A Brief Interview with Professor Jason Schwartz

By Kelly De Stefano

Coastlines: How would you define experimental fiction as it exists today, and do you agree with the label 'experimental'? Would you label it at all?

Jason Schwartz: It's not a great term. Often they're talking about a gimmick, maybe an elaborately packaged collection of gimmicks. Or degrees of make-believe. Sometimes it's a catch-all phrase in the face of strangeness. “Experimental” may be “style” by another name, or in a more severe or aggressive form. And it is sometimes treated as a disease.

Coastlines: Do you notice a movement among students toward experimental fiction at FAU?

Schwartz: Students are doing all kinds of things. Maybe some movement toward, sometimes followed by some movement away from—or vice versa. And sometimes the curious and rather acrobatic: toward and away from simultaneously.

Coastlines: Which authors would you view as current champions and practitioners of experimental fiction, and which would you recommend to someone just beginning to read this type of fiction?

Schwartz: See Unsaid magazine.

Coastlines: Would you consider your book, A German Picturesque, an experimental work?

Schwartz: Not really, no. Though I don't especially prefer one label over another. Could be realism—of a more or less disagreeable sort, depending upon where you're standing.

Coastlines: In A German Picturesque, you opt for a non-normative, observational narrative structure instead of a normative development of plot through causal events. Yet, there are recurring motifs within and between stories; for instance, in part 'I,' there is the repetition of sisters, death, curves, etc. Are these stories more interrelated than their lack of causality seems to suggest?

Schwartz: They're interrelated through these recurring figures, as you say. Though the connections are probably more evident in some places than in others, for better or worse. So the repetition is often a matter of pattern. But sometimes I fall for a certain word and simply wish to keep company with it.

Coastlines: What would you say you first approach a story with? In other words, does any one element (language, structure, themes, etc.) initially determine the presentation of the others?

Schwartz: A phrase, maybe the makings of a line, and I'll try to put this in play, bending the line until I'm pleased by it. From there, if things work out, I'll find my way toward a structure of some kind.

Coastlines: Is there a collection you are currently working on, and, if so, could you tell us anything about its content and/or form?

Schwartz: I'll let you know in about ten years.