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## “Explaining Is Where We All Get Into Trouble.” Anti-Philosophical Philosophies in Richard Ford’s Bascombe Novels

- 1 Anti-philosophical philosophies are as old as philosophy itself. From Diogenes and the Cynics’ acerbic denunciations of thought in favor of action, to the Stoic insistence of Epictetus or Marcus Aurelius on the primacy of individual resolve over abstract speculation, the efforts of Western philosophy to oppose philosophy have been a recurrent trope of its historical narratives. This opposition is of course necessarily paradoxical: in order to value action, experience, or “life” itself, in contrast to *logos* or *nous*, this initial desire must itself be thought, thus entering into a logical antinomy engendered by its own critique. To quote Samuel Beckett in a famous phrase from *The Unnamable*: “The search for the means to put an end to things, an end to speech, is what enables the discourse to continue” (Beckett, 2009 293).
- 2 What is not always so easy to determine in anti-philosophical rhetorics, however, is precisely the definition of “philosophy” which lies behind or within their oppositional motives and motifs. Is it a specific type of philosophy which is being opposed, in which the word itself is a metonymy for a particular mode of thinking, or more generally a particular world-view? Is it rather philosophy as a social, pedagogical and political institution, replete with convictions which are not merely epistemic, but profoundly ideological and moral in nature, linked to the question of epistemological authority and its inevitable political powers?

- 3 In contemporary American fiction, anti-philosophical positions, expressed by both narrators and characters, frequently expose deeper tensions between the supposedly competing discourses of literature and philosophy. Such tensions are particularly prevalent in Richard Ford's Frank Bascombe novels, above all the first three books of the tetralogy: *The Sportswriter*, *Independence Day* and *The Lay of the Land*. Especially in *The Sportswriter*, which will be the main focus of this article's analyses, Frank Bascombe's constant opposition to reflection and explanation underlines the paradoxical nature of the quest to liberate "life" or "existence" from the strictures of language and thought.
- 4 "Explaining is where we all get into trouble" (Ford, 1986 223), Frank affirms. Indeed, Bascombe spends a great deal of time explaining why explanation must be avoided, and producing pages of interpretable text to prove why life must be not interpreted, but rather lived. This paradoxical position may be compared to Nick Shay's misological efforts, in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, to preserve a "wordless shock" (DeLillo, 1997 83) before the world, or the cynical renouncement of the search for meaning in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*: "He had learned the worst lesson that life can teach—that it makes no sense" (Roth, 1997 81). Such explicit protests against the practical usefulness of self-reflection may initially appear symptomatic of an anti-intellectual impetus. This is even more salient given that the novels in question often formulate critiques of a society which views philosophy as a threatening limitation of the free American self. As challenges however against a reductive, rationalizing and explicative logos, these novelistic discourses of resistance against the philosophical are highly self-critical, self-reflexive, and metatextual. They thus represent a solipsistic philosophy, with a history arguably as long as philosophy itself. Far from proposing the United States as an a-philosophical or anti-philosophical culture, these discourses—as fictional incarnations of an ironic Cynic, Stoic, or even Socratic archetype—explore the ways in which modes of reticence against philosophy, construed at once as an institution, mode of discourse, and epistemological method, are themselves explicitly philosophical positionings.
- 5 Before arriving at the case study of Richard Ford, however, it is first important to recognize the peculiarly "anti-philosophical" reputation of contemporary American literary realism more generally.<sup>1</sup>

## Realism Against Philosophy? On the Claim to Anti-Philosophical Immediacy in Realist Modes

- 6 Throughout its various evolutions, American realist fiction has maintained an ambiguous relationship with philosophical discourse. In academic contexts, but also within the wider reading public, fiction deemed to be "postmodern" is often coded as more inherently "philosophical," in both form and content, than novels identified as part of a realist heritage. The work of such diverse writers as Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, William Gaddis, Kathy Acker, Carole Maso or David Foster Wallace are thus frequently presented as more coherent objects of philosophical investigation than many of their realist contemporaries and forebears.<sup>2</sup>
- 7 A brief survey of recent bibliographies yields, for instance, a range of studies on the philosophical propensities of metatextual, self-reflexive, frame-breaking fictions. For Thomas Pynchon, we find, for instance, Martin Paul Eve's *Pynchon and Philosophy: Wittgenstein, Foucault and Adorno* (2014), Frank Palmeri's "Other than Postmodern?"

Foucault, Pynchon, Hybridity, Ethics" (2001) or David Robson's "Frye, Derrida, Pynchon, and the Apocalyptic Space of Postmodern Fiction" (1995) to name just a few. Similarly, we may mention a plethora of articles related to the relationship of Don DeLillo's fiction to Tibetan Buddhism, Gnosticism, or the philosophy of Martin Heidegger or Stanley Cavell.<sup>3</sup>

