

The Velocity of Invective: Time and Narrative in the Culture of Abundance

Demetri Lallas

I begin with a fable. The reading is from Salman Rushdie's 2010 novel *Luka and the Fire of Life*, the sequel to *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. Surveying a culture of seeming abundance, Rushdie's *Nobodaddy* says:

Over in that direction, Over the Top of those mountains is the unusual land of Oh-tee-tee, Ott, a land ringed by bright waters, whose denizens, the Otters, are devoted to all forms of excess. They talk too much, eat too much, drink too much, sleep too much, swim too much, chew too much betel nut, and they are without any question the rudest creatures in the world. But it's an equal-opportunity impoliteness, the Otters all lay into one another without discrimination, and as a result they have all grown so thick-skinned that nobody minds what anyone else says. It's a funny place, everyone laughs all the time while they call one another the worst things in the world. That lady up there is their Sultana, their Queen, but because she's the most brilliant and sharp-tongued abuser of them all, everyone calls her the 'Insult-ana.' It was her idea to take the battle to the Respectorate, because she respects nobody and nothing. You could almost call Ott the 'Disrespectorate,' and dissing is unquestionably what they do best—

A little less allegorically, Rita Barnard describes American culture the last time the economy was this awful. In her 1995 study *The Culture of Abundance*, she argues that in the 1930s we find concern “With the retreat of “real life” into simulacra, the abolition of the auratic power of art, [and] the fragmentation of time and experience.”

In the current financial wreckage we remain more Otter than auratic, participants in, or at least spectators of, the Disrespectorate, caught, as Paul Virilio says, in the ongoing detonation of the information bomb. Twitter beefs, flame wars, trolling accusations – digital media has exponentiated social hostility in a culture of scarcity, where cultural capital becomes ever more crucial to quality of life, due to two primary factors 1) online pseudo-anonymity, a certain facelessness that evidently disinhibits the rudest and most hostile among us, and 2) constant updates in multiple feeds on myriad platforms.

MIT professor Sherri Turkle (2012) deplores a condition in the fallout of the information bomb, in which we are “alone together” with our various virtual reality devices. Tom Scocca (2013), features editor at Gawker.com, defines the prevailing style of the fallout, “smarm”: “a kind of performance, an assumption of the forms of seriousness, of virtue, of constructiveness, without the substance. Smarm is concerned with appropriateness and with tone.” New Yorker film critic David Denby (2009) calls the information explosion aesthetic “snark” and delineates nine principles:

1. Attack without Reason 2. Racism 3. Recycle and disguise old jokey insults 4. Assume and circulate the worst about people 5. Be irresponsible 6. Caricature 7. Adore then loathe celebrities 8. Attack the old 9. The Gastronomic Principle – Taste

The proliferation of over the top snark, smarm, rudeness, and insult render corners and comment sections of the internet, places where we are alone together, veritable pasquinades of vituperation. In 2010 University of Illinois communications professor Thomas Conley characterizes insult as a “scramble for recognition” in his refreshing *Toward a Rhetoric of Insult*. Discussing Aristotle, he writes:

Honor and Reputation are among the most pleasant things through each person’s imagining that he has the qualities of an important person. The Greek word we have translated “imagining” is telling—phantasia; and “important person” is the English for the Greek *spoudaios* —“one who deserves to be taken seriously.” Insults would constitute a threat to that “fantasy”—that is, a threat to what is properly referred to as “self-esteem.” But if we are talking here about self-esteem as a fantasy, one entertained even by those who are high up in the ranks of society, then perhaps their *philotimo* [honor] is less justifiable than they think. Bearing that possibility in mind might act as a reminder to those who feel insulted not to take themselves so seriously as to be offended even when no offense was intended, and it might also act as a check in the mind of the insulter, insofar as the insulter is arrogating to himself or herself a “fantasy” of deserving to be taken seriously.

But when this scrim gets out of hand, can anything be said when so many are talking past, or down to, the rest of us, smarmily and snarkily, competing for status and cultural capital in the Disrespectorate?

Insofar as literature goes, the radioactive fallout of hostility from competing for recognition in the information explosion may be one of the defining features in our own culture of selected “meritocratic” and inherited abundance. To be sure, literary feuding, sparring, spit balling, trolling, and turf wars are, as they say, older than the printing press, spread through gossip, speeches, poetry and proto-fiction. The Ancients could be as mean as junior high students at recess, a condition that has persisted through the ages. The *Dunciad* is the English language *summa invectologica* of the form, Alexander Pope forever banning poor Colley Cibber into literary ignominy.

