

“Did This Really Happen?”: Amit Chaudhuri’s Acknowledgement of the Autobiographical

PAUL DEB

Abstract: In a recent online lecture, the acclaimed novelist Amit Chaudhuri responded to an accusation that has greeted his fiction since the start of his literary career: that since, as he openly admits, his novels contain people and events that are drawn from his own life, they are better thought of as thinly disguised memoirs—as not really novels at all. In this paper, I discuss this charge by drawing on an account by the philosopher Stephen Mulhall of the work of another distinguished novelist—J.M. Coetzee (more specifically, that work which features the character Elizabeth Costello). In particular, I want to establish the pertinence to Chaudhuri’s lecture of Mulhall’s analogy between aspects of that work and the work of the influential art historian and critic Michael Fried on the history of modernist painting. In so doing, I aim to show that the commitment to the projects of literary modernism and realism which Mulhall sees in Coetzee (and Costello), can also be seen in Chaudhuri’s understanding of the sense in which his novels both are, and are not, autobiographical.

Keywords: Amit Chaudhuri, autobiography, the novel, Stephen Mulhall, J. M. Coetzee, Michael Fried, Manet, modernism, realism

In a recent online lecture, the acclaimed novelist Amit Chaudhuri responded to an accusation that has greeted his fiction since the start of his literary career: that since, as he openly admits, his novels contain people and events that are drawn from his own life, they are better thought of as thinly disguised memoirs—as not really novels at all.¹ In this paper, I discuss this charge by drawing on an account by the philosopher Stephen Mulhall of the work of another distinguished novelist—J.M. Coetzee (more specifically, that work which features the character Elizabeth Costello).² In particular, I want to establish the pertinence to Chaudhuri’s lecture of Mulhall’s analogy between aspects of that work and the work of the influential art historian and critic Michael Fried on the history of modernist painting. In so doing, I aim to show that the commitment to the projects of literary modernism and realism which Mulhall sees in Coetzee (and Costello), can also be seen in Chaudhuri’s understanding of the sense in which his novels both are, and are not, autobiographical.

Realism, Modernism, and the Novel

In addition to Fried, Mulhall draws on the work of two other influential critics and theorists of the arts—Terry Eagleton and Ian Watt—in order to articulate his understanding of the projects of realism and modernism in relation to the genre of the novel. And his account takes off from the following preliminary definition of the genre, taken from the opening of Eagleton’s *The English Novel*:

It is less a genre than an anti-genre. It cannibalizes other literary modes and mixes the bits and pieces promiscuously together. You can find poetry and dramatic dialogue in the novel, along with epic, pastoral, satire, history, elegy, tragedy and any number of other literary modes... The novel quotes, parodies and transforms other genres, converting its literary ancestors into mere components of itself in a kind of Oedipal vengeance on them... The novel is an anarchic genre, since its rule is not to have rules. An anarchist is not just someone who breaks rules, but someone who breaks rules as a rule. (Mulhall 141)

Understanding the novel in these essentially parasitic terms immediately suggests that the roots of the genre will reside in a certain kind of critical or Oedipal relation to a preceding literary genre or genres; and Eagleton (like many commentators) proposes the romance as the novel's primary generic ancestor: "novels are romances—but romances which have to negotiate the prosaic world of modern civilization ... [a] place where romantic idealism and disenchanted realism meet" (Mulhall 141). In other words, to the novelist, the defining conventions of romanticism appear as no longer capable of facilitating the representation of reality in a way that accurately captures its true nature—rather, they misrepresent or falsify it—leading her to recognise that, in the name of a continued commitment to the faithful representation of the real, they must be radically subverted or otherwise overturned. In this way, from or at the moment of its birth, the novel's characteristic conjunction of the spirits of anarchy and realism can be understood to generate a distinctively modernist relation to itself. As Mulhall puts it, "Modernism, realism, and the novel are as if made for one another" (142).

