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“Clockwork souls” :

Affect and Effect

in the stories of Stephen Millhauser

As the title of this essay suggests, contemporary literary criticism, in its attempt to avoid the pitfalls of subjectivity, has found a powerful ally in the resources of language. Punning is an effective antidote to the dangers of believing that words express a world beyond themselves, or the emotions of a speaking subject. Writers and critics of contemporary fiction are both worldly and “wordly” wise.

There would appear to be little place in the world of postmodern fiction, built as it is on a paradoxical relation between world and word, for affect or emotion.¹ In the play of language with its own effects, there is little room for affect, which relies on the confrontation between self and world rather than on the sinuous intertwining of

¹ A distinction is generally made between “affect”, “emotion”, “feeling”. The *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* (<http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=affect>) defines “affect” as “the conscious subjective aspect of an emotion considered apart from bodily changes.” In *The Feeling of What Happens*, Antonio Damasio distinguishes between emotion and feeling. He reserves the term “feeling” for “the private mental experience of an emotion”, whereas he uses the word “emotion” for the outward and public manifestation. As for “affect” he explains in a footnote that it is often used as a synonym for emotion or feeling, but that it can also be used to designate “the whole subject matter we are discussing here: emotions, moods, feelings”. Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens* (1999; London, Vintage: 2000) 42, 341-2.

words with other words.² And yet the very lucidity with which much postmodern fiction explores the arcane underside of language, laying bare its entanglement with past and present experience, shows that contemporary authors have not entirely evacuated emotion, but simply organized its expression and perception in ways that differ from those of their predecessors. The belief in fiction as the representation of collective experience has diminished, thus rendering problematic the exploration of emotion as the natural result of an encounter between writer and reader, seen as participants in shared experiences. But emotional response has not been evacuated. It has simply been separated from its anchoring in social frameworks, leaving it free to nest in unexpected niches and to emerge in surprising places.

The fiction of Steven Millhauser, a contemporary American writer, author of several novels and collections of short stories, offers interesting insights into the fate of emotion in contemporary American fiction.³ His stories rely on the relentless self-reflexivity that is one of the hallmarks of postmodern fiction. Short stories like “The Knife Thrower”, the title story from Millhauser’s most recent collection, show how skillful he is in recreating what appears to be a nostalgic vision of an earlier, simpler America, a kind of remembrance of emotions past. But this story, like the others, draws the reader into a vertiginous exploration of the mechanisms of representation itself, making it impossible for him to separate the representation from the

² “What we generally call the signified—the meaning or conceptual content of an utterance—is now rather to be seen as a meaning-effect, as that objective mirage of signification generated and projected by the relationship of signifiers among themselves.” Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991) 26.

³ Steven Millhauser is the author of three novels—*Edwin Mullhouse. The Life and Death of an American Writer 1943-1954* (1972), *Portrait of a Romantic* (1977) and *Martin Dressler. The Tale of an American Dreamer* (1996)—and three collections of short stories —*In the Penny Arcade* (1986), *The Barnum Museum* (1990) and *The Knife Thrower and Other Stories* (1998). A complete bibliography of his works and of articles on his fiction can be found Marc Chénétier’s *Steven Millhauser: La précision de l’impossible* (Paris: Belin, 2003).

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objects represented and thus neutralizing or dispersing emotional response. This is the way in which much postmodern fiction functions. In an article devoted to the notion of the sublime in the fiction of Don DeLillo, Florian Tréguer points out that the sublime is an emotion which is particularly appropriate to a postmodern world because it encapsulates the way in which postmodern narrative blurs the relation between object and perception, making it impossible for the reader to establish a frame of reference in which emotional response can be stabilized.⁴

In order to understand what has happened to emotion in American fiction, it is necessary to situate the function of emotional response in the relationship between self and world. Emotions, seen in a neurological perspective, play a role in the regulatory process through which an organism survives in a potentially hostile environment (Damasio 51). Aristotle's use of the notion of catharsis as a purging of the pity and fear generated in the spectator by tragedy relies on the same underlying assumption of a balance to be maintained between the individual and his environment, as does Burke's idea of the sublime.⁵ Given the mimetic nature of art defined by Aristotle, a work of art introduces, between the individual and his experience, a mirror in which he can observe an embedded version of

