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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This interview was conducted by email between May 23rd and July 29th 2011. The interview also includes three questions that Nathalie Cochoy asked Steven Millhauser.

Etienne Février: I would like to begin this interview with a question about architecture. Images of architecture appear frequently in your fiction, from *Martin Dressler* to more recent collections like *Dangerous Laughter*. In that collection's "thirteen stories," we find a tower reaching all the way to heaven, a life-size replica of a town so precise that even the "levels of salt in the saltshakers" match those of the original town, and a series of outwardly expanding domes—covering a house, first, and eventually an entire country. Am I right to think that you use architecture as a means of expressing the artist's simultaneous desire to conquer the world and escape from it?

Steven Millhauser: It's certainly fair to think that, so long as I'm not limited to a single use. Sometimes my monstrous architectural images are meant to express only America's love of vastness—vast bridges, vast buildings, vast works of art to embody the vastness of the land. Sometimes they're meant to suggest an aggressive human desire to create larger and larger structures, as if, once begun, the urge to immensity can't be stopped. And sometimes it's the sheer pleasure of invention that drives me to dream up impossible forms of architecture, which then haunt me with meanings I can't entirely fathom.

EF: It seems to me that the particular kinds of architecture you create are far more than mere aggregates of stone and mortar: the people leaving the department store in "The Dream of the Consortium" cannot see the world in the same way as they did before. They "have the absurd sensation that [they] have entered still another department," and so they begin to search for a way out. Do museum-like architectures in your fiction ultimately reveal

the artificiality of real life? Or do characters need to walk through these structures in order to rediscover the value of the most subdued elements of ordinary life?

SM: Those museum-like structures behave differently in different stories. In “The Dream of the Consortium,” the artificial world is so powerful that it infects the outside world, at least for a time. More often it works the other way—immersion in a world-within-a-world brings characters back to the first world with new eyes. What these structures always do is challenge the outer world in some way. Are you real, world? they whisper. Realer than I am?

EF: You have been called “a maker of myth.” Would you agree with this assessment? Do you consider that myths belong to some other world, beyond the reach of man, or are they intertwined in the texture of the most banal situations or events?

SM: I’d be happy to agree with it if I knew what it meant. It sounds like a good thing to be called a maker of myth, though I suspect it’s only a way of saying that my work doesn’t fit the criteria of conventional realistic fiction. Myths that belong to some other world hold no interest for me. If I create fictional other worlds, it’s only in order to penetrate the one world that interests me.

EF: Which world would it be? I am thinking of “The Tower.” The story resounds with mythic whispers about the “hidden flaw” of the Tower—a building that rises “higher than the smoke of sacrificial fires.” Here the mythic dimension is the only yardstick men have to account for the mysterious essence of the Tower—it truly becomes the horizon of mankind.

SM Which world? The astonishing one presented to me by my senses, the world that I relentlessly question in my stories. It’s true enough that I borrow myths when they suit my purposes. Here, among other things, I was trying to present a heaven that is desperately longed for but is finally less interesting than the world far below. But the most vital place of all is the structure that joins the two worlds: the ephemeral tower itself, the embodiment of desire.

EF: Michel Collot has suggested two possible ways of looking at the real. We may focus on telling those details that can be told, on pointing to those objects that are clearly defined and identifiable, or alternatively, we may sink into the unnamable quality of things. [*Deux façons du regard [...]: l'une qui découpe dans le réel des objets clairement définis et identifiés; l'autre qui s'enfonce dans l'opacité non nommable de la chose.*] In your fiction, are you conscious of this opposition between clear-cut distinction and a vague attraction to the unfathomable substance of the world? Could this have anything to do with why your stories often emphasize the banal? I am thinking, for example, of the phosphorescent quality of a white fridge in the night, of a bike leaning against a wall, of a baseball bat left lying in a backyard...

SM: I’m definitely conscious of such oppositions. What is a thing, an object? Is it a collection of precise details, which express and reveal the object, or do those details serve to reveal something hidden that lies behind or within the details? My interest in the banal has many explanations, but one is that the banal is never banal, but contains its own beauty, like a familiar word that suddenly reveals its strangeness.

