

Charles Boxer
from BURNING DOWN THE HOUSE

*Dysfunctional Narratives:
or: "Mistakes Were Made"*

WS

Here are some sentences of distinctive American prose from our era:

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From a combination of hypersensitivity and a desire not to know the truth in case it turned out to be unpleasant, I had spent the last ten months putting off a confrontation with John Mitchell. . . . I listened to more tapes. . . . I heard Haldeman tell me that Dean and Mitchell had come up with a plan to handle the problem of the investigation's going into areas we didn't want it to go. The plan was to call in Helms and Walters of the CIA and have them restrain the FBI. . . . Haldeman and I discussed [on the "smoking gun" tape] having the CIA limit the FBI investigation for political rather than the national security reasons I had given in my public statements. . . . On June 13, while I was in Egypt, Fred Buzhardt had suffered a heart attack. Once I was assured that he was going to pull through, I tried to assess the impact his illness would have on our legal situation.

Charles Baxter

These sentences are almost enough to make one nostalgic for an adversary with a claim upon our attention. There he is, the lawyer-president setting forth the brief for the defense, practicing the dogged art of the disclaimer in *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. I've done some cut-and-pasting, but the sentences I've quoted are the sentences he wrote. And what sentences! Leaden and dulling, juridical-minded to the last, impersonal but not without savor—the hapless Buzhardt and his heart attack factored into the “legal situation,” and that wonderful “hypersensitivity” combined with a desire “not to know the truth” that makes one think of Henry James’s Lambert Strether or an epicene character in Haysmans—they present the reader with camouflage masked as objective thought.

The author of the memoir does not admit that he lied, exactly; or that he betrayed his oath of office. In his “public statements,” he did a bit of false accounting, that was all. One should expect this, he suggests, from heads of state. Indeed, the only surprise this reader had, trudging gamely through *RN* looking for clues to a badly defined mystery, was the author’s report of a sentence uttered by Jacqueline Kennedy. Touring the White House after *RN*’s election, she said, “I always live in a dream world.” Funny that she would say so; funny that he would notice, and remember.

Lately I’ve been possessed of a singularly unhappy idea: The greatest influence on American fiction for the last twenty years may have been the author of *RN*, not in the writing but in the public character. He is the inventor, for

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our purposes and for our time, of the concept of *deniability*. Deniability is the almost complete disavowal of intention in relation to bad consequences. A made-up word, it reeks of the landfill-scented landscape of lawyers and litigation and high school. Following Richard Nixon in influence on recent fiction would be two runners-up, Ronald Reagan and George Bush. Their administrations put the passive voice, politically, on the rhetorical map. In their efforts to attain deniability on the arms-for-hostages deal with Iran, their administrations managed to achieve considerable notoriety for self-righteousness, public befuddlement about facts, forgetfulness under oath, and constant disavowals of political error and criminality, culminating in the quasi-confessional passive-voice-mode sentence, “Mistakes were made.”

Contrast this with Robert E. Lee’s statement the third day after the battle of Gettysburg and the calamity of Prickett’s Charge: “All this has been my fault,” Lee said. “I asked more of men than should have been asked of them.”

Lee’s sentences have a slightly antique ring. People just don’t say such things anymore.

What difference does it make to writers of stories if public figures are denying their responsibility for their own actions? So what if they are, in effect, refusing to tell their own stories accurately? So what if the President of the United States is making himself out to be, of all things, a *victim*? Well, to make an obvious point, they create a climate in which social narratives are designed to be deliberately incoherent and misleading. Such narratives humiliate the act of storytelling. You can argue that only a coherent

narrative can manage to explain public events, and you can reconstruct a story if someone says, "I made a mistake," or "We did that." You can't reconstruct a story—you can't even know what the story *is*—if everyone is saying, "Mistakes were made." Who made them? Everybody made them and no one did, and it's history anyway, so let's forget about it. Every story is a history, however, and when there is no comprehensible story, there is no history. The past, under these circumstances, becomes an unreadable mess. When we hear words like "deniability," we are in the presence of narrative dysfunction, a phrase employed by the poet C. K. Williams to describe the process by which we lose track of the story of ourselves, the story that tells us who we are supposed to be and how we are supposed to act.

