Introduction

12 Theses on Fiction's Present

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1. Fiction's present is the intersection of everything that fiction has been and everything that it will become. Forms of writing and reading are always already linked to their historical development and traditions, and yet they are being continuously pulled into a future replete with possibilities. We could even say that change and temporality are the only constants in fiction's present, a characterization that leaves us baffled at the word "present" itself. In comparison with fiction's long past and open future, the present seems relatively brief and unstable, with hardly any durability at all, yet this does not diminish its value. On the contrary, value may well exist nowhere else. That is, if fiction still has significance for us, then it necessarily has it now, in the present, all other significance being latent or potential. In other words, the fleeting, unrealizable present may simply name the condition of fiction's continued existence, distinguishing it from whatever, like epic, has only a past or, like justice, only a future. As the elusive space where the past meets our dreams and desires, fiction's present extends the promise of change to all who would undergo it.

2. The present demands placed upon fiction are unlike any it has experienced previously. Along with its rich history of problems and innovations, fiction at present must confront the suspicion that forms like the novel and story, as well as the framing concepts of literature and art, have exhausted themselves. Many feel that recent military, economic, and environmental threats demand more direct forms of verbal intervention, for example, essays, polemics, autobiographies, journalistic accounts, critiques, and treatises. The war in Iraq, the September 11, 2001, attacks, the rise of globalization, resurgent neoconservatism,

and ubiquitous religious conflicts all hold the potential to energize or enervate literary practice, transforming fiction's present from a natural juncture of past and future into a question: To be present, what must fiction now *do*? Should the novel engage the politically and economically pressing issues of the day, in this way hoping to secure its relevance, or will fiction's effort to mirror contemporary history absent itself, dispelling what has made fiction distinctive? That is, is the present something fiction needs to achieve, or is it an inescapable fact, a condition that fiction can, in becoming itself, only acknowledge? Just as literary historians have attributed modernism's early twentieth-century innovations to the horrors of World War I and the scientific advances of relativity theory, the present of fiction may seem in retrospect to have been produced willy-nilly by twenty-first-century forces and events. But it also is possible that fiction's difference from other, putatively more direct, forms may persist through these changes. In fact, one can even wonder whether the second thesis really describes a historically unique situation at all, or whether it merely makes explicit what the adjective "present" means. That is, to the extent that the demands on fiction are present, not past, they remain irreducible to what has come before. The thesis still expresses a predicament, but one having less to do with fiction's contemporary situation than with our difficulty representing it. If presentness is not an object but a limit, then fiction's problem is presentness itself.

3. Economic pressures seriously complicate the task, both critical and practical, of recognizing fiction's present. Many publishing houses are going out of business, cutting back extensively on the publication of new fiction or becoming absorbed into a decreasing number of publishing conglomerates. Within surviving houses, the change is not so much from quality-driven to market-driven decisions as from a business culture where this distinction made sense to a business culture in which it has become unintelligible. "Economic decision making" now sounds redundant, and niche marketing, the once-imagined solution to market consolidation, has proven largely ineffective for the marketing category "literary fiction." Unlike car buyers and clothing shoppers, consumers of aesthetically ambitious novels do not generally presume to know in advance of reading how to identify the commodity they seek, expecting literariness to be defined, at least in part, at the level of production. As a result, this market segment has proven difficult to target. And even though technological innovations such as e-books, e-zines, and on-demand printing have reduced production costs and increased consumers' access to "literary fiction," these innovations have done more to create the material conditions for a richer, more diverse

present than to actually establish it. In fact, they may have furthered consolidation. It is estimated that over 150,000 new titles were published in 2003, which would require one to read 411 books a day 365 days a year in order to sample them. If the untested conventional wisdom were accepted that 95 percent of these books are "worthless," then culling the "worthy" 5 percent would require an army of critics and reproduce the earlier problems of homogenization, parochialism, and arbitrariness. And one would still need to read twenty new books a day just to sample the "worthies"! This means that readers are increasingly dependent on selections made by bookstore chains and large-circulation review publications, transferring the economic constraints on fiction's present from the level of production to that of distribution and promotion. The critic who sets out to represent fiction's present based on the books in Borders or the *New York Times Book Review* presupposes a prior constructive activity so vast, systematically organized, and consequential that if it does not render the critic's later construction trivial, it renders it hegemonic.

