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1 In an important moment in “Occidentals,” the third and final story of Richard Ford’s 1997 collection *Women with Men*, Helen Carmichael asks Charley Matthews, her boyfriend and the story’s protagonist, what he longs for and Matthews answers: “I’d like for things not to center so much on me” (171). Afterwards this phrase is returned to more than once as a way of explaining what Matthews may or may not want. Not to be at the “center of things” we learn means, in part, seeking a “less governed life,” (157) a life not bounded by social or cultural conventions:

   He longed to be less the center of things. He realized this was what a foreign country–any foreign country–could offer you and what you could never get at home. The idea of home, in fact, was the antithesis of that feeling. At home everything was about you and what you owned and what you liked and what everybody thought of you. He’d had enough of that. (174)

2 The desire to escape from domesticity and all it represents is a standard enough trope of male American writing. Leslie Fiedler pointed out more than half a century ago that an urge to “light out for the territory” in one form or another is central to many of the most significant works of the American canon, while, more recently, Philip Fisher and Ross Posnock have both argued, in different ways, that America and its literature aspires to a condition of permanent immaturity.¹ Charley Matthews has already gone some way to responding to this apparently typical American urge by leaving his job and his marriage and taking a trip to Europe with Helen; as the story progresses, however, it becomes clear that his notions of escape do not follow what we might consider, after Fiedler and others, to be the orthodox patterns.² Although Matthews occasionally uses a language of Jamesian self-expansion (he wishes at one point to “convert himself into someone available to take on more of life” [223]) his strongest desire is actually to dissolve or escape from the self rather than to create or embrace a newer or larger identity.
Matthews finds Paris, where they are vacationing, baffling and ungraspable, but as the story proceeds he becomes increasingly attracted to it precisely because it is a place in which he will never fully understand, and where he could, therefore, never fit in. To live in Paris as he imagines it would be to self-consciously occupy a liminal or marginal position—to be forever undefined and indefinable:

This had to do, he understood, with wanting not to be the center of things, with wanting to get lost in events, with conceivably even fitting into the normalcy of another country—though normalcy of course was foolish to think about. Look around (he said this unexpectedly out loud). He could never fit in in Paris. Except that was no reason why you couldn’t, with the right set of motivations, be here. (228)

In this imaginary—selfless and decentered—state, cognitive and communicative disconnection are the necessary preconditions for a deeper, more satisfying kind of experience. Matthews comes to regard his limited knowledge of the French language and his lack of curiosity about French culture and history as a means of freeing himself from any kind of social role or responsibility:

Yet he found there was another good side to it: since when he would listen in on some conversation Helen was having with a clerk or a flower vendor and would try to figure out from this word or that what either of them were saying he got almost everything wrong. [...] It could get to be addictive he believed, not understanding what people were saying. Time spent in another country would probably always be spent misunderstanding a great deal, which might in the end turn out to be a blessing and the only way you could ever feel normal. (180)

Matthews here associates feeling “normal” with being alienated and being alienated, in turn, with being free. The basic elements of this linkage may be familiar enough from the various forms of European modernism in which “angst” is imagined as the unavoidable price of humanness, but Matthews crucially differentiates himself from those traditions by imagining this alienation/normality not as a burden to be endured, but rather as a “blessing” to be hoped for. Matthews’ desire not to be the center of things is, in other words, much more postmodern than it is modern—and it connects, therefore, not only to an established line of American literary individualism but also to a more recent postmodern championing of the decentered subject in contrast to the “centered” or Cartesian self.3

If we recognise the literary individualism described by Fiedler, Fisher and Posnock as being one aspect of a broader Emersonian tendency in American letters4 then it becomes perhaps easier to understand the particular combination of ideas which emerge in Matthews’ Parisian musings and the particular set of confusions or uncertainties they cause. Emerson’s work inaugurates an American pragmatist tradition, a tradition which in turn connects to European postmodernism genealogically (via Nietzsche’s reading of Emerson) and intellectually via a shared anti-foundationalism. Both ways of thinking reject the notion of a fixed, pre-existing, Truth and argue instead for some version of constructivism.5 However, while American pragmatism replaces metaphysics with an interest in everyday, contingent, truth-making processes—what Hilary Putnam has called “our sense of the common” (Putnam, Realism 118)—European postmodernism (in the work for example of Foucault and Derrida) frequently pushes onwards towards something closer to a full-blown relativism in which knowledge becomes merely a function of power and truth becomes, therefore, something to be avoided or undermined rather than pursued. My contention in this essay is that in *Women with Men* Ford is alert to the ways in
which such relativistic, postmodern tendencies have emerged out of a more home-grown tradition of philosophical scepticism and is concerned with mapping the psychological effects of these tendencies and with suggesting (in terms which ultimately refer back to the American pragmatist tradition) their fundamental weaknesses.

