FORMLESSNESS AS FORM IN BEATTIE’S WRITINGS

“Ann Beattie is perhaps the first and finest laureate of that generation of Americans born to a society built on quicksand and doomed to a life in the long, ambiguous shadow of the sixties.”¹ She imagines a very real world of people trapped in relationships that don’t work. She combines a remarkable array of technical skills with material of wide popular appeal. Her characters inhabit our drab contemporary worlds and brood like us about their lovers, families, politicians and lives. They range from barely mobile children to the barely mobile elderly; bright and limited, educated and not, male and female, stoned and straight, exuberant and dogged. They compose a wide screen panorama of life in United States.

Traditionally novel has relied on action spun out and woven into a plot, complete with beginning and end. Little in our own lives corresponds to this orderliness and our own sensibilities are seldom so goal-oriented except in super markets. Beattie understands and dramatizes this formlessness of society. “She is especially the artist of situations not
plots and the novel *Chilly Scenes of Winter* is an excellent example of this predilection.”

In this novel Beattie renews the common places of the lonesome lover and the life of quite desperation. The novel’s major theme is not waiting for an answer or Laura or love, but waiting itself, wistful anticipation, life unfulfilled and yearning immersing us in specificity. Beattie makes us feel these generalities on our pulse. It is also the funniest novel of unhappy yearning that one could imagine. “It is continually, inventively and perceptively humorous, both in what it reports and in the quietly elegant shape of its reporting.”

The stylistic excellence of Ann Beattie is undeniable. Her spare, beautifully crafted stories and novels speak to and for the men and women who came of the age in the ‘60s and ‘70s, embodying that same curious fusion of hope and despair, dreams and dilapidation that Fitzgerald’s, Cheever’s and Updike’s have for their own generations.

In *Where You’ll Find Me and Other Stories*, Beattie has assembled fifteen of her finest short fictions published in *The New Yorker, Vanity Fair* and *Esquire*. Whether writing about a real-estate agent’s strange fascination with a beautiful bowl “Janus,” a couple who have come to terms with the loss of their daughter in “In the White Night” or an elderly
woman's chilly vision of the stairway to heaven in "Heaven on a Summer Night," she offers us a portrayal that is effortlessly exact and bears the sudden rush of truth. Taken as a group, these stories signal an often profound deepening of understanding both bad and good and plenty of both must be borne during a life on this earth. But coping with life's inevitable sadness requires acceptance, not resignation, affirmation instead of disaffection.

This pervasive sadness in Beattie's characters is due to the nostalgic yearning for their receding youth. In Summer People a character in a mood of melancholic recollection says "we will put on some fifties music and play high school." The heroine of In the White Night remembers the time, their Christmas tree catches fire, and their little girl, Sharon, tries to rush toward the flames and she also remembers the night in the hospital when they learn that Sharon has leukemia.

Where You'll Find Me is a harder and more resilient book than any we have seen from Ann Beattie. It strives toward a more complete and compelling vision of life as we live it and it succeeds in everything.

By contrast, Distortions Beattie's another collection of short stories is disappointing. The word 'Scenes' would perhaps be more apt here than in the title of her book, since that is all we are given – a series of
static scenes, humourless still lives of people who do not have any meaningful connections to humanity and who do not move, feel or grow. Beattie is unable to make us feel any empathy for most of the characters in Distortions – perhaps because they are too self absorbed to feel any for each other. "Unattached to the past, looking forward to no future they live only in the present tense, captured like creatures in amber and clearly going nowhere." To denote this the narrator uses images of physical suspension. This effect is caused by the double narrative that juxtaposes open and closed story and revealed and resolved plot.

Margaret Atwood rightly says: "These stories are not of suspense but of suspension." The narrator describes this physical suspension through her characters ascending in glass elevators in "The Cindrella Waltz," treading water in "Afloat", in 'the desire, for one brief minute they simply get off the earth,' and 'looking down ... from space' in "The Burning House."

Beattie's writing is not tedious; "there is instead, something graceful and painstaking about her fidelity to the ordinary." In "Imagined Scenes" from Distortions, we guess at the 'real facts' of the woman's life because we care about her, her sadness has been made significant. It follows that the author has cared about her in the making. But then it is more astonishing to perceive that the woman cares so little, so indistinctly..."
for herself. She is not suspicious, she has no imagination; the mark of Beattie’s respect for this creation is not to have slipped her some healthy suspicion as it were under the counter. In this forbearance the writer resembles some impossible ideal of a loving parent who succeeds in not interfering in her children’s lives. “To love one’s characters – Tolstoy is the presiding genius here – is to allow them to be who they are.”