EF: Yet it seems to me that in most of your stories, the narrators focus on the banal, but also on the sudden crises or on the unexpected elements that emerge in the midst of, or from, the banal and disrupt it. Such strangeness stands against the cloth of the banal, and has an existence of its own, separated from that of the banal. Would you agree?

SM: I do agree. Disruption is at the center of many of my stories—and what is disruption if not the sudden emergence of strangeness from the ordinary?

EF: Quite often in your work you switch back and forth, or rather you oscillate, between imitation and invention, realism and imagination. Does this oscillation constitute or

otherwise help you to bring about a new avenue of approach to what you call “the blazing thing that deserves the name of reality”?

SM: It’s interesting to me that you describe what I do as oscillation, since I think of myself as often doing something a bit different: beginning in a conventional way, a way that seems to promise the familiar pleasures or boredoms of realist fiction, and then swerving into something else. But whether I do what I think I do, or in fact oscillate, it’s indeed a method that helps me get at whatever it is I’m trying to get at.

EF: Once, when asked to describe your work, you responded by calling it “enigmatic realism.” Could you expand a little on this enigmatic answer? What is the place of the mysterious in your exploration of the real? Revelation, or clarification, seems to play an important role in your work. How do you articulate revelation in tandem with your profound respect for the shadowy sides of the real?

SM: I was trying to be as enigmatic as possible. But you’re right that revelation, by which I mean something like a secular version of religious vision, feels crucial to my sense of art. I would even argue that the end of all art is revelation. But because there is no final truth to be revealed, no godhead hidden behind the forms of Nature, the revelation can at best shadow forth an intimation of something that can be shown in no other way—or perhaps, if I may adopt your terms, it might be said that revelation, far from dispersing the shadowy sides of the real, reveals precisely those shadowy sides. Is this an enigmatic answer? I hope so.

EF: In an interview you talk about the idea/vision dichotomy: “If I truly wanted to present ideas, I’d write essays. What drives me to write a story is something closer to a picture or vision that I want to complete. I understand that this picture isn’t without meaning, but the meaning is buried in it and works in subterranean ways.” Do your short stories, like your creators’ miniatures or museum-like architectures, reiterate the importance of leaving a picture incomplete so as to endow meaning with a mysterious, metamorphic life of its own?

SM: I don’t adhere to a relentless esthetic of incompleteness, if that’s what you mean. But yes, of course, certain kinds of completion are harmful. What’s important is finding the necessary balance between the exhaustive, on the one hand, and the suggestive, on the other. I wouldn’t trust a writer who claimed to know exactly how this is done.

EF: In the end of “The Room in the Attic” David, the narrator, clearly sees in his mind objects that he has yet never seen, but only touched in the dark. Am I right to think that this short story explores the genesis of vision? Here pictures are created through the sense of touch and acquire a life of their own—like in “The Wizard of West Orange.” More generally, do you agree that most of your stories have to do with the creation of images?

SM: “The Room in the Attic” certainly plays with the notion of the genesis of vision, but that’s only part of what it does—or maybe it’s more accurate to say that it does this in a particular way, controlled by the nature of a particular story. Remember, the story portrays a bizarre adolescent love affair, in which the erotic is stimulated by the absence of touch. It’s about a particular development of the imagination, under the grotesque conditions of this story. And it’s significant that when David at last has a choice, he chooses *not* to see—partly because he doesn’t want to be disillusioned, and partly because he understands that he has created an imaginary girl who is far more desirable, perhaps far more real, than the somewhat tedious girl who threatens him with actual existence. I don’t think I can say whether most of my stories have to do with the creation of images—it’s probably fair to say that I simply don’t know whether that is true.

EF: Yet all artists in your stories create images—they are makers of miniatures and of automatons, they are painters, architects, cartoonists and animators, showmen, illusionists...