- 8 The same does not quite hold true for writers more often identified as part of an unambiguously realist tradition. Indeed, there is something vaguely more incongruous about imagining a study on Richard Yates and Jacques Derrida, John Cheever and Michel Foucault, Norman Mailer and Jean-François Lyotard: an apparent conflict of world-views, or at least disjunctive contrast, as though literary realism were somehow too pragmatic, too engaged in sociohistorical depictions, perhaps too lacking in self-awareness, to be an appropriate object of philosophical inquiry.
- 9 In considering realist fiction as somehow less philosophical, a crucial initial question is thus what we mean by the latter term. The word "philosophy" seems often meant to reflect here a fundamental self-awareness and self-reflexivity: awareness of the textuality of text, which frequently goes hand in hand with an explicit foregrounding of the constructed artifices of literary process. In practicing a more direct or unequivocal mode of diegesis, and in respecting more conventional approaches to fictional form, realist modes, whether intentionally or unintentionally, may seem to implicitly align themselves with anti-philosophical positions, wherein the supposedly transparent presentation of the problematic category of "experience" takes center stage, rather than the functioning of a self-aware speaker or sentient logos.
- 10 This critique frequently takes the form of a valuing of "experience," and a connected condemnation of the dangers of over-thinking.<sup>4</sup> Inherent in this critique is an age-old attack against philosophy: namely, the notion that it is, at heart, not itself experiential, but is tantamount to watching the game from the sidelines, rather than being engaged on the field of play. A further irony lies in the fact that this vision of philosophy as being against action, and for a mode of passive or neurasthenically morbid inertia, is also a frequent attack levelled against literature. For literature to take the side of "lived experience" over reflection is to claim, again paradoxically, that literature is "closer"—to life, to the real, to action, to ourselves—than the supposedly increased distance of philosophical rumination.
- 11 What is evoked is the utopian premise of the nineteenth-century realist novel according to which, as Auerbach puts it, the writer's mind would seek to attain "a self-forgetful absorption in the subjects of reality which transforms them" (Auerbach, 1953 486). Thus ascending the need for mimesis, such absorption promises a non-imitative realm of pure experience. In a paradox similar to that which Derrida outlines (Derrida, 1981 204-207), literary realism in this way simultaneously stakes claims to truth because of its accurate mimetic reproduction of the real (an initial sense of mimesis as imitation), but also because of its power for world-creating absorption (a second sense of mimesis as the autarchic unfolding of *physis*). Whereas for experimental modernist and postmodernist fictions the questioning of mimetic models of art is often specifically foregrounded by fractious formal processes—collage, temporal disjunction, polyvocality and intertextuality—these processes are often intentionally absent from realist modes, for reasons which go beyond questions of mere receptive accessibility. As we shall see, such dissimulation does not mean, however, that complex philosophical processes are not, in reality, there.

## Is Philosophy "What Happens"? Dichotomies Between Experience and Reflection

- 12 In seeking, albeit problematically, to "liberate" the subject from the strictures of abstract, formalized, or institutionalized thought, many narrators and characters of American realist works frequently propose an ambiguous vision of philosophical truth—or, as Frank Bascombe, the hero (or anti-hero) of Richard Ford's novels, puts it: "The only truth that can never be a lie, let me tell you, is life itself—the thing that happens" (Ford, 1986 374). This type of formulation posits the existence of an experiential reality—"life"—whose truth content is not open to debate, for its very axiology is based on its mere ontology, on the simple fact that it is "there"—that it exists. The valuing of "the thing that happens" over and above what we may think about it is an explicit opposition to the sort of self-awareness of being represented by Martin Heidegger's *Dasein*—indeed, it is exactly what Heidegger seeks to prevent, namely an abandoning of oneself to external events in the idea that, such is the self's terrible contingency, only they are endowed with reality and truth. The rather more humble goal becomes, as Frank puts it, to "maintain a supportable existence that resembles actual life" (Ford, 2006 432). That *resembles* actual life, but which is not life itself—life being here a purely hypothetical, speculative concept remaining beyond the scope of subjective resolution.
- 13 Bascombe's explicit valuing of experience over reflection is a startlingly recurrent motif in modern American realist modes. Indeed there is an entire lineage of experiential, seize-the-day, notably male affirmations of lived intensity against philosophical passivity, which extends through F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Norman Mailer, and culminates perhaps in Jack Kerouac's all-in-uppercase: "I DON'T KNOW, I DON'T CARE, AND IT DOESN'T MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE," which Kerouac himself presented as his "final philosophical statement" (Kerouac in Ross, 1958). Highlighting its libertarian social aspect, Fitzgerald provides a representative mode of this anti-reflexive position in a variety of characters. As we read regarding Rosalind for instance in *This Side of Paradise*: "Her philosophy is carpe diem for herself and laissez faire for others" (Fitzgerald, 1920 152). At the heart of this position is a particular mode of American liberalism: the problem that freedom itself, rather than a political and experiential value, may appear as the errancy between values, in an axiological no-man's-land, and a fundamental crisis of the value of freedom in a free democratic state.
- 5
- 14 Ford's *The Sportswriter* provides us with a particularly flagrant and complex example of the valuing of experiential immediacy coded and interpreted as anti-philosophical impulse. Nearing forty, the sportswriter Frank Bascombe lives in a state of generalized affective reverie and uprootedness after the death several years earlier of his youngest son, nine-year-old Ralph. In the wake of Ralph's death, Frank multiplied various affairs, leading to the breakup of his marriage to his wife, referred to in the novel only as "X." Now divorced, Frank will later embark, in the second novel of Ford's series, *Independence Day*, on an era he refers to as "the Existence period": a time of simple continuation, an anti-climactic moving through life, or what he calls "the part that comes after the big struggle which led to the big blow-up" (Ford, 1995 94). This period is one of *post*: post-event, post-action, but also post-reflection and post-understanding. In stark contrast to the previous generation's heroic narratives of tragic intensity in

Fitzgerald or Hemingway, Ford's narrator is divested of the invigorating energies of action, yet is unsure—as are we as readers—whether this detachment is a form of psychological and subjective protection, or a state of higher spiritual acceptance.

