Preace

My problem as a writer is that I have lots of axes to grind and no hatchets to bury. As I survey this collection of essays I am at a loss to find a simple unifying theme or a general subject that proceeds to unfold, whether concentrically or longitudinally. If there is a unity, it would appear to be an emotional one: a certain animus alternating or mingling with a certain love. This tonal swivel or libration may trouble readers and reviewers even more than it does me.

But perhaps I am overstating the case. After all, like any writer, I address myself to the subjects I happen to find of interest without looking for some binding or aprioristic theme that only serves to impose a spurious unity. I follow my inclinations wherever they may lead and try to turn to account whatever may provoke either delight or indignation. More often than not, the text serves merely as a pretext. As both Barthes and Derrida suggest, ultimately what the writer writes is writing itself. There is a sense in which the subject is immaterial, provided it is deeply felt and gives the writer the opportunity to exercise his or her craft. So the principle of unity, if it exists, may also be said to reside in the heteronomous impulse to write per se, which is to say, to write oneself into the world that perplexes, threatens, tempts, and challenges all that is inchoate and dispersed in the pre-reflected self. The need is always to give shape to one's experience, but in order for this to happen what must be avoided above all is a procrustean theory of the world or of any given aspect of it to which experience is made to con-
form for the sake of an outward or professional coherence. One exercises, in effect, what Peter Sloterdijk (no doubt influenced by Lyotard) calls “kyrical thinking,” a kind of “floating, playful, essayistic” impulsiveness critical of the grand systems and the rigidity of unifying theory, that tries to redeem all “the little dismembered pieces” neglected by the totality to which we obscurely submit, especially when we think we are at our most authentic. This seems to be how one goes about patiently assembling and fitting together the jigsaw to which one diffidently attaches one’s name, before scattering all the pieces again to avoid the distortion of a definitive portrait.

The textual strategy that suggests itself, then, is to write what I am here calling elective criticism, by which I mean, quite simply, to write in such a way that one invests primarily in one’s freedom and the subtlest of its literary analogues, stylistic versatility, allowing the scansions and trajectories of temperament to choose the themes, interests, and subjects that attract the attention and to sport with the formal conventions that govern one’s presentation. Such a “turn” is becoming increasingly difficult in the current hothouse environment of hydroponic criticism which seems to demand some sort of parti pris, a species of ideological cultivation, or a demonstrable affiliation with a given school or movement. Today we do pomo on principle, forcing what should come freely, adopting a stance rather than taking a stroll. Or we profess post-structuralism or semiotics or new historicism or Marxist revisionism or queer theory or any of the other routine sublimities, usually couched in some mandatory cryptolect that confers the distinction of unreadability – what I am tempted to call the Homi Bhabha syndrome. But the real critical project entails something radically different, a sort of triple Lutz of the mind: the discovery of one’s initial and consciously undetermined motives, dispositions, and enthusiasms as reflected in the secret mirrors embedded in literary works; the construction of a coherent and recognizable sensibility, starting with these primitive gradients of the self but shaping them in line with natural impulse into a conscious unity that is resolutely precessional and intimate; and the refusal to accept the resulting configuration as definitive, a decision requiring that the process constantly begin anew but at a higher or at least different level of integration. Genuine criticism is in a certain sense profoundly dialectical, involving an exertion of psychic or intellectual torque, but not necessarily political or “ideological,” and never institutional.

This project, transposed into the field of critical reflection, may also be seen to owe something to Wittgenstein’s refusal in the Preface to the
Philosophical Investigations to force his thoughts “in any single direction against their natural inclination.” He preferred to pursue his travels “criss-cross in every direction” and persisted in viewing his “remarks” as “sketches of landscape made in the course of these long and involved journeyings.” This is simply another way of describing the “method” of elective criticism which, as such, is nothing new – nor does it pretend to be. It is precisely what Montaigne had in mind when, basing his practice on the precedents he found in Plutarch and Seneca, he proceeded to invent the personal essai, plumbing those regions of the self we might conceive as chthonic and scaling up what he detected – the dark elements of appetite and revulsion – into a complex and luminous, textual simulacrum of achieved identity. I am merely applying Montaigne’s complaisant modus operandi to literary subjects in particular and slapping a new name on this practice or discipline because, trapped in the midst of institutional constraints that are growing more and more wiredrawn and coercive, we have forgotten what it means to be intellectually free: to take random walks across the literary landscape, to choose one’s directions in consulting a private, interior compass, to remain indifferent to what is current, fashionable, “correct,” or scholastically dominant. And, most of all, to proceed with the sort of cognitive insouciance that pays no attention to any principle of unity that is not implicit. Elective criticism, since it is rooted in the fabular incipience of the personal and the paradox of determinate randomness, will always choose its own script and idiom – prompted by the myriad unsuspected reciprocities and recognitions that are mysteriously and yet somehow inevitably coded into literary works – over the multinational prose of an establishment criticism as exclusionary as it is irrelevant.