

## Acategorical Imperatives: A Conversation with Sam Lipsyte

Brian Price and Meghan Sutherland

**Brian Price:** Literature can be understood as an effort to right a wrong—as a description of suffering and its cause, if not also an attempt to imagine, in more expressly didactic moments, more “proper” forms of social existence. And yet, what strikes me about your work, again and again, is that your characters exist in a world—at least as that world is understood through them—that is positively unaffected by the conventional moral codes that are implied in an attempt to describe something as “wrong.” I wonder if style is for you something that is only possible in a world without wrongs, insofar as “wrong” implies that there was, is, something right—that there are clearly defined ways of doing or making something. How, in other words can one write with such style about things that are so wrong?

**Sam Lipsyte:** I wonder at the idea of righting a wrong through literature. I think your phrase about a “description of suffering” is more like it. I believe in writing as a commiserating act. This may include an airing of social and political and personal grievances, but didacticism isn’t a small risk, it’s a huge one. I’d rather readers reach their own conclusions. And the things that drive a piece of imaginative writing for me are the swerving, the self-negation, the leaps and falls. Still, it is an interesting question. It has been written by some that style itself is a reactionary gesture. That truly progressive expression has no time for style. We must build the new world right away. Style is the last feeble defense of an old order. But I think that language, or at least the American English of our official language, has become a hodge-podge of hollow phrases and bland corporate metaphors to such a degree, with such scope, that trying to find something striking or new in recombination is important. The sonic nature of language still excites me, especially when it’s not an end to itself but a way to move toward the difficult, the subverted, the nuanced, when it cracks up the story a little bit. Right now it’s fashionable to write in a more transparent or even vacated style, more affectless. It’s maybe more moral to ignore the music, as that seduces you away from “what’s really going on,” but it just doesn’t come to me that way.

I still haven’t answered your question. My fictional worlds are not beyond good and evil. Characters in them test the codes and are often punished for their transgressions. Often they know what they are doing is giving in to an impulse. At other times they don’t know what they are doing because we do have some fluidity in these codes, and you can be caught on the wrong side of shifting lines, much as you can in a war zone. And I think style is simply a way to best situate and dramatize all of this. We always think of right and wrong as choices, but are they always that? And when they are, are they ever clear-cut? Isn’t that the place that art can explore? I’m just interested, finally, in getting the charge of life on the page. You do this through language. And you mean to zap the reader with a feeling, or a felt idea, or bunch of conflicted ideas and feelings the reader will enjoy sorting out. Whether that motivates the righting of wrongs, well, maybe it’s better to go organize with people. But art can be very good at illuminating the distortions of the world, and of human interiority, often with distortions of its own.

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**BP:** It's hard for me to think of style as a feeble order, since it indicates for me something that can't be foreseen and retains a sense of the unforeseeable even after it has been produced and circulated—even after attempts have been made to emulate it. I like the idea of style itself as a form of justice, or as humane complication. It reminds me of what William Gass says in *On Being Blue* (which is, as I think of it, a book you turned me on to a long time ago as I was beginning to think about color). In talking about poverty and language, he writes, "It's one more thing that we do to the poor, the deprived: cut out their tongues . . . allow them a language as lousy as their lives." I often teach this book, and my students begin with this passage, and for some very odd reason they almost always think I'm an elitist, as if I'm delighting in the denigration of the poor. And yet, when Gass comes up with new ways of swearing, such as "may you be inhaled by your own asshole," I can't help but agree that style is the very condition of effective revolt. I also see this in your work. It's hard not to notice how poetic your "losers" are, just how capable they are with language.

**SL:** Well, style is different things. There is the style of an age, of generations, of aesthetic schools, of individuals. These are all often overlapping, and one's style is probably an incorporation of these layers, and also a resistance to them, plus one's own historical and neural interactions with the language, and the choices one makes while writing, what one plucks from that stew. The hope is that it's tasty. That's fascinating that your students call you an elitist. I would consider it elitist to deny everybody access to all of the rhetorical strategies that have been employed, all of the acoustic variations, all the ways words have been used to create artistic effects, to make a reader think and feel, so that one can be better able to refresh language and get people to listen. The so-called losers (so-called because though they may lack power or purchase in society they are also seekers of some sort, even if the culture has warped them some) have realized that language might be their only recourse at the moment. In some sense they have weaponized it for their protection, and treasured its felicities for their delectation. But the inherent comedy and tragedy stems from the fact that all of this might not be enough.