All the stories of Ann Beattie can best be enjoyed in a narrative form of social history. She has a cool accurate eye for the moeurs of her generation. But a sharp eye for moeurs doesn’t add up to a full fiction any more than the attitude of irony can be said to represent a full human response. The story that, best weds feelings with artistic control is “Distant Music,” in which an office girl and a graduate school dropout are brought together by a mongrel puppy named Sam. They take the dog because they fear for its life. “They order their lives around it and for a time, consequently, they protect and nourish each other, the thriving puppy is their evidence that survival is possible even in huge cities.”

Beattie’s writing has something common with the style of ‘much serious fiction’ which has tended to be cool, to attend scrupulously to the surface of events, with a language pruned and polished in respect of its own surfaces. “Her sentences are often plain, flat, their grammar exposed like the lighting fixtures in avant-garde furniture boutiques and the effect
is at first wearying." Only later does the sympathetic centre of her work betray itself. We may feel misled by the outward reserve, but again, her willingness to distort when necessary, her passion for the particular is ultimately an index of her concern for the integrity of things and people in themselves.

Ann Beattie’s marked flat style is used in Distortions in the story “Hale Hardy and the Amazing Animal Woman.” The opening passage reveals the peculiar willlessness and passiveness of her characters:

Hale Hardy went to college because he couldn’t think of anything better to do, and he quit because he couldn’t see any reason to stay. He lasted one and a half years. He did not exactly quit; he was thrown out. When that happened he went to visit his sister Mary who was living with another girl, Paula who was being supported by some dude. Hale didn’t know the dude’s name or why he was supporting her or why his sister was living there. He just went.

Many of the characters in Distortions and Chilly Scenes of Winter verge on the grotesque. Here Beattie risks a convergence with her slicker contemporaries, whose fascination with the grotesque is full of smugness about what is ‘normal.’ There is a dog in Chilly Scenes of Winter who is a
good example of Beattie’s success with the grotesque. The dog is purchased to replace an entirely admirable dog who has died of old age, much mourned. But the new dog is ugly – part dachshund, part cocker spaniel – as well as hapless and insomniac. And yet, the people around him feel the dog must be fed and must not be compared to his predecessor; at night, his audible perambulations must be endured. “Because ‘terrible genetic mistake’ that he is the dog, named ‘Dog’ is real and undeniable. He is part of that world of fact that Beattie honors almost compulsively, what ever its unwelcomeness or distortion.”

The central figure of the novel, *Chilly Scenes of Winter*, is a young man named Charles, whose quality of self-ignorance is Beattie’s fullest, most intelligent image. He does not know that he is smart, and apparently does not wish to know it, because he has chosen to work in a government office where his abilities are irrelevant. He does not know that he is kind: his many services to others are unmarked by signs of sympathy, generosity, concern or liking; he is made dizzy by his sister’s assertion that he is good. His knowledge that he is unhappy is mere circumstantial. Approaching thirty, he has come to terms with none of the absurd relationships that comprise his life. His only workable relationship is with Syam, his constant companion, who is present nearly on every page. It is significant that Syam as portrayed by Beattie is dull, shapeless,
unrealized. His friendship with Charles is at once blank and affectionate. Its very existence is capable of surprising then, when they must notice it.

Charles and Syam know nothing in fact, about the causes of their loneliness except the details of the pleasureless routine it imposes upon them. Charles is forever gazing hungrily into a cupboard bare of anything except Tuna stretcher and a jar of pickles, forever wondering at the existential courage of people who do all their shopping on one day for the week ahead. Charles’s eye for detail reflects the paradox of Beattie’s own: a passive accuracy of observation masks an active, unsettling distrust of what one sees.

There is one aspect of Ann Beattie’s writing that seems regrettable. Charles’s mother’s baths, his own baths, his sister’s showers; Syam’s car, Pete’s car, dogs and cats; medical references, doctors, disease – all these constitute what used to be called ‘motifs’ or ‘images’. Details drifting from person to person, thing-to-thing, they bend too steadily and purposefully toward significance, betraying an obtrusive self-consciousness about craft which is rather rare in Beattie’s work. It seems to the reader directly at odds with the vitality of her talent, her capacity to conjure independence and actuality of things.
Ann Beattie is well known for her hangdog prose – a stunted use of language alternating with sudden bursts of lyricism. She feels that her endings are to be the most important part of her stories and that she knows when she has a good one because it ‘feels right.’ The feelings more often than not, are of distancing and disembodiment, the desire, mentioned at the end of “Afloat,” “more overwhelming than love... for one brief moment, to get off the earth.”¹⁴ In “The Burning House” Beattie wraps up as a husband tells his wife that he is leaving her to become ‘a star.’:

“... I am going to tell you something about them. Men think they’ve Spider-Man and Buck Rogers and Super Man. You know what we all feel inside that you don’t feel? That we’re going to the stars.”

