

## BETWEEN SILLINESS AND SATIRE: ON BLACK HUMOR FICTION

### *WHAT IS (WAS) BLACK HUMOR?*

#### **Catch-22 and the Humor of Black Humor**

One can't help but note that in the critical commentary about the fiction of the 1950s and 60s known as "black humor" there is much discussion of what makes such fiction "black", but little of its humor. The most famous expression of this tendency occurs in probably the most frequently cited book on black humor, Max Schulz's *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties*. "I have shied away from the humor in Black Humor," writes Schulz. Choosing instead to focus on what he calls the "cosmic labyrinth," Schulz claims that "to give equal value to humor in any consideration of this literature is possibly to let oneself be trapped by a term that came into being somewhat capriciously and may not accurately describe that literature." While it may be true that several of the novels labeled as black humor at one time or another are not "humorous" in a narrow sense, and that the term itself was adapted somewhat arbitrarily, Schulz's reluctance to deal at length with books such as *Catch-22* or Stanley Elkin's *A Bad Man*, clearly funny books by any measure, evidences a common scholarly preference for the "cosmic" at the expense of the comic.

It might reasonably be assumed that criticism of individual novels would confront more directly the vital role of comedy in their aesthetic and rhetorical operations. Such attention would seem to be in order especially for *Catch-22*, which relies so systematically on what Frederick Karl has catalogued as "puns, high jinks, slapstick, [and] witty dialogue." However, by far most writing about *Catch-22* has focused like Schulz on more portentous issues of politics, philosophy, economics, and even theology. In fact, to the extent that aesthetic or expressly literary issues are raised seriously at all, they tend to be restricted to relatively traditional studies of sources and precursors, or broadly thematic discussions of Heller's sense of what critics have chosen to term "the absurd." While the novel clearly has affinities with absurdism, these affinities have generally been used to distance *Catch-22* from the kind of comedy associated with

the devices Heller exploits for absurdist effect. While not everyone who examines the novel neglect Heller's skill as a literary comedian, it is not unfair to cite the following statement by Leon F. Seltzer as typical of the general thrust of opinion about the role of comedy in *Catch-22*: "the novel's absurdities--comic and otherwise--operate almost always to expose the alarming inhumanities which pollute our political, social, and economic systems" (*Critical Essays on Joseph Heller*, 1984)

My intention is not to deny that *Catch-22* does expose such inhumanities (clearly it does just that for many readers), nor even for that matter to criticize the substance of previous commentary on the novel, but to point out the implicit dichotomy between the "comic" and the "serious" created by this commentary. Precisely because *Catch-22* seems to most readers a fundamentally serious work, a reflexive critical assumption comes into play whereby comedy and humor are seen as necessarily in service of something else, something more worthwhile, more identifiably meaningful. In short, the logical inference to draw from the kinds of statements I have quoted is that the comic cannot itself be serious.

An exception to the approach taken by most critics of *Catch-22* is Morton Gurewitch in his book *Comedy: The Irrational Vision*. Gurewitch sees *Catch-22* as above all a "mad farce" so unrelenting as to effectively overwhelm any narrower didactic or satiric impulses. "The satire," writes Gurewitch, "is devoured ... by omnivorous nonsense." In some ways this view could seem reminiscent of early responses to the novel which deemed it unworthy of sustained attention precisely because it seemed like "nonsense." However, Gurewitch intends his assertion to be taken as a laudatory judgment, and as such it is welcome recognition that the "merely funny" pervades *Catch-22*, to the extent that analysis focusing on worldview or ideology are at the very least problematic if not outright misleading. At the same time, Gurewitch's use of the word "nonsense" risks propping up the same opposition between the comic and the serious I have described. It implies a comedy defined by the absence of any positive content (although it must be said that Gurewitch celebrates comedy for what he calls its "irrational freedom"). Opposing "sense" with "nonsense" does not finally overcome what seems to be an inherent devaluation--embedded in critical discourse itself--of the comedic impulse.

Despite the foregrounding of more solemn issues by critics such as Schulz and Seltzer, *Catch-22* provides ample opportunity to explore this impulse. In fact, in my analysis *Catch-22* is first and foremost a comic novel whose primary structural principle is the joke and whose design and execution are most appropriately construed as the vehicles of mirth. This description is also intended to underscore the book's accomplishment, but without divorcing its comedy from its overall seriousness of purpose. In my attempt to establish the inherent respectability of comedy as a mode creating its own kind of meaning, I draw on Jerry Palmer's analysis in his book. *The Logic of the Absurd*, which develops a convincing account of both the internal mechanism of the joke and the effect successful jokes have on our reception of the texts which employ them. Although Palmer's book focuses on film and television comedy, the burden of much of the discussion that follows is precisely that *Catch-22* shares essential characteristics with these forms. (As does, moreover, an entire strain of contemporary American fiction, encompassing loosely American "postmodern" writers and including Joseph Heller, which not only uses comedy extensively but relies on strategies and conventions derived as much from popular sources such as film and vaudeville as from purely literary traditions.)

