

[Book Review]

Readable or Not:
A Complaint on the Standard of Selection

by

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To keep definite standards in literary journals is prerequisite; it is more so if the journals are regarded as prestigious, because the judgment given by them has a wide and lasting effect, defining and forming the value and status of literature and criticism. For a number of years, however, in the journals of English and American literature studies published in Japan, I have come across a number of questionable articles. They are questionable in the point of quality, and most of them make me suspect whether they are really worthy of publication. As far as I have read, some articles are terribly written and almost incomprehensible in quite a few parts. Yet for mysterious and inscrutable reasons they are included in 'so-called' prestigious journals. Reading them, I often wonder to myself if I have suddenly become an idiot, as I am not able to understand them well. But I have come to realize that the reverse may be true, because I can still enjoy and understand the difficult and scholarly articles published, for instance, in *American Literature*, *ELH*, and *SEL*. I wonder why such a thing occurs. What makes the difference?

The journals in Japan mentioned above have, of course, a referee system to judge the acceptance of contributed articles. The referees are selected by election (I do not know how the system works and what people vote for them) and are supposed to cover the separate fields of English and American literature; it is generally believed that each referee has a high level of literary discernment. But are they truly qualified? How many of them have had their articles published in distinguished American or British journals, such as the ones mentioned above? As far as I know, extremely few. How many of them actually have to date published at least two books? Again, few. Evidently, there are doubts as to the qualifications of the referees. Of course, specialized scholars' associations must function with limited human resources. Yet something must be done—not only as to a reappraisal of the qualifications of referees but to the system of their selection. At least I think it is necessary that the literary achievements of would-be referees be shown in detail to all members at the time of their selection. And they should be balloted by the members.

To evidence an example of the inclusion of questionable articles, I will review an article in *Studies in American Literature* (No. 35). It was published by the American Literature Society of Japan in March 1999. The title is "Knowing and Unknowing in Wallace Stevens's 'The Comedian as the Letter C'" by Abe Masahiko. As to this article, I have to confess first that it was not enjoyable reading. Actually, I felt like giving up again and again, because it needed an enormous amount of my energy and patience. It is so poorly written, and some parts are almost beyond comprehension.

In the introduction, Abe first focuses on the matter of the storyline of "The Comedian as the Letter C" (in the following discussion abbreviated as "Comedian"), touching upon some of its characteristics. It is long but I will quote it in full, because it is important:

"The comedian as the Letter C" has a unique status among the works of Stevens for a number of reasons: its length, its semi-autobiographical reflection, its constantly baffling flow of unusual diction, and above all its explicit plot. With regard to the plot, Hi Simons set the norm as early as 1940 by reading the poem as an allegorical account of the

poet who grows out of romantic subjectivism into versions of realism, and then eventually reaches fatalism (453–68). Such a pessimistic storyline has directed critics' attention to the darker side of the poet of *Harmonium*, which is otherwise regarded as full of exotic lustre and hedonistic playfulness. Vendler sees in the apparent gaiety of "Comedian" "a tale of false attempts and real regrets" (54), while Bloom's less disapproving remark is nonetheless discreetly equivocal: "It is funny in places, it is bitter almost everywhere, frequently to the point of rancidity, and yet it shares fully in the obsessive quest that it only ostensibly mocks. (70)

Is "Comedian" unique because of "its constantly baffling flow of unusual diction"? Aren't Stevens's other poems usually full of unusual dictions? Anyway, Abe thinks that the plot of "Comedian" is explicit. I have some doubts about it. First, I do not understand in what sense he uses the words "explicit plot." Is he referring to the phrasing structure and flowing content of the poem, or to the changes in Crispin's life, or to the psychological transitions of the poet Stevens reflected in the poem? Abe seems to be referring to the third case, because he next introduces Hi Simons's reading of the poem as "an allegorical account of the poet." Stevens is here considered as he grows "out of romantic subjectivism into versions of realism, and then eventually reaches fatalism." "Versions of realism" is obscure, yet permissible. But how can the transition of the poet be called "pessimistic"? Is it not too much to call pessimistic the change from romantic subjectivism to realism? Abe also writes that "while Bloom's less disapproving remark is nonetheless discreetly equivocal." What did Bloom less disapprove? Also, is Bloom's quoted remark truly equivocal? To me, not at all. How does Abe find obscurity in Bloom's lines?

