

Because a Lot of Questions Are Complex

ROB KOVITZ

Begging the question of what can be defined as “form”



Elibu Vedder, Questioner of the Sphinx, 1875

How do you formulate the great questions? Research. Contrary to what your teacher told you in high school, there is such a thing as a stupid question, especially when conducting an interview for a celebrity profile.

Think about it. How many times does Norman Schwarzkopf want to answer how he began his career in the military? How often does Hillary want to narrate where she and Bill met? What is Harrison Ford going to think of you if you ask “What was your breakthrough role?” He’s liable to look at you emphatically and say “Duh! Star Wars!”

Sherree Bykofsky and Jennifer Basye Sander, The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Publishing Magazine Articles

Together they had traced the rumors across the solar system. The legends of an ancient humanoid race who had known the answer to all things, and who had built Answerer and departed.

“Think of it,” Morran said. “The answer to everything!”

Robert Sheckley, Ask A Foolish Question

Hi Jerry, Do you like cilantro?

I do kind of like cilantro, but I don’t know what it is.

Would you rather have a rhino sized hamster or a hamster sized rhino?

Oh my god, that’s such an easy question! Who wouldn’t want a hamster sized rhino? It would be one of the greatest things ever! You could put your hand down flat and just let him charge into it!

I just ran out of lunch meat, what kind should I get now?

More lunch meat? Why does it need to be more specific? It’s meat, and they’re telling you when to eat it.

Jerry Seinfeld, Jerry Seinfeld Loves Answering Questions! The Dumber, the Better. Now. (Interviewly)

I am very unfortunate if that is true. But suppose I ask you a question: Would you say that this also holds true in the case of horses?

Plato, Apology

In what ways are you different? In which the same? Why must that small boy wear leg braces? What is it that brings us each to destructive behavior? Remember when Sandoz still made acid? Remember Polio Summer? Where are you coming from? Does it make any difference? What if I was drunk? Just what do I fear about trust? Can you separate the inner from the outer? Why is this not form, but a process? Who is that witch? Is that my bus? What is a memory? Is that a hole in your shoe? How can you imagine that all these things exist? What if he understood that we all thought he was a closet case and were not threatened by that? Is it a question of a wager? Do not verbs collapse the real down to a single, simplified plane? At what point did you realize that you are capable of killing? Why is this not theater, not dance? Are words not ultimately puffy with misuse? Do phenothiazines scare you? What does this exemplify? Are not all truckers jerks? Do you believe that by balling or not balling you will be a better person? What if I told you these were only place holders and that it was you who was in question?

Ron Silliman, *Sunset Debris*

Why am I me? A stupid question ... I am too stupid to answer this question. And to ask it, just stupid enough. What is the mechanism of such stupid questioning? I imagine a small organ, neither inside nor outside myself, like a polymelic phantom limb, a subtle psychic appendage implanted at birth behind my crown, during the moment of my coming to be, whenever that was. This organ (or appendix, or tumor), whose painful inflammation is despair—"despair is the paroxysm of individuation" (Cioran)—is like a strange supplementary bodily member, intimate and inessential, which I can feel yet not move, barely move yet without feeling. Stupid organ, organ of stupidity. It moves, is moved, like an inalienable shackle, only to reinforce its immobility. Am I to sever this organ, hemorrhage of haecceity, escape it? "[E]scape is the need to get out of oneself, that is, to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I [moi] is oneself [soi-même] (Levinas). Just who, then, would escape?" (Nicola Masciandaro, "Individuation: This Stupidity," *Postmedieval* 1 [2010], forthcoming). "The act whereby being—existence—is bestowed upon us is an unbearable surpassing of being" (Bataille).

Nicola Masciandaro, *Anti-Cosmosis: Black Mahapralaya (Hidden Gnosis: Black Metal Theory Symposium 1)*

It's understandable that someone would feel and think that way, especially when frustrated, but the truth is that these are lousy questions. They're negative and they don't solve any problems. Throughout the rest of the book we'll refer to questions like these as Incorrect Questions, or IQs ...

John G. Miller, *QBQ! The Question Behind the Question*

The first time Donald Antrim's mind was exposed to wider scrutiny, that I can find, was more than 20 years ago during an interview he gave to *The New York Times*. It was the fall of 1993, so right after the publication of his first book, the novel "Elect Mr. Robinson for a Better World." The Q. and A. opened with this exchange:

Q. What inspired this book?

A. That kind of question is so hard to answer.

And it ended with this one:

Q. Do you answer "yes and no" to a lot of questions?

A. Sure, because a lot of questions are complex.

John Jeremiah Sullivan, *Donald Antrim and the Art of Anxiety*

This seems a very dubious assertion, besides begging the question of what can be defined as 'form'. Behind it one glimpses that old ghost which still haunts classical studies, however often right-minded scholars may exorcise it: the feeling that ancient authors achieved a perfection which somehow places them above common literary error, that they cannot be criticized, only explained and justified. *Tu nihil in magno doctus reprehendis Homero?* Horace asked—"Tell me, do you, a scholar, find nothing to cavil at in mighty Homer?"

Peter Green, *Introduction to Juvenal, The Sixteen Satires*

Blake: "Was that what you meant to say?"

Leslie: "Isn't it enough to say what you mean, without being obliged to say what you meant?"

Blake: "Half a loaf is better than no bread; beggars mustn't be choosers."