6 The link between Charley Matthews’ views and the perspectives of contemporary postmodernism is suggested most strongly by his relationship with Paris. If Matthews is, or aspires to be, a decentered subject, then Paris, as he sees it, is a decentered and decentering city. From Matthews’ perspective there is “nothing natural” (179) about Paris—mainly because, for him, everything about it is mediated through prior representations. Although he has never visited France before, he has already used the city as a setting in his novel *The Predicament* and has already discussed it in his classes on African-American literature. The result of all this prior textualisation is to make Paris deeply unreal for Matthews—“I don’t really know where any of these places are,” Matthews said. ‘I just read about them. They aren’t real to me. They never were’” (166)—an effect which he sometimes finds irritating but just as often welcomes as a form of liberation. In the following passage, there are elements of Emersonian mysticism (the famous transparent eyeball) but also of a testier, more Nietzschean, irrationalism:

In the meantime he felt better about everything. And walking up the wide, congested Boulevard Raspail—a legendary street he knew almost nothing specific about, bound for some unknown destination, with little language available, no idea about currency, distances or cardinal points—made him feel a small but enlivened part of a wider not a narrower experience. (222)

7 Matthews’ difficulty in finding his way around the city, which he unsuccessfully attempts to navigate with the help of a Fodor’s guidebook, is one of the story’s running jokes. His confusion testifies in part to his New World provincialism, but also, the story suggests, to something inherently puzzling about the city itself. During his final long walk Matthews wonders whether Paris has a center at all or whether “**downtown** was an American idea, something the French would all laugh at if they knew what he was thinking” (237). The contrast here is not simply between the planned space of the American city and the more organic unplanned space of a European city (since Paris after Haussmann is certainly not unplanned) but rather between different forms or degrees of planning. Philip Fisher, in an unashamedly free-market revision of Henri Lefebvre’s critique of capitalist abstraction, argues that the purpose of the American grid system inaugurated by Thomas Jefferson is to eliminate geographical distinctiveness in favour of democratic homogeneity. The grid facilitates movement (both social and physical) by making everywhere more or less the same. Every point on the grid is equal—therefore every point is, in some sense, the center. The center, in other words, is everywhere. According to Fisher, this means it is, symbolically at least, almost impossible to get lost: “This is the special intelligibility and transparency of ways of life that conquered the geographical variety of the American continent, making the American suburb broadly similar from Boston to Los Angeles. It feels ‘like’ home everywhere” (Fisher 49). Fisher’s version of a homogenous and democratic America is, to a large extent, a pro-capitalist fantasy but it is a telling one. If the American grid system aspires to make everyone feel at home, to make them feel, in other words, perpetually centered, then Paris for Matthews does and means exactly the opposite—it is the place where he can never feel at home, but where as a result he might, possibly, feel most free. Fisher intriguingly describes the new democratic social space created by the American grid as “**Cartesian**” and this linkage between
geography and philosophy is reinforced towards the end of Matthews’ walk when he observes that:

Ahead of him [...] was St-Germain-des-Pres and, he’d deduced, the Deux Magots, the Brasserie Lipp, the Café de Flore—one of the great confluences of Europe. There was no more famous place. Descartes was buried in the church. It would have to be the center of something. (236 my emphasis).

If St Germain has to be “the center of something” we might deduce, from its particular philosophical associations that it is, for Matthews at least, the center of a kind of centerlessness—and this moment is indeed the apogee of his efforts at urban self-erasure. It is followed by an awkward phone call to an ex-lover and then by his discovery that Helen has committed suicide in his absence—the moment of climactic reversal in which the moral failure of Matthews’ strategy is definitively exposed.