Next, Abe explains that the purpose of his article is to examine the relationship between the narrator and the narrated, stating that "narration is often treated as complementary to that of the main plot" and that "the narrative agent represents the rhetorical plane that is regarded as separable from the biographical storyline." He emphasizes that the relationship should be understood as to "the shadow of fatalism that prevails in the poem," because "even the narrator's performance is conducted in response to what might be termed discursive fatalism." I think

that this is an interesting idea. But what is “discursive fatalism”? He never explains it. The use of the word ‘discursive’ itself is ambiguous.

In any case, Abe finds the symmetry of “A is B” in Stevens’s discursive fatalism and sees in the equation an “interrogative stage” and a “questioning tone.” It is difficult for me to agree that the symmetrical relationship can be interrogative. Abe never explains why it can be interrogative. Even if I accept his assertion, I still cannot follow his next argument. Explaining the relationship of the equation, Abe astonishingly starts to bring religion and philosophy into his discussion. He argues that “despite its questioning tone, such an approach to knowledge tends to be preconceptual, because its essence lies in the Judeo-Christian-style ascertainment of knowledge rather than in the dialectical inquiry characteristic of classic Greek philosophy.” Could anyone with a proper mind really understand this line? First, I see no reason here to refer to Judeo-Christianity and classic Greek philosophy. Second, Abe never shows any reasonable grounds to say that the essence of the equational relationship to knowledge lies in a particular religion and philosophy. Certainly, Abe quotes from Kennedy to buttress his idea, but again, incredibly, Kennedy’s statement does not support Abe’s idea at all. Abe completely misunderstands Kennedy’s statement. Kennedy says that Judeo-Christian rhetoric is close to philosophical rhetoric, characterized by “adornment, flattery, or sophistic argumentation” and thus simply forgetting God’s truth; and that in Judeo-Christian rhetoric God’s truth is given by God Himself, “not discovered by dialectic through man’s efforts.” Briefly, Kennedy says that Judeo-Christian rhetoric depends upon revelation. How can the revelatory rhetoric and Abe’s interrogative rhetoric be taken as one? Abe does not understand the difference between preconception and revelation. The former is human, the latter divine. Besides, it is doubtful whether Kennedy really uses the word “philosophy” to mean classic Greek philosophy; in any case, there is no way that from Kennedy’s statement one can agree with Abe that the essence of the equational relationship lies in Judeo-Christian reasoning.

Abe continues to state that, briefly, there are two worlds of religious revelation and equational truth. And in the equational world

there is little room for the will and discourse to act since everything is predetermined. He says that the case also applies to Stevens who works hard upon "aphoristic symmetry." This is what Abe really wanted to say. I wonder why Abe made the fuss over the religious and philosophical prating above. He could have reached this point by bypassing the almost illogical argument.

Anyway, Abe says that Stevens collected "aphorisms of various sorts" yet did not evolve them into "any argumentative discourse," and that "it may seem quite reasonable to parallel some of his poems with these aphorisms." But Abe never does the job. Instead, he says:

The coincidence of his resumption of poetry in the 1930s with his renewed interest in the collection of aphoristic expressions is just one of the examples. But the transition is not as smooth as can be explained in terms of source and outcome, or material and product. For the fatalism of knowledge—the "oracular rocking"—does not quite match the American and Stevens's own ideal of the poet as is imagined through Crispin

I wonder if the fatalism of knowledge is the same as the "oracular rocking." Probably not. At any rate, the point is, as far as I understand it, that in the 1930s Stevens began to write poetry by assimilating aphorism into it while probably knowing that aphorism is fatal to poetry because it predestines knowledge. I would like to know how much Stevens was conscious of the risk. Yet Abe continues by quoting from Stevens and Whitman to assert that the fatalism of knowledge does not comply with the ideal poetic figure of the mainstream of American poetry. Abe's assertion is understandable. But his logic and sense of interpretation is incomprehensible. And he does not know how to quote. He writes:

The suggestion seems to be that poetic discourse is not an end, but a process. The aphorism, contrastively, may supply one with a piece of knowledge, or at least make one feel that one is knowledgeable, but it does not necessarily encourage one to be an active speaking subject. By implication it puts an end to the explorative process. It declares completeness and renounces extension.