SM: I believe logic is on your side. If it's true that all artists in my stories create images, and if it's true that I'm an artist, then it has to be true that what I create is images. What isn't true is that I think of myself primarily as an image-maker. I tend to think of myself as someone who takes disparate elements and arranges them in a significant order. If you argue that an ordering of elements is simply another way of saying "image," then once again you're absolutely right.

EF: Your stories often alternate between things that are exposed or revealed and things that are concealed. How do you articulate those polar opposites—if only they are polar opposites? Why are you so keen on the intermediary zones of chiaroscuro?

SM: Any work of art struggles with the forces of revelation and concealment. In a sense, a work of art is nothing but a battle between those forces. To reveal everything would be to create an infinite work. Even Jehovah limited himself to a finite universe. To conceal everything would be to create nothing, to create silence. Since total revelation is impossible, and total concealment intolerable, it's precisely in the chiaroscuro zones that the truth of things is likely to be found.

EF: Characters seem to play seriously as well as dangerously in your fiction. In "Dangerous Laughter," for instance, a girl literally dies of laughter; it all began with a simple game played by restless teenagers. What is the place of games in your work?

SM: I've always loved games, and what I particularly love about them is the way they mix the serious and the playful. You know it's a game, only a game, and yet at the same time it's the most important thing in the world—it replaces the world, as you play. And I like the kinds of restriction and freedom represented by rules. The more you think about games, the more you can't help thinking about art.

EF: Some of your stories question the very notion of game and bring to light its shadowy contours. Quite often, game merges with dream and obsession. For example, would you say that Martin Dressler is playing?

SM: He's playing, and he is fanatically serious. When I conceived that book, one thing I hoped to do was imagine my way into someone as different from myself as possible: a practical man, a builder. But I soon realized that my practical man cared nothing about the practical and everything about the fulfillment of a more and more impossible dream. He might as well be building a soaring structure of words.

EF: Reading "A Precursor of the Cinema," "Eisenheim the Illusionist" and also *Martin Dressler* one may have the impression that you use the Nineteenth Century and more specifically the *fin-de-siècle* atmosphere as an unmapped territory, in which your narrators can draw fresh and new connections, and explore untrodden paths. In this perspective, that portion of the real called "Nineteenth Century" seems to be synonymous, in your fiction, with a moment of historical time when creation was particularly free and fruitful. Would you please tell me more about this interest in—or fascination for—this "turn of the century" atmosphere?

SM: I've set stories in the early nineteenth century, the early eighteenth century, the late fifteenth century—but yes, the end of the nineteenth century has a special fascination for me. It's a time, particularly in America, particularly in New York, when immense structures were built—the first skyscrapers, the great amusement parks, the formidable Brooklyn Bridge, which was the longest suspension bridge in the world, with towers that soared higher than any contemporary structure except

the spire of Trinity Church. It's the time of the great Edison inventions, when it seemed as if every year a new wonder was revealed. It's the time of the invention of a new art form, motion pictures. It's a time favorable to a particular kind of all-inclusive structure, the kind that embraces an abundance of disparate things—I'm thinking of world expositions (like the one in Paris in 1889, in Chicago in 1893), of vast department stores. Most of all, it's a time that's close enough to our own to seem recognizable, while it remains distant enough to seem dreamlike. The mixture of the actual and the fantastic—the end of the nineteenth century has all the characteristics of a great work of fiction.

EF: Another thought-provoking aspect of Nineteenth Century in your fiction is the way it leads descriptions to fully engage with reality. Everything happening then seems probable, and gives the impression of being a familiar story, whereas it is in fact an invention, related by fictitious narrators. One reason for this may be that, as you mentioned earlier, this century is at the same time remote and close to our own. For instance, in "A Precursor of the Cinema," the "Verisimilist movement," and the "Transgressive movement" are trompe-l'oeil movements that fit very well in the picture of Nineteenth Century artistic evolution ["The Transgressive movement began with a handful of disaffected Verisimilists who felt that the realist program of versimilism did not go far enough."] Do you use the past as a lens to create a context of plausible unreality, allowing you to keep a balance between imitation and invention?