⁴ "There is no way of distinguishing between the object and the experience of the sublime, to evaluate the implication of the subject in the response to the event, which is irreducibly double... The cloud is first of all 'what happens' in the absolute sense—for Lyotard, the essence of the sublime is that it is '*what happens* (something) instead of nothing' (*L'Inhumain* 112)... Then the cloud is what happens to the hero-narrator : it is the affective content to which the sublime can always be reduced as soon as it can be grasped by narrative consciousness and takes the form of representation." (my translation) Florian Tréguer, "L'Événement et l'éventualité : les formes du sublime dans l'œuvre de Don DeLillo", *Revue Française d'études américaines* 99 (février 2004): 58.

⁵ "Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions." Aristotle, *Poetics*, Part VI. Translated by S. H. Butcher. <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.1.1.html>.

his personal relation to experience. Works of art, of whatever nature, occupy a median and mediating position between the perceiving subject and the world. Emotion is thus produced and reproduced, presented and represented in a complex chain of interactions. It is the complexity of this series of representations that makes any consideration of the place of emotion in the production and reception of art highly complex.

A clear perception of the problems related to the role of emotion in fictional representations of the world can be gained by reading a classic text on the writing of fiction by Henry James. In his well-known Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, James reveals the extent to which emotion is an integral part of the creating and reading of fiction. He makes no attempt to hide the intensity of his feeling for the activity of story-telling or the strength of his desire to arouse strong feelings in his reader. He tells his reader that the novel, any novel, is in its essence “an ado, an ado about something” (James xiii).⁶ That the product of this “ado” will evoke in the reader an emotion equal to the one which produced it is something that James, of course, does not take for granted. The complex image of the “house of fiction” that James develops in the Preface functions as a metaphor for the various structures that bring the individual and society together in a common frame, making it possible for them to share a fictive experience which is both similar to and different from their own. The functioning of this metaphor in James’s fiction relies, of course, on the assumption that social experience provides the common ground on which the house is built. It is the structuring of an individual adventure in terms of patterns which are either confirmed or contradicted by social expectations that gives to James’s novels, as to all the fiction of the nineteenth century, their emotional resonance.⁷ The house represents the different levels of human interaction through which the reader

⁶ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881, London: Penguin, 1981).

⁷ Paul Ricoeur’s emphasis in *Time and Narrative* on the implications of narrative composition as an act of “configuration” constitutes another expression of the way in which fiction structures a whole series of complex relations in terms of time (Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit* [Paris: Seuil, 1983, 1984, 1985]).

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responds to the story by relating to a series of *relations* and not directly to a given character. What is important is the way in which fiction focuses the emotional response of the reader through the representation of affect in social situations, thus both eliciting and guiding the potential reactions of the reader.

The history of emotional response in American fiction can be clearly grasped by extending James's metaphor to discover its fate in the twentieth century. The problematic role of the house as metonym for the family in its relation to society becomes obvious in the fiction of William Faulkner. The emphasis on mirrors and doors in *The Sound and the Fury* reveals the extent to which the house no longer shapes the relation between the members of a family, but traces rather the innumerable thresholds between self and other that the characters are incapable of crossing. Jay Gatsby's fabulous house is a striking example of the way in which money has replaced social interaction as a shaping structure, opening endless spaces in which feeling finds no proper object of investment. In one of the most striking scenes in *The Great Gatsby*, Jay Gatsby tries to impress his lost love with the splendor of his mansion. The scene ends on a vision of Daisy surrounded by Gatsby's expensive shirts – a powerful metonym for the marvels of American experience, Whitman's America packaged and sold, "shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, with monograms of Indian blue" (F. Scott Fitzgerald 89). Daisy sits weeping among the shirts: "'They're such beautiful shirts,' she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. 'It makes me sad because I've never seen such – such beautiful shirts before'" (F. Scott Fitzgerald 89).⁸

If the houses of contemporary American fiction prove to be houses of cards, shuffled and passed from hand to hand in endless transactions, James's use of space as a metaphor for the relation between the world and its representations has undergone profound mutations that reflect this change in perspective. Postmodern practice in the area of history and cultural studies shows a heightened awareness of the ways in which representation, particularly in its

⁸ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby* (1926, London: Penguin, 1988).