The spiritual godfather of the contemporary disavowal movement, the author of *R/V*, set the tenor for the times and reflected the times as well in his lifelong denial of responsibility for the Watergate break-in and cover-up. He has claimed that misjudgments were made, although not necessarily by him. Mistakes were made, although they were by no means his own, and the crimes that were committed were only crimes if you define "crime" in a certain way, in the way, for example, that his enemies like to define the word, in a manner that would be unfavorable to him, that would give him, to use a word derived from the Latin, some culpability. It wasn't the law, he claimed. It was all just politics.

A curious parallel: The Kennedy assassination may be the narratively dysfunctional event of our era. No one

really knows who's responsible for it. One of the signs of a dysfunctional narrative is that we cannot leave it behind, and we cannot put it to rest, because it does not, finally, give us the explanation we need to enclose it. We don't know who the agent of the action is. We don't even know why it was done. Instead of achieving closure, the story spreads over the landscape like a stain as we struggle to find a source of responsibility. In our time, responsibility without narratives has been consistently displaced by its enigmatic counterpart, conspiracy. Conspiracy works in tandem with narrative repression, the repression of who-has-done-what. We go back over the Kennedy assassination second by second, frame by frame, but there is a truth to it that we cannot get at because we can't be sure who really did it or what the motivations were. Everyone who claims to have closed the case simply establishes that the case will stay open. The result of dysfunctional narrative, as the poet Lawrence Joseph has suggested to me, is sorrow; I would argue that it is sorrow mixed with depression or rage, the condition of the abject, but in any case we are talking about the psychic landscape of trauma and paralysis, the landscape of, for example, two outwardly different writers, Don DeLillo (in most of *Libra*) and Jane Smiley (in the last one hundred pages of *A Thousand Acres*).

Jane Smiley's novel has been compared to *King Lear*, and its plot invites the comparison, but its real ancestors in fiction are the novels of Émile Zola. *A Thousand Acres* is Zola on the plains. Like Zola, Jane Smiley assembles precisely and carefully a collection of facts, a naturalistic pileup of details about—in this case—farming and land

use. As for characters, the reader encounters articulate women (including the narrator, Rose) and mostly frustrated inarticulate men driven by blank desires, like Larry, the Lear figure. Lear, however, is articulate. Larry is not. He is like one of Zola's male characters, driven by urges he does not understand or even acknowledge.

Somewhat in the manner of other naturalistic narratives, *A Thousand Acres* causes its characters to behave like mechanisms, under obscure orders. Wry but humorless, shorn of poetry or any lyric outburst, and brilliantly observant and relentless, the novel at first seems to be about 1980s greed and the destruction of resources that we now associate with Reaganism, a literally exploitative husbandry. Such a story would reveal clear if deplorable motives in its various characters. But no: The book is about the essential criminality of furtive male desire. With the revelation of Larry's sexual abuse of his daughters, in a recovered memory scene not so much out of Zola as *Gerardo*, it shifts direction toward an account of conspiracy and memory, sorrow and depression, in which several of the major characters are acting out rather than acting, and doing their best to find someone to blame.

The characters' emotions are thus preordained, and the narrator gathers around herself a cloak of unreliability as the novel goes on. It is a moody novel, but the mood itself often seems impenetrable, because the characters, including the men, are not acting upon events in present narrative time but are reacting obscurely to harms done to them in the psychic past from unthinkable impulses that will go forever unexplained. Enacting greed at least involves mak-

ing some decisions, but in this novel, the urge to enact incest upon one's daughter is beyond thought, if not the judicial system, and, in turn, creates consequences that are beyond thought. Rose herself lives in the shadow of thought. Throughout much of the book she is unaccountable, even to herself, by virtue of having been molested by her father. This is dysfunctional narrative as literary art, a novel that is also very much an artifact of *this* American era.