- 15 The two possibilities are not, of course, mutually exclusive, for Frank seems to live in a state which is equal parts distraction and acknowledgment, unfeeling dissociation and composed abandonment—a state which is hard to determine if it is merely depression, social dislocation and nihilism, or a wise shedding of futile ego to life's contingencies: "in that very way," as Frank puts it, "our life gets over before we know it. We miss it. And like the poet said: 'The ways we miss our lives are life'" (Ford, 1995 5). "The way we miss our lives are life" for the reason that the category of life itself is only determined within the continuous state of it being lived. If we cannot view it abstractly, from the outside, as though we were somehow external agents to its endless becoming, then why even aim at a rational cognizance which must, by definition, be illusory?
- 16 Revealingly, the word "philosophy" itself in Ford's novels most often refers not to an abstract discipline, but to a practical *modus operandi* of "how to live": "Her philosophy is: A good day's a good day. We get a few enough of them in a lifetime. Go and enjoy it" (Ford, 1986 98). Frank is always apparently on the verge of some greater revelation, a type of higher understanding, which appropriately never comes. In such a worldview, the values promoted are those of simplicity, immediacy, action and experience, which against mental speculation or abstraction pose an uncomplicated desire for existence, pared of overt ratiocinations. This rejection of abstract reflection often gives rise to a discourse closer to the practical *modus operandi* of self-help texts than the established traditions of philosophy, or as Frank puts it: "Best just to swallow back your tear, get accustomed to the minor sentimentals and shove off to whatever's next, not whatever was" (Ford, 1995 152).
- 17 This refusal of interpretation is in accordance with Frank's general feeling of depletion as life progresses: of the steady loss of intensity which comes from the constant effort to process experience and attempt to understand it. For Frank, this effort leaves one increasingly anesthetized against the very experience which initially commanded understanding itself. A feedback-loop of de-intensification is thus created, spreading to an American modernity affected by the condition, or at least the feeling, of being "too late": too late for thinking, too late for planning, too late even for the digestion of the past. As Frank puts it:

(It's not exactly as if I didn't exist, but that I don't exist as much.) So, if I didn't appear tomorrow to get my son [...] as little as possible would be made of it by all concerned, partly in order that everybody retain as much of their own personal freedom and flexibility as possible, and partly because I just wouldn't be noticed that much per se. (This reflects my own wishes, of course—the unhurried nature of my single life in the grip of the Existence Period—though it may also imply that *laissez-faire* is not precisely the same as independence.) (Ford, 1995 176-177)

If one no longer desires, then the apparent cutting of ties is not true independence. This state comes with a paradoxical feeling of freedom: it is not the positive feeling of American personal liberty, but the ambivalent independence which comes from one's fundamental detachment from the world.

- 18 Such disengagement is buttressed by what Lene M. Johannessen calls "a narrative mode of hazy monotony and semi-apathy" (Johannessen, 2011 80) which, perpetuating a mask of neutrality and non-ideology, means that "the reader, as well as the narrator, is far too immersed in the monotonous and levelled narrative to be able to conceptualize

this choice as an ideational position, a deliberate act on the part of the protagonist" (Johannessen, 2011 92). Frank's rejection of the processes of thought is importantly based on the conviction of self-reflection's practical uselessness, and the impossibility for it to even influence the world, let alone fundamentally change it.<sup>6</sup> As we read in *The Sportswriter*:

So much of life can't be foreseen. A hundred private explanations and exculpations come rushing up into my throat [...]. Though, of course, there is nothing to say. Like all needless excuses, the unraveling is not worth the time. However, I feel a swirling dreaminess, an old familiar bemusement, suddenly rise into my appreciation of everything around me. Irony is returned. I have a feeling that if I tried to speak now, my mouth would move, but no sound would occur. And it would scare us both to death. Why, in God's name, isn't it possible to let ignorance stay ignorance? (Ford, 1986 135)

Frank's "swirling dreaminess" is a type of suspension and distancing away from both time and rational processes. The irony of the passage is that, in order to present us this impossibility of speech, Frank must use the "words without sound" that is fictional prose. We see him literally speak his impossibility of speech, in a metatextual doubling in no way foregrounded by the otherwise formally "transparent" realist prose.

- 19 It is not just because realist novels, in their language and structure, may apparently seek to hide internal paradoxes that such paradoxes are not there. Moreover, the associations of "explanations" with "exculpations" underlines the degree to which such explanations for Frank may never be a neutral process, but rather a way for the self to forgive itself its own errors by inventing a range of sophisticated, but ultimately illusory reasonings. These "explanations and exculpations" are crucially "private": because of their intimate locus within the self's speaking throat, they cannot be extrapolated into a general epistemology or world-view.

