No Uncertain Terms

C. NAMWALI SERPELL, *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2014, pp. 408, Hardcover, $49.95.

C. Namwali Serpell's *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* is, among other things, a bravura performance. I do not think she would object to my saying so, since it is precisely the performance of reading—reading as an "agonistic, participatory" (1) act that unfolds over time—that is Serpell's central concern in this ambitious, singular book. Serpell's aims in *Seven Modes* are dazzlingly, sometimes dizzyingly, manifold: she seeks to think anew—in the overlapping wakes of New Criticism, deconstruction, and postmodernism—about the significance of literary uncertainty; to reinvigorate the field of ethical criticism; to retheorize the relationship between readers, authors, and interpretation; and to raise even larger disciplinary questions about what literary history is and what literary criticism ought to look like. Indeed, given the brazenly New Critical spirit of the book itself, a reviewer confronted with the seven chapters, three section introductions, and two appendices of *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* may well start to worry about the heresy of paraphrase. But beneath the "eclectic, rambunctious, pragmatic" (31) approach that Serpell adopts from William Empson—and that makes *Seven Modes* an original and often thrilling work of criticism—this book addresses an elegantly simple and essential question for literary studies: what is the experience of reading really like?

Seven Modes of Uncertainty does not look like most current books of literary criticism. That is its great benefit and also its sizable burden. Relatively unconcerned with matters of historical context and wary of grand theories, Serpell reads seven contemporary novels in order to do nothing less than retheorize reading from the ground up. Framed in terms diversely drawn from cognitive psychology, phenomenology, ethical philosophy, and literary formalism—and frequently explained through metaphors of music and architecture—reading is, in Serpell's formulation, an aesthetic, affective, and ethical experience all at once: "an ongoing dance" (9) of literary form, emotional response, and intersubjective awareness. These intertwined experiences, she argues, are made most visible in our confrontations with literature's elaborately structured uncertainties. Yet according to Serpell, such unsettling and edifying experiences of uncertainty risk being lost by reductive critical approaches to the concept. Decades of exposure to the familiar protocols of postmodern narrative and deconstructive reading have produced a kind of "conceptual exhaustion" and left us with an ethical criticism that "relies on literature's uncertainty even as it reifies it into a universal value, making it certain" (17). Posing a sharp challenge both to an outmoded ethics of authorial morality and to a reified ethics of poststructuralist alterity, Serpell asks: "How do we talk about literary uncertainty without reducing it to a monolithic otherness and without promoting a paralyzed or suspended indeterminacy?" (18).

Her answer is that uncertainty is not a single *idea* but a variety of diverse *modes*, which allow us to recognize "the different affects made available by uncertain reading" and "the different orientations toward the world it can exhort" (17). Striving to do justice to these varied affective and ethical attitudes, *Seven Modes* has a complex, nested structure. Each of the book's seven chapters theorizes one of the titular modes of uncertainty. These seven modes are organized into three sections, each of which designates a fixed "narrative structure" capable of

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producing (or, to use the term Serpell adapts from cognitive psychology, "affording") multiple modes. Serpell explains, "In each reading, a necessarily static picture of the ontological narrative structure—its unavoidable, discernible form—is followed by a suggestive, phenomenological evocation of the aesthetic, affective, and ethical affordances of moving through that structure, what I call a *mode*" (24). Seeking to bridge form and experience, structure and temporality, *Seven Modes* thus develops "a flexible, labile, heuristic scheme" for identifying and ordering the phenomenological experiences afforded by structures of uncertainty. Serpell sums it up well: "My seven modes are thus made up of three sets of two, plus one: *oscillation, enfolding* (modes of mutual exclusion); *adjacency, accounting* (modes of multiplicity); *synchronicity, vacuity* (modes of repetition); and *flippancy* (a composite mode)" (25). Each of these modes simultaneously describes an aesthetic form, an affective experience, and an ethical relation "and holds them in resonant tension, like a hum" (1). This vibrating hum, subtly modulating over time, is the sound that emanates from the act of "reading ambiguous literature" (36).