Watergate itself would have remained narratively dysfunctional if the tapes hadn't turned up, and, with them, the "smoking gun"—notice, by the way, the metaphors that we employ to designate narrative responsibility, the naming and placing of the phallically inopportune protagonist at the center. The arms-for-hostages deal is still a muddled narrative because various political functionaries are taking the fall for what the commander in chief is supposed to have decided himself. However, the commander in chief was not told; or he forgot; or he was out of the loop; or he didn't understand what was said to him. The buck stops here? In recent history, the buck doesn't stop anywhere. The buck keeps moving, endlessly. Perhaps we are in the era of the endlessly recirculating buck, the buck seeking a place to stop, like a story that cannot find its own ending.

We have been living in a political culture of disavowals. Disavowals follow from crimes for which no one is capable of claiming responsibility. Mistakes and crimes tend to create narratives, however, and they have done so from the time of the Greek tragedies. How can the contemporary disavowal movement not affect those of us who tell sto-

ness? We begin to move away from fiction of protagonists and antagonists into another mode, another model. It is hard to describe this model but I think it might be called the fiction of finger-pointing; the fiction of the quest for blame. It often culminates with a scene in a court of law.

In such fiction, people and events are often accused of turning the protagonist into the kind of person the protagonist is, usually an unhappy person. That's the whole story. When blame has been assigned, the story is over. In writing workshops, this kind of story is often the rule rather than the exception. Probably this model of storytelling has arisen because sizable population groups in our time feel confused and powerless, as they often do in mass societies when the mechanisms of power are carefully masked. For people with irregular employment and mounting debts and faithless partners and abusive parents, the most interesting feature of life is its unhappiness, its dull constant weight. But in a commodity culture, people are *supposed* to be happy. It's the one myth of advertising. You start to feel cheated if you're not happy. In such a consumerist climate, the perplexed and unhappy don't know what their lives are telling them, and they don't feel as if they are in charge of their own existence. No action they have ever taken is half as interesting to them as the consistency of their unhappiness.

Natural disasters, by contrast—earthquakes and floods—are narratively satisfying. We know what caused the misery, and we usually know what we can do to repair the damage, no matter how long it takes.

But corporate and social power, any power carefully masked and made conspiratorial, puts its victims into a

state of frenzy, a result of narrative dysfunction. Somebody must be responsible for my pain. Someone *will* be found. Someone, usually close to home, *will* be blamed. TV loves dysfunctional families. Dysfunctional S&Ls and banks and corporate structures are not loved quite so much. They're harder to figure out. They like it that way. In this sense we have moved away from the naturalism of Zola or Frank Norris or Dreiser. Like them, we believe that people are often helpless, but we don't blame the corporations anymore. We blame the family, and we do it on afternoon TV talk shows, like *Oprah*.

Afternoon talk shows have only apparent antagonists. Their sparring partners are not real antagonists because the bad guys usually confess and then immediately disavow. The trouble with narratives without antagonists or a counterpoint to the central character—stories in which no one ever seems to be deciding anything or acting upon any motive except the search for a source of discontent—is that they tend formally to mirror the protagonists' unhappiness and confusion. Stories about being put-upon almost literally do not know what to look at. The visual details are muddled or indifferently described or excessively specific in nonpertinent situations. In any particular scene, everything is significant, and nothing is. The story is trying to find a source of meaning, but in the story everyone is disclaiming responsibility. Things have just happened.

When I hear the adjective "dysfunctional" now, I cringe. But I have to use it here to describe a structural unit (like the banking system, or the family, or narrative) whose outward appearance is intact but whose structural

integrity has been compromised or has collapsed. No one is answerable from within it. Every event, every calamity, is unanswered, from the S&L collapse to the Exxon Valdez oil spill.

So we have created for ourselves a paradise of lawyers: We have an orgy of blame-finding on the one hand and disavows of responsibility on the other.