Few novels in fact offer comedy as pure as that offered in *Catch-22*. No situation, not even the bloodiest or most fearful, is insulated from the further indignity of the joke, or exempt from the comedic *reductio ad absurdum*; no character, not even the apparent protagonist, escapes the ravages of mockery and ridicule. While such thoroughgoing comedy is familiar to us in film--particularly the American comic film descended from Mack Sennett--it is undoubtedly disconcerting to find it in a purportedly "serious" work of literature depicting a subject as forbidding as war and its consequences. Nevertheless, this brand of comedy distinguishes *Catch-22* from the primary line of twentieth-century comic fiction which uses comedy as a strategy to clearly satirical or discursive ends, and it is here that Palmer's view of the comic process is most illuminating.

Palmer argues for the necessity of a theory of comedy which values it for its own sake: "by reducing comedy to the play of serious values (attacking A, promoting B) the nature of the process, the pleasure which is specific to comedy and humour is lost." Palmer contends that comedy has a force of its own which inevitably muddies the thematic waters a text might otherwise seem to be navigating. His book's thesis, he writes, is that "ambiguities are built into

the reception of comedy and humour, and this for reasons that are fundamental to their nature.” He goes on to analyze in impressive and compelling detail the operations inherent in comedy, constructing a model which provides a basis for understanding the way jokes and gags unfold, and which also explains their success or failure. On one level, Palmer's account seems remarkably simple, as he divides the comic event into two distinct moments, one during which occurs a disruption of narrative or contextual expectations, and a second which leads to a laugh-producing contradiction: that the cause of the disruption—either a verbal remark or visual image—is implausible yet at the same time contains a kind of plausibility after all. The clarity provided by this formulation, however, as well as its potential relevance in a wide range of contexts and across generic boundaries, make it an effective tool for appreciating particular comic effects. It is especially insightful when applied to a text like *Catch-22*, whose comic effects have struck so many as being at best in conflict with an overarching seriousness of purpose.

That *Catch-22* engages in broad comedy is readily apparent from its first chapter, indeed its very first sentence. But the reader attentive to comic structure and pattern will not fail to appreciate a passage such as the following:

The colonel dwelt in a vortex of specialists who were still specializing in trying to determine what was troubling him. They hurled lights in his eyes to see if he could see, rammed needles into nerves to hear if he could feel. There was a urologist for his urine, a lymphologist for his lymph, an endocrinologist for his endocrines, a psychologist for his psyche, a dermatologist for his derma; there was a pathologist for his pathos, a cystologist for his cysts, and a bald and pedantic cetologist from the zoology department at Harvard who had been shanghaied ruthlessly into the Medical Corps by an faulty anode in an I.B.M. machine and spent his sessions with the dying colonel trying to discuss *Moby Dick* with him.(9)

One almost waits for the rimshots at the end of such a performance (it has the feel in particular of a more verbally playful Woody Allen joke). Although the ultimate effect of humor such as this may be to contribute to the novel's overall sense of absurdity, it should be emphasized that the

immediate effect is laughter, and that the novel's knitting together of such moments is its primary narrative strategy.

While "jokes" in the most conventional sense do not necessarily dominate the pages of *Catch-22*--they are nevertheless plentiful--the spirit and substance of comedy like the above does inform much of the novel's exposition, as well as many of its character exchanges. Chapter II, "Clevinger," for example, opens to a brief dialogue between the title character and Yossarian, the tenor of which is echoed in subsequent dialogue as well:

Clevinger had stared at him with apoplectic rage and indignation and, clawing the table with both hands, had shouted, "You're crazy!"

"Clevinger, what do you want from people?" Dunbar had replied wearily above the noises of the officers' club.

"I'm not joking," Clevinger persisted.

"They're trying to kill me," Yossarian told him calmly.

"No one's trying to kill you," Clevinger cried.

"Then why are they shooting at me?" Yossarian asked.

"They're shooting at everyone," Clevinger answered. "They're trying to kill everyone."

"And what difference does that make?" (pp. 11-12)

The tone of this interchange is suggestive of nothing so much as the patter of a vaudeville team, and the humor evoked by such a passage clearly relies on the basic strategies of comedy, surprise and incongruity. In replying "what difference does that make?" to Clevinger's declaration, Yossarian is clearly disrupting the logical case Clevinger is trying to make for Yossarian's "craziness." At first we find Yossarian's defense quite implausible (and therefore are perhaps inclined to agree with Clevinger) but on second thought it makes its own kind of sense. What difference does it make to Yossarian if he is in fact killed that everyone else is a target? The

ambiguity ensuing from these disparate responses provokes our laughter. It is this instinctive, largely subconscious reaction which is prompted by what Palmer terms the "logic of the absurd."