Uncertainty is central to Serpell's theory of reading because it offers a supple and dialectical way of negotiating between reading experience and narrative form: "*uncertainty* can refer to either the object or the cognitive state of the observer. . . . Drifting between reader and text, uncertainty invokes both" (9). It also invokes the tension between readership and authorship, revealing literature to be shaped by a fundamental "uncertainty about agency in reading" (7)—that is, about who controls the reading experience, author or reader. This struggle for control is what makes reading unavoidably ethical: a confrontation with the other as author. Building on these insights, Serpell uses uncertainty to establish a model of literary criticism that emphasizes not reduction or "reflection" (literature = moral lesson) but the complex "resonance" of aesthetic and ethical questions (26). For Serpell, the logic of resonance allows us to bring literature into contact with other modes of thought while preserving the particularity of the literary.

This timely commitment to the specificity of literature perhaps also explains Serpell's provocative and willful refusal to reduce literary texts to something else: history. Although the introduction to *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* makes several intriguing historical claims—namely, that the aesthetic uncertainty of modernism only acquired an ethical valence around midcentury; that the "belief in literary uncertainty as an index of ethical value" (15) emerged specifically out of the controversy and debate surrounding Nabokov's *Lolita*; and that what we call contemporary literature "operate[s] within a cultural frame about the uses of uncertainty that *Lolita* made possible" (11)—this is not a book about the history, literary or otherwise, of uncertainty. Serpell systematically refuses to use her seven exemplary novels to tell any sort of historical story. She asserts in her conclusion that "newer literature has not become any more uncertain"—but not so fast: "I would not characterize the trajectory of experimental literature as an ethical devolution," either (287). According to Serpell, only an alternative model of literary history—one not in thrall to teleology or periodicity—can trace modes of literary uncertainty whose "resonance zig-zags across centuries" (288). While this announcement of skepticism toward progression and periodization is familiar (Serpell herself is drawing on Wai Chee Dimock here), *Seven Modes* really does put its money where its mouth is. The book is all resonating zig-zags, no historical arc. This is a high-wire act, for sure—with all the attendant dangers that implies. For there is a split-second drop from the well-meaning search for an *alternate* model of history to the hard ground of a complete *absence* of history, and it is not clear that Serpell always stays aloft. By the time she admits that the most "troubling" and unsuccessful versions of uncertainty "turn out, upon reflection, to

be the most recent of the texts I have considered" (287), the spirited lack of any speculation about why this should be so—or about what role uncertainty itself may play in the culture of the 2000s that it did not in the 1950s—feels less like a bold questioning of disciplinary assumptions and more like a missed opportunity.

Yet this is all in keeping with the iconoclastic and irreverent spirit of *Seven Modes*, and it is easy to be possessed by it. That spirit, Serpell explains, is Empson's, and the modulating, musical tone of her book bespeaks an Empsonian commitment to "the utility of theorizing without a general theory" (34). This commitment clearly underwrites the work done in the chapters, which move from inspired close readings to etymological riffs to rigorous engagements with ethical philosophy—through the work of Martin Buber, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-Luc Nancy, C. G. Jung, Bernard Williams, and Barbara Johnson—in order to explore the full range of literary forms and ethical relations that embody "the dynamism of the reading experience" (34).

Part 1 of *Seven Modes* focuses on the modes of uncertainty afforded by mutual exclusion—conflicting events or interpretations within a single novel. The first chapter follows the "oscillations" of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. This will stand as a definitive reading of the novel, one that makes impressive sense of its manic fluctuations of meaning, metaphor, and tone. Showing how Pynchon's novel flings readers constantly back and forth between paranoia and reality, conspiracy and chance, seriousness and levity, and alterity and empathy, Serpell argues that the oscillatory experience of reading *Lot 49* ultimately "approximates the obscurity, the difficulty of our dealings with other people" (77). Chapter 2 defines the mode of "enfolding" that reveals itself in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. Assessing how *Atonement*'s ending seems to spoil the story that has come before it—leading critics to issue misbegotten spoiler alerts—Serpell brilliantly demonstrates how McEwan's folding in of multiple endings (happy and sad), multiple time frames, and multiple selves ("young and old, foolish and repentant," first-time reader and rereader [104]) leads to the enfolding of our own ethical complicity. This tour-de-force chapter, probably the book's best, offers a powerful theory of *Atonement*'s "spoiled empathy" (110), which transforms our judgment of the characters into a recognition of our readerly complicity in the lies they have told and the fictions they have written for our benefit.

