

SELECTED ESSAYS ON
ART AND LITERATURE,
1966 TO 2005

Radical Coherency

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a dazzling jumble of shards that keeps threatening to assemble itself into a fairly dull familiar thing which you hope it doesnt and i understand this pleasure in regarding sears as a work that was done for you yet there are other kinds of organization that i find interesting banal coherencies for example that can become somehow suddenly interesting

there was a professor when i was in college a professor of french literature a balding little man in an ordinary dark tweed jacket and gray pants and cordovan shoes who one day appeared wearing a gray chamois glove with a pearl button now there he was in his professional tweed jacket and his ordinary striped shirt and tie with a stickpin but wearing a single gray chamois glove with a pearl button and it was not especially noticeable except that he didnt take the glove off in classes or at coffee with guest lecturers or in conferences in his office with students and while no one made very much of it no one could figure out when they thought of it why this dumpy little french professor with the watery blue eyes and slightly bulbous red nose was wearing one gray chamois glove

but soon things became slightly more coherent he started appearing with two gray chamois gloves and some time later apparently having found his way to a thrift shop he had bought himself perhaps for seventy five cents or a dollar an old alpaca morning coat in splendid condition but he still looked funny wearing his blue or pink striped shirts and the thin dark tie with his morning coat and chamois gloves and the cordovan shoes that professors used to affect in those days but before long he was wearing black pumps striped trousers and stiff white dress shirts with a softly knotted flowing tie then he acquired a walking stick and disappeared which is to say that he had acquired a banal coherency that was not so banal at new yorks city college in 1953 and he had acquired it progressively growing more and more coherent each week and more banal till the final moment at which point he disappeared and thats also a form of coherency or rather a movement from and toward coherency ive found interesting

at one time there was at city college a conventional coherency of which this man was a part at some point he began to become less coherent for a time he became a form of incoherency that gradually evolved toward an absolute if discordant banality and at that moment disappeared and this movement i have also found interesting but not so much nowadays now i am more interested in the kinds of coherency that develop sometimes rather startlingly out of the way the human mind works as it faces the exigencies of everyday life that is i'm interested in the way the mind works because i dont know how the mind works in this area i'm very ignorant but fortunately as i find fortunately or

unfortunately so is everybody else specialists in the working of the human mind dont know very much about it which surprises you or rather it surprises me it may not surprise you it surprises me

because things happen with the human mind that are very peculiar and startling and reveal unlikely situations that require nearly no cultivating only to be attended to and sometimes you cant help attending to them

my little boy hes no longer a very little boy blaise hes thirteen years old he was going to sleep and feeling sentimental he was sleepy and couldnt sleep and in spite of being thirteen he was being sentimental usually hes a cheerful noisy kid who sounds a lot like the poet hes named after blaise cendrars thats his name and its turned out to be the right name for him but today he was being young and sentimental and he said "why dont you put on the sleepy time music daddy you know the sleepy time music you always put on that record by fields" "fields" i said "fields?" "you know" he said "w.c." and sure enough it was the debussy flute viola and harp sonata that we always used to play for him when he was agitated since he was three so it occurs to me that there are ways that the mind organizes things that are rather startling that are more surprising than what you can do mechanically

that are more surprising than what i can do by planning to sit down and cut the pieces up or surprise myself by shaking them in a hat or getting a machine to shake them in its hat for me and i like shaking things in a hat no matter whose hat but you dont normally come up with things that are quite so surprising when you do that or at least i havent for a long time by shaking things in hats and i think sometimes even trying to formulate merely to formulate a kind of sense out of someones most conventional narrative just to try to make sense of it appears to produce a radical coherency that i had never anticipated for example when my grandmother was dying and i had never fully understood this

my grandmother was a very elegant lady a sort of high class european style lady from a kind of european jewish background and she was dying and when she was dying she was dying for a while she was weakening and she had taken to bed now she was a very lively lady by temperament so she was not someone who liked being in bed and at one point while i was there i came in and she was protesting and at the time i thought she was protesting being in bed and it would have been very much like her to say to hell with this and try to get up and do something but she was protesting obscurely she kept saying over and over again "theres not enough room not enough room" and i kept trying to listen because she had become very weak and was speaking