Moreover, Clevinger's disclaimer—"I'm not joking!"—ultimately works to highlight his position as the butt of the joke being set up at his expense, both by Yossarian and by the shape of the scene's own comic logic. Ironically, by the end of Chapter II Yossarian finds the tables turned as he himself becomes the butt of the joke whose absurd but ruthless logic provides the novel its title and controlling metaphor: *Catch-22*. Doc Daneeka informs him that the required number of missions has been raised (from 44 to 50 at this point), and throughout the rest of the book Yossarian struggles against the inescapable force of *Catch-22*, sometimes resisting actively and at others more passively cutting his losses in his effort to somehow get the last laugh on the system it represents. Doc Daneeka's explanation of the principle of *Catch-22* suggests further the relevance of Palmer's schema; indeed, what is most disturbing about the whole idea of *Catch-22* is explicable through its terms. We--and the airmen on Pianosa--are surprised by the obvious manipulation and injustice embodied in this unofficial law. Its main tenet--that anyone who would continue to fly missions after what Yossarian, Orr, and the others have been through would be crazy, but that "anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn't really crazy" seems a perversely implausible distortion of logic, but at the same time has a certain monstrous plausibility as well. Even Yossarian is moved to admire such a catch, and Doc Daneeka pronounces it "the best there is." If the world of *Catch-22* is indeed "crazy," it is largely because it is so thoroughly informed by the rigorous logic of comedy.

Not only is Yossarian repeatedly taken aback by the ubiquity of this logic, but readers of *Catch-22* must also be surprised by the unremitting manifestations of its all-encompassing joke in an incongruous setting of bloody air war and inhuman exploitation where fear and misery are translated into comic pratfalls. A large part of the book's artistic interest, I would argue, lies precisely in the way in which Heller sustains his comic routines over the course of nearly 500 pages, as well as the way in which he joins these routines into a compelling, albeit highly fragmented, narrative. Heller succeeds both in creating consistently startling comic moments and in tying these moments together in a way that reflects and reinforces the fundamental nature of the joke itself. Palmer describes two kinds of narrative which incorporate gags and jokes. The first gathers such gags into an essentially self-sufficient sequence, while the second subordinates

the gags to an otherwise non-comic story. In the former case, comedy is presumed to be capable of producing its own kind of satisfaction; in the latter, the comedy is employed as a supplement to the story's non-comic core.

While Palmer is perhaps correct to contend that narratives of the first kind are rarely found in practice (especially in literature), *Catch-22* comes as close to this kind of narrative as any text in modern fiction. Further, while such a strategy might seem a threat to narrative unity, in *Catch-22* it actually provides a kind of unity that has previously been overlooked. What has appeared to be an excessively fragmented narrative (or at least a too randomly fragmented one) can be read as a mammoth orchestration of individual comic bits and routines into a kaleidoscopic comedy revue, the cumulative effect of which is to situate Yossarian ever more irretrievably in the world defined by *Catch-22*. The chronological fluidity of the story is partly induced by the logic of an absurdity as overwhelming as this, and is partly an opportunity for the reader to reflect on the logic of the absurd itself as played out under this text's conditions: that a world so irrational, where distinctions between past, present, and future collapse, could actually exist seems implausible in the extreme, yet when judged by the terms of its governing assumptions, the confusions of such a world seem plausible indeed.

Thus does one of the most basic of comedic devices--the joke--serve both as the foundation of individual scenes and episodes and as a central organizing principle of the novel as a whole, with consequent ramifications not only for its aesthetic structure but also for any philosophical or political positions it may be presumed to be advancing. Even more examples of scenes and situations in *Catch-22* explicable in terms of jokes and related kinds of "low" humor could be adduced here--the "atheist" scene between the chaplain and Colonel Cathcart, for example, in which the Colonel "plays dumb" (although he isn't really playing) in his astonishment that atheism is legal, that the enlisted men pray to the same God as the officers, etc. But while many readers might reluctantly acknowledge the book's reliance on such humor, it is the marginal status of this kind of comedy that provokes even admirers to attribute supplemental value to its use in order to "raise" the text to a more respectable and more suitably meaningful level of discourse.

Again, examining the mechanism of the joke can help to explain why this happens. The balance between the plausible and the implausible in a given joke is often delicate, and can itself determine the impact of that joke. Palmer argues, for example, that contemporary audiences may see only the implausible in silent film comedies, and therefore judge them to be merely silly. Some audiences at the time, however, attended mostly to the plausible—that is, currently relevant—features and thus, notably, "found them excessively 'black,' too abrasive to be funny." Substituting "serious" or "disturbing" for "abrasive" in this statement, we can perhaps begin to see how contemporary literary critics avoid or overlook the humor of black humor.

Implicit in Palmer's account of the operation of comedy is a kind of self-consciousness which, if not expressed directly through the text, is potentially induced on the reader's side by the text. Thus while comic fiction is not necessarily self-reflexive in the mode of more strictly defined metafiction (e.g., John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* or Robert Coover's *Universal Baseball Association*), that which, like *Catch-22*, unleashes the logic of the absurd does encourage an awareness of textuality in those moments when the very mechanism of this logic compels the reader to note the disruption of textual continuity. When the joke opens an especially wide gap—that is, when the imbalance between the plausible and the implausible seems, initially at least, very pronounced—such awareness can only increase. Here is perhaps the source of both the primary effect of humor—laughter—and the temptation to devalue mere laughter, an apparent paradox that can be illustrated by looking at a scene skeptical readers could well point to as fundamentally non-comic.