SM: I like the phrase "plausible unreality," so long as it's understood that the unreal, in itself, has no interest for me. Invention, fantasy, dream, all these are techniques in the service of the real. Then again, the merely plausible, the merely probable, is not what I'm after. What am I after? Let's call it the place where invention and imitation intersect, resulting in implausible reality. But yes: the past, when I occasionally turn to it, allows me exactly the balance you mention. It's as if history is a metrical form that restricts me in certain ways and releases me in others.

EF: I would like to ask you a question about the historical references you use in your work. In "The Wizard of West Orange," you recreate the atmosphere of Thomas Edison's laboratory, the Wizard of Menlo Park. "The Little Kingdom of Franklyn Payne" evokes the life and work of a cartoonist and animator reminding the reader of Winsor McCay. "Balloon Flight, 1870" alludes to an actual historical event—a messenger leaving Paris with a balloon to fly above the Prussian lines and join Gambetta and the French army in Tours. And "Kaspar Hauser Speaks" conjures up the—written—voice of Kaspar. In all these examples, you seem to use a historical reference only to better depart from it, and to reveal another facet of reality. Is this process of deviance what you have in mind when you choose a historical reference?

SM: Yes and no. I have two things in mind when I write a story based on a historical period. One is a faithful reproduction, or let's say a careful illusion of faithful reproduction, of the period. This itself leads to a seductive paradox, since any reproduction of a vanished world, a world that no longer exists, begins to merge with the world of dream. The other thing I have in mind is just what you suggest—a swerving away, a disruption, in order to express something that can be expressed in no other way. Then again, both of these methods—the method of meticulous reproduction, the method of disruption—are exactly what I use when I'm writing about the present.

EF: There seems to be a pattern that is deeply embedded in your fiction: the creation of a tension between polar opposites. Quite often, characters and plot seem to be pulled in opposite directions. To quote but a few examples, the characters of "Beneath the Cellars of Our Town" need to go from below (the tunnels) to above (the town, the towers) and vice

versa in order to fully exist. The same is true in “The Other Town,” where the inhabitants like to go from one town to the other—both being scrupulously identical. In the same way, the artists and creators in your fiction are often caught in between creation and destruction, frenzy and silence. The teenagers in “Dangerous Laughter” or “The Room in the Attic” try to keep their balance, between July and September, childhood and adulthood. Is it because you want to explore moments of choice, or moments of crisis when different paths are suddenly opened and not yet explored?

SM: You’re making me realize how present these patterns of opposition are in my work ! I’ll have to be slyer, in the future. But yes, what you say is definitely part of the reason. The other part is something harder to define—my sense that patterns of opposition really do exist in the world and in the minds of human beings and therefore represent a kind of biochemical justification for similar patterns found in works of fiction.

EF: In an interview you present “Cat ‘N’ Mouse” in a simple way, saying that you missed opening cartoons at the cinema and that you seized the chance to start your collection with one. Yet it seems to me that this story is also a revealing means of starting your collection, in the sense that it celebrates the demiurgic magic of the act of writing. Indeed, by turning an animated cartoon—images and sound—into *words*, you seem to challenge the genre of the cartoon, or of story-telling, by revealing the violence that lies beneath comedy and by showing that the lines of a cartoon or a story can indeed acquire a third dimension and inhabit the world. Do you agree that this story is also a celebration of the power of words?

SM: I agree. It’s certainly that. A cartoon celebrates the power of images, and this story does its best to steal that power and place it entirely within words. You could even argue that the story is an attempt to destroy the very world it appears to be creating. The story undermines the cartoon in another way as well—it infects the cartoon, here and there, with psychological descriptions that are alien to the image-world of cartoons but typical of realist fiction.

EF: I would like to ask some questions about the craft of writing. In your stories, there is usually a complicated set of problems expressed with some extraordinary clarity. Is this combination of precision and complexity in your work something that you have to work at consciously?