4. If fiction is to have a present, then writers and critics must exercise leadership. While there are good venues for discussing and reading about fiction's present, we need to generate more and better ones. Not only can such venues introduce readers to work that has proven too heterodox for widespread distribution and mainstream reviews, but they also can provide critical perspective on fiction's present, hosting discussions of the political, aesthetic, and philosophical problems to which contemporary fiction responds. This writing on the present must serve intellectual ends that are more expansive and concrete than those defined by the profession of literary criticism or the academic study of contemporary culture. Its aim must be to organize readers and writers into the producers, not just recipients, of fiction's present. That is, it must address a community that traverses the institutional divisions between publishers, writers, scholars, pleasure readers, marketing directors, teachers, reviewers, editors, theorists, and retailers. The obstacle to achieving this kind of expansive aim is only secondarily that of an alienating critical terminology. It is more fundamentally that of a critical discourse that constitutes itself by its externality. That is, both the intellectual humility that wishes not to prescribe and the intellectual arrogance that speaks about but never to share a vision of criticism's relation to fiction's present as a discourse about another discourse. To accept the collective task not of critiquing an already formed present or of imposing a present on the uninformed but of producing fiction's present is for criticism to accept the participant's position. This is the critical perspective from inside, the viewpoint of one who has been

addressed by fiction and for whom productive activity is his or her response. This is the form cultural leadership at present must take.

5. Professional criticism today is much more comfortable examining fiction's past and future than its present. Considerations of fiction's past are enabled by hindsight. Even without critical intervention, history itself widens the fissures in sedimented opinions, providing present consciousness with demystifying insight. And the past has a definiteness that even when attacked is reassuring. If one wishes to assault the canon of nineteenth-century English fiction, then one may feel outgunned and overmatched, but one need not wonder whether there is a canon. Perhaps more significantly, a contemporary critic can regard fiction's past as the trace, material artifact or institutional creation of an alien consciousness, not the critic's own, and discussing fiction's future, because inherently speculative, offers similarly guilt-free pleasures. One need not get things "right." But to accept one's part in producing fiction's present is to accept a degree of complicity and accountability that leaves the critic dangerously exposed. There is rarely an earlier discourse in contrast to which one's own, putatively more advanced consciousness can appear demystifying, and there is little stability or definiteness to one's object. To speak of the present is not normally to speak of a predetermined fact, given condition, or established institution, and yet misrepresenting this unstable object can be fraught with professional, moral, and legal consequences. And in the cruelest irony of all, nothing will count for the critic as confirmation, not even universal agreement. About fiction's present the professional critic speaks as contingently as every other reader. Her or his authority is a posteriori, solely a function of her or his illuminations. There can be no institutional protection. The study of fiction's present lays criticism bare.

6. All worthwhile considerations of fiction's present are limited in scope and value. Given the massive number of fiction writers and fictional texts in the United States alone, a synoptic account of every representative of the present is impossible. One cannot speak of fiction's present as a totality, or not if by "totality" one means all inclusiveness. On the contrary, to speak of fiction's present is necessarily to locate one's own presence, hence to project a limit. That is, the project of determining fiction's present is not that of the social sciences. What is sought does not resemble a description of predominant characteristics, not even one based on a truly representative sampling. What is sought is an account of what has made fiction present for the ones it has located, what establishes its significance for me now—whoever I am determined to be—and in what form it has made its presence known. In other words, the account of fiction's present should not be understood on

the model of an empirical survey or anthropological description but rather on the model of personal confession. It necessarily reveals its subject. This remains true even where the account of fiction's present is proffered and accepted, not as the critic's alone but as that of his or her group. It is inescapably an insider's discourse, with all the problems and responsibilities, blindnesses and complicities, of an account of values. The totality demanded of such an account is total candor, total manifestness. What an outsider wants to know is this: What kind of achievement has separated the insider's present from past, set limits on action, and projected its ends, located someone here and now? There will always be a circularity to accounts of fiction's present, to what counts as present example and as present exemplified, but the danger is not that by enclosing the insiders this circle will prevent their seeing all. The danger is that in aiming to see more, the rest of us may fail to see what we see.

7. Totalizing versions of fiction's present must be regarded with skepticism. All efforts to derive generalizable features of fiction from a survey of the most widely circulated novels and stories either will sacrifice difference for identity or erase particularity through abstraction. While such generality in critical discourse is understandable and may be necessary for communication, this search for critical universals is underwritten by an enlightenment and a romantic political vision, not a vision of difference and global diversity. Now, as worldwide communication and trade draw human beings into interdependent proximity, it is hardly the time to retreat into aesthetic provincialism. Fiction's present necessarily exceeds our accounting. However, it may not be universally obvious that the threat to aesthetic diversity today comes from explicitly universalizing theories. That is, even while marveling at the array of distinctive fictions from culturally disparate groups, one may also be struck by marked continuities. In fact, difference and identity may seem at times to have cross-dressed. What appears unmistakably new and important about globally diverse texts is their representation of societies and cultures previously disregarded by the West. Stories are set, partly or entirely, in geographical locales remote from America and Europe. Points of view are those of characters previously marginalized or objectified by Western novels. And plots turn on moral norms, political conflicts, climatic conditions, and local knowledge that, to those whose novelistic paradigms are *Middlemarch*, *Madame Bovary*, and *The Great Gatsby*, seem exotic and enlightening. Although such works also incorporate formal departures related to European modernism or to non-European vernaculars and traditions, fiction's dominant global aesthetic today—to the extent that it is represented by the works most

