**Literary Topoi**

*An explorer’s task is to postulate the existence of a land beyond the known land. Whether or not he finds that land and brings back news of it is unimportant. He may choose to lose himself in it forever and add one more to the sum of unexplored lands.* Gerald Murnane, *The Plains* 1

*In this immensity my thought is drowned:*

*And sweet to me the foundering in this sea.* Giacomo Leopardi, *The Infinite 2*

Once I decided I would no longer do mathematics I set myself the task of making up for years of lost reading and, concomitantly, harbored hopes of becoming a writer. It has taken me a long time to acquire the wherewithal to attempt to try to understand the connections, if any, between my two careers, and the ways in which my mathematics has intersected with my approach to reading. One thing I have ascertained is that underlying both are the precepts of abstraction and aesthetics, and the goal of finding connections.

I like the idea of thinking of a reader as a kind of flâneur. After reading *The Arcades Project 3*, and replacing “street” by “book” and “flâneur” by “reader”, is it not the case that *a book opens up a landscape even as it closes around as a room?* In the same way that a flâneur is a detective of the streets, a reader is a literary detective. Thus, I imagine myself a literary flâneur, being drawn hither and yon, along aleatoric paths, down alleyways that looked enchanting or at times forbidding, discovering cul-de-sacs where I found myself lingering, obsessively returning time and again. Increasingly, I ventured out to more and more remote neighborhoods seeking out houses of writing whose windows faced away from the prevailing winds, looking out on a seemingly endless landscape.

Recently, my perambulations have led me to Rue de Bachelard, with its imaginative poetic spaces inspiring reveries and flights of imagination, and Sontag Square, with its eclecticism, the breadth of its catholic tastes, the rigorous attention to detail, and imaginative approaches beckoning one to take a closer look. Then, there is Barthes Boulevard with its forbidding, imposing edifices yet, if one has the courage to enter and the patience to explore, one finds a treasure trove of arcane delights.

As a mathematician I studied category theory, a subject which “encompasses everything” in the sense of seeking to find a foundational underpinning for the constructions and relationships of objects of mathematics across sub-disciplines. It has been called, with more than a hint of disdain, “abstract nonsense”, for abstraction can be intimidating, yet category theory attempts to weave a beautiful tapestry from seemingly disparate mathematical threads. It is a language for translating ideas from one discipline into another, seeking heretofore unrealized connections.

Without going into any mathematical detail, (and, admittedly, drastically over-simplifying), a *topos* is a kind of category that is a “place for doing mathematics”, subsuming and expanding upon the usual set-theoretic foundation for mathematics. The theory of topoi, a branch of category theory, is at the same time forbiddingly abstract and yet quite beautiful, imbued with what I have always thought of as the aesthetics of mathematics. In ancient Greek, *topos* refers to place; interestingly, in classical rhetoric, *topoi* are categories (in the non-mathematical sense) that help delineate the relationships among ideas. They are variously described as “strategies of invention”, or more broadly as “literary themes”.

As a mathematician turned writer, it is not surprising that I have a fondness for and interest in Oulipo. One of the most famous Oulipians, Jacques Roubaud, is a mathematician, (interestingly, he also worked in topos theory), and in the third volume of Roubaud’s “memoirs”, *Mathematics* 4, his description of mathematics might easily become a description related to my above conceit of being a “literary flâneur”, upon replacing the word *mathematics* by *literature.*

*Literature is a great city whose suburbs never cease to grow in chaotic fashion on the surrounding lands, while its center is periodically reconstructed, each time following a clearer plan and a more majestic arrangement, demolishing the old sections with their labyrinthine alleys, in order to launch new avenues to the periphery, always more direct, wider and more convenient.*

What follows are my own personal *literary topoi,* as I attempt to unravel for myself the question of what are the essential features of literary texts - of any form - that provide me with the greatest intellectual fortification and means of organizing the aesthetics and trajectory of my own writing.

**Price of admission your mind. Not for everybody.**

David Markson’s “index-card” quartet of novels form a compulsively addictive accumulation of facts and quotes. I realize that this essay is perhaps along the lines of what he describes in the first book *Reader’s Block* 5 as: something similar to but not exactly like a *commonplace book,* more like *an assemblage.* One of the titles Markson considers for the book he is writing is *Price of Admission Your Mind. Not for Everybody*. This essay is a collection of quotes with commentary and the idea of *convolute*s *6* from *The Arcades Project* appeals to me. A synonym for convolute is *sheaf* and this personal appeal comes from the fact that sheaves are central constructions in topos theory (spatially, *un espace étalé*); there is the space of ideas generated by my reading *spread out* over the base of my internal space, containing as its points my thoughts related to writing.

**Erudite, filled with literary illusions, idiosyncratic**

In*This is not a Novel 7* by Markson, Writer describes the very book he is writing as *erudite, filled with literary allusions, idiosyncratic.* These attributes, which seem in the current literary climate to have been sacrificed at the altar of accessibility, are very much what I aspire to in my own work. From my recent readings, Judith Schalansky’s *Pocket Atlas of Remote Islands* and *Inventory of Losses* 8 represent ideal texts with their polymathic erudition and multivalent approaches to style, which give the texts their resonance. The former won an award for “most beautiful book” and, being about *50 islands I have not visited and never will*, it shows how abstracting from maps and using only one’s imagination can be beautifully rendered.