relation to emotion, is socially constructed.⁹ Postmodern theory underlies this type of investigation through its deconstruction of the distinction between outside and inside, appearance and reality, sign and meaning. What Frederic Jameson has called “the waning of affect in postmodern culture” is based on a theory “which has, among other things, been committed to criticizing and discrediting this very hermeneutic model of the inside and outside and of stigmatizing such models as ideological and metaphysical” (Jameson 10, 12). In Jameson’s theoretical vocabulary, James’s (no, Jameson is *not* the son of James) “house of fiction” is replaced by “cognitive mapping”, a concept which is supposed to “enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole” (Jameson 51). One effect of this increased sensitivity to the constructed nature of emotion and its representations has been a proliferation of the spaces, or domains, in which it is observed theoretically, in what has become a curious museum of emotional artifacts. Jameson’s investigation of architecture in *Postmodernism* is just one example of the way in which postmodernism’s metaphorization of the world as map allows it to subject the objects of Western culture to the powerful scalpel of a deconstructive vision. Another result has been the emergence of a porous frontier between creativity and criticism, the two linked as opposite sides of a single interface, creating curious echoes between fiction and criticism and making even more problematic the relation between feeling and knowing. Jameson’s description of the Hotel Bonaventure in Los Angeles seems to be a gloss on the hotels and department stores of Millhauser’s fiction, in which space constructs and deconstructs itself in a continuous process of imaginative investment and critical investigation. The very distinction between text and gloss loses its meaning. Jameson’s comment that “the glass skin [of the hotel]

⁹ See for example Carol Stearns and Peter N. Stearns, *Emotion and Social Change: Toward a New Psychohistory* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988). Feminist critics have also examined the social construction of emotional response.

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achieves a peculiar and placeless dissociation of the Bonaventure from its neighborhood: it is not even an exterior, inasmuch as when you seek to look at the hotel's outer walls you cannot see the hotel itself but only the distorted images of everything that surrounds it" (Jameson 42) finds an uncanny echo in the description of the department store in Millhauser's "The Dream of the Consortium":

But at last we must step through the parting glass doors, bewildered to find ourselves in sunlight; across from us the buildings, dark rose in hue, lie in late afternoon shadow. In the black plate-glass windows opposite we see the bright green-and-white reflection of a passing bus, through which a row of half-closed blinds is visible. (143)¹⁰

It would be tempting to say that the fascination with observing and knowing has replaced the passion for feeling and doing, the house of fiction subjected to the Walmartization of America.¹¹ However, this would be an oversimplification of a complex phenomenon. Millhauser's fiction, filled like so much postmodern fiction with shining surfaces of intertextuality and self-reflexivity, seems indeed to resemble a museum or a department store more than the "back-shop of the mind" which James uses as a metaphor for his own imagination when he describes the apparition of Isabel Archer as having been "placed in the imagination that detains it, preserves, protects, enjoys it, conscious of its presence in the dusky, crowded, heterogeneous back-shop of the mind" (James x). But such a conclusion would be hasty and would take little account of the complex relation between emotion and cognition in contemporary fiction.

¹⁰ "The Dream of the Consortium" is one of the twelve stories in *The Knife Thrower and Other Stories* (1998; New York: Vintage, 1999). All page references are to this edition.

¹¹ This term was used in *Business Week* in a review of a book entitled *The Future of Competition; Co-creating Unique Value with Customers*. Walmart, a discount chain, has become in itself a metaphor, in the world of business, for the expansion of discount retailing, a process which, given the extensive coverage of Walmart in the press, is seen likewise as a metaphor for the transformation of American culture through its commercial practices. Steve Hamm, "Adding Customers to the Design Team", *Business Week* (European Edition), March 1, 2004: 10.