He continues however by identifying what appears to be the self-defeating nature of such an account, a problem he finds summarised in the following quote from Watt's canonical study of the origin of the genre in *The Rise of the Novel*: "Formal realism is, of course ... only a convention; and there is no reason why the report on human life which is presented by it should in fact be any truer than those presented through the very different conventions of other literary genres" (Mulhall 144). In effect, Watt is here pointing out the conventionality of the conventions of formal realism, that the novel is of course as much a literary genre as the romance: just like its generic predecessor, it is populated by fictional individuals whose impression of reality depends on the employment of literary resources which are no less conventional, and the text as a whole can only ever achieve a representation of the real rather than reality itself. So, what kind of authority or superior claim to realism can the novel actually be said to possess? And for Watt (amongst others), the force of this question was soon to become apparent in the history of the novel, to inevitably subversive effect. By the 1760s *Tristram Shandy*, for example, would not only embody the resources of formal realism in order to create a convincing impression of reality, but simultaneously (and to the point of parody) make their conventionality a thematic as well as a formal issue. Consequently, Mulhall claims that it is not only the novel's originating relation to other literary genres that can be characterised as parasitic or anarchic; rather it also has a similarly Oedipal relation to previous work within the genre itself, and so to the generic conventions it has been bequeathed. This leads him to suggest that the history of the novel might therefore be understood in terms of novelists' repeated subjection of their inheritance of realistic conventions to critical questioning in order better to create an impression of reality in their readers (largely, by drawing their attention to the conventionality of those conventions). As he puts it:

[The novel] endlessly renews its claim to be an unprecedentedly faithful representation of individual human experience of the world in comparison with other literary genres precisely by claiming to be more faithful to that task even than its novelistic predecessors. Only by ceaselessly testing, criticising, and otherwise innovating with respect to the conventions through which it represents reality can the novelist create the impression that, unlike her predecessors' merely conventional efforts, she is conveying reality to her readers as it really is for the first time. And since her best efforts could only result in the recreation of new conventions, they—and so the impression of reality they make possible—will inevitably be vulnerable to the critical questioning of her own successors. (145-6)

With this brief summary of Mulhall's account of the relation between realism, modernism, and the novel in place, I want now to begin my discussion of its relevance to Chaudhuri's understanding of his own work, and to the accusation to which that work is often subjected.

Family Resemblances I: Chaudhuri, Coetzee, Costello

As Chaudhuri's opening discussion of the resemblance between his maternal uncle and F.N. Souza's charcoal self-portrait illustrates, insofar as their subjects can be seen to share certain common features, a portrait of one person may also be taken as the portrait of another (we might wonder whether Souza's self-portrait also resembles in some way Chaudhuri himself, insofar as the author may have inherited, on his mother's side, certain familial features shared by his uncle). Similarly, I want to suggest that Mulhall's portrait of Coetzee (and importantly, Costello) as a modernist realist is one that can also be taken to apply to Chaudhuri's self-portrait—to his understanding, such as it is, of himself as a writer of novels—presented in his lecture.

For example, in portraying Coetzee in such terms we might say that Mulhall takes him to be manifesting an inherently problematic desire: that the author is simultaneously both repelled and attracted by his inheritance of the novel's generic conventions as the means by which he might create a convincing appearance of reality; what we might think of as a fundamentally unsettling experience that forces him to subject that inheritance to critical questioning (for example by formal innovation), and thereby to occupy, seemingly despite his literary success, an essentially unsettled or unorthodox (say, anarchic) position in relation to the genre as a whole. And it would seem that Chaudhuri understands himself in similar terms, and with similar consequences. For he admits to being critical of and variously dissatisfied with the novel as a genre—confessing that he cannot help but to find its formal conventions or rules boring, or worse, abhorrent (hardly surprising then that he should want to devote a lecture to exploring the question of why it is that he writes novels at all)—and so thinks of his work, again seemingly despite its success, as outside or counter to the culture of the literary mainstream (a spirit of anarchism that gains further expression in Chaudhuri's development of and commitment to what he calls "literary activism"). Nevertheless, at the same time Chaudhuri confesses that he cannot help but find himself repeatedly drawn to the form. Indeed, despite deliberately trying to make a break from the novel—and succeeding for nearly a decade—he was eventually unable to resist his (insofar as he views himself as neither a "natural" writer nor reader of novels [Chaudhuri 4.5]) unnatural attraction to the practice of writing fiction and went back to it again; and then again, and again. We might think of this apparently inescapable desire or compulsion as disclosing the feminine side or aspect of the novel's modernist story of Oedipal revenge; that the novelist is somehow unwilling or unable entirely to deny the significance of the inherited conventions which gave birth to his originating attraction to the genre, and so to the genre itself—that he is so to speak, haunted by the figure of a mother.