It is the failure of his relationship with Helen which most clearly expresses within “Occidentals,” the philosophical inconsistencies of Matthews’ postmodernist position. Matthews’ fantasy of escaping from the self is unfavourably contrasted with Helen’s desire to hold onto life in the face of a serious, possibly terminal, illness. Quite soon after Charley’s statement about not wanting to be at the center of things, the two of them have the following exchange:

“Do you love Paris now?” she said. “Do you feel like you’re not the center of everything? Because you’re certainly not.”
“I don’t feel much like it’s Christmas.”
“That’s because you’re not religious. Plus you’re spoiled,” Helen said. “For spoiled people the real thing’s never enough. Don’t you know that?”
“I don’t think I’m spoiled,” Matthews said.
“And spoiled people never do. But you are though.” [...] “Not to want to be at the center of things, that’s what spoiled people think they want.” (180-181)

This conversation takes place in a religious curio shop where Helen has just discovered and purchased (to Matthews’ bemusement) a tea towel with the slogan “THE GLORY OF GOD IS TO KEEP THINGS HIDDEN.” If Matthews’ viewpoint is broadly postmodern, Helen’s, as suggested here and reinforced elsewhere, is common-sensibly Kantian—she believes there is something like an ultimate Truth but she is also well-aware that she does not have direct access to it. Whereas Matthews sees Paris as pleasingly unknowable, Helen sees it as the repository of a kind of seriousness she envies but cannot hope to emulate:

“You know what people want when they come to Paris?” Helen said, still staring up at the glowing dome with the white sky in the background.
“I don’t;” Matthews said. “I have no idea.”
“To be French,” Helen sniffed. “The French are more serious than we are. They care more. They have a perspective on importance and unimportance. You can’t become them. You just have to be happy being yourself.” (177-178)

If to be French is to be inherently serious, then to be spoiled it seems may be typically American—Helen importantly admits that she is spoiled too, “I’m the same way, just not as bad as you are” (181). Although Helen may not be free of this besetting problem, she is certainly alert and self-conscious enough to accurately diagnose and describe it. For Matthews and people like him, she tells us, the “real is not enough”—in other words his postmodern desire to escape from himself (and from meaning more generally) is based on a lack of appreciation of what he already has, and a consequently unrealistic or childish yearning for something else. Helen’s diagnosis here is a home-spun version of the arguments of more sophisticated anti-postmodernists such as Hilary Putnam and Jurgen Habermas. For Putnam and Habermas contemporary relativisms are inherently
contradictory since if everything is relative then relativism itself must be relative also. Therefore, in arguing against the universal claims of reason and Enlightenment and arguing for the superior claims of relativism, relativists implicitly (or ungratefully in Helen’s terms) assume the existence of the very rational and transcultural standards of proof which they explicitly try to reject.  

The cultural and psychological sources of such postmodern relativism are many and complex, and any attempt to precisely define or fix them is far beyond the scope of this essay. Nonetheless, Hilary Putnam makes a passing remark about this subject which in the context of Ford’s work is both relevant and suggestive. Having noted that contemporary scepticism about interpretation is based on an “adolescent sort of error” which imagines that because descriptions can never be complete they are therefore worthless, he then goes on:

It must be conceded that the error has deep roots. Talk of “otherness,” “exotopy,” and “incommensurability” would not be as widespread as it is if the ideas of perfect knowledge, of falling short of perfect knowledge, and of the falsity of everything short of perfect knowledge did not speak to us. What those roots are is a matter for speculation. Certainly there is a desire for what psychoanalysts call “fusional” relationships. It is a commonplace to say that the tragedy of life is that we are “alone,” that such relationships are impossible; but perhaps as one grows older one comes to feel that separateness as a blessing as well as a curse. (Putnam, Realism 120)

Putnam’s suggestion here interestingly illuminates Helen’s assertion that Matthews is “spoiled.” If the postmodern rejection of the real originates in a frustrated desire for metaphysical “oneness,” then it is plausible to see the postmodern gesture as not only a rebellion against metaphysics but also (and I suspect this is Putnam’s point) as a displaced version of it. Matthews’s apparent desire to be nothing, in this context, becomes only a modified version of the standard narcissist’s desire to be everything, since both tendencies are based on an unwillingness to recognise the reality of a separate, limited self existing within a world of external objects—a world which contains other people who are both distinct and real. Matthews’ desire to escape from himself is, in other words, as Helen’s comments perceptively suggest, based on a refusal to be satisfied with what he has and what he, like everyone else, inevitably is.

According to Melanie Klein (following on from Freud), narcissistic disorders are a result of the infant’s unsuccessful separation from the mother due to a failure of the Oedipal process. This developmental failure produces feelings of overpowering rage and fear within the patient, feelings which are dealt with by a form of splitting whereby the bad part of the mother is externalised and the good part is introjected and thus forms the basis of a delusionary and grandiose self-image. If Matthews’ desire to lose himself in, and be absorbed by, Paris is, as I have suggested, a displaced form of narcissism, then we must trace these narcissistic tendencies back not literally to the months of early infancy (rarely a good subject for realist fiction) but rather more simply to Matthews’ feelings of emotional abandonment subsequent to the departure of his wife Penny and the failure of Blumberg, his French editor and a symbolic father figure, to offer him any adequate compensation for this loss.