The scene inside Yossarian's airplane after it has been hit and his fellow airman Snowden wounded is probably one of the most memorable episodes in *Catch-22*. Although portions of this scene are replayed throughout the novel, its full impact is registered near the end in a final flashback. Yossarian's memory does indeed for the most part unfold with appropriate sobriety:

Yossarian bent forward to peer and saw a strange colored stain seeping through the coveralls just above the armhole of Snowden's flak suit. Yossarian felt his heart stop, then pound so violently he found it difficult to breathe. Snowden was wounded inside his flak suit.

But even here the solemnity and outright horror of the situation can easily be interrupted by a joke:

A chunk of flak more than three inches big had shot into his other side just underneath the arm and blasted all the way through, drawing whole mottled quarts of Snowden along with it through the gigantic hole in his ribs it made as it blasted out ... Here was God's plenty, all right [Yossarian] thought bitterly as he stared--liver, lungs, kidneys, ribs, stomach, and bits of the stewed tomatoes Snowden had eaten that day for lunch.

Yossarian hated stewed tomatoes and turned away dizzily and began to vomit, clutching his burning throat.

No doubt such a moment can, and has, been interpreted differently. Some might find it merely tasteless; most probably assume it has some comprehensible relationship to the scene's—and the book's—aesthetic or thematic design, and look to subordinate it to that design—thus the joke serves to heighten the horror, reinforce the anti-war message, etc. While I would not deny that it does either or both of these things, what gets overlooked in such an interpretation is the sheer disruptiveness of the joke, the way it actually takes our attention away from the grossness of "God's plenty" to contemplate the implausibility of the joke itself entering the narrative space otherwise occupied by Snowden's internal organs. As Palmer has it, "any gag works by contradicting discursively defined expectations," and the starkness of the contradiction involved here makes for a particularly strong sense of implausibility—so much so that Heller might seem to risk alienating readers for whom such a situation "deserve[s] only serious treatment or behavior." Yet reflection does indeed suggest it is plausible after all that Yossarian, continuously immersed as he is in death and mayhem, would be sickened only at the sight of the less familiar stewed tomatoes.

In a scene like this, the comedic element is so unsettling that one's awareness of the discordant note introduced can produce either the sense that Yossarian's squeamishness is mordantly funny or that its origin in the repulsiveness of war makes its comic quality secondary. Readers whose response is the latter are likely to find that perceptual gap created by the logic of the absurd to be an abyss into which received notions of literary significance could disappear. But those whose immediate response is laughter are acknowledging the integrity and the vitality

of comedy, although it would not be accurate to say such readers thus ignore the potentially provocative insinuations of context--in fact, a definition of "black humor" would have to emphasize the obvious way in which this particular brand of levity depends on a corresponding contextual gravity.

Certainly not all scenes in *Catch-22* are comic in the way I have described. Yossarian's descent into the underworld on the streets of Rome, for example, seems clearly meant to convey a sobering impression (although even here his obvious helplessness finally only reinforces an overall view of him as a comic figure). Furthermore, comedy as absolute as *Catch-22* at its most extreme does almost unavoidably provoke consideration of its implications, formal and thematic. It is finally only testimony to the impact of comedy, its capacity to be meaningful in a variety of contexts, that the novel has drawn the weighty interpretations I adduced previously. Misunderstanding and distortion result when the hermeneutic operations involved in such interpretations are insufficiently distinguished from the operations of comedy proper, or these latter operations are disregarded entirely. In effect, humor is erased as a significant element of the text, becoming merely an incidental effect. Certainly joking in a context perceived as especially serious or disturbing could elicit laughter resonant with questions (not only "Why am I laughing?" but undoubtedly following from that immediate response), but the joke itself remains separate from such questions, its structure independent of context. The force of a given joke may indeed be related to its context, of course: the blackness of black humor, while often overemphasized, cannot be ignored and is obviously meaningless except through reference to context. The term "black humor," then, is perhaps most appropriately defined as an unapologetic, unalloyed use of comedy in extreme situations that implicitly raise very large, even profound, questions. Black humor of the sort found in *Catch-22* neither trivializes such questions nor foregrounds them, but rather broadens the range of experience to which comedy is relevant.

The conclusion to *Catch-22* has struck many readers as a particularly extreme situation, or at least one with important implications for the novel's ostensible thematic concerns. Many who see *Catch-22* as a satire or a philosophical treatise find the ending a cop-out. Why does Yossarian choose to run away, they implicitly ask, rather than stay and work to change the system? (Although such criticism overlooks the fact that the chaplain proposes to do just that.) Should one conclude that the book is insufficiently serious from the outset, the ending could

conceivably seem a transparent attempt to graft on an explicitly antiwar message. A more accurate assessment would conclude that the ending does leave a message, but also point out that it is a message entirely consistent with the novel's preponderant use of comedy. If the world depicted on Pianosa could be changed, surely by the end of this long novel a sign of such a change would reveal itself. Yet Yossarian's lived-world remains essentially the same at the end as it was when we first experienced it in the hospital ward. Nor are we as readers likely to feel that the conditions of that lived-world have been neutralized, much less altered, by the extended comic treatment of them. Instead, the comedy of *Catch-22* is ultimately nonregenerative: its relentless, frequently black humor does not finally call attention to situations, issues, or problems that could be improved, resolved, or eliminated through more concerted human effort. The blackness of the humor, in fact, may be a function of this final despair. In the face of a world so wholly irredeemable, Yossarian's only alternative is to abandon it in a gesture of personal survival. He may have managed to get the last laugh, but it is a feeble one, and his apparent optimism about the possibilities of "Sweden" make this reader feel the joke is still on him.

