Centre Shouts and Peripheral Echoes: Reading Literature for Voices of Choice and Change

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A postmodern writer or artist is in the situation of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he accomplishes, is not governed in principle by any rules already established, and they cannot be judged by means of a determining judgment, by the application to the text or the work of known categories. These rules and categories are what the work or the text are in search of.

Jean-François Lyotard, ‘What is Postmodernism’

Theory is never more than an extension of practice.

Charles Bernstein

CONCLUDING INTRODUCTION

I remember very vividly a scene from Herman Melville’s Moby Dick, another one of those books which I really did enjoy reading but have no desire to read again, at least in its entirety. This particular episode is called ‘the monkey rope’. Having killed a whale, the whalers would bring this enormously magnificent animal along side of the ship, tie the whale securely to the ship, and prepare it for storage aboard the vessel.

In this particular episode, Ishmael describes how he would tie a rope around his waist and then the harpooner Queequeg would tie the other end of the rope around his waist. Queequeg would then
descend to the body of the whale to begin cutting the blubber, while Ishmael would remain on the ship at the other end of the rope in order to give the person 'aboard the whale' balance and anchor. I remember how vivid a picture this scenario provided my mind's eye – and continues to do so even today. (A brief aside – this vivid memory suggests that while I no longer have the desire to re-read Moby Dick, no matter, for Moby Dick has and continues to read me.) Let us now turn back to our story.

I can see the ship and the whale reeling and rocking on the sea, Queequeg shuffling his feet on the slippery skin of the whale, trying to maintain balance, while attempting to cut the huge mammal into manageable pieces. I see sharks, drawn by the whale's blood, quarreling around the feet of Queequeg, who by this point is not a disinterested party in the function of the monkey rope. I can see, as vividly, the person on the deck of the ship (Ishmael) giving slack and taking-up slack in the monkey rope in order to assist Queequeg in his precarious task.

Even now, I marvel at the interdependence of the two jobs, an interdependence so well symbolized by the ropes connecting the pair of workers. I am convinced that Ishmael not only recognized the importance of his task but at the same time assumed that the other's task, Queequeg, whose work he was 'assisting' was even more important than his own. To lose the rope was to lose life and livelihood for the person on board the ship and on board the whale.

This story represents, well, my understanding of seeking and discovering an ethic in postmodern narratives. I must learn to posture my readings of narrative from a perspective that the narrative, other than my own, is telling the more important story. I think that this 'desire for the peripheral' comes about when those of us who do literary/textual criticism profess our critically ethical exercise to be an act of confession.

THE INFLUENCE OF POSTMODERNISM

In a rather profound way, postmodernism has influenced the manner I look at texts in a variety of ways. I have only begun to appreciate how little I understand narrative's complex and inherent power not only to tell life's stories but also to change them, in