**Meghan Sutherland:** The idea of weaponizing language is a striking one. It makes me think of the market research labs that employ linguists, psychologists, and all manner of other professionals to develop product names and slogans that can drive an angry consumer into states of ecstasy, desire, comfort, and so on. Your own writing style often seems to draw upon the ironic resources of this ad-speak—a character might seize the kinds of rhapsodic terms and incantations used to promote a snack food, a lifestyle, or whatever, and deliver it in a deadpan soliloquy that is somehow triumphant, sincerely felt, and defeated at once. At least to me, these instances never feel like traditional examples of "postmodern" pastiche. You have been called a satirist by many, but it doesn't really feel cleanly satirical either—many of these moments also convey expressions of genuine emotional complexity. So this leads me to wonder whether you think language even exists without style, even if it has been instrumentalized. How you understand the stylistic dimension of your own writing in these kinds of instances. Does pastiche or satire describe it for you, or describe what precisely is "lost" or "won" when style is alternately commodified and appropriated? Or is there something else to be said for the more Derridean possibilities of what might be considered, in the context of the Gass allusion, the very apex of a stylistically "impoverished" language? In other words, is there some kind of chaotic poetry that cannot be entirely controlled or expunged from language—however "impoverished" it may seem? Is style something that can in fact be taken away from it?

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**SL:** You hit on something here, because I really don't think satire is quite the word for what I'm trying to do, though it seems to help others place my work. I guess I would say that there are satiric elements in my books, but other modes as well, both comic and more straightforwardly, emotionally, dramatic. I want clarity but not easy categorization. It's my particular mix. But I think you are right in wondering if language exists without style. There are the styles of institutions, of instruction, of banks, of alternative healing, of baseball fans, of juggalos, etc. Everything is "stylized." Certain approaches to art have been deemed "natural" or "real" but of course they are styles as well. What could be more stylized than to say "Give it to me plain"? Anyway, you play with this stuff, you bend it and deform it and subvert it, but if that's all you do, then it feels like it's just an exercise. Not to knock exercises. Great writing can come from them. But you want to do it in the service of something else going on in the writing. Which may just be for the writer the theme Harry Crews used to claim the only one worthy of literature: "the crushing of the human heart." But about playing with tropes and dialects of official culture, I'll quote another writer I admire very much, the novelist Christopher Sorrentino:

The problem is to see beyond simple collage, and especially to see beyond parody and ham-fisted satire. This is the backdrop of our lives, and simply to make fun of it doesn't cut it. Parroting degraded language—ad copy or what have you—is fun, but it takes an artist to see the poetry in there.

Now, as an artist who does try to see the poetry in there, I have to be tough on myself. If I am trying to find the poetry, or more precisely, to make the poetry out of all this given language, I must know that if I am successful I can create some new space. But there I am standing in it. What now? You always try to push.

As for the impoverishment, as I said before, it's a matter of breadth, not depth. Much of the pleasure to be had speaking English (and I'm sure this is true of other languages) is dipping into rich vernaculars of the streets of many centuries. Barry Hannah's Maximum Ned is "thirty-eight and somewhat Spanish." He tells us he speaks, "white, Negro, some Elizabethan, some Apache." He's an antiquated figure ("Negro"?) but/and a believer in vibrant, vigorous speech. Now what could Gass mean by the impoverished language of the poor? If he means a group's own way with the language is impoverished, I'd argue with that. The impoverishment comes from not having access to the resources that would allow for fluid movement between the ways different groups manipulate the language. Lateral and vertical play, etc. But there is always the rich textured language of the group. And anyway, there are usually artists around to take the poetry of the everyday and amplify it and link it to other styles of speech for aesthetic ends. Hip-hop, etc. Now the truly impoverished language doesn't belong to a community of people, but to corporations and such. And of course it produces examples of hypocrisy and also odd bits of beauty. It's useful for a writer to listen to it, to pan it for music and meaning. Makes me think of DeLillo's riff in *White Noise* about the beauty of the phrase "Toyota Celica." Also, it just occurred to me that since corporations are individuals now, there is a great corporate bildungsroman to be written. "Then Pepsi looked into her eyes." Ah, maybe not.

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**MS:** You mentioned the idea of creating “clarity without easy categorization.” To me that phrase aptly describes the opening pages of *The Ask*, when Milo Burke rouses himself from a daydream about “titboning” a woman in his office named Vargina to unleash a verbal assault on the obnoxious daughter of a donor to the university where he works, only to lose his job when the university strategically classifies it as an act of hate speech. It is a tour-de-force of moral defiance, and like its punishment it is carried out entirely at the level of language. But at the end of it all Milo doesn’t express a sense of rage or recrimination about the trumped-up charges that money can buy; instead, he accepts their absurd categorical force at face value, concluding, “I think it probably was hate speech. I really fucking hated that girl.” Like so many other characters in your work, Milo evinces a distinct moral sensibility here, and also a clear sense of justice and injustice. But it would be impossible to account for either one according to the categories of universalism, immorality, relativism or even amorality that define most debates about the difference between right and wrong today. In fact, I don’t even know how to describe the pure impurity of this sensibility without quoting the lines themselves. I am tempted to say that it’s only the pleasure of the language itself—the *différance* of Vargina, if you will—that secures it. So I’m curious if you could say more about the way you understand the meaning of the word “wrong,” and the persistent role it seems to play in defining the stories, characters, questions, and even the words that interest you most.