SM: Exactly what brings a story into being remains elusive to me. I’m happy to let it remain elusive. Certainly, once a story has emerged from wherever stories emerge, I work at it relentlessly so that it can become itself as completely as possible. I’m conscious of achieving or failing to achieve certain effects, but that consciousness is often little more than an almost physiological sense of rightness or wrongness. At a certain stage of revision I’m definitely aware of trying to make my language more precise, but the struggle for precision is itself controlled by something deeper that I can’t define and don’t question. And precision is a tricky business. As your own Robbe-Grillet once put it: “*Rien n’est plus fantastique que la précision.*” As for complexity: complexity alone holds no interest for me. But a precise complexity, a vital complexity—now that is something worth striving for.

EF: You often resort to lists in your short stories. Although the juxtaposition of words often appears heterogeneous, do you organize words according to a certain pattern?

SM: Any system for creating lists would quickly reveal itself as tediously mechanical. But a complete lack of system, a randomness, would be just as bad. The crucial thing about a list is that it must suggest the exhaustive without the possibility of being exhaustive. The exhilarating challenge is to combine smallness and vastness—to imply vastness through smallness, completeness through incompleteness. The items

in a list must also harmonize and clash with one another in a way that remains lively, even though a list is inherently boring. A list is a kind of exercise in overcoming impossibilities—that’s what I find so seductive.

EF: In *Dangerous Laughter*, the maker of miniatures “seemed to sense dimly, just out of reach beyond his inner sight, a farther kingdom. [...] He confessed to himself that it was less a seeing than a desire gradually hardening into a certainty.” Do you feel the same way when you are starting a story? That is, do you know beforehand where you are heading, or do you follow your desire to write until it coalesces into a finished piece of work? Do you start with a small, single image in your mind and then enlarge it or explore it, or do you set out more or less with a grasp of the whole?

SM: When I was in my early twenties, I began writing as soon as I had a single image and a vague sense of what I wanted to do. It’s a very youthful, very clumsy way of going about it. I now don’t begin until I know a great deal about the still unwritten story, though I don’t know and don’t want to know everything. To put it another way : the business of knowing only a little, and then knowing a little more, and a little more, now takes place almost entirely in my mind, as well as in notebook jottings, as I slowly prepare for the act of writing. To write down a story while not knowing anything about it, not having any idea at all where you are going, strikes me as ludicrous. It’s also not believable. Writers like to claim such things all the time, but I remain skeptical.

EF: In “A Change in Fashion,” logic is pushed to its last possible end. “After the age of Revelation came the Age of Concealment,” the first line indicates. And indeed dresses start concealing the female body, more and more, until they “merge with architecture” and some of them become small houses. Logic eventually collapses with a humorous twist, as men realize that dresses are actually empty—women are chatting in a kitchen. Did you start with a clear idea of the trajectory the story would take, or did you discover its evolution gradually, in the course of writing?

SM: I began by trying to imagine what an extreme revolution in clothing might be like. Exactly why I tried to imagine such a thing is a mystery to me. The principle of concealment came early and led inevitably to the method of increasing size. If things like bridges and buildings have gotten larger and larger in the course of time, why not clothes? The precise trajectory was worked out slowly, partly in notebook jottings over a number of weeks, and partly as I read several books about the history of clothing styles, the history of hairstyles, and so on. I knew, before writing out the slowly evolving story, that it would end in collapse, but the exact terms of the collapse came to me only in the act of writing.

EF: Your story “In the Reign of Harad IV” follows the steps of a maker of miniatures along his wayward journey into realms never before discovered, sinking “below the crust of the visible.” The story insists on the journey itself, in an evocative and concrete way, telling how the master proceeds, step by step, cautiously and patiently respecting the rules of his craft: “He began as always with a simple object.” Keeping in mind that for the author of *Edwin Mullhouse* any attempt at a biographical reading may appear preposterous, to what extent could we see in the numerous artists and creators of your stories a reflection of the way you approach the craft of writing?

SM: I’d describe it as dangerous rather than preposterous. It’s of course impossible for me to write about an artist without being aware that I myself am an artist writing about an artist. But this isn’t the same as representing myself in a story. Some of my artists are close to what I think I am, others are a little piece of me, others have

nothing to do with me at all. Am I Eisenheim? Am I Eschenburg? Am I J. Franklin Payne? But I think these are questions for others to answer.

