

Donald Harington: A Case for Individualism

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Abstract

Contemporary literature cannot always be called contemporary literature. There comes some point at which the work becomes no longer concurrent. Our predecessors had their contemporaries, and we now have names for those periods. Postmodernism, our current name for ourselves, relies too heavily on the period of modernism, which supposedly is adjacent. These brands lack the character and specificity included in labels such as Romanticism and Neoclassicism. The works produced since the first World War can be collected under specific criteria, so shouldn't we grant them the same privileges we give these preceding periods?

Thus we come to the term "Individualism," spawned from a loss of innocence, which the world may never see again, at least until the downfall of civilization as we know it. Groups arise, demanding the rights of specific groups or peoples, and nations, especially in eastern Europe, break continually into smaller nations and smaller groups.

The writing of this time reflects such fragmentation, and the work of Donald Harington provides excellent examples of the vast differences between different areas and different people, and even, in some cases, within the same person. Constantly characters search for themselves, or at least what they believe to be themselves. His style is purely his own, and his techniques are new and individually tailored. Harington is perhaps the model individualist.

If there were any word to describe the opposite of history,
to mean for the future what history means for the past,
then that would be my favorite word, my favorite subject,
just as history is your favorite subject. Futurity?
Would that do? Then you are lost in history,
and I . . . I want to be lost in futurity. (*The Cherry Pit* 334)

So I am left with this concept as applied to the present. What would that term be? Presentity? No, that sounds too spiritual. Modernity? No, that is a period, and is supposedly behind us. Post-modernity, then? But what does that really mean? Does it imply that the ideas are beyond that which already is? Is this something in which we would want to be lost? It just doesn't work.

Perhaps it cannot be done. Perhaps there is no way to adequately evaluate contemporaries with the qualities that will some day be synonymous with a period of literature, art, and living. Someone would almost surely be left out. Perhaps we should abandon the process for the future generations, hoping that the futurity can locate something we cannot.

Perhaps, but I am going to try now.

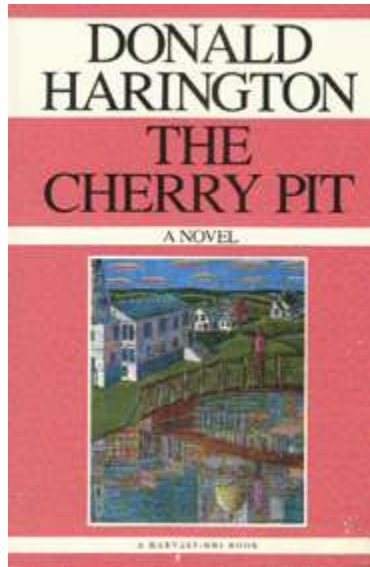
To begin, the minute differences between modernism and post-modernism must be done away with. In this essay, the literature written to date since the beginning of the first World War will be collected under the term Individualism. For those who refuse to reject the standard terms, consider: modernism turned on the period before it, stating that the world was too new for the old rules to apply; post-modernism, according to one definition, turned on modernism at mid-century, holding the beliefs that no works could be written to surpass those already recorded: more precisely works by Joyce, Faulkner, and Hemingway (Frye). Both stressed the importance of originality and, with all the controversy over the two terms, it could be accurate to state that post-modernism is simply an extension of modernism (in name as well as characteristics). Now forget the terms. The concentration from this point on will focus on Individualism and its characteristics.

Individualism grew from the first World War and the political and social turmoil that the great struggle introduced into the world. Never before had man shed so much of his own blood on the earth, and the species lost much of an entire generation to the conflict. Many felt the entire generation was lost. With advanced weaponry and tactics, war was catapulted into an era void of innocence and purity. This, along with the encroachment of psychology toward the world, propelled the mainstream inward.

