

Peak Freedgood

CANNON SCHMITT

THE allusion in my title, of course, is to Marion King Hubbert's theory of "peak oil," that moment in history when petroleum production reaches maximum output and then begins to decline.¹ But Peak Freedgood is not Time's fool. It is an ever-fixed mark: a quality or an intensity rather than a quantity; a stretch of Elaine Freedgood's work in which she is most like herself—when Elaineness production reaches maximum output. Such passages can be encountered in every book and article she's ever published, but the one I'll start with appears in a 2010 *New Literary History* essay called "Fictional Settlements" focused on Catharine Parr Traill's *Canadian Crusoes* (1852).

Here is Elaine spelling out what Parr Traill's novel shares with its key precursor text, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719):

In [her memoir,] *The Backwoods of Canada*, Parr Traill gives details of the domestic economy of a settler's life, which she describes as a "Robinson Crusoe sort of life," suggesting that her fiction is realistic in the sense that every settler in Canada starts from scratch. . . . *Robinson Crusoe* is an allegory, but also a field guide, as is *Canadian Crusoes*, in which three children enact a story that proves what ingenuity, endurance, and courage can do, and which also gives quite specific tips for survival. The ratio of allegory and reality is awkward because both are so stark: virtues are named by national origin (ingenuity is French; obedience is Aboriginal; endurance is British); methods for hunting, fishing, and making baskets out of porcupine quills and birch bark are given in detail.²

Now, unless one happens to be a Canadianist, Parr Traill's novel is so out of the way that calling it "noncanonical" hardly seems to do the trick. *Robinson Crusoe*, on the other hand, exemplifies that special kind of canonicity reserved for texts seen as foundational, texts that belong to a canon they themselves initiate and define. But in order to make it occupy that place, literary historians from Ian Watt on have had to tidy up Defoe's novel, purging it of allegory for certain but more crucially of

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its field-guide properties. To achieve canonicity, modern (here meaning roughly post-1700) fiction must navigate carefully between the Scylla of *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) and the Charybdis of the *Boy Scout Handbook*. Only by steering such a course can it manage to *not* be allegory but *still* be art. Elaine, in her characteristically matter-of-fact way, quietly dismantles this account of the novel. First, she reads *Robinson Crusoe* by way of *Canadian Crusoes* in order to restore to the former the absolute centrality of instructions for making bread and raising goats. Second, she holds Parr Traill's apparently anomalous text, as well as the apparently anomalous aspects of Defoe's text, up against novels firmly ensconced in the Great Tradition and—as if by a kind of analytical squinting—discerns their commonality.

What that commonality indicates is that the novel has a much stranger relation to referentiality than heretofore allowed. Far from being separated from our world as if by a *cordon sanitaire*, the novel is on the contrary always relying on and incorporating that world, and therefore always in violation of the very condition that's supposed to define it: viz., its fictionality. And so Elaine writes about Parr Traill's footnotes that they “estrangle the ordinary relationship between fictionality and factuality that we usually glide by in the novel.”³ But of course it's not the footnotes that do the estranging, nor the instructions for making quill and bark baskets; it's Elaine herself.

Which brings me to *The Ideas in Things* (2006), a kind of master class in estrangement. That the “referential fallacy” was not among the New Critics' explicitly named targets testifies to the strength of an unspoken assumption. The siren songs of “what the author meant” and “what the reader feels” were so alluring that Wimsatt and Beardsley had to prepare theoretical wax to put in our ears to keep us safe. But finding out what words refer to seems to have been judged a tune that was easier to tune out. The New Critical firewall between the literary and the world survived mostly intact through those otherwise utterly transformative events known as structuralism, poststructuralism, and New Historicism. It could even be argued that the New Historicist transmogrification of world into words intensified the separation. Derrida's pronouncement, *Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*, seems not to have been dealt a death blow by the return of history; on the contrary, it lived on, zombielike, in its Foucauldian incarnation, which might be imagined to go something like: *Il n'y a que le discours*.

But then along comes *The Ideas in Things* and sentences like this one: “A strong, literalizing metonymy can ‘start’ fictional objects into historical

life and historicize our fictions against the grain of the kinds of allegorical meaning we already know how to find, read, and create.”⁴ Suddenly we find ourselves in a new world. Since I’ve just discussed her reading of Parr Traill’s novel, it’s tempting to suggest that Elaine Freedgood is a kind of (half-)Canadian Crusoe, building literary criticism and theory again from the ground up. But she’s also—and I think maybe this hasn’t been fully appreciated, not even by her—a kind of necromancer. Stephen Greenblatt famously opens *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988) with the sentence: “I began with the desire to speak with the dead.”⁵ How much stranger and more difficult to achieve is Elaine’s desire, which is to speak with inanimate objects. Like Marx personifying commodities, she compels mahogany, calico, and “negro head tobacco” to talk. Perhaps because these things are not quite commodities in her view, what they have to say does not repeat the errors of classical economics; instead, it shows us how we can, how we must, take account of both words and things in novels, of the fictional and the actual together.