But even before or behind such comparative exercises, Coetzee and Chaudhuri can be seen to share two obvious common features that can be quickly sketched: both novelists have been subject to critics' continuing attempts to locate them in relation to specific cultural, national, and literary contexts (as respectively, white and Asian, South African and Indian; and as variously modernist or postmodernist, colonial or postcolonial); and both have written novels which self-consciously appropriate canonical literary sources (*Robinson Crusoe* in Coetzee's *Foe*, the *Odyssey* [and to a degree, *Ulysses*] in Chaudhuri's *Odysseus Abroad*, in which he relocates the epic to the reality of the streets of London in 1985). And this sense of a marked similarity between the two authors is intensified when one notes that they also have a shared propensity variously to attribute these same features to the protagonists of their fictions (an apparent common emphasis on the identification of author with character which eventually leads them to write texts whose narrators are called respectively, 'John Coetzee' [in the trilogy *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime*], and 'Amit Chaudhuri' [in *Friend of My Youth*]). For example, Coetzee's recurring protagonist Elisabeth Costello is like him a celebrated novelist (for Mulhall, one who shares her author's

modernist realist aspirations), whose Australian origins put her at risk of being treated (as her son warns) of being treated as “a Mickey Mouse post-colonial writer”; and she too found success in the appropriation of a canonical literary text (relocating Joyce’s Molly Bloom from the confines of her bedroom to the reality of the streets of Dublin in 1904, in her *The House on Eccles Street*). And Chaudhuri’s namesake in *Friend of My Youth* is also an acclaimed novelist, who like his creator was born in Calcutta, grew up in Bombay, and whose fifth novel (by coincidence) was also called *The Immortals*—and expresses a similar resistance to the expectations of an Indian novel in English.

As Chaudhuri explains, the accusation that since he writes from life his novels are, obviously, not really novels but memoirs, is a long-standing one. Even before the issue returned with a new acuteness with the appearance of Amit Chaudhuri in *Friend of My Youth* (Chaudhuri’s seventh novel) his work had repeatedly courted or invited this charge. His first novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address*, for example, describes two childhood visits made from Bombay by a boy, Sandeep, and his mother to his (maternal?) uncle’s house in Calcutta; visits which Chaudhuri admits to having himself made, and at roughly the same time (leading the publisher and critic Karl Miller, after reading a chapter, to exclaim “It’s your bloody memoir!” [Chaudhuri 1.3]). And *Odysseus Abroad* (Chaudhuri’s sixth novel)—based on memories of his days as an undergraduate in London in the early 1980s—casts his maternal uncle as Odysseus and himself as Telemachus, an initial conceit which leads the author to map a proliferating series of features from his life onto the epic (Chaudhuri 1.7). This approach can of course be understood to reach its vertiginous peak or climax in *Friend of My Youth*, in which its first-person narrator, Amit Chaudhuri, details a series of events during a visit to Bombay in 2011 for the purposes of a book tour (staying at a club in Malabar Hill overlooking the building in which he grew up; visiting the Taj Mahal hotel to exchange some shoes; being interviewed by a newspaper; eating Parsi/Iranian food at Britannia restaurant; giving a reading from *The Immortals*; and missing an absent friend who has gone into rehab) all of which had occurred in Chaudhuri’s own life; and which ends with Amit Chaudhuri returning to Bombay, partly to engage in research for writing what he knows will become *Friend of My Youth*.