Early in the story he remembers his marriage in terms that strongly recall the symbiotic mother-infant bond: “the two of them had once been so close as to be two parts of one person. That was years ago. Whatever he’d liked then she’d liked. Though that was over now.” He then immediately compensates for this painful recollection of primal loss by
reimagining Paris itself as a kind of substitute mother/wife: “Paris […] seemed to lie forth more the way he would’ve wanted had he ever let himself want it. A metropolis of bounteous issue; a surface to penetrate; a depth in which to immerse oneself, even reside in” (171). In merging or potentially merging with the city, Matthews escapes in fantasy from the loss of Penny and from the murderous anger which that loss has provoked in him—a tactic we see in full in the final movement of the story. Within this complicated psychic drama Helen becomes (in symbolic opposition to Paris) another version of Penny, i.e. the “bad” or failed mother whose own needs and desires oppose and take precedence over those of the child (Matthews):

Helen dominated life, shoved other interests aside, visualised her own interests clearly and assumed his were the same.
The best thing to say about Helen was that he wasn’t adequate to her needs or demands, due to needs and demands of his own, and that he should let things go on as they now would then quietly part company with her once they were home. He’d felt the very same—that he’d barely escaped with his life—when he left behind being a professor. (222)

In this context, Matthews’ oddly casual attitude to Helen’s cancer (“Helen had had cancer of the something a year before” [158]) can be understood as in part a result of his unconscious feelings of aggression towards her—feelings which are themselves a projection of his more fundamental anger towards Penny. The fantasies he enjoys while walking alone in Paris, fantasies of never going back to the hotel, of abandoning Helen entirely—“just having a long lunch alone, buying the cigar he’d imagined and setting off on a very, very long walk” (239)—suggest that her eventual suicide, although literally unexpected, may also express Matthews’ deeper matricidal desires. (This possibility is reinforced by the fact that Helen’s actual death in Paris echoes Penny’s fictionalised death in Matthews’ novel The Predicament where Greta, who is an “unflattering” version of Penny, is killed off in a traffic accident.)

The possibility, suggested by “Occidentals,” that postmodern relativism and regressive anxiety are linked responses to a contemporary male experience of loss or absence is also explored in the collection’s first story “The Womanizer” via the relationship between Martin Austin and Josephine Belliard. Austin, like Matthews, has separated from his wife and is defined by a general dreaminess and lack of intellectual and emotional fixity. Vacillation and uncertainty are his dominant characteristics throughout the story. He second-guesses himself compulsively:

He almost said “I love you” into the receiver. But that would be a mistake, and he didn’t say it, though part of him furiously wanted to. Then he nearly said it in French, thinking possibly that it might mean less than it did in English. But again he refrained. “I want to see you very much” he said as a last, weak, compromise.

(39)

Josephine has, in contrast, we are told, “a greater sense of responsibility than he had, a greater sense of life’s importance, its weight and permanence” (91). (In other words, within the logic of the story, and perhaps of the collection as a whole, she is characteristically French). Austin’s attraction to Josephine lacks the kind of unconscious aggression we see in Matthews’ relationship with Helen, but is nonetheless peculiar in ways that suggest it is equally regressive and narcissistic. First, his desire for Josephine is almost entirely oral—they never sleep together and the most physical intimate moments of the relationship are all to do with kissing. Second, Josephine is throughout extremely, perhaps definitively, resistant and/or indifferent to his oral advances. As a result of these two linked tendencies Austin spends a significant time in the story trying to manoeuvre
Josephine into kissing him and then once he has in some sense succeeded, considering in
detail the (usually disappointing) nature of that experience. One example out of several
will suffice:

“I want to kiss you the right way, not that way,” Austin said. He pulled her firmly to
him again, taking hold of her soft waist and pushing his mouth towards hers. He
kissed her as tenderly as he could with her back stiff and resistant, and her mouth
not shaped to receive a kiss but ready to speak when the kiss ended. Austin held the
kiss for a long moment, his eyes closed, his breath travelling out his nose, trying to
find his own wish for tenderness igniting an answering tenderness in her. But if
there was tenderness it was of an unexpected type–more like forbearance. (71-72)