## Thinking Against Thought: at the Heart of the Anti-Philosophical Paradox

- 20 This impossibility of generalizing abstraction is not, however, for the reason we might expect. Frank refuses this type of generalization not because of his awareness of the inescapable singularity of his own life—the awareness that not all lives are the same, and that there are thus no general rules of existence at which we may arrive via a process of induction, moving from the particular to the general. As the first sentence of the above passage makes plain, he is in fact never shy about making generalizations about "life" in general. What rather seems to cancel the value of such reasoning speech is the recognition that it will not radically change the course of lived events. "What happens" is somehow seen to be outside of philosophy, rather than integrated into its workings. What good then is the inventing of such reasonings if what occurs in the future will only undo the formal systems invented on the basis of past lived events?
- 21 "So much of life can't be foreseen," Frank affirms, and because both thinking and feeling hardly help in foreseeing the future, reflecting on thinking and feeling creates merely a range of "needless excuses," which does not alter experience in any meaningful way. Reflection, conceived here as merely imitative of a prior experiential original, does not stop bad things from happening, does not stop injustice, and does not stop pain. What then, Frank asks, can be its fundamental use? The axiological problem is of the self's active power to sculpt the world, or not, by way of its own inner



representations. If for Frank "the unraveling is not worth the time," it is because at the end of such unraveling—filtering the world down through its inner subjective representations—the outer world will have again altered, contexts too will have shifted, infirming all prior reflections and making all induction a mode of soothsaying: at best purely speculative, at worst meaningless.

- 22 Frank Bascombe's ideal of lived existence—the individual who most incarnates the "being-present" and pure absorption of what he calls "literalness"—is thus ironically, for such realist fiction, a highly anti-mimetic model, namely: the athlete. For Frank, the athlete is gifted with "a rare selfishness that means he isn't looking around the sides of his emotions to wonder about alternatives for what he's saying or thinking about. In fact, athletes at the height of their powers make literalness into a mystery all its own simply by becoming absorbed in what they're doing" (Ford, 1986 63). Like the adolescent Swede before his downfall in Roth's *American Pastoral*, or tennis players in Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), the athlete becomes for Bascombe an incarnation of a modern, arguably highly American ideal: the individual who, though he has not forsaken feeling, has fully mastered the ability to transfer emotional agitation and turmoil into original action, even if this action itself may appear, to an outside observer, solipsistic or vain. Indeed, it is the athlete's pure absorption that provides a possible solution to the specific suffering produced by Frank's distanced removal from the real. Importantly, we discover that this absorptive capacity requires a certain egotism, and an ability to neglect others who are not so able to reach such an unstable equilibrium. Nevertheless, it is for Frank the surest way to avoid the endless imitative mirroring that both over-thinking and over-feeling for him necessarily imply. As he puts it after a discussion with his girlfriend Vicki:

An athlete, for example, would never let a story like the one Vicki just told me get to him, even though the same feelings might strike him in the heart. He is trained not to let it bother him too much or, if it bothers him more than he can stand, to go outside and hit five hundred balls off the practice tee or run till he drops, or bash himself head-on into a piece of complicated machinery. I admire that quality more than almost any other I can think of. He knows what makes him happy, what makes him mad, and what to do about each. In this way he is a true adult. (Though for that, it's all but impossible for him to be your friend.) (Ford, 1986 63-64)

- 23 As an antithesis to Frank's character, but one to which he nevertheless aspires, the athlete is an image of mastered unicity. His or her affective, anti-philosophical unification, however illusory, is won only after recurrent battles to preserve the fortress of comprehensible, identifiable, unified feelings, which from the outside may resemble absolute detachment. Again, however, the self-reflexive and imitative quality of Frank's reflection is clear: he respects in athletes the capacity for action which he not only lacks, but discourses at length about, in a cutting irony underlined by the final verb: "I admire that quality more than almost any other I can *think* of." Frank makes us witnesses again to a verbose attack against verbosity, a passionate attack against passion, a thoughtful attack against thought. In doing so, he esteems original experiential action in an imitative manner, devoid of the very immediacy that it sets out to praise.
- 24 Regarding questions, then, of Frank's thoughtful opposition to thinking, it is not just that, as realist narrator, he finds himself in an antinomical position of which he seems unaware, but that his narrative reinforces the very position it is arguing against. A certain tradition of realist mimesis is ironically undone, for if actions cannot be directly

imitated, and are instead replaced by the representations which are feelings and thoughts, a problem arises if such feelings and thoughts are made themselves to argue that action is indeed superior! In other words, how is literature able to imitate the supposedly "immediate" action of the athlete if literature itself—as soon as it sets about representing, narrating, and describing such action—necessarily transforms it into the less "immediate" material of a subsidiary *imitant*? Frank's admiration is projected precisely onto what he perceives as both less "emotional" and more difficult to capture in literary form. Literature may well be able to capture the tergiversations of the undecided mind, but the pure state of presence represented by athletic "being-in-the-world" proves a more challenging task.