EF: Yet regardless of the actual characters or persons, most of the artists in your work reveal the paradoxical contiguity between creation and destruction (Sarabee's radical trajectory ends up in flames), and are animated by a deep restlessness, leading them towards unknown territories, constantly running the risk of collapsing under the weight of their own excess. To what extent does this apply to your own appreciation and practice of art?

SM: You know me almost too well. Art is a passion or it's nothing. And any passion is a restlessness, a violent reckless striving, which left unchecked leads to excess and destruction. First the *Liebesnacht*, then the *Liebestod*. For me, a successful work of art is a ferocious pressure released into a form. You feel the form and the pressure—both.

EF: In a number of your stories you deal with artists obsessed by certain patterns. Thus Heinrich Graum "accumulated a gallery of some six hundred heads, many of them in grotesque states of incompleteness." Is there a gallery of unfinished works and drafts haunting your desk or filing cabinets?

SM: I'm afraid I'm about to disappoint you. It sounds very fine, very romantic, that gallery of incomplete heads. But I tend to finish what I set out to do. Then again, there are various ghosts of half-imagined works drifting through the corridors of my imagination, and every once in a while I come upon one—with a feeling of anxiety, a feeling of exhilaration.

EF: Would you agree that in your books you go along the same paths, only in different worlds?

SM: I tend to resist any statement, however reasonable, however generous, about what it is I do. Any such statement makes me want to do something else. I suppose it's often the case that I go along the same paths, in different worlds. But don't I sometimes go along different paths, in the same world?

EF: Do characters ever run away from you and take on unexpected identities?

SM: This happens in the preliminary stage, when I'm dreaming my way into a story without yet permitting myself to write it down. Characters change, events change, a kind of fluidity runs through everything. But gradually things become less unsettled, the parts begin to relate more clearly to one another, sentences begin to form. This doesn't mean that later discoveries and surprises don't happen. But "run away"—that sounds easy, like the sort of thing that happens to someone who's drunk at a party and wants to tell you a story. It has nothing to do with the ferocity of art.

EF: Do you think there is something about American fiction that sets it apart from other bodies of literature in the world? Along these lines, do you think of yourself as an "American" writer? Or like Martin Dressler, an "American" dreamer?

SM: I'm wary in general of large definitions, grand statements. American fiction is many things. But one strain in it is the impulse to set off in search of new territory, the desire to explore the unknown. You see this repeatedly in the fiction of Melville and Poe—to say nothing of Huck's voyage down the Mississippi. The tall tale is part of the same impulse. American realism has a brilliance of its own, but it's finally no more than a late variety of a nineteenth-century French experiment. As for me, I like to think of myself as a writer—period. Any adjective threatens to constrict me. Then again, of course I'm an American writer, rather than a Chinese writer, in the sense

that I grew up in American towns, among American sights and smells, and in the deeper sense that my thoughts take shape as a series of linguistic events known as the American variation of English.

EF: The novella *Enchanted Night* can be seen as an elaboration on the short story “Clair de Lune.” You once explained to Marc Chénétier that “what [you] wanted most to do, in the novella, was experiment with many points of view,” which is precisely what the format of the short story does not allow. You have mainly been publishing collections of short stories in recent years ; are there any other literary “elaborations” you would like to carry out?

SM: I don’t know how stories come to me. I sit and wait. I dare them not to come. I pretend not to care. I pray to gods whose existence I reject. This is my usual state, between acts of writing, and it’s as far as possible from a sense of future projects I’d like to carry out. Length has little to do with it. It’s true I’m attracted to small forms, with their sharp constraints and their invitations to disruption, but if I were seized by the need to write a three-thousand-page novel, I wouldn’t hesitate. I believe I’ve both answered and evaded your question.

EF: We will thus end this interview with another *chiaroscuro*, in between revelation and concealment. Thank you very much, dear Sir, for your generosity, patience and precision while answering my questions.