All the recent debates and quarrels about taking responsibility as opposed to being a victim reflect bewilderment about whether in real life protagonists still exist or whether we are all minor characters, the objects of terrible forces. Of course, we are often both. But look at *Montel Williams*, or *Oprah*. (I have, I do, I can't help it.) For all the variety of the situations, the unwritten scripts are often similar. Someone is testifying because s/he's been hurt by someone else. The pain-inflicter is invariably present and accounted for onstage, and sometimes this person admits, abashedly, to inflicting the ruin: cheating, leaving, abusing, or murdering. Usually, however, there's no remorse or shame. Some other factor caused it: bad genes, alcoholism, drugs, or—the cause of last resort—Satan. For intellectuals it may be the patriarchy: some devil or other, but at least an *abstract* devil. In any case, the malefactor may be secretly pleased: s/he's on television and will be famous for fifteen minutes.

The audience's role is to comment on what the story means and to make a judgment about the players. Usually the audience members disagree and get into fights. The audience's judgment is required because the dramatic personae are incapable of judging themselves. They generally

will not say that they did what they did because they wanted to, or because they had *decided* to do it. The story is shocking. You hear gasps. But the participants are as baffled and as bewildered as everyone else. So we have the spectacle of utterly perplexed villains deprived of their villainy. Villainy, properly understood, gives someone a largeness, a sense of scale. It seems to me that this sense of scale has probably abandoned us.

What we have instead is not exactly drama and not exactly therapy. It exists in that twilight world between the two, very much of our time, where deniability reigns. Call it therapeutic narration. No verdict ever comes in. Every verdict is appealed. No one is in a position to judge. The spectacle makes the mind itch as if from an ideological rash. Hour after hour, week after week, these dysfunctional narratives are interrupted by commercials (on the Detroit affiliates) for lawyers.

But wait: Isn't there something deeply interesting and moving and sometimes even beautiful when a character acknowledges an error? And isn't this narrative mode becoming something of a rarity?

Most young writers have this experience: They create characters who are imaginative projections of themselves, minus the flaws. They put this character into a fictional world, wanting that character to be successful and—to use that word from high school—*popular*. They don't want these imaginative projections of themselves to make any mistakes, wittingly or, even better, unwittingly, or to dem-

onstrate what Aristotle thought was the core of stories, flaws of character that produce intelligent misjudgments for which someone must take the responsibility.

What's an unwriting action? It's what we do when we have to act so quickly, or under so much pressure that we can't stop to take thought. It's not the same as an urge, which may well have a brooding and inscrutable quality. For some reason, such moments of unwriting action in life and in fiction feel enormously charged with energy and meaning.

It's difficult for fictional characters to acknowledge their mistakes, because then they become definitive: They *are* that person who did *that* thing. The only people who like to see characters performing such actions are readers. They love to see characters getting themselves into interesting trouble and defining themselves.

Lately, thinking about the nature of drama and our resistance to certain forms of it, I have been reading Aristotle's *Poetics* again and mulling over his definition of what makes a poet. A poet, Aristotle says, is first and foremost a maker, not of verses, but of plots. The poet creates an imitation, and what he imitates is an action.

It might be useful to make a distinction here between what I might call "me" protagonists and "I" protagonists. "Me" protagonists are largely objects—objects of impersonal forces or the actions of other people. They are central characters to whom things happen. They do not initiate action so much as receive it. They are largely reactionary, in the old sense of that term, and passive. They are figures of

fate and destiny, and they tend to appear during periods of accelerated social change, such as the American 1880s and 1890s, and again in the 1980s.

The "I" protagonist, by contrast, makes certain decisions and takes some responsibility for them and for the actions that follow from them. This does not make the "I" protagonist admirable by any means. It's this kind of protagonist that Aristotle is talking about. Such a person, Aristotle says, is not outstanding for virtue or justice, and s/he arrives at ill fortune not because of any wickedness or vice, but because of some mistake that s/he makes. There's that word again, "mistake."

Sometimes—if we are writers—we have to talk to our characters. We have to try to persuade them to do what they've only imagined doing. We have to nudge but not force them toward situations where they will get into interesting trouble, where they will make interesting mistakes that they may take responsibility for. When we allow our characters to make mistakes, we release them from the grip of our own authorial narcissism. That's wonderful for them, it's wonderful for us, but it's best of all for the story.