From the nineteenth through the early twenty-first century, literary combat raged. Byron branded the early barbed conflict between him and his critics English Bards and Scotch Reviewers. Soren Kierkegaard and Peder Ludvig Moller, Dickens and Thackeray, Mark Twain and Bret Harte, Henry James and HG Wells, Hemingway and Faulkner (and Fitzgerald and Gertrude Stein), Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, Vladimir Nabokov and Edmund Wilson, Gabriel Garcia-Marquez and Mario Vargas Llosa, Norman Mailer and Gore Vidal (and Tom Wolfe and Truman Capote), Mary McCarthy and Lillian Hellman, V.S. Naipaul and Paul Theroux (and Derek Walcott),

Richard Ford and Colson Whitehead, Stephen King and James Patterson, Dale Peck and Rick Moody, our friend Salman Rushdie and John Updike (and Tom Wolfe), James Wood and Zadie Smith have all squared off.

But something has changed with omnipresent multidimensional Twitter etc. in the meta-narratological discursive arena. Now, minute by minute, second by second, interview by instantly uploaded interview, post by post by post, the contest rages, quickens, exacerbates ever more convincing status insecurities. Take for example Jennifer Egan (recent National Book Award winner) and Jennifer Weiner. In an April 2013 Wall Street Journal interview, Egan comments on a Harvard plagiarism scandal: "But she had plagiarized very derivative, banal stuff. This is your big first move? These are your models?" To which Jennifer Weiner almost immediately tweeted in response: "Agh. Did Egan really have to pause, mid-victory lap, to call Kinsella, McCafferty 'derivative and banal?'"

Bret Easton Ellis tweets ill of the departed David Foster Wallace, early on a September 2012 morning, firing off a series of complaints about D.T. Max's Wallace biography, *Every Story Is a Ghost*, before Ellis had even finished reading the book. In one message, Ellis denounces Wallace as "the most tedious, overrated, tortured, pretentious writer of my generation," and in another, as an author who "made me embarrassed to have any kind of ties to the publishing scene." Last year Ellis described his Tweeting habits to Vanessa Grigoriadas: "I hate being called a shit-stirrer and a provocateur, because I don't believe I am."

Amidst hosts of speed tweeters and shit-stirring provocateurs, perhaps no impressively-selling American author, with a pile of cultural capital to spare, more aligns with Paul Virilio's alarm about the velocity of "culture" than does Jonathan Franzen. Franzen in fact recently played the role of insultant to our friend Mr. Rushdie. Last year his "What's Wrong with the Modern World" ruffled some significant feathers. "What's Wrong" is a chapter in Franzen's Kraus Project translation. Franzen, the self-styled scholar, attacks internet industries like Amazon.com, and wonders: "Who has time to read literature when there are so many blogs to keep up with, so many food fights to follow on Twitter" in this "media-saturated, technology-crazed, apocalypse-haunted historical moment"? Salman Rushdie has "succumbed" to Twitter, Franzen alleges. Salman Rushdie tweets: "Enjoy your ivory tower." Franzen also reflects on "Jennifer Weiner-ish" self-promotion. Self-defensively and justifiably so, Weiner recounts in the September 18, 2013 New Republic why she coined the hashtag "Franzenfreude" in 2010:

When Franzen's most recent novel, *Freedom*, was published, newspapers and magazines devoted thousands of words to the book and its author, while giving other literary books far less attention, and, in some cases, ignoring commercial works completely. Perhaps Franzen's recent name-check was payback for when I implied that he was the face of white male literary privilege, or for pointing out that he's the kind of writer who goes on Facebook only to announce that he won't be

doing Facebook, with the implication that he doesn't have to do Facebook, because the media does his status updates for him.

She further hits back with an over the top map of his turf:

Other literary writers have won prizes, or Oprah's endorsement. Other writers have appeared on Time's cover, or have been able to shun social media, but only Franzen's done it all. From his privileged perch, he can pick and choose, deciding which British newspaper gets the honor of running his 5600-word condemnation of self-promotion that ends with an unironic hyperlinked invitation to buy his new book. Few—no—other writers have it so good. For the rest of us—commercial and literary alike—there is social media for fun, ads and tours for publicity, billboards and book trailers only if we're lucky. Franzen can choose to be horrified by what he sees as shocking new developments on the literary landscape, instead of modern writers continuing the long-time practice of getting their books into readers' hands by any means necessary. But he cannot pretend that literary writers have been ensorcelled into a headlong rush for clicks and "add to carts," pure souls who've been corrupted by exposure to commercial Philistines with itchy Twitter fingers. If Franzen's being honest, he'll acknowledge that the problem isn't just writers like me—it's also writers like him.