Given this apparent repeated identity of author and character, it is then hardly surprising that the questions “Is it from your life? Did this really happen?” should arise with tiresome regularity whenever Chaudhuri is asked about his work. As he says about one such incident, on the occasion of the publication of *Friend of My Youth*:

When the book came out, an interlocutor asked me, in the course of one of those events that newly published books can’t do without, if everything I’d described in it had happened. “More or less, I suppose. Almost all of it,” I said. “Then why call it a novel?” he asked, smiling pityingly, as if at a man who has a chronic problem he’s not aware of. “Why not say it’s a memoir?” (2.2)

But despite this blithe admission of the autobiographical nature of his novels, Chaudhuri nevertheless still wants to maintain that his fiction is exactly that: that for all that he might write from life, he still wants to claim that his novels in fact detail episodes that had no existence prior to their writing—they are “inventions”, he “made them up” (2.4, 7.1). As he says of *Odysseus Abroad*, “Everything in it is from life, and nothing in it is” (2.4).

How then are we to make sense of these apparently contradictory or paradoxical claims? Chaudhuri explains that his immediate response to his interlocutor’s question was to argue that the structure of the book was too fragmentary, and the excursions of Amit Chaudhuri which formed the book’s subject too sporadic, to count as a memoir; that since a memoir “must recount part or all of what happened to oneself... No respectable memoir should take a such a form” (2.2). In a Wattian spirit, however, we might say that these remarks seem hasty; we might question their prescriptive tone and invocation of the notion of

respectability. For if the genre of the novel is subject (albeit to an intensified or defining degree) to the rule- or convention-breaking operation of modernism, then why not other literary genres and forms, such as autobiography? However that may be, a year or two later Chaudhuri himself comes to reflect on the accuracy of his response and qualifies it by saying that when he admitted that everything he'd described in *Friend of My Youth* had happened (more or less), this was "true in one sense and untrue in another" (2.3); by which he meant that although the events which the novel details had really occurred, they had done so at different times, independent of each other. Thus, the episode of his visit to Bombay in March 2011 which occupies the first two thirds of the book actually never took place. So, when in the novel Chaudhuri writes the following paragraph, he takes himself as not only staying true to his sense of what is significant, but as giving shape to what's never existed:

In front of the building, upon the road—there's no pavement here—sits a woman on her haunches, displaying a basket of fruit. What she offers that the grocers' opposite don't, I can't say. In another area, there'd be a gaggle of squatting women. Here, she is one. One is enough for Little Gibbs Road. (Chaudhuri 2.4)

As he puts it:

Although I have crossed Little Gibbs Road many times, I never crossed it in March 2011 in the early evening, mainly because I wasn't in Bombay in March 2011. I never saw that woman sitting on her haunches selling fruit, though I may have seen such a woman at some time. (2.4)

Similarly, with respect to *Odysseus Abroad* and *A Strange and Sublime Address*, the day of 19 July 1985 whose arc the former follows is non-existent (Chaudhuri admits that, personally speaking, he was in Bombay at the time, so there was no chance of his encountering the figures of Menelaus on Warren Street or Odysseus in Belsize Park), and the incident in the latter, where Sandeep is present when his uncle has a heart attack, never occurred (Chaudhuri heard about it on the phone).

For Chaudhuri then, these various factual divergences or differences (of time, order, detail) between what really took place and what his novels describe—between episodes that had actually happened and those he had invented—constitute the sense in which his admission that everything described in them had occurred is both true in one sense and untrue in another; that everything in them is from life, and yet nothing is. I want now to argue that one way of understanding Chaudhuri's position here is to see it an expression of his modernist realism, of his novels as embodying a critical relation to the established literary conventions which he has inherited to create the impression of reality. And in so doing, I want to refer to the figure of Costello, rather than to Coetzee (thereby affirming the latter's success in creating the impression of the former as a modernist realist author—his success in creating the impression of Costello as a real individual in a way that bears comparison to that of a real human being [like a self-portrait might resemble its artist] insofar as her position here resembles that of Chaudhuri). For as it happens, Mulhall quotes an incident from *Elisabeth Costello* that is surprisingly similar to the one involving Chaudhuri and his interlocutor. When during an interview, the eponymous author is asked whether her most recent novel is autobiographical, she explains: "Of course we draw upon our own lives all the time—they are our main resource, in a sense our only resource. But no, *Fire and Ice* isn't autobiography. It is a work of fiction. I made it up" (Mulhall 167). While the unavailability to us of *Fire and Ice* prevents any appreciation of the extent to which its specific mixture of life and literature compares to that of *Friend of My Youth*, the parallel here between the two authors' responses is striking.