He takes my hand, “I’m looking down on all of this from space,” he whispers, “I’m already gone.”¹⁵

Images of watery diffusion swamp Beattie’s stories. She becomes lyrical when the things start to get wet. The narrator of “Girl Talk” feels her first contractions while sitting down to cocktails at the house of her boy friend’s family:
I am really at some out-of-the way beach houses with a man I am not married to and people I donot love, in labour.

Seven squeezes a lemon into the pitcher, smokey drops fall in to the soda and wine. I smile, the first to hold out my glass. Pain is relative.\textsuperscript{16}

Unlike Hemingway Beattie writes in present tense and relies heavily on dialogue and on a purified declarative prose. \textit{Chilly scenes of Winter} is written in this manner. She takes every care as a novelist to differentiate even her minor characters, and one of her most memorable cameo players declares herself only as a voice through the telephone – a nervous guilty mother trying to trace her wayfaring daughter in two brief conversations that momentarily distract the protagonist during this final winter of his prolonged adolescence. The hero himself is wonderfully alive; a gentle bewildered man, extravagantly loyal to old friends and to the songs of the 'sixties, drifting, through a final nostalgia for the mythologies of adversary selfhood he absorbed in college and toward an embarrassed recognition of his hunger for such ordinary adventures as marriage and fatherhood. “The unillusioned tenderness that informs Beattie’s portrait of her central character is a rare act of intelligence and mimetic art.”\textsuperscript{17}
In Ann Beattie’s stories characters often wear the same names from story to story. And diverse as they are, they all echo the same bewilderment at having a complaint without a clear reason or target. Beattie understands that members of the Baby Boom / Youth culture generation have had the dubious privilege of being able to carry their childhoods on their backs. As young adults her characters are still playing cowboys and Indians and yearning for a simpler, sterner era without so many oppressive choices. She knows that while automation and conformity were the banes of a previous age, freedom and self expression – the next age’s remedies – have proved to be no paralyzing. “Satirically, sadly and truthfully, she writes of familiar fights against the damning arbitrariness of our charmed post industrial lives.”18

Though Miss Beattie realizes unrewarding nature and narrowness of the world, she has widened the range of her scrutiny in Falling in Place by writing not only about dropouts but also about an unhappy suburban family and its dreadful children. But she moves into John Cheever’s territory without any of his mournful humanity, and the people she finds there turnout to be not very different from and certainly no more admirable than her aging hippies. It is not just ‘things’ that happen to the idle souls, but thoughts and words and feelings: everything flows together with dead pan randomness – Laundromats, brand names, cute-T-shirts
and bumper stickers, rock songs and campy movies snatches of wispy talk
over heard in the New York movies, coffee shops and department stores
and offices and Connecticut houses through which Beattie’s specimens
drift in a list less stupor. While such wads of dissociated irrelevance have
sometimes worked in Ann Beattie’s short stories, they become
unendurably monotonous in a novel unless the purposeless inertia is
disrupted by some decisive action. That indispensable thunderclap, the
dramatic, unexpected event which should stop everyone in his tracks for a
long moment of unaccustomed lucidity, occurs more than halfway
through Falling in Place. But the incident alters nothing enforces no
lucidities… “Moral apathy has so completely displaced genuine emotion
in all these corroded hearts that their lives must go on as always,
untouched by the promise of change and redemption.”19

Making no comic gestures, taking everything in with her
customary neutrality and giving it all back, Beattie seems oblivious to her
readers, unperturbed by their inevitable irritation and boredom. “Though
her stories can be strange and clever, though she is an undeniable original,
what Ann Beattie entirely fails to arouse in us as we yawn through
Falling in Place is any conviction that the men, women and children
whose odd and empty lives she transcribes so expertly count for
something that deserves our attention.”20
References

8. Ibid.
13. Ibid., p.64.
16. Ibid., p.38.
20. Ibid., p.61.