In the hands of a lesser critic (and of course I mean me), that would be enough. But such is not the Freedgoodian way. Having opened a door, she goes on to demonstrate that it can swing in more than one direction. Having shown that we need not suspend our belief in the reality of novelistic things, she goes on to demonstrate the political usefulness of doing so. This is “Fictional Settlements” again: “The realistic novel creates an open circuit between fictionality and factuality, between fiction and history, and thus gives us the choice fiction *or* history. . . . The metalapses of fiction make possible an ontological flexibility in cultural memory . . . that contributes to the imagining and undertaking of the work of empire, again and again.”⁶

Above I’ve characterized the kind of approach that enables such insights as a Crusoe-like starting from scratch. But I think I’d better find a less politically vicious metaphorical field to draw from than settler colonialism. How about Zen Buddhism, then? In 1970 Shunryu Suzuki published a book of lectures called *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, the first words of which are: “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few.”⁷ What I’m trying to say is that Elaine incarnates beginner’s mind. This plays out not only in her writing and thinking but much more broadly. For example: after serving as an anonymous peer reviewer for an anonymized journal submission of mine, Elaine emailed to say: I’m guessing you might have written this; if you did, would you like to co-author something with me?

No one likely to be reading these words will need the kind of explanation I give to my scientist and social-scientist colleagues when they ask why humanists rarely work in teams. With a couple of notable exceptions, we don't run labs, and even in the case of those exceptions we don't do our research and then "write up" our results. In some measure the writing *is* our research, which is one reason why the question of methodology is such a vexed one for many of us. And so on: I could spin out this line of thinking further if I didn't suspect it's mostly an attempt to take the focus off my own tetchiness. Truth be told, I can't stand the idea of another person mucking about with my sentences. Could there be anyone more infuriating, more benighted than the copyeditor of whatever piece happens to be going to press at the moment? So when Elaine proposed writing something together, trepidation threatened to drown out temptation.

Luckily, so luckily, temptation prevailed. Preparing to write this appreciation, I went through all the emails and drafts we exchanged as we worked on what was to become the introduction to *Denotatively, Technically, Literally*.⁸ Some of them, occupied with things quite separate from writing, make for painful reading: Hurricane Sandy looms large, as does the murder of Trayvon Martin, as does a fire in her apartment building. Further, the parts that *are* about writing are not the sample of an even web. There were phone calls and Skype sessions, and the work that went on in them is irretrievable except insofar as it made its way into print. But in the emails and the drafts, much of Elaine remains: brilliance, rigor, excitement, frustration, tentativeness, decisiveness, flexibility, inflexibility. The list could go on, of course, but the whole is unified by something that, to my surprise, can also be found in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. A little further along in the book's first chapter, Suzuki writes: "The beginner's mind is the mind of compassion."⁹ Writing with her brought home to me more forcefully than ever something I already knew, something that everyone who knows her already knows: Elaine Freedgood's mind is above all the mind of compassion.

If you happen to be familiar with my work, you might expect me to close with a sailing reference. If you happen to be familiar with my extraprofessional obsessions, you might expect still worse: a cold-water surfing one. But I'm going to surprise you and turn to mountaineering instead, which at least can be authorized by appeal to the fourth chapter of Elaine's first book.¹⁰ Yes, the peak in Peak Freedgood is like unto the peak in peak oil: the densest moment of production, stylistically and conceptually; Freedgood *ne plus ultra*. But it's also like the peak in, say, Pikes

Peak: a summit; a place that can be seen but that's hard to reach; something to aspire to and work toward all the while knowing that, unless you happen to be Elaine, you probably can't get there from here.

NOTES

1. See Hubbert, "Nuclear Energy and the Fossil Fuels."
2. Freedgood, "Fictional Settlements," 396–97.
3. Freedgood, "Fictional Settlements," 402.
4. Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things*, 17.
5. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 1.
6. Freedgood, "Fictional Settlements," 408.
7. Suzuki, *Zen Mind*, 21.
8. Freedgood and Schmitt, "Denotatively, Technically, Literally."
9. Suzuki, *Zen Mind*, 22.
10. Freedgood, "The Uses of Pain: Cultural Masochism and the Colonization of the Future in Victorian Mountaineering Memoirs," in *Victorian Writing about Risk*, 99–131.

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