Mulhall immediately follows this quotation with a brief but suggestive remark that relies on his earlier analogy between the history of literary modernism and that of pictorial modernism (as the latter is interpreted by Fried, with particular reference to the work of Manet³):

This is the analogue in Costello to Manet's acknowledgment of his paintings as both conditioned by, and yet not reducible to, the fact of their being painted, and painted by one particular, historically situated individual. In both cases, to deny any relation between creator and creation would be as foolish as to [in Chaudhuri's case, passionately or pityingly] identify the two. The reality is, one might say, that they are embedded in one another. (167)

What then is the nature of this analogy, and how might it relate to the vexed issue of the nature of Chaudhuri's novels?

Family Resemblances II: Chaudhuri and Manet

On Mulhall's account, Fried's Manet, like his novelistic counterparts, is engaged in the critical questioning of the realist conventions by and through which the history of his artistic endeavour has been determined—the most central or primordial of which, in his case, is that paintings are made to be viewed or beheld, and therefore presuppose the existence of a viewer or beholder capable of doing so. According to Fried however, the contemporary condition which gives rise to such questioning, and to which Manet's work is a response, is one in which that convention has become deeply problematic for the enterprise of painting as such. For he takes it (drawing on the critical writings of Diderot) that by roughly the same period as that in which a loss of conviction in its prevailing conventions to represent reality was being felt by writers and readers in the genre of the novel, serious painters had started to sense that the existence or presence of a beholder could no longer be taken for granted—that the representations of reality found in painting were no longer capable of gripping or absorbing their increasingly estranged and alienated viewers, a development that threatened a loss of conviction in the very idea of pictorial representation itself, in the sheer possibility of creating convincing depictions of reality by means of pigment on canvas (irrespective of the specific painterly conventions artists might employ); and thereby endangered the status of painting as a major art.

Fried goes to explain that if such a threat was to be averted, the artist therefore had to create paintings that somehow earned, accomplished, or affirmed the beholder's presence or existence. As such, the essential task of the painter becomes above all to attract, arrest and finally to enthrall a beholder; to create a painting that brings the viewer to a stop in front of itself and holds her there in a state of perfect absorptive involvement, as if spellbound. If, however, the painting betrayed any consciousness of that task, it would thereby court theatricality by making the beholder aware of herself, and so of the illusion of reality by means of which she had been halted in front of the painting, thus breaking its spell. In the face of this theatricalising force, Fried outlines two antitheatrical artistic responses or strategies intended to recover the beholder's absorptive attention. The first (advocated by Diderot) embodied the seemingly paradoxical idea that only by establishing the fiction of the beholder's absence or nonexistence within the body of the painting could her actual placement before it, and enthrallment by it, be secured. But crucially, for Fried, this conception of the pictorial enterprise, and the antitheatrical strategy of which it was a part, ultimately rested upon the supreme fiction that the beholder did not exist, the ontological illusion that she was not really there, standing before the canvas. But since of course, any as it were fictional representation of reality can only operate in the context of such a literal or physical scene of representation—of a canvas and a beholder facing one another in space and time—the beholder's existence before the canvas could no more be negated or denied than could the canvas's existence before the beholder. Consequently, this antitheatrical tradition in effect committed itself to the entirely incoherent aim of denying the physical reality of its own works as well as that of those who behold them. And since paintings exist not just as physical objects and as fictional scenes of representation, but as products—the results of meaningful human activity—Fried sees another aspect or

implication of this incoherent denial of the literal scene of representation to be its negation or repression of this further fact about their nature: that in encountering a painting the beholder is not only perceiving an object and (if that encounter is successful) absorbed in a dramatic illusion, but is also confronting the work of another human being.