Nathalie Cochoy: Although the sense of an imminent visual revelation is often noticeable in your stories, it seems to me that an interest in the wonderful potentialities of touch also pervades your work. Or rather, an interest in the suggestiveness of a fleeting contact with the elusive, metamorphic surfaces of the world. In *Dangerous Laughter* in particular, this delicate yet sensuous “brushing” against the real seems incarnated in the narrators’ encounters with Clara Schiller’s skin, Isabel’s “warm forearm” or the “silken lining” of the “haptograph.” Could we go as far as to relate this distant yet intimate contact with the unknown mysteries of the real to the “coincidence” between the very physicality of words (the “skin” of discourse: its scars or blanks, its repetitive creases, its sharply outlined tattoos...) and the malleable surfaces of the world?

SM: Until I began assembling the stories of *Dangerous Laughter*, I hadn’t realized that a number of them were concerned with the sense of touch. I believe this can partly be explained as my attempt to overcome a habit of relying too thoroughly on my visual imagination. But yes, the tactile invites the kind of relation you suggest. Words seem to bring you the world, in ways no one is clear about, but they also bring you themselves—you might almost say that the more vividly the world seems to come to you through words, the more aware you are of the look and sound of these strange non-objects. They disappear into the things they name, and at the same time they assert themselves, they make themselves felt. The analogy with touch isn’t difficult to make. The very skin that brings you something of the world also brings you an awareness of itself. To touch something is to be touched. The act creates your skin. I don’t know whether this is the precise relation between words and world that you were asking about, but it’s one that your question brought to mind.

NC: It seems to me that the narrators’ restless need to “touch” the real and ceaselessly invent new means of approaching its unfathomable mysteries also foreshadows the way in which your words “inhabit” the world. In your descriptions, the most ordinary elements of life seem to shine with an extraordinary radiance. Visual details vibrate with some timeless intensity, as if independently from one another. The poetic force of your descriptions then seems to stem from a wish to pay attention to the most commonplace things, events or people—to see the invisible. In the magnificent story entitled “The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman,” you seem to draw a portrait *in absentia* of all those who exist only in the traces of

what they failed to be—*next to nothing*. In this sense, would you say that you are a committed writer?

SM: In this sense, definitely yes. In “The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman,” the act of not-noticing is equated with the crime of murder. But though I wish, as you say, to pay attention to commonplace things, I see no reason to restrict my attention only to them. I’d argue that my desire to pay attention to the commonplace is no different from my desire to invent exotic worlds. The ordinary and the extra-ordinary keep turning into each other. The fantastic—taken seriously—is finally only another form of realism. Both are attempts at showing forth the real. Both are attempts at revelation.

NC: In your stories, the narrative voice often evolves towards the voice of rumor. This collective voice often admits its inability to name the truth adequately and resorts to negations, hesitations or contradictions in order to show its dread and its desire to fix meaning. In “History of a Disturbance,” however, the narrative voice paradoxically relates its evolution towards silence. In his constant questioning of the most banal statements, the narrator seems to see the world better. He notices the strangeness of the most familiar details— “the faint liquidity green cast by the little glass swan on the windowsill,” the “two glasses of wine on the wicker table,” “a finger with purple nail polish”... As the clichéd sentence “Do you see what I’m trying to say?” seems to imply, could we go as far as to say that the questioning of language intensifies our vision of the real?

SM: The story invites you to make that leap, though it’s also true that the narrator is meant to sound like a quiet madman. And his questioning of language is so extreme that he finally rejects language in favor of pure sensation, which he claims is distorted by words. A sinister argument ! But it’s also very attractive, since words are continually contracting and hardening, though they go on as if they’re alive. In all this, I’m assuming that there is something that deserves the name of “real” and that language is a crucial way of getting at it. To question language is therefore inevitably to ask about its relation to the real, and in that sense to intensify our vision of the real. I suppose I think of the story as a paradox: I’ve invented a character who questions language by means of language, who argues for silence by uttering an extended monologue. It’s also an attack on what I’ve spent my life doing. It says: Wouldn’t it have been better to be silent ? The story is my attempt to answer that terrifying question.

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