Part 2 surveys modes of multiplicity (a novel's use of multiple narrators or perspectives). The section's first chapter analyzes the "proximate yet distanced adjacency" that "suffuses the narrative" of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (133). This mode of adjacency creates the experience of a temporary, side-by-side community that is neither atomized nor codependent but instead promotes an ethics of discretion: a discerning commitment both to the discreteness of individuals (their separateness) and to the discreetness with which we must treat their private, unknowable experiences. Serpell's reading of the novel is characteristically illuminating, and her use of *Beloved*'s sideways glances to imagine an "alternative to Lévinas's face-to-face encounter" is inspired (150). Yet this chapter also raises some questions about Serpell's experiential approach to literature. Throughout *Seven Modes*, Serpell frequently frames the formal and phenomenological aspects of reading as ways to move beyond the simplicities of a novel's content. This deemphasizing of content is often quite salutary. But in the chapter on *Beloved*, it produces a more jarring disconnect between the historical setting of Morrison's novel and the ethical universality that Serpell wants to find in it: "In *Beloved*, nineteenth-century American slavery . . . is a lens that allows us to perceive two perennial threats to communities" (124). Is slavery really just a lens for Morrison? The gap between the "perennial" and the particular here—between the abstract idea of community and the specific character of *this* community (of ex-slaves living in the midst of Reconstruction)—is

slightly disconcerting. Justifying her approach to *Beloved*, Serpell proposes that "we consider the ethics of the reading experience" (121) because the link between the novel's historical setting, the context of its writing, and Morrison's intentions in writing it is too thorny to untangle. Yet this knot of context, content, and form is exactly what literary objects are and exactly where literary interpretation starts. To set it aside too quickly is to risk forgetting that behind every "reading experience" lies the novel being read. In the next chapter on multiplicity, Serpell explores the mode of "accounting" by inventively "interreading" three different texts titled "Seven Types of Ambiguity": Empson's 1930 book of criticism, Shirley Jackson's 1943 short story, and Elliot Perlman's 2003 novel. Accounting, Serpell argues, captures the ethical tension between comprehensive explanation and mere enumeration when confronted with incommensurate perspectives or values. The chapter is dense—moving from Benthamite utilitarianism to the "imbrication of economic and literary value" by way of an anecdote concerning Empson and Bertrand Russell (171)—and its central vision of pluralism's "uncertainty about how to measure many values in relation" (158) as both a mathematical problem and an imaginative one is brilliant. Yet, precisely because of its fidelity to "Empson's ambivalence" about resolving conflict (188), the chapter cannot but end ambivalently, electing not to give an account of what explains the differences among these three distinct versions of literary accounting.

Part 3 tracks the uncertainties produced by narrative repetition. First, Serpell considers the mode of "vacuity" that shapes Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*. She rightly seeks to move beyond "a literal-minded reading of its content" (196)—and the simplistic moral controversies that arose from such readings—in order to focus on the effects of the novel's *formal* emptiness: its evacuation of meaning from language and of consequence from violence. Serpell deftly connects the novel's oft-discussed "banality, blankness, vacancy" (204) to readers' inability to gain either moral certainty or interpretive mastery over the text—to judge or even explain the novel's horrific acts of violence. This "hollow but intense . . . uncertainty" (204) about how to respond to the novel prompts an ethically unsettling confrontation with incomprehensible violence. The chapter gives an ingenious account of "the sadomasochistic experience of reading *American Psycho*" (226)—though I think it is underserved by a somewhat glib analogy between Ellis's descriptions of violence and the "interpretive violence" of trying to impose meaning on the novel (223). In the section's second chapter, Serpell meditates on the "synchronicity" of Tom McCarthy's *Remainder.* The reenactments and repetitions that structure *Remainder*, she suggests, leave readers with the strange sensation that the novel has somehow perfectly anticipated their reading of it. Serpell cleverly shows how the novel mesmerizes us with a series of repetitions, allusions, and "affective vibrations" (249) that ultimately work to synchronize us with a psychopathic narrator we would not otherwise identify with. This troubling ethics of "enthrallment"—a passive succumbing to *Remainder*'s "static, abstracted prison of correspondence" (257)—hangs over the novel until its final pages, when a moment of unexpected and unsynchronized laughter breaks McCarthy's spell.