That Millhauser is aware of the dangers of seeing language as a self-reflecting surface on which the world floats can be seen in the way he draws his own conclusions from the process by which language generates its own inverted images. In another of the stories in the collection *The Knife Thrower and Other Stories* entitled “Balloon Flight, 1870”, Millhauser uses the siege of Paris as an occasion to explore the consequences of an altered perception of the world, the perils of distance. As the autodiegetic narrator floats over the city, he sees it differently, and the change in perspective allows him to perceive, in a brilliant demonstration of the way in which language structures perception, that “there’s no difference between Paris and Berlin; between Paris and pissing.” (149) But the verbal momentum of the moment draws him into another discovery that is almost his undoing, for he sees that what his new vision has produced is not just an absence of difference, but *indifference*: “A terrible indifference courses through me, shakes me to the core. And always a little voice that whispers, whispers: what does it matter, this thing or that thing...” (149)

What the narrator of “Balloon Flight, 1870” discovers, rephrased to fit postmodern theory, is that it is not really possible to achieve the distance that postmodern awareness requires without running the risk of losing it through loss of the very objects of perception which defined it as distance. The postmodern paradox strikes at the very heart of its own enterprise. Linda Hutcheon, one of the more articulate interpreters of postmodernism in fiction, says in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*:

[...] I would not argue that in metafiction the life-art connection has been either severed completely or resolutely denied. Instead, I would say that this “vital” link is reforged, on a new level—on that of the imaginative process (of storytelling), instead of on that of the product (the story told).¹²

Anyone who has read criticism of contemporary fiction, or theoretical texts dealing with reader response, is familiar with this

¹² Quoted in Wimmers, Inge Crosman, *Poetics of Reading* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 159.

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type of remark. Inge Crosman Wimmers, who quotes Hutcheon in her *Poetics of Reading*, offers the same reaction to a reading of Robbe-Grillet's *Projet pour une révolution à New York*, a reading which for her vacillates between distance and empathy: "Reading, seen from this perspective, becomes an occasion for further self-awareness [...]." (129)

While Hutcheon and Wimmers express what has become the conventional view of the way in which postmodernism deals with Jameson's "waning of affect" by emphasizing the reader's heightened pleasure at the experience of "effect", this idea does not necessarily cover all of the different ways in which postmodern writers confront the severing of the heart from the head. Millhauser's man in the balloon, while enjoying a new point of view which allows him to see gunfire as "chimney-smoke turned sideways" (147), is also suffering from a surfeit of self-awareness. The desire to carry awareness to a higher level, as Hutcheon does, blurs the effect that writers like Millhauser wish to achieve by so obviously creating a gap between affect, the feelings inspired by the images and scenes they create, and the structures which make these very scenes available for intellectual inspection and understanding. The vertiginously self-reflexive nature of his stories, which can always be read as demonstrations of their own representational devices, does not so much evacuate emotional response or draw it to a higher level as leave it revolving on itself, preventing the reader from making sense of the feelings that have been inspired. This technique owes much, of course, to Edgar Allen Poe, whose influence can be felt behind all of Millhauser's fiction. But the particular way in which Millhauser uses what the narrator of "The New Automaton Theater" calls "a realism of means" (93) to create "clockwork creatures, grown conscious of themselves" (108) reveals a twentieth-century preoccupation with the self-reflexive nature of fiction and its particular relation to the worlds it holds in suspension, leaving the reader both aroused and uneasy. At the end of "The New Automaton Theater," the narrator says: "Dying of a thirst we did not know we had, we drink from the necessary and tormenting waters of fictive fountains." (110)

Like the novels of Paul Auster, which they resemble in significant ways, Millhauser's stories render emotional response problematic by carefully separating the settings, characters and voices from the narrative structures which could be expected to bring them together. James saw the *placing* of Isabel Archer in a physical and social setting as a way of describing the relation between what the reader would see and the meaning with which the actions observed would be invested. But for Millhauser, the shared social knowledge which transformed Isabel's various houses into James's "house of fiction" are no longer functional in fictional terms. His stories are filled with objects and events which, by the very vividness with which they are described, seem to constitute the setting for an unfolding narrative which never really materializes. In the garden of his mysterious friend, the narrator of "A Visit" sees "fat heads of lettuce and flashes of yellow squash" (26). Visitors to the new department store in "The Dream of the Consortium" wander through "a soft brown world of night tables, dimly glowing lamps, pulled-back bedspreads displaying flowery sheets, and four-poster beds with arched canopies and heavy curtains" (132). However, the narrative frame which would normally make it possible for the reader to stabilize the emotional energy of these perceptions, permitting him to measure the voltage of the "flash of yellow", is made ambiguous through all of the resources available to postmodern fiction. In "A Visit", the use of the undecidability related to the fantastic (the narrator's friend is married to a frog named Alice) leaves the narrator "not unhappy but not really happy either, but caught in some intermediate place, looking both ways" (28). In "The Dream of the Consortium" the transformation of the department store into pure space, a space both containing and contained by the objects it "displays", prevents the objects offered for sale from being situated in past or future narratives. Since the story is the store and vice-versa, the setting and the plot cancel each other out in an endless process that Jameson would see as a perfect illustration of the way postmodernism