widely available in the United States—is realist. Its marked achievement is the representation of an author's particular world. In accounting for the value of such work, criticism must candidly bring out its own stake in narrative representation, not tacitly assimilate representation to fiction as such. That is, to combine an explicitly anti-universalist, diversifying program with an implicit marginalization of formal innovation and realist critique is to enact criticism's covert wish for totality. What such totalizing represses is the insider's viewpoint, the specific conviction that differences in forms of practice can be as significant for the producer as differences between justice and oppression, freedom and jail. Fiction's present has no outside.

8. All accounts of fiction's present are local and must become so. The limits on our ability to account for the present require that productive criticism acknowledge its own location. This cannot mean limiting its value to its own group, since a critical account distinguishes itself from prejudice only by universal accountability, its openness to questioning by others. Nor can it mean limiting the value of the fictions it studies, since a fiction's limited value marks it as past, no longer of the moment. If the criticism of fiction's present is to localize its object—either literally, by restricting it to a particular geographical region, or metaphorically, by narrowing the critic's focus to race, gender, class, disability, trauma, or some other topos—then criticism must show how this locality produces fiction's present value, not just for locals but for the critic's group as well. In other words, to accept that fiction's present exceeds every accounting is to conceive of the present as multiple, composed of many competing versions, but to concede the absence of any outside, of any accounting for values from without, makes problematic criticism's access to these versions. The present is not bounded like an object. To know fiction's present is to inhabit it, and although criticism may, if sufficiently respectful and open and studious, learn to inhabit more than a single present, attempting to be present in two places at once risks duplicity, the passing off of mere tourism for citizenship. There are urgent reasons today to value fictions that represent locales or topoi underrepresented in Europe and the United States, and utilizing novels to document contemporary history may well be one way criticism produces its own present, but using fiction for ends not its own is appropriation, and when critical appropriation is of another's locale, it becomes conquest. To localize fiction's present is to discover one's own location in another's. All that limits my access are the present limits of fiction for me.

9. All accounts of fiction's present are global and must become so. Although every location projects a limit, the boundary between the

local and the global is not, like a mountain range, naturally occurring. Only within the horizon of global change do localities acquire their irreducible significance, and primarily as a local disruption does the global make its presence felt. However, it seems unclear whether these facts describe a new historical phenomenon (i.e., the erosion of geographical divisions through innovative communication technologies and of political divisions through market expansion) or merely make explicit what the words "local" and "global" now mean. Either way, they suggest that political interpretations of fiction's present will be marked by a tension that is difficult to locate. On the one hand, what the criticism of fiction's present discovers at every location is nothing less than the world, global history in its concrete manifestation. Criticism gains access to these presents by overcoming its own limits, the pastness or irrelevance of the critic's global consciousness. On the other hand, criticism's representation of the world beyond its own province, of global history manifest in fiction's distinct versions, is just one more local account. That the critic's account seeks global inclusiveness merely defines its ambition as presentness, as the critic's quest for knowledge that is present, not dated. A synoptic account of fiction's production at various locales, all joined to produce an encompassing picture of global history and change, can provide valuable insight into transcultural forces and help articulate the material obstacles to present achievement, but it cannot represent the conditions that control present consciousness, either for the writer or the critic. The limitations of the present are not presently knowable. If criticism would know the conditions of fiction, then it must know them in the critic's own location, and this makes the encounter with the global a continuous relocation, not only of fiction's present but of criticism itself. Either criticism locates its global consciousness within the present value of fiction or it discovers the global and its own absence together.