Josephine persistently denies Austin the oral satisfactions he craves. She is in that sense,
and much more explicitly than Helen Carmichael, the “bad” or withholding mother, just
as Austin is (again much more explicitly than Matthews) the disappointed/angry/
terrified infant. Austin’s unspoken, infantile fears of abandonment are, in the story’s final
section, partially projected onto Josephine’s actual son Leo who is abducted and assaulted
after Austin takes him out to a nearby park. The projection is only partial because in
passages such as the following it is clear that the fear of the absent mother is as much, if
not more Austin’s, as it is Leo’s:

a darker thought entered his mind: of Josephine never coming back, deciding simply
to disappear somewhere en route from the lawyers. That happened. Babies were
abandoned in Chicago all the time and no one knew what happened to their
parents. He knew no one she knew. He knew no one to contact. It was a nightmarish
thought (77).

If, according to the Putnam passage quoted earlier, both metaphysical Realism and
postmodern scepticism can be aligned with forms of developmental failure in that both
are motivated by an urge for pre-oedipal “oneness,” then Putnam’s proposed “solution”
of “internal realism” implies a version of successful maturation which involves
separation (from the mother or from Truth) but not complete separation. Such a position
clearly echoes the standard Freudian model in which unsatisfiable infantile desire is
sublimated in socially useful ways rather than being acted out or repressed. Ford’s
adherence to this, in some ways quite traditional, model as an alternative to the
developmental failures he associates with the intellectual weaknesses of postmodernism
is made explicit in the middle story of the collection “Jealous” which is set in Montana in
1975 and which acts as a foil to the other two pieces. In contrast to “The Womanizer” and
“Occidentals”, “Jealous” offers a traditional, perhaps even nostalgic, version of American
selfhood in which the inevitable sexual and philosophical uncertainties of adolescence
are successfully resolved under the influence of a benign father-figure and via the
mechanisms of the classical Oedipal model.

The key to the story lies in its initially mysterious title. Although there are some hints of
jealousy in the relationships between Doris and Larry’s father and between Larry’s father
and his estranged wife, these are not particularly significant. The story is clearly not
about jealousy in any overt or explicit way, and the title only begins to fully make sense
when we consider the narrative via a Freudian model in which the relationship between
father and son is defined by sexual rivalry over the mother—in which the son is in other
words, by definition, jealous. The structure of the story, in which Larry the seventeen-
year-old protagonist, leaves his father in Montana and travels in the company of his Aunt
Doris to Seattle to visit his mother, allows what is on a conscious level unspeakable to
emerge in the dream-like interval between leaving one parent and reaching the other.
The events which occur in and around the Oil City bar, where Doris and Larry are waiting for the Seattle train, function as a fantastic realisation of Larry’s Oedipal urges. Barney, his Aunt’s temporary drinking companion, an ersatz father figure, is gunned down by the police and shortly afterwards Doris (who is very clearly a version of the mother) seeks comfort by having sex with Larry in her Cadillac. Larry in other words achieves (albeit in a displaced form) what according to Freud every male child truly wants–he satisfies the incestuous desires which, unsatisfied and unsatisfiable, elsewhere in the collection fuel the narcissisms of Matthews and Austin.

The kind of freedom that Doris offers to Larry, although it seems exciting and tough-minded at times is, the story finally insists, regressive and immature. This is signalled strongly, if strangely, by Doris’s revelation in the story’s final pages that she is bisexual: “I was involved with another woman for a while. Quite a while in fact. It was very fulfilling [...] Does that shock you? I’m sure it does”(143). Although Larry pretends he isn’t shocked by this, he certainly is, and it is this revelation rather than any more orthodox Freudian threat of symbolic castration which has the effect of resolving or ending Larry’s Oedipal phase–of allowing him to achieve a healthy and independent selfhood. In using homophobia as the catalyst for successful individuation, Ford appears to be following Freud’s suggestion that homosexuality represents a form of narcissistic self-regard. (An implication which is also present in “The Womanizer” where Austin, while in Paris, uncomfortably occupies the apartment of a gay acquaintance–“a luxurious metal-and-velvet faggot’s lair with enormous mirrors on the bedroom ceiling” [53]). Such a linkage, between narcissism and homosexual desire, feels outdated in the light of contemporary queer theory and it may well add to our sense of “Jealous” as a relatively conservative story in which nostalgic regionalism and father-son bonding are offered as implicit alternatives to the failures of postmodern culture. Within the context of the collection as a whole, however, it is important to note that this more old-fashioned vision offers little concrete hope or help to characters such as Austin and Matthews whose social and familial backgrounds have clearly not prepared them to understand or resist the temptations of a contemporary postmodern milieu. If “Jealous” succeeds in reminding us that the dilemmas of the American present are not necessary or universal, that they emerge from a particular historical set of circumstances, it does little to explain how they may currently be overcome. For that we must turn again to the endings of the other two stories and in particular to the remarkable penultimate scene of “Occidentals” in which Matthews finally meets his translator Mme de Grenelle.