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treats the traditional opposition of setting and story, inside and outside.¹³

It would be tempting to read these stories as symptomatic of the final breakdown of the “life-art connection” to which Hutcheon refers, especially since Millhauser, like so many writers, offers the reader all the possible glosses he might desire. The narrator of “The New Automaton Theater” proposes an interpretation which seems well adapted to this particular dilemma:

In this sense we may ask whether the highest form of an art contains within it the elements of its own destruction—whether decadence, in short, so far from being the sickly opposite of art’s deepest health, is perhaps nothing but the result of an urge identical to both. (103)

Far from leading to some higher form of awareness, the riddles around which Millhauser’s stories are constructed seem only to widen the “inner crack” that the narrator of “Balloon Flight, 1870” feels opening up inside him. They resist resolution, whether on a narrative, emotional or esthetic level and seem to suggest a retreat into the two worlds they refuse to reconcile. On the one hand, the luminous realism with which the surface of the world is described seems to invite the reader into a nostalgia where all feeling folds in comfortably upon itself. On the other hand, the relentless way in which the stories undercut the traditional linguistic and narrative links between self and world makes it impossible for the reader to enter into this radiant reality, to appropriate it as the story of himself or of someone like him.

One might describe Millhauser’s stories in terms of total mastery, total control of the art of illusion, the satisfaction of knowing

¹³ In talking about the use of space in the Bonaventure Hotel, Jameson points out that “the escalators and elevators here henceforth replace movement but also, and above all, designate themselves as new reflexive signs and emblems of movement proper. [...] Here the narrative stroll has been underscored, symbolized, reified, and replaced by a transportation machine which becomes the allegorical signifier of that older promenade we are no longer allowed to conduct on our own: and this is a dialectical intensification of the autoreferentiality of all modern culture, which tends to turn upon itself and designate its own cultural production as its content.” (Jameson 42)

as opposed to the treachery of feeling. However, to the extent that his stories invariably stage desperate struggles for mastery and control, it is clear that Millhauser, like other postmodern writers and theoreticians, is aware of the terror that lies behind total control. Stories like “The New Automaton Theater”, in which “the mastery of the illusion of life” (92) through the creation of mechanical creatures becomes itself a frightening mechanism, reveal the author’s sensitivity to the threat represented by the very capacity of postmodern art to deconstruct illusion by imitating its mechanisms. In this story, as in “The Dream of the Consortium” and “Paradise Park”, he sets in motion a process which appears to be self-generating and which perpetuates itself not only in time, but also in space, to the extent that the obsession with the processes involved seems to devour the entire city. The narrator of “The New Automaton Theater” tells the reader, “It is generally agreed that well over eight hundred theaters are in operation throughout our city in the course of a single year, and there is no day during which one cannot attend some hundred performances” (90). If Millhauser seeks actively to reproduce the mechanisms of artistic mimesis, to make them the very subject of his stories, it is in order to use them as frames in which to trap, like the hapless inhabitants of Pompeii, figures frozen in the postures of past emotion. The miniatures of the Stadtmuseum — “In the Stadtmuseum one can see such marvels of the miniature art as an ark carved from the pit of a cherry, containing three dozen pairs of clearly distinguishable animals, as well as Noah and his sons; and carved from a piece of boxwood one inch long, and displayed beneath a magnifying lens, the winter palace of the Hohenzollerns, with its topiary garden, its orchard of pear trees [...] (91)— are set in motion through the creation of the automatons with their “clockwork souls” (91). The story itself thus becomes a mirror of the paradox through which the automatons reproduce the motions associated with emotion, without yielding a clue as to what connects their “clockwork” to their “souls”. In a sentence that captures the essence of the paradox in its opposition of “expression” and “penetration”, the narrator explains that the new master spent six years “studying the works of the masters and trying to penetrate the deepest secrets of expressivity” (100).