10. Fiction and its criticism at present confront a historical divide. If, as some suspect, the forms of the novel and story have exhausted themselves, then their demise is unlikely to mean any decline in the availability of novels and stories—or, more precisely, of books indistinguishable from those formerly called novels and stories. On the contrary, fiction's pastness seems just as likely to mean increased production, a rise in the number of commodities fitting the market category "literature-fiction" coincident with a dwindling readership. Fiction's present, like its absence, is not a sociologically documentable fact. This suggests that one way of recognizing the divide in fiction's history is through changes in the kinds of success, or the markers of it, that will establish fiction's present. A present for fiction is no longer guaranteed,

perhaps not even evidenced, by widespread interest in novels and stories, and commercial success and failure seem similarly ambiguous. It could even be that recent ethical and political justifications for narrative are themselves not signs of fiction's renewed vitality but responses to its obsolescence, as though comprising a compensatory effort to *make* fiction present. All that will now establish fiction's present is fiction's unsettling disclosure—to individuals and to groups—of what it has always and everywhere been. That is, the achievement of a present will be marked by my or our inability to see beyond it, to locate work that casts the value of this present into the past, coupled with my or our ability, based on this disclosure, to project a past inclusive of other valued work. And who my group is, who I am, will not be known prior to fiction's disclosure. This means not merely that there can be many plausible claimants to fiction's present but also that these diverse presents will not coexist peacefully, threatening to divide both me and my group against ourselves. Access to any present can jeopardize access to others, can render them past or obsolete, and my group's discovery of value beyond the present, that is, beyond what fiction is for us now, will have the power to render us obsolete, to unmask us as "us." It is just such radical stakes that represent literary success today. Fiction becomes present by establishing an origin not in the past but in what is happening now.

11. The present of fiction must be located beyond modernism and postmodernism, not before them. In the twenty-first century, fiction's present will not be established by repeating the formal innovations of modernism and postmodernism independently of the historical conditions that gave them significance. Of course, what those conditions were remains controversial. If there is anything less convincing than postmodernism's self-promotional claim to have overcome modernism, it is the self-promotional claim, repeated continuously by various figures and movements over the last three decades, to have overcome postmodernism. To discover the significance of postmodernity is to rediscover the significance of modernism, discoveries that make possible the recognition of modernism's and postmodernism's limits, and only afterward can the historical conditions necessary to their significance be known. However, it seems uncontroversial that certain literary gestures once polemically associated with modernism and postmodernism have little impact on readers today, at least in their most familiar embodiments, and the present consequences of this change call for investigation. Does our present nonresponsiveness to formal innovation, at least as an end in itself, mean that fiction's present can now be established by directly representing contemporary events and forces, perhaps in their global and local manifestations? Although the

value of much past fiction seems recognizable in some such terms, other forms of literary and artistic practice—essays, autobiographies, commentaries, and treatises, not to mention documentary film and video journalism—have at least as strong a claim as novels to represent our contemporary world. Is our present interest in previously marginalized voices, each with its unique inflection and perspective, an interest in the novel per se, or is it at bottom a turn toward autobiography? Is there any historically unprecedented task today that falls specifically to fiction? Such questions cannot be answered apart from the continuing investigation, by writers and critics, of fiction's form. That is, to know the historical conditions necessary to fiction's present significance is to discover, in our globally and locally contested present, what being a work of fiction means. This task falls to insiders. To be present, to produce its value here and now, fiction must know itself.

12. Fiction's present is the acknowledgment of fiction's past. Only with the establishment of fiction's present can the political, moral, and philosophical value of twentieth-century aesthetic innovation be recognized. In other words, producing the present requires radicalizing the past, locating our freedom's roots. This is how a revolution takes hold. If fiction is not to retreat from its history of problems and achievements then it must further, not merely repeat, the modernist and postmodernist exploration of the conditions of literature's existence, and within the context of global change and conflict this furthering means laying bare the consequences of these conditions for individuals and groups situated variously around the world. The twentieth-century investigation of language—an investigation encompassing textuality, writing, voice, interpretation, authority, temporality, subjectivity, and representation—does not necessitate the forms of fictional practice and achievement celebrated in the twenties and thirties or sixties and seventies, but it cannot meaningfully coexist with an uncritical acceptance of mainstream literary fiction today. The present and dominant appear synonymous only to the dominant. If our current valuing of diverse voices and perspectives is to produce a present, then it must show itself to be the present meaning of postmodernism's account of voice and modernism's account of point of view. In this way, our freedom from their history is achieved. Although prior to inhabiting a present no one knows what will produce one, the testimony of psychoanalysis is that repressing the past leads only to compulsion. For the twenty-first century to liberate a new episode in the history of fiction, writers and critics will need to locate points of contact between the formal conditions of reading and writing and the demands of a multicultural, globally organized, technologically complex, and economically constrained world. To demand

that fiction accommodate itself to this history without acknowledging the historical specificity of fiction itself is to erase it. The present cannot be the past's denial. It is the absence of any *need* for denial. From such openness, the future is born.