Finally, a concluding chapter on Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* catalogs the novel's various "flippancies." Drawing a remarkable connection between literary form and sentimental affect, Serpell details how the text's infamous flip-book-style ending encourages skimming (flipping) rather than careful reading, which mirrors the novel's own flippant and reductive equivalence between different, incommensurable traumas. The chapter ends with a characteristically bold (certainly exciting, possibly flippant) leap: from Foer's manipulative attempt to keep us turning his pages to the craze for "turns"—that is, new

methodological trends—among literary critics. (Serpell mentions the "turn to ethics" as well as turns to "affect, aesthetics, form, and surface" as examples [288–89].) Wondering why such turns never feel entirely new ("the 'New Formalism' and the 'New Ethics'" automatically imply old ones, after all [289]), Serpell concludes by presenting her "*re*turn" to Empson (288) as an attempt to acknowledge as well as to encourage the inevitable variegation, belatedness, skepticism, and, yes, uncertainty that are the hallmarks of criticism.

These brief summaries cannot do justice to the thrills afforded by Serpell's readings. The chapters are engrossing, learned, surprising, and seductive—if also sometimes a bit slippery. The entire book is given life through lyrical, punning prose that cannot hide the pleasure it finds in language itself (the dual trajectories of *projection*, the enfolded etymology of *complicity*, the double meaning of *discretion*, the varieties of *flippancy*). That pleasure, in turn, cannot help but become the reader's own.

Yet *Seven Modes* also left me with some uncertainties. As a non- (if not an un-) ethical reader myself, I was deeply persuaded by Serpell's insistence on the necessity of a "darker" ethics: "we should be less afraid to argue for the darker, troubling modes—the risks and threats—that literary uncertainty affords" (19). The unavoidability of projecting onto others, the selfish spoiling of empathic judgment, the interpretive obstinacy of extreme violence: these are darker and more useful discoveries than the usual calls for empathy or recognition. Yet Serpell's larger point is that confronting such dark, uncertain states itself affords ethical enlightenment: "I do see having many different experiences of uncertainty as in itself a good" (39). There is thus one troubling possibility that is not fully entertained in *Seven Modes of Uncertainty*: what if uncertainty *is not*—or is no longer—a good? This is where the ethical rubber meets the historical road. More than fifteen years into the twenty-first century, it seems increasingly clear that ours is a historical moment buffeted not simply by the aesthetics or the ethics of uncertainty but also by the ideology of it. At a moment when postmodern ambiguity has become the backbone of antiscience skepticism, when undecidability currently underwrites the liberal aversion to radical politics, and when uncertainty is now another word for economic precarity, it seems worth asking whether it is not the unsettling experience of uncertainty but of *certainty* that, today, is needed to shake us out of our ethical and political torpors.

But if *Seven Modes*'s celebration of uncertainty occasionally produces a mild historical vertigo, the book remains a bracingly original and timely prehistory of a literary experience on the cusp of becoming a lived condition. And if Serpell insists on the slight but unmistakable gap between literature and history, she does so in order to make us think that much harder about what role literature has to play in articulating the still-uncertain history of our contemporary moment. Such provocations leave one matter, at least, quite unambiguous. *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* is a bold, brilliant, and essential contribution to current debates about what it means to read literature—and what it means to do so in the shadow of a contemporary history that remains, for now, unknown, though one hopes not entirely unknowable.

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