A few instances: I once had a friend in graduate school who gave long, loud, and unpleasantly exciting parties in the middle of winter. He and his girlfriend usually considered these parties unsuccessful unless someone did something shocking or embarrassing or both—something you could talk about later. He lived on the third floor of an old house in Buffalo, New York, and his acquaintances regularly fell down the front and back stairs.

I thought of him recently when I was reading about

Mary Butts, an English writer of short fiction who lived from 1890 to 1937. Her stories have now been reissued in a collection called *From Altar to Chimneypiece*. Virgil Thomson, who was gay, once proposed marriage to her, and says the following about her in his autobiography:

I used to call her the "storm goddess," because she was at her best surrounded by cataclysm. She could stir up others with drink and drugs and magic incantations, and then when the cyclone was at its most intense, sit down at calm center and glow. All of her stories are of moments when the persons observed are caught up by something, inner or outer, so irresistible that their highest powers and all their lowest conditionings are exposed. The resulting action therefore is definitive, an ultimate clarification arrived at through ecstasy.

As it happens, I do not think that this is an accurate representation of Mary Butts's stories, which tend to be about crossing thresholds and stumbling into very strange spiritual dimensions. But I am interested in Thomson's thought concerning definitive action because I think the whole concept of definitive action is meeting up with considerable cultural resistance these days.

Thomson, describing his storm goddess, shows us a temptress, a joyful, worldly woman, quite possibly brilliant and bad to the bone. In real life people like this can be insufferable. Marriage to such a person would be a relentless adventure. They're constantly pushing their friends and acquaintances to lower their defenses and drop their masks and do something for which they will probably be

sorry later. They like it when anyone blurts out a sudden admission, or acts on an impulse and messes up conventional arrangements. They like to see people squirm. They're *gleeful*. They prefer Bizet to Wagner; they're more Carmen than Sieglinde. They like it when people lunge at a desired object, and cacophony and wreckage are the result.

The morning after, you can say, "Mistakes were made," but with the people I've known, a phrase like "Mistakes were made" won't even buy you a cup of coffee. There is such a thing as the poetry of a mistake, and when you say, "Mistakes were made," you deprive an action of its poetry, and you sound like a weasel. When you say, "I fucked up," the action retains its meaning; its sordid origin, its obscenity, and its poetry. Poetry is quite compatible with obscenity.

Chekhov says in two of his letters, "... shun all descriptions of the characters' spiritual state. You must try to have that state emerge from their actions. . . . The artist must be only an impartial witness of his characters and what they said, not their judge." In Chekhov's view, a writer must try to release the story's characters from the aura of judgment that they've acquired simply because they're fictional.

In an atmosphere of constant moral judgment, characters are not often permitted to make interesting and intelligent mistakes and then to acknowledge them. The whole idea of the "intelligent mistake," the importance of the mistake made on an impulse, has gone out the window. Or, if fictional characters do make such mistakes, they're judged

immediately and without appeal. One thinks of the attitudes of the aging Tolstoy and of his hatred of Shakespeare's and Chekhov's plays, and of his obsessive moralizing. He especially hated *King Lear*. He called it stupid, verbose, and incredible, and thought the craze for Shakespeare was like the tulip craze, a matter of mass hypnosis and "epidemic suggestion."

In the absence of any clear moral vision, we get moralizing instead. Moralizing in the 1990s has been inhibiting writers and making them nervous and irritable. Here is Mary Gaitskill, commenting on one of her own short stories, "The Girl on the Plane," in a recent *Best American Short Stories*. An account of a gang rape, the story apparently upset quite a few readers.

In my opinion, most of us have not been taught how to be responsible for our thoughts and feelings. I see this strongly in the widespread tendency to read books and stories as if they exist to confirm how we are supposed to be, think, and feel. I'm not talking wacky political correctness. I'm talking mainstream. . . . Ladies and gentlemen, please. Stop asking "What am I supposed to feel?" Why would an adult look to me or to any other writer to tell him or her what to feel? You're not *supposed* to feel anything. You feel what you feel.