This passage is attached to the quotations from Stevens's and Whitman's poems. First, how can Abe reach the idea of his first line through the poems he cites? The poems never indicate that "poetic discourse is not an end, but a process." In them, as one can see, the heroes and spiritual messengers are certainly in the process of adventure, but that does not mean that the poetic discourses themselves make the process Abe indicates. The process of the character's transition is different from that of the discourse's change. Furthermore, what is the meaning of the line that "one is knowledgeable"? It is too obscure and too much to demand that the reader should understand this.

In the next part, Abe says that "the aphorism is peculiarly voiceless as a mode of discourse; words come as if through something beyond human organs." What does this mean? How can man perceive words without the use of human organs? Furthermore, he says that "the mode's implicit denial of discursive evolutions, which would otherwise qualify and transform the static symmetry, renders the vocal stasis exotic and unreachable in tone." Abe first declares that aphorism is voiceless and then at the next moment asserts that it is "vocal." What should we believe? He then uses Borroff's idea, saying that "Stevens's frequent use of sound-symbolic words reflects his view of poetic language as something partly inhuman and uncanny." What is Borroff's idea for? So far as I understand, what Borroff means by the "sound-symbolic words" is not exactly what Abe means by aphorism. It is far-fetched to apply the significance of "sound-symbolic words" to the aphorism. What is the basis for Abe to assert that they are the same?

To sum, in Abe's concept, because of its own limitation, aphorism makes Steven's speaker taciturn and urges him to "compressed reticence" (Abe's words, the meaning of which I have no idea) in "Comedian." Abe closes the introductory part of his essay as follows:

In the following discussion I shall examine how Stevens dramatizes a departure from symmetrical fatalism, how he substitutes for an oracular subjectivity another more dynamic one. The substitution essentially takes place at the level of motivation: it is knowledge as a motive for the speaking subject that is replaced. Stevens here invents

another motive for utterance. But he also invites us to contemplate the intriguingly “unnatural” process of invention

Who understands this passage? It is a nonsensical hotchpotch. Why does Abe not write in a way anyone can understand? It reflects nothing but the state of his muddled head. What I get at most from this passage is that Abe will examine how Stevens departs from “symmetrical fatalism,” (which I agree is worthy of investigation), and how the poet creates a stronger “oracular subjectivity,” whose meaning, apparently, is vague without definition. The rest of the passage is beyond comprehension.

In deciphering “Comedian,” Abe regards its beginning as an oracle and says, “It stands out because it is uncanny.” In what sense does he use the word “uncanny”? In the previous section, he interprets the beginning of the poem by stating that “Wisdom looms large from the outset. Knowledge precedes experience.” In other words, calling the first part of the poem uncanny, Abe at the same time interprets it as indicating wisdom and knowledge. What is this paradox? Furthermore, obscure passages continue: Abe states that the “queer accents” of the oracle “erode ‘proper’ language,” resulting in the phrase that “the primary knowledge loses its grip on common sensibilities.” He never shows exactly how the queer accents “erode ‘proper’ language”; he merely thinks so. Nor does he explain the relationship between primary knowledge and common sensibilities.

Abe discusses the comical tone of “Comedian,” and discovers “underlying uneasiness.” Yet a problem occurs again. According to Abe, Stevens’s aim is to depart from “the primary knowledge”:

As one moves on in the poem, it becomes manifest that what is more important than the eventual farcical circularity between reticence and eloquence, or the authentic and the exotic, is Stevens’s attempted abandonment of the primary knowledge: departure from the “given” is his principle aim.

This paragraph makes the idea of departure complex. As we already saw in the above, Abe first stated that Stevens tried to dramatize “a departure from symmetrical fatalism” of aphorism; now he explains that Stevens attempted to depart from “the primary knowledge”. Abe’s

sense of "symmetricalized fatalism," as I infer, refers to the deadlock of stasis, while he regards "the primary knowledge" as something defining human sensibilities, because he says that "the primary knowledge loses its grip on common sensibilities." In any case, what is important is that a departure from "symmetricalized fatalism" and one from "the primary knowledge" are two different things. The former concerns the rhetorical stasis of aphorism, the latter the knowledge regulating human sensibility. It is most likely that Abe mixes them. If he considered them the same from the start, he should have defined them so.

