yet Williams's apparent aversion to the question of what her stories are about also points us in a second direction. Perhaps, literary texts are ultimately less world-creations than word-creations, i.e., verbal works of art. If we adopt this perspective, inquiries into the relations between fictional and empirical worlds are ultimately secondary. Instead, what counts in literary experience is what the text does with and to language. Approaching "There Should Be Nothing Remarkable" in this spirit allows us to see that it is very much a text about texts. Note the recurrence of words such as "mark," "sign" or "words" that refer to the process of writing: "remarkable," "Hallmark card," "words which are not your own," "I don't remember the words," "how you sign yourself away." Such self-reflexivity prompts us to look at the text itself rather than anything it may or may not represent. Crucially, this kind of self-reflexivity is anything but apolitical; it makes us reflect on how we, in our own lives, use words that are not our own—Hallmark card-words, if you will—and how that makes us sign ourselves away.

And once we have our eyes set on the forms of Williams's story and the functions those forms perform, we may also let ourselves be irritated by the narrator's extremely cruel tone, which may, perhaps, make us question our own, often sentimental and euphemistic ways of talking about the plights of others. An aesthetic reading, may, in other words, make us question the kind of *Betroffenheit*—a somewhat false and artificial performance of concern—that has a tendency to slip from Hallmark cards into our own speech. Again, aesthetic considerations have not led us away from politics. Instead, they have helped us understand that any consideration of a literary work's politics of representation that is worthy of the name must take a detour through considerations of literary forms and the impact of those forms on readers' perceptions of themselves and of the world.

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