The second antitheatrical strategy identified by Fried, which he takes as finding its paradigmatic expression in Manet, is diametrically opposed to the first. For he sees Manet as attempting to reconstruct the specific painterly conventions he has been bequeathed in such a way as to acknowledge, rather than to deny, the apparently ineliminable conditions of pictorial representation as such. Manet's work thus realises three essential interrelated conditions or dimensions of any given painting: its material reality as a physical object (as pigment on canvas); its capacity to generate fictional pictorial space (thus relating it to a beholder); and its createdness (as a canvas that has been deliberately painted, thus relating it to a maker or producer). And according to Fried, Manet's acknowledgment of the createdness of his work is to be found in his unprecedented emphasis on the reality of the models that served him in his painting, and so of the scene of the studio in which they were painted (the as it were primordial or ontologically prior scene of representation to which his work's subsequent literal and fictional representative descendants are necessarily indebted); an emphasis that effectively prolongs the act of painting within—and so makes it continuous with—the painting itself. By forcibly directing his viewers' attention to this relationship between painter, painting, and model, Fried understands Manet as thereby attempting to produce work which acknowledges itself as the site of his own artistic efforts—as having its origins in the actions of a particular human being—and so makes it possible for a beholder to acknowledge her role as the beholder of intentional worked object, of the work that goes into producing a work of art.

In the present context, however, it is this third constitutive condition of painting that is of particular relevance. For we can now understand Mulhall's analogy between Costello and Manet to centre on their shared acknowledgement of the createdness of their respective works of art—their natures as products of their respective creator's artistic efforts. Costello's identification of her life as the main or only resource upon which her writing draws thereby acknowledges that writing as essentially related to or conditioned by that life, as having been written by a particular, culturally and historically locatable, human being. But at the same time, since that createdness is only one of three determining dimensions of anything recognisable as a literary (or pictorial) work of art, it cannot properly be understood as exhaustive of it, as if the latter were simply reducible to or straightforwardly identifiable with it. Rather if such work is to be properly acknowledged, by both novelist and reader, it must in addition be acknowledged as both a physical object (since one cannot acknowledge the process of creating a product without thereby acknowledging the product of that process), and as having the capacity to create fictional representations of reality. For Mulhall then (drawing on a phrase of Costello's), it seems more accurate to characterise the relation between *Fire and Ice* and its author—between creation and creator—as one of “embedding”, rather than identity (or indeed difference): that although the literary or artistic achievement of Costello's fiction is rooted or embedded in an originating matrix of literal—cultural, historical, and not to forget psychic and familial—contexts and factors that undeniably significantly condition or determine it; they do not thereby exhaust or define it. As Costello affirms, *Fire and Ice* isn't an autobiography, it is a work of fiction.

Extending this analogy to Chaudhuri, we might then understand *Friend of My Youth's* unprecedented emphasis on its author, on the reality of the person who served in its writing—an emphasis that in effect makes the work of writing continuous with the work itself (most explicitly in the novel's concluding reference to its own composition)—as a similar acknowledgment of its createdness. Indeed, we might say that Chaudhuri's persistent and forceful direction of his readers' attention, throughout his literary career, to the

ineluctable relationship between novelist and novel (embedding himself within them by drawing upon or writing from his life) thereby allows him to produce novels which both acknowledge him—the specific human being that he is—as their creator, and themselves as the products of that particular human being's creative efforts (thus embedding them within him). But again like Costello, insofar as Chaudhuri takes the createdness of his novels as not definitive of them (that everything in them is from life and nothing is, that the events they contain both had happened and had not) he claims that his novels are not memoirs but fictions in which, as he puts it, "I make up stories about my life" (7.1). And in so doing, Chaudhuri thereby identifies his novels as embodying a critical relation to the literary conventions which he has inherited—to the genre's prevailing understanding of the distinctions between the realms of facts and of fiction, and of truth and untruth—and so, to the nature of the novel itself and its relation to other literary genres (most immediately, autobiography).