Palmer ultimately addresses what he calls the "effectivity" of comedy. He concludes that humor "is neither essentially liberatory nor conservative, for its nature is such that it always refuses to make any commitment to any 'opinion' about anything (except of course the opinion that levity is appropriate under these circumstances)." Possibly what has driven scholars to neglect the role of comedy in *Catch-22* is the sense that under the circumstances portrayed by this novel—war, death, systemic oppression—"levity" assuredly does not seem appropriate. Perhaps there are situations, attitudes, and beliefs that are off limits to comic treatment, but surely comic art can be served only by those who reject taboos of decorum and give free rein to the logic of comedy; the unrestrained play of this logic once unleashed achieves the only truly serious purpose of comedy, which is finally to expose the potentially ridiculous even if what is exposed proves disturbing or offensive. Joseph Heller does so unleash the inherent force and energy of the comic impulse, and this more than its concern with the "alarming inhumanities" of the system makes *Catch-22* a sobering work of literature. Thus, while "black humor fiction" may do little to enhance our knowledge of the "cosmic labyrinth," it does greatly enhance our understanding of the legitimate reach of comedy: even the gravest or the most exalted of subjects

can be submitted to the logic of the absurd. *Catch-22* will not tell you how to live or what to think or even what's worth thinking about. It will tell you what's worth laughing at.

### **The Comedy of Mishap and Misfortune: Bruce Jay Friedman**

Bruce Jay Friedman has been a presence on the American literary and cultural scene for a very long time. He has published over twenty books and authored (or co-authored) numerous plays and screenplays. His work, however, is still most often considered as a contribution to the emergence of “black humor” in American fiction during the 1960s, although his first novel, *Stern* (1962), more likely would have been regarded as absurdist, an existential comedy about the angst of Jewish assimilation. The novel’s title character finds himself in alien territory—the American suburbs—confused and beset by a series of humiliations he struggles to understand. The story of his misadventures is funny, but in the way the plays of Beckett and Ionesco are funny, in a detached and deadpan manner that can also be disconcerting. The same is true of Friedman’s second novel, *A Mother’s Kisses* (1964), although here the subject, a meddling Jewish mother, is more conventionally “comedic” in its overtones. In this novel the humor comes from the straight-faced way in which the narrator relates his mother’s speech and actions, as if it is simply expected in the ordinary course of things for a mother to say outrageous and embarrassing things and behave erratically enough that she would fly with her son to Kansas on his first day of college and remain with him for several weeks as he adjusts to the place, staying in a hotel room the two occupy together.

By the time Friedman published *A Mother’s Kisses*, this sort of unadulterated comedy delivered in an impassive tone had come to be called black humor. Indeed, Friedman himself edited an influential anthology of black humor fiction that did much to delineate and draw attention to this newly prominent mode of fiction (not literally new, since Friedman traces it as far back as Gogol, and one of the included writers is Céline). Friedman doesn’t insist on too strict a definition of black humor, just that “the work under discussion, if not black, is some fairly dark-hued color,” while “the humor part of the definition is probably accurate although I doubt that the writers are bluff and hearty joke-tellers who spend a lot of time at discotheques.” In fact, “invite them to a party and you would probably find a great deal of brooding and sulking.” Presumably Friedman intended his own work to be covered by this general description, although of all the black humorists, with the possible exception of Joseph Heller, Friedman was

the writer most likely to be counted among the “joketellers,” as his fiction, especially the short stories, does indeed significantly rely on gags and jokes as a structural device. (Probably he was the black humorist most likely to be found in discotheques as well.)

Friedman’s analysis in *Black Humor* is shrewdest in its perception that the fiction of such writers as Heller, Pynchon, and Barth (the Barth of *The Sot-Weed Factor*) cannot be described as satirical, that these writers (including himself) had “to discover a new land, invent a new currency, a new set of filters” and “sail into darker waters somewhere out beyond satire.” The humor of black humor encompasses in perhaps its purest form a tendency shared by much fiction of the 1960s and 1970s, one replacing the high seriousness of modernism with a pervasively comic perspective that takes human reality seriously by refusing to take it seriously on its own terms, representing it through various kinds and degrees of distortion and exaggeration. Some of this fiction is laugh-out-loud funny (Stanley Elkin), some closer to the grotesque (Pynchon), some surreal (Donald Barthelme), some using comedy to hold not just “reality” to the implicit mockery of the comic vision but also fiction itself, the conventions and presuppositions of the form (what came to be called “metafiction”).