Whatever the meaning of Abe's "departure" is, what he wants to say after all is that "the separation of the hero from the narrator" is now possible. Quoting from "Comedian," he says, "The trope Stevens uses for the two paralleling plots is 'severance':"

Severance

Was Clear. The last distortion of romance
Forsook the insatiable egotist. The sea
Severs not only lands but also selves.
Here was no help before reality. (30)

As a matter of course, Abe takes the meaning of severance to be "the separation of the hero from the narrator." I wonder where there is an indication that the narrator is separated from the hero in the above quotation. Is it really true that Stevens's idea of severance refers to the separation of the hero from the narrator? After this quotation, almost incredibly, Abe interprets the "selves" as the plurality of "Crispin's character or vocation" and insists that Crispin thus acquires "a third person status." Where is the narrator? Finally, as if to repair his logic, he retrieves a forgotten ghost and says, "Two separate ontological levels are created in the poem, the one for Crispin, and the other for the invisible narrator." This zigzagging argument is unbearable to read. Besides, is it such a splendid discovery that Crispin and the narrator have different identities? Isn't it a commonplace idea in literature? In *Paradise Lost*, for instance, do we regard the narrator as Satan?

Abe writes in the next paragraph: "Severance also occurs as to the locality of discourse, though initially the axis wavers, like Crispin, in

the undulating water.” What is “the axis”? He never explains it. In his article, evidently, Abe has a habit of throwing in unexpected words without any reference, not knowing that they will muddle up the flow of logic and torment the reader enormously. Furthermore, he does not even know simple rules to follow in writing. Touching upon the locality of the narrator and Crispin, for instance, he says,

The exact location does not really matter so much as the sharp distinctness of “at last” and the “final tone.”

This line itself is ambiguous, but that is not much of a problem here. The problem is that I could not find the words with quotation marks in the stanza Abe cited just above the line. So I reread further back, thinking that I probably missed them somewhere. I could find the “at last” way up, but never the “final tone.” Where did Abe get the words “final tone”? So I read further and further back again and again. But I never discovered them. Finally, I checked the original that Abe cited, and, alas, it was there. Abe had abbreviated it in the last dotted line in his quotation and dared to use it with indifference in his text. Can such a bad practice be condoned? I do feel that he needs to be dispatched to a freshman composition class.

After the blunder, Abe continues to write about Crispin’s development and the change of the first oracle. I guess that it may be interesting to investigate how Crispin’s development accords with the change of the oracle and how it is carried out. The primary concern of Abe’s argument, however, is with the progressive structure of the changes, not with their content. Therefore, he never explains the significant meaning of the change of the first oracle: from “Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil” to “Nota: his soil is man’s intelligence.” Also, Abe avoids calling the second “nota” as an oracle; instead he calls it “note,” because he thinks that it is not “authorized.” Yet as far as Crispin is concerned, whether the second note is authorized or not is a trifle matter. What counts is what meaning it has to Crispin.

In the part subtitled “Narrative Unknowing,” Abe continues with the following statement: “When the aphoristic equation is thus disturbed and converted into a restless evolving story in ‘Comedian,’ there occurs

a paralleling transformation in the narrator." A careful reader would think that this line is odd. Because in the previous part (p. 57), Abe wrote the aphoristic equation "is treated as a self-contained piece of knowledge and does not evolve into any argumentative discourse." Though there may be a slight difference in the use of words between the statements, it is clear that the former admits the evolution of aphorism and the latter does not. Which statement is correct? This is an incredible deception! Furthermore, Abe emphasizes that the "oracular narrative agent" becomes "more self-conscious in terms of his relation with the audience" and says that "through these beckoning and nodding, the speaker shows himself as an entertaining host who is quite mindful of the guest listeners." Abe thinks that the following lines from "Comedian" express "beckoning and nodding": "Yet let that trifle pass. Now, . . ." (32); 'The book of moonlight is not written yet / Nor half begun, but, when it is, leave room / For Crispin, fagot in the lunar fire' (33)." I must say that Abe has a peculiar sensibility. How can those lines be taken as "beckoning and nodding"?

What Abe argues in the first part (pp. 63-64) of "Narrative Unknown" is, briefly, that the narrator of "Comedian" becomes "more self-conscious" and purposeful "to reach through his verbal action for what is more than what he knows." According to Abe, the narrator "creates a zone of the unknown." Now, the two statements look similar and flawless. But does Abe really know what he himself says? There is a large difference, almost from heaven to earth, between reaching for the unknown and creating it. Abe is completely unaware of the difference. What is particularly flabbergasting is the following part: Abe asserts that the narrator needs to become an *ignoramus*. In Abe's words:

firstly, in trying to nurture the curiosity of the postulated audience, he simulates their ignorance and looks forward with them to the coming *dénouement*; secondly, he wears the face of an anxious narrator who is not sure about the response of his audience.