Mankind was never the same. Perhaps it is the fear of what may come that caused the characters of Individualist literature to often turn inward, toward their thoughts and motivations, to attempt to regain, or at least find, lost innocence, often associated with the Romantic ideal of innocent youth or childhood. This search often arrives in what we now call a "mid-life crisis," though any time in life, as the vast difference of both narrators and principle characters demonstrates, is adequate for such an undertaking. Much of the writing comes from a first-person perspective. This is advantageous in that the thought process can be more thoroughly explored and developed. The characters, as time propels the reader forward, become increasingly eccentric, and some are often quite selfish. In contrast to these characters, there will normally be a character who is, or at least appears to be, naïve, and often plots will involve the exploitation of such individuals. Both *Ekaterina* and *The Cherry Pit*, novels by Donald Harington, fit the criteria stated above as examples of literary individualism. Though neither title found itself on best-seller lists, both carry literary merit.

Donald Harington was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1935, and spent all of his youth in the state. His grandmother lived in a small Ozark town called Drakes Creek, where he lived in the summers and which would later serve as a basis for his fictional Mecca of Stay More. At the age of twelve, he came down with a case of meningococcal meningitis, which stole a large portion of his hearing. He attended the University of Arkansas and eventually earned an M.F.A. in studio art at the age of twenty-two. A year later, he earned a degree from Boston University. Harington attended Harvard under a Ph.D. program, but withdrew after only a year. He remained in the Northeastern part of the United States, acquiring a variety of instructing positions that would last him until 1978, at which point he would return to his native state (Giles 83-4).

Harington carries himself beyond the border of these works, recently seeing his twelfth novel, *When Angels Rest*, come into print. Although this novel is told through a second-person narrative, the point of view has not really changed, as is the case in *Ekaterina*. He has received numerous awards for his teaching at the University of Arkansas, and lately earned the 1998 Heasley Prize.



The Cherry Pit, Harington's first novel, is the story of an Arkansas native who has removed himself to Boston, where he works to preserve the "Vanished American Past." Cliff Stone, the narrator and principle character, takes an obligatory trip back to his hometown of Little Rock, in the continuing search for himself and his own vanished past. He meets up with old friends and lovers, all but forsaking the married life he has developed for himself (or that has developed around him) in Boston.

Clifford Willow Stone is the perfect protagonist for Individualist literature. With the strong parallels between his life and that of the author's own personal past, Harington has, in a sense, inserted himself into the novel. Naps, or more formally Napoleon, a friend of Cliff's, asks him, Nub as he calls him, what he plans to do about Margaret, the woman he has returned to in Little Rock, and his wife, whom he has left in Boston. His response is perhaps the individualist manifesto: "I was doing what I felt like doing, that I was looking for answers, that I had never stopped trying to discover why I had come home [. . .]" (*TCP* 249).

Late in the novel, Cliff discusses nicknames with Tatrice, the wife of Naps, who tells him the possibilities of the meanings of Cliff's nickname. Among these are "the point or gist of the story, a small or imperfect ear of Indian corn, anything small or imperfect or . . . worthless" (*TCP* 249). She goes on to mention that some use the term to apply to an unborn child, which is the interpretation Cliff seems to latch onto most.

However, as Cliff learns upon his reentry to Little Rock, he is no longer Nub. He has grown out of the frame of the innocent, the unborn, and no longer has a real place in the world of Little Rock. He successfully enters his father's house, nearly undetected, until his father's new lover discovers him enjoying a free breakfast and, mistaking him for a prowler, calls for Wes Stone, Cliff's father. "It is a wise father that knows his own child," yet Wes approaches Cliff with the welcoming barrel of his .38 pistol (33). Later that day, Cliff decides to call those he had been closest to in his youth without success. He can come into contact with no one, or at least no one who really cares he is home. At one point, he meets in a bar "Hy Norden, who, if I was not mistaken, had been one of my best friends in high school", but Hy only casually recognizes him and does not even offer him a seat at his table (25). Despite this seeming antagonism, the more dominant supporting characters in *The Cherry Pit* are somewhat similar to Clifford Willow Stone, each in his own way. Harington successfully pulls off a multiple doubling in the novel, which can lead to somewhat ambiguous conclusions near the end of the novel.