The mockery of such comedy is implicit because, as Friedman rightly points out, it is “out beyond satire” and does not explicitly ridicule specific behaviors or social conditions for the traditional satirical purpose of highlighting and correcting them. “Black humor” puts this quality of postwar comedy in particularly high relief in its depiction of a world whose every feature is the appropriate subject of ridicule or lampoon, every character a figure of jest, even the protagonist (maybe especially the protagonist). In Friedman’s case, he achieves this effect by invoking the schlemiel figure, beginning with *Stern*, whose protagonist may be the ne plus ultra of beleaguered schlemiels in American literature, but extended throughout his stories and novels as well. Indeed, “The Peace Process,” the novella that anchors Friedman’s new book, features a schlemiel protagonist who, although outwardly a respectable figure (or once a respectable figure) experiences only a series of humiliations as his reward for performing a good deed.

The protagonists of Friedman’s two novels of the 1970s, *The Dick* (1970) and *About Harry Towns* (1974), experience humiliation of a sort, but theirs is less pristine, so to speak, more attached to their own questionable behavior than Stern or the narrator of *A Mother’s Kisses*. These novels are closer to conventional social satire than to black humor, and they probably

mark the end of Friedman's career as a novelist who seemed in tune with the more radical developments in American fiction of the 1960s and 70s. Both of these books could be called more "topical" than *Stern* or *A Mother's Kisses*, more self-conscious of their place in a culturally turbulent and accelerated era, but this now makes them seem dated, artifacts from their historical moment, in a way that the first two novels, despite the superficial details of setting, finally do not. *The Dick* concerns itself, in part, with racial attitudes in 60s-era America, although at least one prominent critic, Anatole Broyard, contended that the novel didn't merely depict racist attitudes but itself embodied an essentially racist perspective.

The protagonist of *The Dick*, a "clippings specialist" with a big-city police department, finds his life falling apart when, after moving to this city, he discovers his daughter will have to attend a school whose students are predominantly black. His wife is especially upset about this (she is clearly a racist), and she eventually leaves her husband for another man, ultimately motivating Kenneth Le Peters (formerly Sussman), heretofore a hesitant if not timid man, to assert himself more vigorously. At the novel's conclusion, Le Peters removes his daughter from the school and they leave the city, presumably to begin a new life, but while Le Peters is escaping all of the confining assumptions of his old life, it remains at best unclear whether he has escaped the confinement of the racial attitude that regards the daughter's school as inherently a hindrance to her education and social status.

That this question lingers about *The Dick* is the most serious indication of a tonal uncertainty in the novel. Its comedy is not thoroughgoing enough to render the characters and their circumstances so farcically absurd that in effect the author is insulated from an association with any character's less savory actions or beliefs. (Perhaps under the circumstances it would have difficult, even impossible, to pull off such a move.) Le Peters is indeed at times a ludicrous and rather hapless figure, but in his conflicts with his wife and many of his colleagues (the real police officers), he induces some sympathy for his plight, and the narrative clearly implies growth in his outlook and his sense of responsibility. Le Peters is not like Yossarian in *Catch-22*, whose flight at the end of the novel is existential, an attempt to restore sanity in an insane world. Le Peters has in a way triumphed, and this outcome fits uneasily with the unresolved racial issues and softens the novel's comic identity.

If *The Dick* awkwardly yokes social commentary with a slapstick sensibility, *About Harry Towns* is a more coherent but mild send-up of Hollywood culture, represented by the title character, a dissipated screenwriter sounding out the depths of his dissipation through most of the novel (which might also be taken as a series of stories). As in *The Dick*, however, Harry Towns has apparently accomplished meaningful change at the book's conclusion, so that even more than the previous novel, *About Harry Towns* could be called a kind of moral allegory, albeit one loosely structured and realized through an underlying comic vision. That vision produces consistently funny, occasionally outrageous, vignettes, but with this novel we have travelled pretty far from the "darker waters" of the foreboding humor we find in *Stern*. The comedy of *About Harry Towns* is more ordinary, more predictable, the comedy of the standup with his shtick.

By the time Friedman published *About Harry Towns*, he had not only begun working in Hollywood but had also written two successful theatrical comedies, *Scuba Duba* and *Steambath*. During the 1980s he worked primarily as a film and television writer, his most noteworthy scripts being those for the Gene Wilder-Richard Pryor film *Stir Crazy* and the Ron Howard-directed *Splash*. Since *Harry Towns*, his most notable books are probably two works of nonfiction, *The Lonely Guy's Book of Life* (made into a Steve Martin film) and *Lucky Bruce: A Literary Memoir* (2011), as well as *The Collected Short Fiction of Bruce Jay Friedman*, published in 2000. The latter shows Friedman to be a prolific writer of short fiction, although the book itself does a poor job of showcasing Friedman's best work in the form. Some of the stories ("The Brazzaville Teenager," "Black Angels") do indeed show that he is adept at a kind of episodic, sketch-like story, usually proceeding from an outrageous premise—in "Brazzaville" a man believes his sick father will recover if he embarrasses himself by asking his boss to "make a recording with Little Sigmund and the Flipouts, three kids, doing the background doo-wah, doo-wahs and the second chorus yeh yeh yehs." Which the boss does.