- 25 Frank's praising of the athlete's unfazed magnanimity is thus curious on several levels. Firstly, it confuses the athlete's way of dealing with emotional disturbances—the resorting to repetitive physical mechanisms of relief—as proof of an epistemological insight. In truth, and in spite of what Frank imagines, the athlete may have no idea "what makes him happy," only that he *is* happy. "Happy" and "mad" are purely hypothetical, categorical affective essences which, while meant to be originary and pure, are also, in spite of Frank's mythologizing, inevitably involved in imitative procedures. "He knows what makes him happy, what makes him mad, and what to do about each" is a strange conclusion to draw from a situation in which we witness not the athlete's deep ability to understand her own existence, but rather her specific recourse to artificial stopgaps for dealing with affective disruptions. Such techniques may be put in place not in order to produce self-understanding or philosophical awareness, but merely to restore a semblance of superficial stability to the bewildered self.
- 26 This absence of depth in emotional engagement hardly makes such an athlete "a true adult," in a *non sequitur* conclusion in which Frank implies that being an adult is defined by knowing the origin of one's emotions in order to *dispel* them: to cathartically expurgate them from the body, restoring corporality to a balanced, primordial homeostasis. Being an "adult," we may argue, may rather precisely lie in the extent to which one recognizes that any disturbances coded as negative are not simply to be banished by the repetition of mechanistic exertions. Thought or emotionality in general, moreover, are perhaps better understood as dynamic interactions in which one can never entirely know what "makes" one "happy" or "mad," and "what to do about each." For Frank, a "true adult" is made of true feelings, because they are feelings of which he has recognized the elemental origins, and which he has then actively *expelled*. Rather than emotional maturity, this ideation rather represents an immature desire for resolution, via expurgation, of affective derangement, in order to create a doubtful calm. "It's all but impossible," Frank concludes, for such an idealized athlete "to be your friend": incarnating only powerfully original affects, and able to ascend above feeling's imitative processes, such an "adult" becomes an utterly isolated subject, unable to interact with other beings traversed by an array of unsettling affective force.

## The Psychological Comforts of "Pure Experience"

- 27 Frank's anti-philosophical positions, supported by his reliance on notions of pure experience, in this way often appear as psychological mechanisms of comfort for the

disturbed modern self. As he himself puts it in a typical moment of apparent self-reflexive sincerity:

I even had, in fact, a number of different voices, a voice that wanted to be persuasive, to promote good effects, to express love and be sincere, and make other people happy—even if what I was saying was a total lie and as distant from the truth as Athens is from Rome. It was a voice that totally lacked commitment, though it may well be this is as close as you can ever come to yourself, your own voice, especially with someone you love: mutual agreement with no significant irony. This is what people mean when they say that so-and-so is “distanced from his feelings.” Only it’s my belief that when you reach adulthood that distance has to close until you no longer see those choices, but simply do what you do and feel what you feel. (Ford, 1986 64)

This passage begins with the recognition of a multiplicity of voices within the self, only to conclude with the reduction of this multiplicity to the singular “your own voice,” which is in the end postulated as a singular ideal. Framed as an unattainable unicity, such unified subjectivity is defined by its positive intentions rather than by the truth of what it says. “Though it may well be” and “as Athens is from Rome” are moreover typical of Frank’s sagacious Socratic tonalities; and in spite of his pseudo-Stoical definitions of emotional compromise, a definition of love as “mutual agreement with no significant irony” (Ford, 1986 64) shows how radical his distanced rationalizations have become.

- 28 “Do what you do and feel what you feel” becomes the deterministic rule of a life that has come to be lived in supposed immediacy and transparency, but which is in reality like the closing of all other emotional and intellectual perspectives. “You can never successfully argue the case for your own passions” (Ford, 1986 224), Frank affirms, further implying that “passions” are above and beyond not only language, discourse, and a rational logos, but the epistemological searchings of the self.<sup>7</sup>
- 29 Throughout these reasonings against reasoning, the trope of distance is key, though Frank is always arguing that he is not in fact adopting a transcendently naturalizing position, but simply living in the “here and now”:

All this seems odd now, and far away, as if it had happened to someone else and I had only read about it. But that was my life then, and it is my life now, and I am in relatively good spirits about it. If there’s another thing that sportswriting teaches you, it is that there are no transcendent themes in life. In all cases things are here and they’re over, and that has to be enough. The other view is a lie of literature and the liberal arts, which is why I did not succeed as a teacher, and another reason I put my novel away in the drawer and have not taken it out. (Ford, 1986 16)

- 30 The fundamental irony is that if Frank fully and fundamentally believed that all the rest was indeed “a lie of literature,” then the very text we are reading would have no inherent reason for being. *The Sportswriter’s* very existence argues against the nominal content that it itself expresses, namely: the value of simply recognizing that “things are here and they’re over,” and that we must search for no “transcendent themes.” In a representational context in which literature, like philosophy, constantly argues against itself, the mimetic paradoxes never cease to spiral and multiply, for to postulate that there are no transcendent themes to life is, of course, itself a transcendent idea. Or as Frank goes on, in an extrapolation which may have disturbing ethical implications:

So I learned this all those years ago—that you don’t need to be held responsible for what you think, and that by and large you don’t have any business knowing what other people think. Full disclosure never does anybody any favors, and in any event there are few enough people in the world who are sufficiently within themselves to

make such disclosure pretty unreliable right from the start. All added to the fact that this constitutes intrusion where you least need to be intruded upon, and where telling can actually do harm to everyone involved. (Ford, 1986 77)

- 31 Being "held responsible for what you think" is not advisable because of Frank's valuing of action, where thought, like feeling, is abstracted: at a remove from the point where judgment may occur with regard to actions and events in the world. Again, however—and in spite of his claim to acquired wisdom in phrases such as "I learned this all those years ago"—if what Frank and others think truly had no value, there would be no point in us reading the very passage in which he expounds that we do not need to read it.