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One possible explanation for this curious desire to create a world in which emotion is observed and fossilized, like an artifact from the past, can be found in the need for the writer himself to reconcile the “uncanny intensity” (101) of his own perceptions with the desire for lucidity. Although the masters he mimics can be seen as alter egos, in a self-consciously metafictional sense, it is nonetheless true, as the narrator of “The New Automaton Theater” says, that “[...] the acknowledged master of expressivity cannot be said to have turned against the expressive itself” (108). Wordsworth defined poetry as “emotion recollected in tranquility”. Millhauser, in a new take on an old idea, would perhaps define it as “emotion collected in lucidity”. His stories reveal the problematic nature of all connections. Stories like “The Dream of the Consortium” rely on the metaphoric and metonymic potential of proximity, of the way that things are placed side by side. The objects on sale in the department store are not simply relics of the American past, bric-a-brac from the author’s lost childhood. The “highboys, glass-fronted bookcases, and rolltop desks with pigeonholes” (129) contain buried metaphors, recording the workings of the collective imagination which gave them verbal expression as well as the images of the child that saw them. Placing them next to “long-legged mannequins with pink and green hair, wearing flashes of black satin and white lace” (129) prevents them from becoming lost in the alcoves of nostalgia by forcing them to take on new meanings and generate new narratives. But this is not a purely intellectual exercise. The “transitions and confusions” created by the store satisfy a “secret longing” (130). The new vistas suggested by juxtaposing disparate entities, which is the essence of metaphor itself, are constantly renewed and reshaped in ways that invite response to familiar images while defamiliarizing them by laying bare their inner workings. The fantastic list of items found on page 140, which begins with “quartz heaters, power mowers, Venetian palazzi” and continues through an amusing conglomeration of real and invented objects, the relations of which are as much phonetic as anything else... “wax museums, submersible sump pumps, Sumerian ziggurats [...] sphinxes, exercycles, black leather recliners”... and ends on “old piers with seagulls” reveals the way in which Millhauser, like any poet, sees

vistas in language which are more enticing than any real landscape. While the playful nature of the story itself holds the meaning of these objects in abeyance, their endless multiplication and repositioning produces the longing for an emotional response which they can neither satisfy nor extinguish. Display and delay prove to be close relatives.

However, beyond the way in which Millhauser's fantastic postmodern constructions explore the nature of emotional response without solving its mysterious connection to cognition, they also confront the cultural dimension of emotional experience in ways that bring Millhauser much closer to Henry James than would initially appear. In Millhauser's exploration of department stores and amusement parks, automatons and miniatures, lies an awareness of the ways in which public life in the modern world mirrors people's inability to find emotional satisfaction in private life. This is an old theme, but Millhauser gives it new life. One of the most astonishing demonstrations of this can be found in "Balloon Flight, 1870". This is not a story that simply treats the siege of Paris as grist for the metafictional mill. Millhauser is not an American tourist caught in a time warp. On one level, the story re-enacts the patterns of Robert Frost's poem "Birches." The French general rises above the world, discovers its beauty seen in a purely esthetic perspective and comes back to earth with a renewed perception, marveling in "the play of cloud-shadow on field and wood". But the balloon does not let him down as gently as Frost's birch might have done. As he touches down on earth, he looks up "where the wide spaces cleave the spirit like an axblade" (157). This is one of Millhauser's most powerful stories because of the way in which it explores the emotional price to be paid for esthetic distance. The "terrible indifference" which the narrator experiences, the inability to feel, is the dark underside of the possibility of rediscovering the world as pure metaphor, "childhood's dream." (155) Confronted with the treachery of the sky's "sinister blue", the narrator can only reassemble the pieces of himself by re-appropriating the fear and revulsion with regard to the Prussian "other" which are the most primitive of emotions. The feelings elicited by the sights he has seen cannot be integrated into sentences without recourse to the grammar of "us and them". In the "treacherous

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blue”, they remain elusive, unavailable like the “frostless refrigerators, three-tier dishwashers, microwave ovens with digital displays” (129) on sale in the department store. Furthermore, the private, poetic perception to which the narrator has access in the balloon can only be acquired at the expense of concern for public good, which is inextricably embedded in the specific conflict enacted in a precise moment in time. Too much feeling, if it is separated from the “human turmoil” (157) which makes it meaningful, results in a loss of the ability to feel.