Part of the purpose of the scene between Matthews and Mme de Grenelle is certainly to mock Matthews, perhaps on some level even to morally punish him for his previous blindness and self-absorption. If through most of the story (focalised as it is through him) we have seen other people–Helen and Penny especially–translated into his way of thinking, this pattern is comically reversed by Mme Grenelle who proposes to transform Matthews’ self-justifying autobiographical novel into a satire with an unreliable protagonist:

“So. It is not quite finished in English. Because you cannot rely on the speaker. The I who was jilted. All the way throughout, one is never certain if he can be taken seriously at all. It is not entirely understandable in that way. Don’t you agree? Perhaps you don’t. But perhaps he has murdered his wife, or this is all a long dream or a fantasy, a ruse—or there is another explanation. It is meant to be mocking.”

“That could be true,” Matthews said. “I think it could.” (253)
24 Mme de Grenelle’s subversive rereading of *The Predicament* functions also and equally well as an interpretation of “Occidentals” itself—since Matthew’s moral reliability is central to both the imagined novel and the actual story. In that sense, this scene could be seen as itself a postmodern gesture by which Ford emphasises the status of the story as only one text (among other texts) by including within it its own ironic reinterpretation. Mme de Grenelle’s otherness in relation to Matthews is strongly signalled by both her race and her sexual orientation, and at first or even second reading it may seem that her intervention at this late stage shows Ford conceding to the relativizing, postmodernist tendencies which the rest of the story seems to wish to resist. Mme de Grenelle is brutally accurate in some ways but crude and coercive in others, in other words she herself is not entirely reliable, and the temptation may be to conclude from this fact that there is no one right interpretation of what has happened or of who Matthews is, and that Ford is offering us finally, in opposition to Matthews’ narcissistic fantasies, only a more sternly postmodern and pluralistic world made up of incommensurable language games, of separate versions of the truth which cannot ultimately meet.

At this point, however, it is useful to refer again to Hilary Putnam. In *Reason Truth and History* Putnam specifically addresses the issue of translation as part of his consideration of relativist arguments concerning incommensurability. He notes that relativists such as Kuhn and Feyerband emphasise the impossibility of any true or accurate translation across languages or even across different historical versions of the same language:

> The incommensurability thesis is the thesis that terms used in another culture, say, the term ‘temperature’ as used by a seventeenth-century scientist, cannot be equated in meaning or reference with any terms or expressions we possess. As Kuhn puts it, scientists with different paradigms inhabit ‘different worlds’. (Putnam, *Reason* 114)

Putnam rejects these arguments as self-refuting by noting that if taken literally they would mean that people from other eras or cultures (or even earlier versions of ourselves) could not be understood or recognised at all. As with other contemporary manifestations of relativism, he sees radical scepticism about translation as being based on the failed fantasy of complete synonymy (which he argues is equally absurd). Rather than the opposed alternative of synonymy or incommensurability, Putnam offers a notion of translation based on “interpretative charity”: “interpretative success does not require that the translatees’ beliefs come out the same as our own, but it does require that they come out intelligible to us” (Putnam, *Reason* 117).

Although Matthews has, in an earlier conversation with Helen, explicitly supported a relativistic understanding of translation—“I think it’s inventing [...] I think it’s using one book to invent another one” (164)—the story’s conclusion emphasises that his opinions have changed. The story ends with Matthews deciding to write a long-delayed letter to his parents: “And in his letter he would try as best he could, and with the many complications that would need detailing, to explain to them all that had happened to him here and what new ideas he had for the future” (255). In writing to his parents, Matthews is clearly “centering” himself again, in other words he is placing himself firmly back inside the social and historical contexts from which he has earlier sought to escape. This may seem like a modest and rather conservative gesture, but within the logic of the story and in the context of his recent narcissistic and matricidal fantasies it is a small but telling vision of a new maturity (or realism to use Putnam’s term) in which the various experiences of loss, separation and difference—all symbolically encapsulated in the
original loss of the mother–can be acknowledged and managed through (rather than

denied or embodied by) language, and in which also the very ability and willingness to

recognise and communicate with others, however uncomfortable or partial that

communication may feel, is itself important evidence of a shared set of assumptions and

beliefs.