## Against the Immediacy of Feeling and the Moral Risks of the Anti-Philosophical Imperative

- 32 Representing thought's rebellion against thought instigates a mimetic hall of mirrors. In spite of his constant insistence that life must not be reproduced but rather lived, Frank constantly displays and foregrounds his own efforts to describe and reproduce, often in extremely close detail, his own intellectual and emotional processes. Even a moment of disturbance with his girlfriend is analyzed in an effort to capture the indefinable tenor of an affective state:

What I feel, in truth, as I swing these two suitcases off the wet concrete and our blue bus sighs and rumbles from the curbside toward its other routed hotels, and bellboys lurk behind thick glass intent on selling us assistance, is, in a word: a *disturbance*. As though I were relinquishing something venerable but in need of relinquishing. I feel a quickening in my pulse. I feel a strong sense of lurking evil (the modern experience of pleasure coupled with the certainty that it will end). I feel a conviction that I have no ethics at all and little consistency. I sense the possibility of terrible regret in the brash air. I feel the need suddenly to confide (though not in Vicki or anyone else I know). I feel as literal as I've ever felt—stranded, uncomplicated as an immigrant. All these I feel at once. And I feel the urge—which I suppress—to cry, the way a man would, for these same reasons, and more. (Ford, 1986 119-120)

"What I feel, in truth" is a phrase which seeks to convince us of the sincerity of its expression, to persist in Frank's "uncomplicated" being, even though what follows is as complicated a portrait of affective forces as we may imagine. The anaphora of the indicative present "I feel" at first seems to support Frank's valuing of feeling's immediacy, but in reality, the need to incessantly repeat "I feel" in order to describe one's immediate feeling demonstrates how *processed* this feeling is, not only by the thought that subsequently reconstructs it, but by the language—replete with its grammatical strictures—which will give it formalized life. Not content merely to categorize this experience as a "disturbance" and leave it at that—as may be, one could argue, the approach of the true "literalist"—Frank seeks to dissect and decode this disturbance into its contiguous parts. These deconstructed sensations range from fluctuations in bodily intensities—"I feel a quickening in my pulse"—to the less rationally measurable "sense of lurking evil" or "the possibility of terrible regret." In this maelstrom of affects and percepts, what is surprising is less Frank's catalogue of contrasting senses, feelings, and intuitions, than the conviction that this maelstrom may still qualify as living like a "literalist." And we begin to wonder then, going by Frank's suppression of feeling at the passage's end, if his theory of the literalist's

existence of simple acceptance is not merely a mode of affective repression by a more sophisticated name.

- 33 Towards the beginning of *The Sportswriter*, Frank affirms: "That is the truth of what I feel and think. To expect anything less or different is idiotic" (Ford, 1986 120). At the same time as this argument is put forward, the novel's complex diegesis, replete with Frank's self-canceling rhetorics, shows that to affirm "that is the truth of what I feel and think" is by definition never as absolute as it may seem. And indeed, the categorical nature of these positions becomes apparent when Frank further extrapolates them into diagnostic labels, creating a dualistic division of humanity into what he calls "literalists" and "factualists":

Another way of describing this is that it's the difference between being a literalist and a factualist. A literalist is a man who will enjoy an afternoon watching people while stranded in an airport in Chicago, while a factualist can't stop wondering why his plane was late out of Salt Lake, and gauging whether they'll still serve dinner or just a snack. (Ford, 1986 133)

- 34 There is perhaps nothing wrong with desiring a more immediate mode of apprehension of experience, where one may partake of the interest of people-watching elevated to the status of spiritual activity. The problem lies in associating this state with an existential immediacy, rather than one which, in its own way, is as constructed as its apparent opposite. Revealingly, Frank is reticent to admit that this state of "literalism" is as artificial, in the non-pejorative sense of the term, as always "looking around" what one feels. Both are philosophically conditioned by an apparatus of desires, contexts, and circumstance. And as so often in such cases, the problem is related to a fundamental essentialism: for are we not all literalists and factualists depending on the situation, indeed on the very moment at which we experience a passing affective force? Are we not, moreover, most often both literalists and factualists at once, within the selfsame moment, engaged in competing emotional and intellectual dialectics in which intersect the contrasting aspects of a polyvocal self?
- 35 Literalist and factualist, like anti-philosophical or philosophical, describe here not vital alternating responses to a fundamentally dynamic experience, but rather fixed subjective categories. In Frank's vision, it is as though becoming a literalist were to attain a higher state of being paramount to spiritual enlightenment, distinguishing such elected individuals from those who still attempt to "look around" their own feelings, rather than "simply" and "immediately" existing within them. Frank's vision of love, which in the end becomes another emotional category, is reflective of this essentialist position: "And finally, when I say to Vicki Arcenault, 'I love you,' I'm not saying anything but the obvious. Who cares if I don't love her forever? Or she me? Nothing persists. I love her now, and I'm not deluding myself or her. What else does truth have to hold?" (Ford 1986, 133)
- 36 We may realize here, however, the ultimate cynical potential of Frank's dangerous anti-philosophy of experiential immediacy. For in such pragmatic rhetoric, truth is presented as a momentary quality, re-evaluated at every instant. Though we may be tempted to approve of this vision as somehow anti-essentialistic, Frank's conclusion is curious: because of its transitory nature, no future promise of emotional stability is possible or indeed desirable, a position which thereby delivers the self from all need to project into the persistence of its affective future.