Doyle, or Dall, Hawkins, has become a sergeant in the Little Rock police force in the

years that Nub has been absent from the area, and Dall is probably the least like Cliff of any of the supporting characters of the novel. Dall's occupation as an officer of the law, together with Cliff's background as a young fighter, make the case for Dall as the aggressive side of Cliff's personality. "While I was drinking my beer, I debated with myself whether or not to go see Dall Hawkins at the police station" (54-55). The debate ends in Cliff's procession to the station. Perhaps it is his drinking that draws him closer to his rambunctious high school pal. Both have physical statures that do not denote power: "lanky though he was, he had been one of the best fullbacks . . . runty though I was, I had been one of their best boxers" (55).

To a slightly lesser degree, perhaps, Nub's old high school girlfriend Margaret Austin could simply be an extended persona of Cliff. She is the part of him most removed; through her innocence, or seeming innocence, she is the sought after and desired aspect of his old life. If Nub can mean an unborn child, it is perhaps not coincidence that Margaret is called "as still as a stillborn child" (258). Perhaps Cliff should not be Nub anymore; that which was unborn was brought into the world, but it (the innocence) never lived. Margaret still lives with her parents, as Cliff lives with his family when he visits.

After their mock sexual encounter, Cliff awakens the next morning to find waiting for him a bowl of Rice Chex, prepared for him by Margaret. This is the same cereal he eats upon his arrival in Little Rock, and it is implied that the meal was common in his youth. He even finds this reason to call her a "psychic girl" (261).

The main difference between the two is that Margaret is a part of Little Rock; Cliff has become a part of Boston. Pamela, Cliff's wife, is a figure associated solely with the metropolis areas of Boston or New York, whereas Margaret offers him an escape from this world into the smaller one of Arkansas. She has, in a sense, developed from the part of Cliff that does not want to return to a cold, unloving wife and city, and her presence alone becomes a force to make Cliff choose whether to stay or leave.

James Royal Slater is Cliff's rival for Margaret's time and attention during his stay in Arkansas. The two are similar in that they both are married unhappily and seek an adulterous affair with Margaret, possibly to regain their innocence, most preferably by destroying hers. This becomes an obsession on both sides, with Cliff following her almost everywhere she goes, even tracing her down to Hot Springs when she goes into hiding with her mother. Slater, upon realizing he can never have her again, rides his horse into a lake and kills himself. When Slater's death is realized, Cliff, in part, gives up his search for Margaret (innocence) as well.

Perhaps one of the strongest resemblances between any two characters in the novel is the one shared by Clifford Stone and Napoleon Howard. Both have similar nicknames: Nub and Naps, respectively. Both, again, are physically small characters. Naps is described as being slightly smaller than Cliff, but the difference is only nominal. In one scene, having nothing to wear, Naps offers Cliff a purple dinner jacket, and Cliff "was happy enough that his sizes were the same" (188). Naps even knows things of which he should possess no knowledge. When Cliff objects, later in the same scene, to having no elevator shoes (which he feels he needs to wear due to his insecurities concerning his height disadvantage), Naps suggests that he "call the Missouri Pacific baggage agent once more and attempt to retrieve [his] suitcase and the pair of

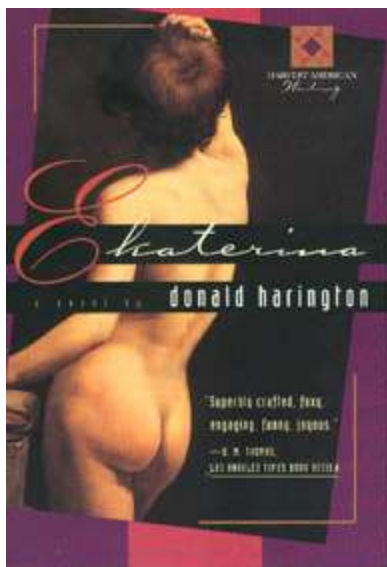
black elevator shoes which it contained" (189). Not only should Naps not know that the shoes were in the suitcase, but he has also not been informed that previous calls have been made to the Missouri Pacific baggage agent. The line that best sums up the idea is presented: "Nub and Naps, a perfect pair" (309).