**SL:** I would agree that Milo and the narrator of my previous novel, *Home Land*, as well as the narrator of the “Gary” stories, have perspectives that overlap in places, though I think that Lewis Miner from *Home Land* is a bit more romantic in his morality, perhaps even believes that justice can be achieved by poeticizing injustice. Milo doesn’t believe that. Philosophically he has more of a materialist streak. He has no conception of the spirit or the soul to rely on. Milo’s defense against despair is the pleasure of language, as you put it, and the pleasure of using it to describe what he considers wrong. (I think they both have a little bit of an angry prophet component to their personalities, but they keep it under wraps with humor.) One of the things Milo considers wrong is the way language is neutralized so that power can roll along unobstructed, and sometimes this neutralization is done in the name of protecting people from one another. On the face of it hate speech legislation seems like a great thing. I’m all for it. It protects people from the abuse that is often hurled at various racial and ethnic communities and so forth. But the phrase is laughably general. To the point that we think we’ve licked the problem by naming it. Also, a couple of strange things come to mind. One, as I’ve already mentioned, is the Supreme Court decision in the U.S. granting corporations the status of individuals. The other is the way that the right wing accuses any politics that challenge power as “class warfare.” As though we’re all supposed to honor some American taboo against acknowledging class conflict. The proper reply is: Of course it’s class warfare, you fucking idiot. And nobody except Fox News takes the phrase seriously at this point anyway. But what about when McDonald’s can press charges against an individual for hate speech? I know it can for libel, etc., but this feels a little different. If you are attacking a corporation for being a corporation, and it’s an individual, is that like spewing horrible speech at a particular person because of race or gender or what have you? Now I’m really out of my depth on such a legalistic question, of course, but as a writer such a possibility is marvelously absurd, and scary, and funny. And it makes one want to play with a piety like the phrase “hate speech.” The idea is noble, but the phrase itself is so ripe for appropriation by shitty people, it’s frightening. And in *The Ask* I guess I was poking at this a little, by having Milo accept the charge at face value, because he did “hate” that person. As

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for Vargina, what people never remember is that she was actually named what her name resembled, and a sympathetic nurse added the “r.” And I guess what interested me there was the bittersweet effect of such small mercies, and the fact that a person marches on.

But your question was about my understanding of the word “wrong.” The meanings that compel me operate on a few different levels. There is, of course, what I think is wrong, in simple terms. And this has to do with abuse of power, the acceptance of unnecessary human suffering for the profit of a few, those kinds of chestnuts. All that relates to suffering we can avoid. And while I have strong feelings about it I also accept that I am a person alive at a particular historical moment with a certain array of beliefs accessible to me. And there are choices we make in that context that won’t affect us now, but will make us collectively an example of some wrong, even as individuals may stand out in opposition. For instance, the fact that I eat meat might make me the equivalent of a slave-owner to future generations, according to some powerful arguments. (And here is another point of fascination—the intersection of morality and personal weakness, and all of the ways we produce contradictory pronouncements on it.) But back to the now. So, as I mentioned, I think the abuse of power and the knowing promulgation of human suffering are wrong. As do most people. But as a writer I am interested in how our language supports these conditions, not just overtly, but in all the little nuggets of received speech that distort our views of the world and ourselves. How language can be arranged to help us wrong even ourselves intrigues me. (After all, I commit hate speech every day, all of it self-directed.) But in other ways, in sentences, “wrongness” can be a salvation. This is another meaning of the word for me. In this sense wrongness is that which doesn’t sound right. And invariably what sounds right is what we’ve heard before, have already digested, fits the slot. It’s “commonsensical.” So, the wrongness, the “off” thing, is that which comes at an oblique angle to the given, disrupts it enough to make a stranger sound, a more startling thought. The wrongness is precious to a writer, because it charges the language, makes the readers feel again, if only because they are reading sentences whose ends they can’t foresee. They can’t finish them themselves, unlike many of the sentences we process each day. (“Thank you. Have a nice...”) So, for me, in the context of writing, doing the “right” thing involves an exploration of the “right” wrongnesses, the ones that can help readers experience thought and feeling anew. Wronging some rights can maybe right some wrongs. Perhaps there is some morality in there somewhere. But one shouldn’t forget that good fiction depends on some moral ambivalence. And good fiction writers all know in their hearts that they do what they do for the kicks.

*Sam Lipsyte’s most recent book is The Ask (2010). He is also the author of Home Land (2005), which was a New York Times Notable Book for 2005 and winner of The Believer Book Award, as well as The Subject Steve (2001) and Venus Drive (2000). His fiction has appeared in The Quarterly, The New Yorker, The Paris Review, Noon, Tin House, Open City, n+1, Harper’s, McSweeney’s, La Nouvelle Revue Française, and Playboy, among other places. His essays and reviews have appeared in The New York Times Book Review, Bookforum, Esquire, GQ, The Believer, and The Washington Post Book World. He was a 2008 Guggenheim Fellow.*

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