37 What is presented as an enlightened conviction of the mutability of feeling and the transitory nature of the self's desires is perhaps better viewed as a shirking of all deeper emotional engagement. In demanding that the phrase "I love you" refer only to the instant of its enunciation—and is thus in no way a promise that this emotion will endure over time—Frank effectively strips love of the future projection that, for Vicki, intuitively defines the concept. The fact that love may change with each passing moment in no way means that it is pure immediacy without projection: in this specious reasoning, Frank produces the ideal moral philosophy to justify the behavior of the modern narcissist. How can you criticize me, in other words, if I behave badly towards you in the future, when I have already warned you that all my actions were merely the temporarily valid effects of an immediate, purely experiential, passing force? The advantages then, as Frank describes them, of a possible life together with Vicki would be: "I could forget about being *in* my emotions and not be bothered by such things" (Ford, 1986 140). In other words, not being "in" his emotions is also not to be bothered by the difficult communication required in the interpersonal negotiations of affective and intellectual exchange.

## Conclusion: "Life" as Philosophical Invention

- 38 Are such apparently anti-philosophical currents in American realism solipsistically valuable, creating, like Epimenides's famous liar paradox, a self-generating feedback-loop which cancels out their own negativity? Or are they on the contrary fundamentally nihilistic? This anti-philosophical philosophy often aims to supplant the formulated—and perhaps formulaic—processes of philosophy conceived as an exclusive history, canon, and institution. Behind these tendencies, however, are a number of tropologically American values such as self-autonomy, self-definition, liberty and egalitarianism: a trust in the individual to "make good," with its roots firmly planted in a specific interpretation of Emersonian self-reliance, and the Puritan moral responsibility of the autonomous self.
- 39 In choosing not to foreground the hidden processes of narrative artifice, and in nominally seeking to hide or to underplay its own textual machinery, realist texts such as Ford's may appear to consider language a more transparent medium, forever hiding the networks of props and pulleys which lie behind their textual stage. But the specific vision of philosophy which takes root here is not of socio-political engagement, nor even of ethical or moral interrogation—all of which find ample sustenance in realist modes—but of philosophizing as a purely self-reflexive process: one of thinking about thinking, and reasoning about reasoning, which deprives one of the possibility of ever accessing a transcendent "experience," "true life," or "pure being."
- 40 At the end of Frank Bascombe's questionings then is the temptation, but ultimate impossibility, of accepting an ironically Socratic condition of knowing ignorance. This dilemma is not only supremely pertinent to Bascombe's state, but also to a particular moment in American history in which, in spite of social and financial ameliorations, the foundation of a stable subjective epistemology may seem fundamentally out of reach. As William Chernecky puts it: "Ford's Frank Bascombe novels reflect the contemporary American cultural climate where people no longer yearn for personal salvation, let alone any return to some earlier epoch, but for the sense, the ephemeral illusion, of well-being, good health, and psychic security" (Chernecky, 164 2010).



- 41 Pure experience, like pure being, cannot exist, for the reason that such categories as "life" or "experience" are themselves philosophical inventions, and the quest for an unmediated state of existence itself a mediation. In this context, the practical uselessness not only of philosophy, but of any reflection which may be labelled philosophical, is its perceived inadequacy to prepare one to live. But as Frank Bascombe's case makes clear, the deep irony is that all preparation for living is, necessarily, itself living, and all thinking about life is, in the end, what we call life itself.