**It must be abstract**

So proclaimed Wallace Stevens as one of the necessary tenets for his *supreme fiction.* 9 In an essay on reality and imagination, he further averred the necessity of abstraction for fully realizing the potentiality of imagination. *The imagination is the only genius. It is intrepid and eager and the extreme of its achievement lies in abstraction*. *10* Abstraction involves stepping back, a distancing, in order to be able to allow for a reconsideration. It challenges preconceived notions. By its very nature of seeking the universal, it allows for a questioning of the particular and then, subsequently, provides the means to envision it with a newfound clarity. It is by its very essence in opposition to facility and ready accessibility.

**It draws on no less than everything**

As soon as I read Roberto Calasso’s description of *absolute literature,11* it seemed apposite to my intellectual inclinations. Much like category theory in mathematics, absolute literature *draws on no less than everything*, bringing all of nature as well as the full range of humanity into its sphere. It is unbeholden to agreed-upon conventions or forms, and thus of no describable genre. Being in search of an absolute and hence bound to fail, it is not only unbounded but becomes freed from any social utility or obligation to inform.

**A creature sufficient unto itself**

One of the main characteristics adduced by Calasso is that absolute literature should be *a creature unto itself.* Susan Sontag echoed this sentiment when discussing the over-emphasis on content in *Against Interpretation* 12 and the idea that, in the case of writing, the work requires some form of justification and validation that goes beyond its meaning to the individual reader. She goes so far as to proclaim that *the greatest artists contain a sublime neutrality*. The text should be autonomous and self-sufficient. *A work of art should be just what it is - nothing more.*

**The point is the writing itself**

Anne Carson says *the point is not to find the reader, the point is the writing itself.* She further articulates the need for writing to be a *private gesture, as accurate as one’s name.*13Roland Barthes in his essay *Authors and Writers* 14makes a profound distinction between writers and authors. The *writer* writes about something, whereas an *author* is immersed in the function of writing. *Authorial* writing eschews didacticism and should be an *inductor of ambiguity.* Sontag claims in discussing Barthes*, the point is not to teach us something in particular - it is to make us bold, agile, subtle, intelligent, detached.*15

**The sensuous surface of art**

This is how Susan Sontag refers to style when arguing that there has been an overemphasis on content and interpretation. It is style as opposed to content that truly gets us inside the text. Gaston Bachelard, in describing the importance of style, said *any poetic work that derives its force from the vigilant action of a cause must still flower, must adorn itself….must embrace the exuberance of formal beauty.* 16 Absence of style trivializes the inherent poetry of ideas which lose their impact in an attempt at facile communication.One should not be ill-disposed to alembicated, mandarin prose, rather it should be embraced and celebrated. It is language that determines the vibration and luminescence of the text.

**Words…are merely the sails. The way they are set turns them into concepts.** 17

As I read the convolutes in *The Arcades Project* on “the collector” and “the interior”, it occurred to me that a reader is a collector, with the interior being the mental space into which the readings are received. As with the collector accumulating aesthetically pleasing objects to create an interior which becomes an *asylum for art*, we create an interior space from our readings. Much as category theory allows for a perspective from which to approach the study of connections between different branches of mathematics, so does our reading and writing allow us to *recognize the sea on which we navigate and the shores from which we push off of.* As Benjamin postulates, the key is deciding in how we set our sails in negotiating the vast ocean of literature.

Fortunately I have been able at times, in both mathematics and writing, to set my sails properly in order to reach the opposite shore.

**Notes**

1. Gerald Murnane, *The Plains,* New Issues Poetry & Prose, Western Michigan Press,

2. Giacomo Leopardi, *The Infinite,* The Norton Anthology of World Literature, Vol. E, W.W. Norton and Co., 2012

3. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project,* The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999

4*.* Jacques Roubaud,  *Mathematics*, Dalkey Archive Press, 2012

5. David Markson, *Reader’s Block*, Dalkey Archive Press, 1996

6. See #3

7. David Markson, *This is Not a Novel*, Counterpoint, 2001

8. Judith Schalansky, *Pocket Atlas of Remote Islands (Fifty Island I Have Not Visited and Never Will),* Penguin Books, 2009

*——————-, An Inventory of Losses*, New Directions, 2018

9. Wallace Stevens, *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, in “The Palm of the Mind”, Vintage Books, 1990

10. Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel (Essays on Reality and Imagination)*, Vintage Books, 1951

11. Roberto Calasso, *Literature and the Gods*, Vintage Books, 2002

12. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*,

13. Anne Carson, *Float*, Knopf Publishing, 2016

(These phrases come from the pamphlet *Candor*.)

14. Roland Barthes, *Writers and Authors,* in “A Barthes Reader”, Hill and Wang, The Noonday Press, 1990

15. Susan Sontag, *Writing Itself : On Roland Barthes*, Introduction to “A Barthes Reader”

16. Gaston Bachelard, *Creative Language and Imagination,* in “On Poetic Imagination and Reverie”, Spring Publications Inc.,2014

17. See # 3 for the italicized quotes. The title of this section opens the chapter *Wind in the Sails* of Fredric Jameson’s work on Benjamin, “The Benjamin Files”, Verso 2020.