Behind the writer's loss of patience one can just manage to make out a literary culture begging for an authority figure, the same sort of figure that Chekhov refused for himself. Mary Gaitskill's interest in bad behavior and adult-

hood is that of the observer, not the judge. Unhappy readers want her to be both, as if stories should come prepackaged with discursive authorial opinions about her own characters. Her exasperation is a reflection of C. K. Williams's observation that in a period of dysfunctional narratives, the illogic of feeling erodes the logic of stories. When people can't make any narrative sense of their own feelings, readers start to ask writers to tell them what they are supposed to feel. They want moralizing polemics. Reading begins to be understood as a form of personal therapy or political action. In such an atmosphere, already moralized stories are more comforting than stories in which characters are making complex or unwitting mistakes. In such a setup, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* starts to look better than any other nineteenth-century American novel.

Marilynne Robinson, in her essay "Hearing Silence: Western Myth Reconsidered," calls the already moralized story, the therapeutic narrative, part of a "mean little myth" of our time. She notes, however, that "we have ceased to encode our myths in narrative as that word is traditionally understood. Now they shield themselves from our skepticism by taking on the appearance of scientific or political or economic discourse. . . ." And what is this "mean little myth"?

One is born and in passage through childhood suffers some grave harm. Subsequent good fortune is meaningless because of this injury, while subsequent misfortune is highly significant as the consequence of this injury. The work of one's life is to discover and name the harm one has suffered.

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This is, as it happens, a fairly accurate representation of the mythic armature of *A Thousand Acres*.

As long as this myth is operational, one cannot act, in stories or anywhere else, in a meaningful way. The injury takes for itself all the meaning. The injury *is* the meaning, although it is, itself, opaque. All achievements, and all mistakes, are finessed. There is no free will. There is only acting out, the acting out of one's destiny. But acting out is not the same as acting. Acting out is behavior that proceeds according to a predetermined, invisible pattern created by the injury. The injury becomes the unmoved mover, the replacement for the mind's capacity to judge and to decide. One thinks of Nixon here: the obscure wounds, the vindictiveness, the obsession with enemies, the acting out.

It has a feeling of Calvinism to it, of predetermination, this myth of injury and predestination. In its kingdom, sorrow and depression rule. Marilynne Robinson calls this mode of thought "bungled Freudianism." It's both that and something else: an effort to make pain acquire some comprehensibility so that those who feel helpless can at least be illuminated. But unlike Freudianism it asserts that the source of the pain can never be expunged. There is no working through of the injury. It has no tragic joy because, within it, all personal decisions have been made meaningless, deniable. It is a life fate, like a character disorder. Its politics cannot get much further than gender injury. It cannot take on the corporate state.

Confronted with this mode, I feel like an Old Leftist. I want to say: The Bosses are happy when *you* feel helpless. They're pleased when you think the source of your trouble

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is your family. They're delighted when you give up the idea that you should band together for political action. They'd rather have you feel helpless. They even like addicts, as long as they're mostly out of sight. After all, addiction is just the last stage of consumerism.

And I suppose I am nostalgic—as a writer, of course—for stories with mindful villainy, villainy with clear motives that any adult would understand, bad behavior with a sense of scale that would give back to us our imaginative grip on the despicable and the admirable and our capacity to have some opinions about the two. Most of us are interested in characters who willingly give up their innocence and start to act like adults, with complex and worldly motivations. I am fascinated when they do so, when they admit that they did what they did for good and sufficient reasons. At such moments the moral life becomes intelligible. It also becomes legibly political. If this is the liberal fallacy, this sense of choice, then so be it. (I know that people do get caught inside systems of harm and cannot maneuver themselves out—I have written about such situations myself—but that story is hardly the only one worth telling.)

It does seem curious that in contemporary America—a place of considerable good fortune and privilege—one of the most favored narrative modes from high to low has to do with disavowals, passivity, and the disarmed protagonist. Possibly we have never gotten over our American romance with innocence. We would rather be innocent than worldly and unshockable. Innocence is continually shocked and disarmed. But there is something wrong with this. No one can go through life perpetually shocked. It's

disingenuous. Writing in his journals, Thornton Wilder notes, "I think that it can be assumed that no adults are ever really 'shocked'—that being shocked is always a pose." If Wilder's claim is even half true, then there is some failure of adulthood in contemporary American life. Our interest in victims and victimization has finally to do with our constant ambivalence about power, about being powerful, about wanting to be powerful but not having to acknowledge the buck stopping at our desk.