This particular double has a special effect on the novel. The only real difference, other than the state of happiness in their marriages, is their racial distinction. Naps represents the ideal of the black community, Nub of the white. However, the two transcend race altogether. Dall, a strict racist, at one point says of Naps, "I think you ain't really a nigger" (236). When Naps is driving Cliff around town, Cliff wants to ride up front, though Naps knows that society would be outraged. It is only when Dall rides with them that Cliff can fulfill his wish of sitting in the front of the car.

Naps is also the part of Cliff that did not leave Little Rock. He is the most supportive in Cliff's search to reclaim Margaret, showing up just when Cliff needs a ride (or a drink) the most, and even when Cliff discusses Margaret at Dall's home, Naps waits patiently, knowing he is not permitted inside. It is no wonder that Cliff "always wanted to seek out Naps in moments of distress or anguish" (309). He is, in a sense, seeking out his hometown, his past.

But can we believe Cliff? He is our narrator, and our only narrator throughout the novel. However, he lies to almost all the characters contained in the tale. To his wife, he implies that he is having an affair. "Things are a bit hot here, and getting hotter. Get me?", though nothing of the sort has taken place (92). While in a Hot Springs whorehouse, he complains that his shoes are jerked off him, though he is still standing. This is a man who, at one point, has a conversation with his friend's dog, which actually responds, or so Cliff would have us believe. He even raped his boss without realizing or remembering the event.

So can we believe Clifford Stone? Or did he even make up the trip to Little Rock? Was the whole novel simply a fantasy? Perhaps. Even Cliff questions himself: "Had I only dreamed the whole thing from the beginning?" (207). Even as he is ready to depart, with only his family and Naps to see him off, he thinks "none of this had really happened, all of my days during these past two days were just like this day, dull and uneventful" (340). Perhaps all of *The Cherry Pit* is simply a large, elaborate daydream in the mind of a man in search of his youth and old times while confined to a small cubicle over a thousand miles away.



Cliff's return to Boston (assuming there is a need to return to a place one may have never left) was only temporary. In *Ekaterina*, he shows up again in the small town of "Stick Around," obviously a play on the name of the Ozark town about which Harington has often written. In this novel he specializes in restoration, and is commissioned to restore an ancient building for the famed writer Ekaterina Vladimirovna Dedeshkeliana, or V. Kelian, for short. His role here is only a minor role, and he has no

actions that take place immediately in the focus of the novel.

This novel, which is truly a triumph, is about a young Svanetian princess who reaches America in exile, always in fear of the looming psychologist Bolshakov, who is always one step behind. Published in 1993, "*Ekaterina* proved the occasion for a reconsideration of Harington's work among many critics" (Giles 91).

If the first-person narrative is the ideal point of view in individualist literature, Harington has been innovative enough to surpass this boundary, narrating the first part of *Ekaterina* through second person narrative. From the opening sentence: "Ekaterina you were, and you were not at all" (3), the tone is such that involves each individual reader in the mind and the actions of the title character with incredible ease. On top of this brilliant use of the second-person narrative, we find later that the instruction, given mostly in present tense, is from the first-person voice of Daniel Lyam Montross, a ghost and the main character in Harington's second novel, *Some Other Place. The Right Place*. This narrator inserts himself into as much of the action of the novel as can be expected from a ghost, attributing chance meetings and events to his own achievements.

The novel, difficult already, becomes even more complex when Harington inserts himself into the novel. The character of I., or later Ingraham, is obviously the novelist behind the novelist in this work. He, when first introduced, is almost named "Agathon N. O. Dirndl," the letters of which can be rearranged to spell "Donald Harington." The narrator then decides to simply "pick the initial to the east of his real one. I." The narrator is immediate to warn, "Just never [. . .] let it stand for *I*, meaning me, your phantom lover" (60).