Against this background, the patronising question about the essentially autobiographical nature of *Friend of My Youth* posed by Chaudhuri's interlocutor can be diagnosed as symptomatic of a chronic, recognisably Diderotian, denial of the mutually determining nature of these conditions. But whereas in the case of painting, that antitheatrical tradition denied those conditions by emphasising the fictional scene of representation and thereby occluded or repressed its literal counterpart, Chaudhuri's interlocutor would appear to be doing the reverse: focussing exclusively on the literal createdness of the novel, and so on the person of its creator, to the extent that its capacity to generate fictional representations is entirely negated. As Mulhall puts it, it is as if in the Diderotian mode of antitheatricality, the fictional and the literal are essentially self-cancelling, either the former blocks a proper attentiveness to the latter, or *vice versa*; thereby making it impossible to keep the two in focus simultaneously (155).

More generally, we can see this reductive impulse to identify Chaudhuri the character with Chaudhuri the author—to straightforwardly relate fictional creations to the biography of their creator—as yet another of the continuing attempts by the author's critics (and indeed his admirers) to locate his work in relation to certain specific cultural and historical contexts. But doing so to the extent that, self-defeatingly, their grip on the purported object of their attention—the literary achievement that presumably initiated their original attraction—slips away. And insofar as his readers give in to such an impulse, the familiar sense of independent existence or autonomy which Chaudhuri (typically of writers of fiction) takes his characters to possess is essentially denied. Rather, it seems that such readers are not fully prepared to allow that Chaudhuri's literary progeny can ever break with or outgrow the life of their, so to speak, suffocating parent; thus making them effectively stillborn (or at best disabblingly dependent), not so much embedded in their originating matrix or womb as buried.

This importance of the role of critic is something to which a lifelong friend and interlocutor of Fried, the philosopher Stanley Cavell, gives particular attention, in his understanding of modernism as a condition in which the relation between the present practice of an enterprise and its history has become inherently problematic.⁴ For he takes it to be a consequence of that condition that the challenges faced by the creator of a modernist work are ones that are mirrored or shared by its critical audience, since neither are able to rely upon or take for granted the governing conventions they have been bequeathed by the past of their particular practice in order to determine how, and indeed if, the work they create or behold is a genuine example of its living present. For the modernist artist then, nothing outside the work can establish its value or significance; and similarly for her critics, nothing outside of their experience of encountering the work can show that it has established (or failed to establish) the same. Instead, both must look to the work itself to validate, entirely from its own resources, whatever claims might be made with regard to its successfully

exemplifying the present continuation of the relevant artistic tradition, or its failing to do so. In other words, the immediate task of the modernist work of art is to stake a self-reliant or autonomous claim, both for its own existence and for that of the tradition which it aims to inherit; to as it were give account of itself (call it an autobiography) that will attempt to elicit or invite from its audience the conviction that it has earned the right to be acknowledged as a work of art, as deserving of that title as established examples from the history of that endeavour, and thereby allow that tradition to have a future.⁵

The particular burden of the modernist critic is thus to ensure that she gives genuine consideration to the invitation or opportunity that the work embodies. She must make certain that her impression or evaluation of the work is the result of giving her absolute and sincere critical attention to her personal experience of encountering the work as it is in itself; rather than the result of an impersonal and mechanical, essentially prejudicial, application of ingrained professional conventions, labels and expectations. The former will express her openness to the future, to the possibility of establishing new conventions that can create a new creative community (of at least two) which will allow her tradition to progress or continue; while the latter is an essentially inward- and backward-looking impulse—a disabling or paralysing fixation with the deliverances of the past—that occludes her ability seriously to consider the invitation that the artist's work presents; a self-destructive refusal of the possibility of entering into a genuine conversation about the nature of that tradition that will, over time, lead it to go dead.