Franzen's 2013 Scratch interview attracted similar disrespect. Ben Marcus picks up on a tete-a-tete that goes back at least to his 2005 Harper's essay, "Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It." In a recent January interview, answering a question about the appropriateness of Franzen's comments, Marcus says:

I just can't see why I would ever want to put up stoplights around [social media]. I'm not following the public policy side of Franzen. His cultural commentary is often really embarrassing. For all of his gifts as a novelist, his role as a public figure seems very strange to me. I don't understand the tone. I don't know his argument against Twitter, but I tend to think that we always hear as though the language is getting ruined, getting debased. People are getting illiterate; people are getting agrammatical. But I think the language is insanely powerful and durable and it's coming from a place beyond us and deeper than us, and it's going to endure and mutate. It's the way we connect. To suddenly say, "We shouldn't connect in this way that's just evolved, let's stop that," when there's clearly a universal urge to connect that way — that seems strange. If eight people were using Twitter, it might be easier to second-guess what seems like a fairly primal instinct to use it. I have faith that language keeps evolving in fascinating ways, so it's hard to feel worried.

As for the interview in question, the man Jennifer Weiner identifies as king of the literary mountain says for himself:

It could be that my model of literature is simply outmoded, but I feel closer to Joyce with his "silence, cunning, and exile." I worry that the ease and incessancy of

communication with electronic media short-circuits the process whereby you go into deep isolation with yourself, you withdraw from the world so as to be able to hear the world better and know yourself better, and you produce something unique which you send out into the world and let communicate in a non-discursive way for you. It's not like I'm militantly opposed to discursive interactive communication. It's fine, it's great. But there's a tipping point you reach where you can't get away from the electronic community, where you become almost physically dependent on it. And that, I persist in thinking, is not compatible with my notion of where terrific literature comes from. I think the model of the new technology is addiction. You're sort of asking, "You can't quit cigarettes, or you just don't want to?"

Another Scratch point Franzen makes – more over the top, perhaps – involves the various dromological vulnerabilities of freelancing. He says:

I have many reasons to resent this new electronic world, and one of the big ones is that the people whose job it is to report responsibly are getting kicked out of work, downsized, reduced to half time, having their pay slashed, by this bloodsucking monster squid of the Internet. All these blogs—they all need information. Where's the information coming from? Who is paying for the information? The Silicon Valley visionaries say, "Oh, well, we'll crowdsource it." Yeah, give me a fucking break. As if you therefore don't need people whose job it is to have a beat, to work contacts for years, to understand a subject thoroughly, to put things in context, to be able to distinguish meaningful information from nonsense... it's just not doable. And nobody is talking about what happens when the Internet kills journalism. I think the tech corporations are like the nineteenth-century coal magnates, and the free-lance writers are like the people slaving in the mines, the only difference being that the tech corporations can't stop congratulating themselves on how they've liberated everybody. I think the Internet should be really strictly regulated, the way the airwaves used to be. If an entire region of the country had its main industry suddenly lose 90 percent of its paying jobs because of the predatory practices of a different region's industry, you might, if you were the government, step in and say, "We can't actually let this entire region starve. We're going to subsidize prices, we're going to redistribute some income." Why should Apple shareholders be getting rich while working journalists are getting fired? This is an unjust situation, and the libertarians in Silicon Valley are either moral idiots or liars. They know they're getting away with shit they shouldn't get away with, and all they've got is this idea of libertarianism. That, and the mantra of making the world a better place.

Who benefits from this smarmy, snarky pasquinade, this over the top disrespectorate, Ellis versus Wallace, Egan versus Weiner, Weiner versus Franzen, Franzen versus Marcus and Rushdie, and so on? Franzen says Silicon Valley visionaries, information addicts, libertarians, and blood sucking monster squids are the beneficiaries of our dromological culture. But regulation? Really? Strict regulation? Maybe instead we could lessen exploitation (and insult!) by taking our time . . . is it "our" time; isn't time the greatest commodity now? . . . slowing down, reprioritizing sharing in this culture of hyperabundance for the few and insecurity,