Such moments of hard-won hopefulness are rare enough in Ford’s short fiction, but their

rarity testifies more to the difficulties of expressing, even within art, the valuable but

unstable combinations of knowledge and uncertainty that internal realism (to use

Putnam’s term) implies, than to any lack of faith or belief on Ford’s part in the

importance of the realist project. In “Charity”, a story in his next collection A Multitude of

Sins, the protagonist, Nancy Marshall, while on vacation in Maine finds herself observed

by a busload of Asian tourists whom, she is sure, imagine her to be very different from the

person she actually is. “Isn’t it odd,” she says to her husband, “to be seen but to

understand you’re being seen wrong” (Multitude 205). This encounter subtly echoes that

between Matthews and Mme de Grenelle in the sense that both are moments of cross-

cultural encounter in which recognition and misrecognition are combined. For Nancy this

experience provides a rare moment of freedom and pleasure in an otherwise unhappy

weekend, but the pleasure, I would argue, comes as much from being misunderstood as

from being noticed in the first place (and also vice versa). Ford’s point here, as in the Mme

de Grenelle scene, is surely that both elements of the experience of communication or

translation (the being seen and the not being recognised) are equally crucial since to

achieve maturity is to recognise both similarity and difference–i.e. to realise that other

people exist, but that it is not possible to completely understand them. If to be fully

understood (or centered) is the nightmare from which male American protagonists from

Rip Van Winkle onwards have fled, then Ford reminds us in Women with Men and

elsewhere that to not be understood or seen at all (to be decentered) is in fact equally

unbearable and impossible. If both “Occidentals” and “The Womanizer” only hint at a

third “mature” position, it is not, as I have just suggested, because Ford does not

recognise that such a position is real and meaningful but rather because such a position is

so inherently unstable and fleeting that to name it at all is to risk having it harden into

Truth or dissolve into difference. As Nancy notes in “Charity,” after being seen but also

not seen by the busload of tourists: “It was a grand feeling […] The great mistake would be

to try to seize […] and keep it forever. It was good just to know it was available at all” (Multitude 205).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. In the provocative and hyperbolic *Still the New World: American Literature in a Culture of Creative Destruction* Fisher argues that America and its literature is defined by a process of creative destruction in which each generation starts afresh and in which immigration (or “removal”) is thus “a life form not a one-time act” (272). In *Philip Roth’s Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity*, Posnock places Phillip Roth within a literary and intellectual tradition of transgressive immaturity which is at the same time Emersonian, pragmatic and modernist. He emphasizes, above all, Roth’s refusal to conform to any predetermined role or expectation, his desire to always remain on the move. Fiedler notes in the introduction to *Love and Death in the American
that ever since Rip Van Winkle “the typical male protagonist of our fiction has been a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat—anywhere to avoid ‘civilisation,’ which is to say the confrontation of a man and a woman which leads to the fall, to sex, marriage, and responsibility” (xx).

2. Fiedler suggests in typically robust fashion that the three main options available to a male American protagonist fleeing the confines of domesticity are impotence, innocent homosexuality and un consummated incest (329-69). Fisher and Posnock emphasize, in contrast, the importance of pragmatic or aesthetic self-creation but neither set of possibilities, the darkly Freudian or the more hopefully pragmatic, fully capture Matthews’ position.

3. The classic articulations of this position are Roland Barthes 1967 essay “The Death of the Author,” and Jacques Derrida’s 1966 lecture “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.” In the latter work Derrida uses “center” as a synecdoche for structure more generally, and identifies a recent “rupture” or “event,” which we may plausibly identify as the beginnings of postmodernism and which he describes as the moment when “language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse” (Derrida 280).

4. Fiedler had little time for Emerson (who is barely mentioned in Love and Death in the American Novel) but Emerson is central to both Fisher and Posnock, and the central importance of Emerson to the development of America’s literary and philosophical traditions has been convincingly argued for by a number of recent critics—most notably Richard Poirier and Cornel West.

5. The connections between American pragmatism and continental philosophy are most energetically and thoroughly examined in the work of Richard Rorty.

6. “Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant is then a trifle and a disturbance” (Emerson 6).

7. Although in his discussion of “democratic social space” Fisher does not acknowledge any debt to Lefebvre, the connections are clear enough.

8. The notion of the city as a place of irrationality, disorder and postmodern “play” has been articulated most notably by Michel de Certeau in The Practice of Everyday Life.