Again in *Ekaterina* is the "half-formulated search that we all carry around with us all our lives, most of us never finding anything" (147-8). Kat searches for her innocence and safety, finding a close match only in the seduction of twelve-year-old boys. Ingraham is in the search for mere contentment, once he realizes he cannot find the success he wants in his writing. Bolshakov, the terror of psychology, is in pursuit of Kat, thinking that he can find her, then better her by imposing his ways upon her, all before attempting to kill her.

Kat's seduction of the young boys is a key to the development of the novel. She expresses the need to have the young boys before their pubic hair begins to grow and they get all hairy, though that is not the real reason she seeks young boys. Her main criterion is that the boys be virgins. She is obsessed with the idea of taking away another person's virginity (as perhaps someone took hers, possibly without consent) and thereby voiding their innocence at a relatively young age. When she realizes that Travis, one of her later lovers (and her favorite), is not a virgin, she literally breaks into tears: "For the longest time after he finished and I sighed my sighs, I was unable to say anything more, consumed as I was with jealousy" (264). Kat proceeds to be so disturbed by the revelation that she was not young Travis's first lover that she throws him out of her room at the Halfmoon Hotel.

Bolshakov's theory of this need for the seduction of the young is that Kat is "only a little girl wanting to grow up and acquire a penis" (337). His involvement with the plot and theme of the novel originates long before the novel itself begins. As a psychiatrist at the Serbsky Institute in Russia, he tormented the Svanetian princess until her escape from him. His motivation is to

catch her and impose his reality onto her world. Kat, in her obituary for the creative writing class she takes under Ingraham, asserts "Bolshakov's own peculiar mental disorder, is a delusion that all 'reality' must conform to his own limited concept of what 'reality' is" (92).

In a sense, Bolshakov is that part of literature known as realism. The writing of individualism, or that period of time since the first World War, has never fully escaped this realism, characterized by "actuality in its representation" (Harmon 427). The emphasis of psychology toward the understanding of motivation and mental order and disorder helps to push along the movement, which perhaps is not over yet.

Harington himself, or at least his character Ingraham, "hates endings and cannot write them" (333). However, the ambiguity of his endings are the very part that makes each novel more enjoyable. Ekaterina ends her narration, the second part of the novel, in mid-sentence. This is followed by the transcription of an interview (which seems to have no narrator at all, unless one counts the tape recorder), in which Kat is (reportedly) killed in a murder-suicide. Again, the novel is not over yet, though it appears to be. Beyond this interview lies a part entitled "Afterword by Clive Henry," which, surely enough, reads exactly like an afterword. This afterword presents the notion that Ekaterina perhaps did not die at all, that the interview in which she supposedly was shot is, perhaps, a hoax. If this is the case, could Ekaterina possibly be writing this afterword under the pseudonym "Clive Henry?" The possibility exists. So what is Harington attempting to say here? That writing extends beyond the border of the work? That, even though a piece of writing, or better yet, a piece of art, ends, its maker carries on in some form? Or perhaps the ending is a death. Did that fact that the narration (of Ekaterina) ends in mid-sentence perhaps mean that death (such as it was) can come at any time? When a novel comes to an end, does its maker in some way cease to exist? Or does it simply mean that nothing has to truly end? These are questions Harington blatantly leaves to the reader:

One of I's several flaws was that he was never able to admit defeat, nor to backtrack from a stubborn destination. He could not turn around. If he had gone back to the place where he'd taken the wrong turn, all would have been well. But he insisted on going back only as far as the next westward divergent trail, which was scarcely better than the one you were on. This trail, which obviously hadn't been used for years, wandered up hill and down vale all over the countryside, like the sledge paths of Mount Layla. The only advantage of it, because it clearly wasn't getting you anywhere, was that it afforded you a view, in passing, of some interesting mushrooms. (*Ekaterina* 164-5)

Assuming Harington writes of himself as I., or Ingraham, we find he underestimates himself. It is no flaw. Do not go back; do not admit your defeat; dare not turn around now. On this road we the readers have been driven along, there is no wrong turn. The reader does not necessarily need to get anywhere. The view is the main reason for the journey, and Harington's view, and the interesting mushrooms observed along the way, are the benefits we all reap.

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Biographical Sketch

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