Many other stories in *Collected Short Fiction* are slight and gimmicky, such as "Let's Hear It For a Beautiful Guy," the narrator's paean to Sammy Davis, Jr. This story, as well as too many others in the book, participate too easily in the show-biz entertainment model of comedy, and while Friedman can do this style as well as or better than most, it prompts a milder, less anxious sort of laughter than we find in his early novels. Friedman described his plays as "tense

comedies,” moving away from the perceived vagueness of “black humor,” but many of the stories in *Collected Short Fiction* lack tension, and the situations are frequently more weird and “wacky” than they are dark in their humor, a problem that afflicts a later novel such as *Tokyo Woes* as well. Friedman would be well-served by a “Selected Stories” that highlights his best short fiction and more emphatically indicates its continuity with the work that brought Friedman his initial attention and that represents the achievement with the best chance to endure as part of an important tendency in postwar American fiction.

Unfortunately, none of the short stories in *The Peace Process* can be ranked among his best, although a few nevertheless provide samplings of some of Friedman’s signature character types and typical situations. A number of the stories feature writers or other characters with show business ties, increasingly a feature of Friedman’s fiction after his first two novels and early stories. Several stories riff on psychiatry and therapists, also a frequent motif in Friedman’s work since the 60s (when to be in therapy was a trendier, and perhaps funnier, preoccupation). Two of the stories, “The Storyteller” and “The Choice,” are exercises in outright fantasy, in which Friedman has occasionally indulged, black humor edging into fabulation and the unreal. A number of the stories evoke aging and encroaching (or actual) death, probably not a surprise for a writer in his mid-80s when this book was published.

“The Impulse” and “A Fan is a Fan” are the two best stories included in *The Peace Process*, but they represent departures from Friedman’s prevailing methods and concerns. The former tells of a man named Dwight, who, at the time story takes place (it has a retrospective frame) is a just-fired book editor still hoping to return to his job. Upon leaving a dinner honoring his former employer, Dwight encounters an elderly lady (Dwight himself is nearly 70, but estimates the lady may be 90), who introduces herself as “Fleming” and invites him to her townhouse on the Upper East Side for a drink. After resisting her rather grotesque attempts at seduction, Dwight steals a necklace, but the old woman proves less addled than he apparently assumed; when he arrives home, his wife informs him “there’s a detective who called and wanted to have a chat with you. . .Do you know a woman named Fleming?” While Dwight is in some ways a recognizable enough Friedman schlemiel, and the scenes between Dwight and Fleming are uneasily funny, this story uses a more self-contained slice-of-life narrative approach than we see in most of Friedman’s fiction (the novels, as well as many of the stories, tend to the

picaresque in form), and the protagonist is less morally ambiguous, not so much a true schlemiel as just a schmuck.

“A Fan is a Fan” is a dark and ominous story, but there is nothing at all humorous about it. A Jewish writer named Max Wintermann receives a call from Joseph Goebbels, acting in his capacity as editor of the “People’s Observer,” asking the “celebrated” writer for a “satirical piece” that will be appropriately “Wintermannesque.” Wintermann has been expecting some such call, after “one by one, family by family, friends and acquaintances had disappeared, a number of them spirited away in vans in the dead of the night,” but certainly not from Goebbels himself, and certainly not extending this sort of invitation. Goebbels assures Wintermann of his admiration for the writer’s work, and Wintermann accepts the commission, only to produce a piece that Goebbels finds inauthentic, causing him to exclaim: “I defy you to show me one touch of Wintermann in these pages. One speck. A crumb.” Wintermann is handed an armband (one also for his daughter) and led off to meet his fate.

Beginning with *Stern*, Friedman’s fiction is of course notable for its Jewish characters, themes, and sensibilities, especially the comedic outlook that is its most signature quality. Seldom, however, has he so directly attempted to engage with Jewish history and the legacy of anti-Semitism as in this story, which itself perhaps helps us see why. “A Fan is a Fan” is chilling in its seamless simplicity, but it evokes dread and revulsion, not laughter, not even the tense or nervous kind. The story reminds us that the line between black humor and outright horror was always very thin, even for a writer like Friedman, who in all but his best work did not often approach that line, preferring to stay back in the more settled areas where comedy is careful to safeguard its identity. But, as Max Wintermann discovers, when the satirist attempts to confront evil the effort is doomed, since evil doesn’t get the joke.

The Jewish milieu in the book’s title novella could not be more conspicuous—the first part of the story takes place in Israel—but it offers a much more recognizably Friedmanesque comedy of mishap and misfortune, in this case afflicting the novel’s protagonist, a no longer employable film director reduced to scouting locations in Jerusalem. William Kleiner first encounters an Arab man named Mahmood when the latter masquerades as a hotel employee anxious to please the new guest who has arrived from the United States. Mahmood believes Kleiner can help him leave Israel to attend his brother’s wedding in New York, but Kleiner

informs him this is not the case. Later, when the claustrophobic Kleiner faints while visiting the Chapel of the Ascension, Mahmood is there to rush him to the hospital. Kleiner agrees to help.

Not that Kleiner doesn't question his decision:

Then he went to bed, the enormity of what he was attempting to do closing in on him.

Over decades, the country of Israel had been constructed with the blood and money of a multitude of Jews. Kleiner himself had sent them a few dollars. Yet what was his major contribution to the Jewish state? Sneaking an Arab out of the country to attend a wedding, when a simple present would have sufficed. What kind of Jew did that make him? And a Jew he'd remain until his dying day. Unless of course, hostility to his people ended, in which case he would have to think over his options.