The narrator "simulates their [the audience's] ignorance." What does this line mean? Furthermore, Abe regards the narrator's effort to be ignorant as "coaxing," and for this reason he thinks that the narrator is

motivated and becomes “eloquent and dynamic in emotion.” As I infer, what Abe insists is, briefly, that feigning ignorance motivates the narrator to acquire his “subjectivity.” I must say that Abe has a peculiar logic. He eventually calls this feigning ignorance of the narrator “the act of ‘unknowing,’” and considers it as also applicable to Stevens. In other words, the narrator and Stevens intentionally becomes fools to deceive. While such things occur, Abe says that Crispin who is cursed with fatalism comes to acquire “the oracular sensibility.” For Abe, Crispin ultimately appears as a poetic scapegoat for Stevens’s attainment of subjectivity: “Crispin as a poetaster is sacrificed for his creator.” Crispin is made “an unmistakable fatalist” and “a compulsive aphorist.”

I have no intention to refute Abe’s interpretation here. He can think whatever he wants to. But I believe at least that he is responsible to show his points in a fair and scholarly way. He insists first that the narrator feigns ignorance. But where is the evidence? Show at least a stanza to prove it. Otherwise, it is nothing but a child’s imaginary blabbering. Furthermore, he has a peculiar sense of interpreting poetry. This can be seen in the quotation from “Comedian” which Abe thinks describes fatalist and aphorist Crispin. Here, it is made clear again that Abe has no ability to quote. The quotation is as follows:

The wind,
Tempestuous clarion, with heavy cry,
Came bluntly thundering, more terrible
Than the revenge of music on bassoons.
Gesticulating lightning, mystical,
Made pallid flutter. Crispin, here, took flight. (32)

Abe’s explanation attached to this stanza is that “While the farcical festivity suggests an escalated narrative campaign for attention, it also brings into focus Crispin’s contrastively pale, melancholic look.” Apalling absurdity! How can we accept his main thesis, then, when he makes such a terrible interpretation?

In my opinion, the narrator never feigns ignorance. I do not feel it in “Comedian.” The narrator may appear so because he comes to be

put behind the active description of Crispin. As Crispin comes to establish his identity, he obtains a verbal and ideological independence: he becomes not only the object of Stevens's imaginative language but the active subject of his own language. The fact is not that the narrator creates a realm of the unknown, but that he simply disappears behind the stage. The narrator never makes an effort to become an *ignoramus*, nor does he go through the process of any voluntary "unknowing." Simply, he comes to be forgotten as Crispin establishes his identity.

Abe describes Crispin in the fourth section of "Comedian" as a purposeful figure with a colonial project and in the fifth section as fixing his project in actual reality. There is nothing to argue here, for there is nothing new. Coming to the last section of the poem, Abe sums up that Crispin's anecdote is detached from the narrator and Stevens; and they can have a freer view beyond "the dilemma between knowledge and utterance" and create "another sphere of verbal motivation." Simply put, Abe says that in "Comedian" there are two plots: one is the narrator's (or Stevens's), and the other Crispin's; and that the narrator (or Stevens), by giving free rein to Crispin and feigning ignorance, sets himself free from the curse of fatalism and succeeds in creating his own poetic independence.

On the whole, from Abe's essay I did not get any impression that it made me understand "Comedian" any better. As shown above, a number of parts are almost incomprehensible and absurd, and there are still some other questionable parts I have overlooked. Abe set to deal with a difficult problem, but he never carries it out successfully. His argument is muddled and unscholarly. He is persuasive here and there, but on the whole not convincing at all. Besides, some of his arguments are deceptive, though he shields them with "theoretical" ideas.

Apparently, Abe likes to write theoretically and philosophically. Then, why doesn't he write in a readable and reasonable style? I have no doubt that his essay is a typical one that fakes a simple idea with pseudo-philosophical and pseudo-theoretical flourishes. It is astonishing that despite so many flaws, this essay was selected as excellent in a

prestigious journal, representing 2,000 scholars of American Literature Society in Japan. Evidently and sadly, the referees were “brilliantly” deceived by the convoluted style of the essay. The inclusion of the essay makes me strongly doubt the qualifications of the referees. Anyway, if they believed in its value, they should at least have required the contributor to rewrite it because it is so poorly written.