Although Millhauser, in his stories, seems to widen the gap between private perception and the forms of public, social interaction which fiction has traditionally examined, it could also be said that he is obsessed by the way in which modern life conflates and confuses the public and the private, creating the “nauseating nowhere” (22) in which the narrator of “The Visitor” becomes lost in his search for his old friend. James’s “house of fiction” suggests the numerous social groups that stand between the isolated individual and society at large. But the result of many of the economic and social changes which have affected society in the past one hundred years has been an eroding of many of these social structures—family, church congregation, club, community—leaving the individual face to face with a “faceless” society. This is a social truism with particular effects in fiction. The leveling effects of Jameson’s “cognitive map” have made it possible for writers of fiction to exploit the peculiar loss of perspective which it implies, placing the private and the public side by side in structures that present them as two sides of one ambiguous coin. Millhauser’s fascination with questions of scale, his creation of models and miniatures which multiply in two directions, becoming simultaneously smaller and more inclusive, is an indication of his fascination with this dilemma and its dizzying implications. The ultimate aim of Paradise Park in the story by the same name is to make the most minute corner of space available for public consumption. The Park includes

[...] a sixty-by-forty foot model in wood and pasteboard of Paris, France, including over eighty thousand buildings and thirty thousand trees [...] and at the heart of the little city, an exact scale model of the Louvre, including not only every gallery, every staircase, every

window mullion and ceiling decoration, but a precise miniature reproduction of every painting (oil on copper) and its frame (beechwood), every statue (ivory) and every artifact, from Egyptian sarcophagi to richly detailed eighteenth-century spoons so miniscule that they were invisible to the naked eye and had to be viewed through magnifying lenses. (182-3)

Miniaturization is an interesting phenomenon in itself. It expresses a wish for control, a desire to bring public space within the scope of the private eye. Within miniature scenes, public social rituals can be performed in front of a single spectator. The distinction between public and private becomes a mere question of scale. The emotional potential of human interaction is both magnified and carefully distanced. Most importantly, a manipulation of space, reducing it to private dimensions, replaces the necessity of making choices in time, with social and public implications.

Millhauser might appear to be playing for effects, but his stories reveal the extent to which effects are the visible traces of affect. Far from registering a “waning of affect”, the stories found in “The Knife Thrower” constantly return to the borderline between public and private experience in order to examine the places where private feeling and public action have parted ways. Millhauser’s stories are almost always located on that fragile frontier. “Edges” are often evoked in one way or another. If the very mechanisms of postmodern mapping seem to have run out of control, it is because they are being used to capture and hold in a kind of timeless suspension the human conflicts which they can explore but cannot explain. His miniatures and models do not invite the reader to plunge into a world of private fantasy. Rather, they suggest the need to look for some of the lost connections, to understand the specific ways in which feeling has become divorced from thought in American life. The character of “A Way Out”, forced into a duel with his mistress’s husband, has no cognitive map to help him find his way out of a hopelessly banal situation. The narrator says, in the moments preceding the duel, “Harter saw everything very sharply. It all seemed to have a meaning for him, a meaning that had always been there, but that he had failed to understand, as if he had spent his life with his head turned in the

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wrong direction” (72). But the reader is not surprised to learn that a man who “taught history—ancient, modern, and American” (56), but who has made no intellectual effort beyond thinking “of writing a longish essay on the effect of the muzzle-loading musket on campaign strategy” (63) is unable to grasp the whole picture and can see the arm of his adversary only as “the arm of the cowboy in the penny arcade” (75).

At the beginning of “The Knife Thrower”, the narrator says, “When we learned that Hensch, the knife thrower, was stopping at our town for a single performance at eight o’clock on Saturday night, we hesitated, wondering what we felt” (3). The narrator of another story, “Kasper Hauser Speaks”, offers what may be the only possible answer to this type of question when he says that it is “with no small measure of amazement” that he stands before the citizens of Nuremberg (201). Embedded in this word, which expresses the narrator’s emotion at being rescued by language from his primitive state, lies the “maze” into which the story, like all of Millhauser’s stories, leads the character and the reader. It may appear to be a simple pun, the most postmodern of postures. But it opens onto an entire world, leaving the reader, like the customers in the new department store “to search for secret relations that continue[d] to elude us” (139).