Against this perilous background, it might not then seem unreasonable to ask those inclined to give a negative evaluation of a modernist work at least to reconsider the true nature of their position—to ask themselves (indeed for them to see themselves as obliged to ask themselves) whether the work has failed them, or they it (of course either could be true). Consequently, those for whom Chaudhuri's novels appear as a series of ever more obvious memoirs should at least give due consideration to the possibility that their view is grounded in various unquestioned assumptions and convictions that repressively dictate that a novel (and indeed, an autobiography) must necessarily possess certain features and take a certain form, rather than being grounded in a genuinely open encounter with it. Ironically, we might diagnose such a view as symptomatic of the failure of the creative or imaginative powers of such critics to appreciate the nature and possibilities of the novel as a genre at precisely the point at which they attribute exactly the same failure (manifest in his reliance on real people and events) to Chaudhuri as a novelist: in effect, making their criticism a self-criticism.

Accordingly, the supercilious refusal of Chaudhuri's interlocutor to acknowledge the fictional character of *Friend of My Youth*—to see there only autobiography—is not only indicative of a literal-minded failure on his part to exercise those powers in relation to that work, but to the genre as a whole. And of course, insofar as the construction of any novel's fictional impression of reality depends on the work of its readers as much as its author, those same imaginative powers are required by the interlocutor if he is to have any possibility of appreciating (positively or otherwise) other examples of the genre. His smirk thus betokens or betrays a reader at increasing risk of denying, or being stripped of, his capacity to imagine, and so of the very possibility of being a reader of fiction at all. A pitiful condition indeed.

But, importantly, this is not to suggest that any and all modernist writing can or should take an autobiographical form—that the only way a modernist author can properly acknowledge the createdness of her work is by writing autobiography (this would in effect be to repeat or succumb to the same failure of imagination as Chaudhuri's Diderotian interlocutor)—but it is to suggest that writing which does can be seen as responding to a recognisably modernist concern, and so cannot be immediately dismissed as an example of the relevant genre (as simply or self-indulgently autobiographical) for doing so. For of

course, if an author finds herself no longer able to draw upon the impersonal conventions that she has inherited to determine the nature and value of her work, she will then naturally have nothing else to draw upon but personal conventions (as Costello might put it, she must become her own main resource, in a sense her only resource); inevitably foregrounding herself in inherently personal artistic statements aimed at establishing new conventions, and so a new artistic community with each of her individual readers. And since the particular genre to which Chaudhuri finds himself repeatedly drawn is one which, from its birth, has displayed a parasitic or cannibalistic relation both to other literary genres and to itself, the fact that he writes novels that manifest a closeness to another genre—that which takes the expression of such personal statements as its defining business—should really be the very reverse of surprising to his audience. Indeed, one might well wonder why they would expect anything less from a gifted contemporary novelist genuinely deserving of that title.⁶

Institute of Continuing Education, University of Cambridge, UK

Notes

- ¹ “Why I Write Novels”. The text of the lecture was subsequently published online in *n+1*. In the absence of page numbers and section titles, all references to the text will be given by specifying the numbers of the relevant section and paragraph (e.g., material from the fourth paragraph of the third section would be cited as Chaudhuri 3.4).
- ² Specifically, chs. 9 and 10 of his *The Wounded Animal*.
- ³ Mulhall draws here on Fried’s magisterial trilogy *Absorption and Theatricality; Courbet’s Realism; and Manet’s Modernism*.
- ⁴ Most explicitly, in his early collection of essays *Must We Mean What We Say?*
- ⁵ One might then say that the genuinely autobiographical character of Chaudhuri’s novels is to be found not in the fact that he writes from life, but rather in the fact that they constitute works that he has taken a stand on, or stands behind—ones to which he is willing to put his name. In this sense, the autobiographical point is not that the novels contain his story, but that they are *his*.
- ⁶ I would like to thank Stephen Mulhall and Amit Chaudhuri for comments on a draft of this paper.

Works Cited

- Cavell, Stanley. *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge University Press, 1969.
- Chaudhuri, Amit. “Why I Write Novels.” *n+1*, 3 Dec 2020, nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/why-i-write-novels.
- Fried, Michael. *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- Fried, Michael. *Courbet’s Realism*. University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Fried, Michael. *Manet’s Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s*. University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Mulhall, Stephen. *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee & the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy*. Princeton University Press, 2009.