Leslie: "Oh, if you put it so meekly as that you humiliate me. I must tell you now: I meant a question."

Blake: "What is it?"

William Dean Howells, *Out of the Question: A Comedy*

In the tragedy in question, for example, he found fault with the ideas but admired the style; he condemned the conception but applauded all the details; and he was incensed by the characters, though he raved about their speeches. When he read the great

passages, he was transported; but when he thought how the pulpитеers were profiting from it to sell their goods, he was grieved, and in this confusion of feelings in which he found himself entangled...

Gustave Flaubert, Madame Bovary

When I went to Lunnnon town sirs, Too rul loo rul Too rul loo rul Wasn't I done very brown sirs? Too rul loo rul Too rul loo rul—still, in my desire to be wiser, I got this composition by heart with the utmost gravity; nor do I recollect that I questioned its merit, except that I thought (as I still do) the amount of Too rul somewhat in excess of the poetry. In my hunger for information, I made proposals to Mr. Wopsle to bestow some intellectual crumbs upon me, with which he kindly complied. As it turned out, however, that he only wanted me for a dramatic lay-figure, to be contradicted and embraced and wept over and bullied and clutched and stabbed and knocked about in a variety of ways, I soon declined that course of instruction; though not until Mr. Wopsle in his poetic fury had severely mauled me.

Charles Dickens, Great Expectations

Q. Why is this style called the Debased?

A. From the general inferiority of design compared with the style it succeeded, from the meagre and clumsy execution of sculptured and other ornamental work, from the intermixture of detail founded on an entirely different school of art, and the consequent subversion of the purity of style.

Matthew Holbeche Bloxam, The Principles of Gothic Ecclesiastical Architecture, Elucidated By Question and Answer

In the inevitable period of decomposition, those forms devised to transform the world turn in upon themselves and implode. The form, once world-historical, becomes its own subject. History stops; action is replaced by an endless series of repetitions. As the form decomposes, symbolically, so does the world—it becomes sterile, inaccessible, worthless, unreal. Any aesthetic form could illustrate the necessity, but the novel will do: we move from Fielding, where a story, a creative account of the world, is in question, to Joyce, where communication itself is in question. The result is the post-Joycean novel, which asks no questions and communicates nothing: it is merely a set of empty gestures, a dead commodity, a thing whose only use value is its exchange value. We move from eternity (Fielding is still read, and, as you read him, you still feel the world changing) to slime (to believe that the present-day novel will be read in a hundred years is not to praise the

novel but to condemn the world).

Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century

He passed the *Irish Times*. There might be other answers lying there. Like to answer them all. Good system for criminals. Code. At their lunch now. Clerk with the glasses there doesn't know me. O, leave them there to simmer. Enough bother wading through forty-four of them. Wanted, smart lady typist to aid gentleman in literary work. I called you naughty darling because I do not like that other world. Please tell me what is the meaning. Please tell me what perfume does your wife. Tell me who made the world. The way they spring those questions on you. And the other one Lizzie Twigg. My literary efforts have had the good fortune to meet with the approval of the eminent poet A. E. (Mr Geo. Russell). No time to do her hair drinking sloppy tea with a book of poetry.

James Joyce, Ulysses

By contrast, the realistic attitude, inspired by positivism, from Saint Thomas Aquinas to Anatole France, clearly seems to me to be hostile to any intellectual or moral advancement. I loathe it, for it is made up of mediocrity, hate, and dull conceit. It is this attitude which today gives birth to these ridiculous books, these insulting plays. It constantly feeds on and derives strength from the newspapers and stultifies both science and art by assiduously flattering the lowest of tastes; clarity bordering on stupidity, a dog's life. The activity of the best minds feels the effects of it; the law of the lowest common denominator finally prevails upon them as it does upon the others. An amusing result of this state of affairs, in literature for example, is the generous supply of novels. Each person adds his personal little "observation" to the whole. As a cleansing antidote to all this, M. Paul Valéry recently suggested that an anthology be compiled in which the largest possible number of opening passages from novels be offered; the resulting insanity, he predicted, would be a source of considerable edification. The most famous authors would be included. Such a thought reflects great credit on Paul Valéry who, some time ago, speaking of novels, assured me that, so far as he was concerned, he would continue to refrain from writing: "The Marquise went out at five." But has he kept his word?

If the purely informative style, of which the sentence just quoted is a prime example, is virtually the rule rather than the exception in the novel form, it is because, in all fairness, the author's ambition is

severely circumscribed. The circumstantial, needlessly specific nature of each of their notations leads me to believe that they are perpetrating a joke at my expense. I am spared not even one of the character's slightest vacillations: will he be fairhaired? what will his name be? will we first meet him during the summer? So many questions resolved once and for all, as chance directs; the only discretionary power left me is to close the book, which I am careful to do somewhere in the vicinity of the first page.

André Breton, Manifesto of Surrealism

Ask a Spartan whether he had rather be a good orator or a good soldier: and if I was asked the same question, I would rather choose to be a good cook, had I not one already to serve me. My God! Madame, how should I hate such a recommendation of being a clever fellow at writing, and an ass and an inanity in everything else! Yet I had rather be a fool both here and there than to have made so ill a choice wherein to employ my talent. And I am so far from expecting to gain any new reputation by these follies, that I shall think I come off pretty well if I lose nothing by them of that little I had before.

Michel de Montaigne, Of The Resemblance of Children to Their Fathers (Essays)

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