9. The same terminology is used by LeFebvre, although with entirely opposite political implications.

10. For a more detailed account of this argument see Hilary Putnam Reason, Truth and History, 119-124. See also Jurgen Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity and, for a discussion of how Putnam’s ideas may relate to literary criticism, Martha Nussbaum.

11. The most clear and striking example of this paradox within the postmodern canon is the hallucinatory anti-Realism of Jean Baudrillard where the hyperreal frequently takes on the qualities of absolute truth. In Fatal Strategies for example Baudrillard notes: “Just as the model is more real than the real […] the amazing aspect of fashion is that it is more beautiful than the beautiful. […] It exceeds the aesthetic form in the ecstatic form of unconditional metamorphosis” (Baudrillard 186).

12. Freud’s classic essay “On Narcissism: An Introduction” has surprisingly little to say about the specific ways in which narcissistic disorders develop. Melanie Klein and her followers, however, offer a more detailed account. Paula Heiman notes, for example: “in the narcissistic condition the external object is hated and rejected, so that one loves the internal object which is fused with the self and experiences pleasure from it. The external object and its inner representation (gained through introjection) are thus sharply divided. However, the technique of splitting the object into two derives from and presupposes the fundamental premise that somewhere the two are one” (Klein et al 154).
13. Narcissism is an accusation that has been levelled at Americans before of course—in the work, most notably, of Quentin Anderson and Christopher Lasch. Both Anderson and Lasch see narcissism as an unfortunate side-effect of American individualism—and, in particular, of American culture’s long-standing disdain for fathers (both literal and symbolic). Matthew’s relationship with his actual father (who runs a furniture business in Pittsburgh) remains quite vague in “Occidentals” but the story begins with him being painfully disillusioned by his French editor Francois Blumberg—a man he has previously imagined in distinctly and sentimentally paternal terms: “From their correspondence, Matthews had always pictured Francois Blumberg as an old man, a kindly keeper of an ancient flame, overseer of a rich and storied culture that only a few were permitted to share” (152).

14. This idea of the “bad” mother comes from Melanie Klein’s object relations theory. The splitting of the mother (or more specifically the breast) into “good” and “bad” versions—the former introjected, the latter projected outwards—is typical, according to Klein, of the paranoid-schizoid position of early infancy which should be left behind in the process of healthy development. The failure to pass beyond the paranoid-schizoid position is associated with narcissism as well as a number of other related mental disorders. See Klein’s essay “Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms” in Mitchell 175-200.

15. The aggression towards the “bad mother” is present in the story but is expressed via Josephine’s first husband Bernard who writes an autobiographical novel intended to humiliate her (91).

16. “We have discovered, especially clearly in people whose libidinal development has suffered some disturbance, such as perverts and homosexuals, that in their later choice of love objects they have taken as a model not their mother but their own selves. They are plainly seeking themselves as a love-object, and are exhibiting a type of object-choice which must be termed ‘narcissistic’” (Freud 88).

17. Mme de Grenelle is of “mixed race” (Matthews speculates that she is Berber) and shares her house with another woman.

ABSTRACTS

À un moment important d’ « Occidentals », la dernière nouvelle du recueil Women with Men de Richard Ford, publiée en 1997, le protagoniste Charley Matthews maintient qu’il ne veut plus être « au centre ». Ses désirs le relient à la vieille tradition d’individualisme américaine et en même temps à une forme de postmodernisme européen plus récent. Ne pas être au centre signifie, manifestement, être libéré des contraintes domestiques et sociales, mais alors que le récit progresse, cela signifie aussi être libéré du moi cartésien ou du moi « centré », être, selon le discours postmoderne, « décentré ». Cet article soutient que dans Women with Men Richard Ford est conscient de l’importance croissante de ces tendances postmodernes dans la culture contemporaine américaine et qu’il s’intéresse à tracer leurs origines et à suggérer leurs failles. Sa critique du postmodernisme souligne ses tendances narcissiques et relativistes. Il offre comme alternative une version du réalisme philosophique que l’on pourrait comparer au « réalisme interne » proposé par le philosophe américain Hilary Putnam.
AUTHORS

IAN MCGUIRE

Ian McGuire teaches American Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Manchester. He is one of the codirectors of the University of Manchester’s Centre for New Writing, which he also helped found in 2006. His novel, *Incredible Bodies*, was published by Bloomsbury in 2006 and he has published scholarly articles on W.D. Howells, Walt Whitman and Herman Melville. He is currently completing a monograph on Richard Ford and contemporary American realism.