Romantic victims and disavowing perpetrators land us in a peculiar territory, a sort of neo-Puritanism without the backbone of theology and philosophy. After all, *The Scarlet Letter* is about disavowals, specifically Dimmesdale's, and the supposed "shock" of a minister of God being guilty of adultery. Dimmesdale's inability to admit publicly what he's done has something to do with the community—i.e., a culture of "shock"—and something to do with his own pusillanimous character.

The dialectics of innocence and worldliness have a different emotional coloration in British literature, or perhaps I am simply unable to get Elizabeth Bowen's *The Death of the Heart* out of my mind in this context. Portia, the perpetual innocent and stepchild, sixteen years old, in love with Eddie, twenty-three, has been writing a diary, and her guardian, Anna, has been reading it. Anna tells St. Quentin, her novelist friend, that she has been reading it. St. Quentin tells Portia what Anna has been doing. As it happens, Portia has been writing poisonously accurate observations about Anna and her husband, Thomas, in the diary. Anna is a bit pained to find herself so neatly skewered.

Bowen's portrait of Portia is beautifully managed, but it's her portrayal of Anna that fascinates me. Anna cannot be shocked. A great character you would never think of describing as "nice" or "likable," she is only what fictional characters should be—interesting. Everything she has done, she admits to. In the sixth chapter of the novel's final section, she really blossoms: Worldly, witty, rather mean, and absolutely clear about her own faults, she recognizes the situation and her own complicity in it. She may be sorry, but she doesn't promise to do better. Portia is the one who is innocent, who commands the superior virtues. Speaking of reading private diaries, Anna says, "It's the sort of thing I do do. Her diary's very good—you see, she has got us taped. . . . I don't say it has changed the course of my life, but it's given me a rather more disagreeable feeling about being alive—or, at least, about being me."

That "disagreeable feeling" seems to arise not only from the diary but from Anna's wish to read it, to violate it. Anna may feel disagreeable about being the person she is, but she does not say that she could be otherwise. She is honorable about her faults. She is the person who does what she admits to. As a result, there is a clarity, a functionality to Bowen's narrative that becomes apparent because everybody admits to everything in it and then gives their reasons for doing what they've done. Their actions have found a frame, a size, a scale. As bad as Anna may be, she is honest.

Anna defines herself, not in the American way of reciting inward virtues, but in a rather prideful liany of mistakes. In her view, we define ourselves at least as much by

our mistakes as by our achievements. In fictional stories, mistakes are every bit as interesting as achievements are. They have an equal claim upon truth. Perhaps they have a greater one, because they are harder to show, harder to hear, harder to say. For that reason, they are rare, which causes their value to go up.

[Speaking of a library book that is eighteen years overdue, but which she has just returned, the narrator of Grace Paley's story "Wants" says, "I didn't deny anything." She pays the thirty-two-dollar fine, and that's it. One of the pleasures of Paley's stories derives from their freedom from denial and subterfuge. Their characters explain themselves but don't bother to excuse themselves. City dwellers, they don't particularly like innocence, and they don't expect to be shocked. When there's blame, they take it. When they fall, they have reasons. They don't rise. They just get back on their feet, and when they think about reform, it's typically political rather than personal. For one of her characters, this is the "powerful last-half-of-the-century way." Well, it's nice to think so. Free of the therapeutic impulse, and of the recovery movement, and of Protestantism generally, her characters nevertheless *like* to imagine various social improvements in the lives of the members of their community.

Dysfunctional narratives tend to begin in solitude and they tend to resist their own forms of communication. They don't have communities so much as audiences of fellow victims. There is no polite way for their narratives to end. Richard Nixon, disgraced, resigned, still flashing the

V-for-victory from the helicopter on the White House lawn, cognitively dissonant to the end, went off to his enforced retirement, where, tirelessly, year after year, in solitude, he wrote his accounts, every one of them meant to justify and to excuse. The title of his last book was apt: *Beyond Peace*.