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## NOTES

1. Throughout this article I do not use the term literary "realism" to refer to a restrictive category, but rather to a range of flexible modes, tropes and techniques, which at once express, counter, and play with mythologized ideals of narrative coherency, rhetorical transparency, extra-diegetic reference and epistemological omniscience. A narrow definition would not only be impossible for more contemporary fiction—even more so than for nineteenth-century antecedents—but would effectively exclude texts which strive to actively reshape realist traditions for their own aesthetic and ideological ends.
2. It is not possible within the parameters of the present paper to fully develop this literary-historical argument regarding the complex relationship of post-war "realist" fiction to the supposedly more philosophical texts of a "postmodern" canon, nor to debate the applicability of these often disputed categories. A far more in-depth treatment is provided however in my new monograph, entitled *The Artifice of Affect. American Realism and the Critique of Emotional Truth* (forthcoming).
3. See Kohn 2011, Bonca 2002, Herren 2015, Mahon and McHugh 2016.
4. See Kant's devaluation of experience in favor of reason in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: "Nothing, indeed, can be more injurious, or more unworthy of a philosopher, than the vulgar appeal to so-called adverse experience. Such experience would never have existed at all, if at the proper time those institutions had been established in accordance with ideas, and if ideas had not been displaced by crude conceptions which, just because they have been derived from experience, have nullified all good intentions" (Kant, 2007 312). Kant is speaking however of experience as a possible basis of an epistemology, rather than of experience, as will later be the case with Richard Ford's Frank Bascombe, as an ontological state, nominally disconnected from knowledge or epistemological systems.
5. This valuing of a purely experiential truth is similarly tightly bound up with famously realist valuations of "ordinary" experience. Regarding Richard Ford, Andrew Bennet identifies this as an explicitly Romantic heritage, finding its form in "a registering or expressing of the stuff of the ordinary that does *not* move beyond the ordinary to make it extraordinary" (Bennett, 2012 176).



As Bennett argues however: “the paradox of the ordinary is one that engages with the fundamental problematic of literature itself, with the question of exemplarity: as soon as you write about an ordinary, everyday experience, you make that experience unusual, you mark it, remark it, make it remarkable, just in marking it” (Bennet, 2012 187).

6. This question recalls Aristotle’s discussion, in Chapter 9 of *On Interpretation*, of the problem of future contingents: “It is manifest that [...] circumstances are not influenced by the fact of an affirmation or denial on the part of anyone. For events will not take place or fail to take place because it was stated that they would or would not take place.” The problem being, however, “that of which someone has said truly that it will be, cannot fail to take place; and of that which takes places, it was always true to say that it would be.” If this is true, as Aristotle puts it, it would be useless “to deliberate or to take trouble, on the supposition that if we should adopt a certain course, a certain result would follow, while, if we did not, the result would not follow” (Aristotle, 1952 29).

7. Moreover, this lexical choice is crucial, for “passions” refers to a specific historicized conception of emotional intensities, one emerging out of Hippocratic models of the balance of passionnal humors, and particularly from Galen’s sixteenth-century identification of “non-naturals,” which included “the passions or perturbations of the soul” (see Rather, 1968 and Jarcho, 1970).

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## ABSTRACTS

“Explaining is where we all get into trouble,” affirms Richard Ford’s anti-hero Frank Bascombe in *The Sportswriter*. Frank spends however a great deal of the novel explaining why explanation must be avoided, and why life must be not interpreted, but rather lived. This position may be compared to Nick Shay’s misological efforts, in Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*, to preserve a “wordless shock” before the world, or the renouncement of the search for meaning in Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral* (“He had learned the worst lesson that life can teach—that it makes no sense”). Such explicit protests against self-reflection may initially appear symptomatic of an anti-intellectual impetus within a society which views philosophy as a threatening limitation of the free American self. As challenges to a reductive, rationalizing and explicative logos, such novelistic discourses of resistance against the philosophical are highly self-critical, self-reflexive, and metatextual. They thus represent a solipsistic philosophy, with a history arguably as long as philosophy itself, which this article considers in specific reference to the fiction of Richard Ford, especially his 1986 novel *The Sportswriter*. Far from proposing the United States as an anti-philosophical culture, these discourses, as fictional incarnations of an ironic Socratic archetype, rather explore ways in which modes of reticence against philosophy, construed at once as an institution, mode of discourse, and epistemological method, are themselves explicitly philosophical positionings.

« Explaining is where we all get into trouble », affirme Frank Bascombe, l’anti-héros du roman *The Sportswriter* de Richard Ford. Et pourtant, Frank ne cesse d’expliquer, au fil de longues pages, en quoi il faut éviter toute explication et pourquoi la vie doit être vécue plutôt qu’interprétée. Cette forme d’anti-philosophie peut évoquer les élans misologiques de Nick Shay dans *Underworld* de Don DeLillo, qui veille à maintenir un état de « choc muet » devant le monde, ou le

renoncement à toute quête de sens dans *American Pastoral* de Philip Roth (« He had learned the worst lesson that life can teach—that it makes no sense »).

Ces attaques explicites à l'égard de la réflexion sur soi peuvent apparaître, a priori, symptomatiques d'une attitude d'anti-intellectualisme propre à une société qui considère la philosophie comme une limitation menaçant le moi américain libre. Cependant, de tels discours de résistance à l'encontre du philosophique, en cela même qu'ils prétendent défier un *logos* réducteur, rationalisant et explicatif, se révèlent hautement autocritiques, réflexifs et métatextuels. Ils relèvent d'une philosophie solipsiste dont l'histoire est au moins aussi longue que celle de la philosophie, et que cet article interroge à travers les romans de Richard Ford, plus particulièrement *The Sportswriter* (1986). Loin d'ancrer les États-Unis dans une culture anti-philosophique, ces discours se présentent comme les incarnations fictives d'un archétype socratique ironique. Ils invitent à explorer dans leur pluralité les formes de réticence envers la philosophie – comme institution, modalité discursive et méthode épistémologique.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** roman contemporain, affect, émotion, Richard Ford, réalisme, philosophie

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