Perhaps William Kleiner is a prototypical kind of Jew, if the schlemiel can be considered such a figure. After nearly drowning trying to get Mahmood across the border, the two of them do make it to New York, where Mahmood takes over Kleiner's apartment, steals his girlfriend, and (through Kleiner's own auspices) sells his screenplay and is hired to direct. Kleiner leaves New York and reunites with his wife and daughter in Miami, assuming he has left Mahmood behind, but soon he hears from the former girlfriend: "We've run into some trouble on the film. The completion bond fell through at the last minute and Mahmood is taking it badly. He's out on a ledge at the moment, threatening to commit suicide. And he says you're the only one he'll talk to."

The novella ends as Kleiner pulls Mahmood off the ledge and then parts company with him for good, joining his wife at their daughter's ballet recital just in time for her solo. Again Friedman's protagonist is offered the possibility of renewal, in the prospect of the "Promised Land" he sees as his daughter begins her dance. Thus this late work is of a piece with *The Dick* and *About Harry Towns*, summing up Friedman's career as a writer whose early work legitimately participated in an important movement in 20th century American literature, but who eventually retreated from the most radical implications of that work to become a comedy craftsman of sorts, whose later fiction can still be funny but employs a mostly safe and ultimately formulaic kind of comic narrative that does not elevate Friedman's work above ordinary modes of humor. "The Peace Process" superficially raises the thematic stakes by introducing the Arab-Israeli conflict as an allegorical backdrop, but finally the novella projects on it the same by now

overworked story Friedman has told since the initial inspiration that produced *Stern* seemed to flag. Certainly it does no particular damage to Friedman's literary legacy, but neither does it provide us much reason to assess that legacy more favorably.

### **James Purdy and Black Humor**

Although the term was certainly not new (a book about French fiction exhibiting it had appeared in the 1930s) and had already been used to describe some of the writers included in the anthology, "black humor" as an apt designation for a kind of American fiction being written in the late 1950s and early 1960s arguably can be attributed to a collection of representative selections called, unsurprisingly, *Black Humor*, published in 1965 and edited by Bruce Jay Friedman (himself a black humorist). The book presents writers other than American, including Celine and J.P. Donleavy, presumably as a way of reinforcing Friedman's own contention in his Foreword that black humor is not a recent or provincial phenomenon, even if the term itself primarily names a movement in recent American fiction. Nevertheless, Friedman's book is now most notable for establishing "black humor" as the critical marker of choice for the increasingly prominent comic novels of the 60s that seemed to gravitate toward a particularly dark, unrelenting kind of comedy.

Certainly Friedman is not prescriptive in his definition of black humor. Indeed, he begins his Foreword by admitting he "would have more luck defining an elbow or a corned-beef sandwich." Friedman does believe that the immediate context for the rise of black humor in fiction is the increasing extremity of social and cultural conditions in the United States in the 1960s (he is writing before the even more extreme developments of the later 1960s), agreeing with the idea that in modern America there is a "fading line between fantasy and reality."

'How does it feel,' the TV boys ask Mrs. Malcolm X when her husband is assassinated. We send our planes off for nice, easygoing, not-too-tough bombing raids on North Vietnam. Sixteen U.S. officers in Germany fly through the night in Klansmen robes and are hauled before their commanding officer to be reprimanded for "poor judgment." It confirms your belief that a new Jack Derbysque chord of absurdity has been struck in the land, that there is a new mutative style of behavior afoot, one that can only be dealt with by a new, one-foot-in-the-asylum style of fiction.

These conditions defeat the satirist, Friedman argues, so that the comic novelist "has had to sail into darker waters somewhere out beyond satire," and this more adventurous kind of comedy is what Friedman takes to be "black humor."

Friedman's account of black humor as a mode "somewhere out beyond satire" seems to me a perfectly sound way to think about the "black humor fiction of the sixties," as Max Schulz called it in his 1973 book of that title, as does Friedman's sense that black humor fiction is ultimately something you recognize when you see it, not something that needs to be pinned down to the specimen board. Readers today, however, looking back at his collection from a historical perspective that regards Black Humor as a period-specific phenomenon that in hindsight can be delineated more specifically and authoritatively, are likely to find the selection of authors in *Black Humor* something less than definitive. Heller and Pynchon are certainly appropriate choices, since their work arguably still stands as quintessential black humor. Terry Southern is also correctly included, as is Donleavy, even if his fiction is actually atypical of Irish/British writers of the time. John Barth seems more of a stretch, although the excerpt Friedman chooses is from the one Barth novel that does plausibly exhibit black humor, *The Sot-Weed Factor*, while Nabokov fits even more uncomfortably, however much we do remember the disturbing humor in *Lolita*. The current reputations of Charles Simmons and John Rechy are sufficiently removed from the black humor of Heller and Pynchon as to make their appearance in the table of contents seem almost a curiosity, especially given the absence of both Vonnegut and Thomas Berger, perhaps the two most serious omissions from the anthology.

Given the relaxed vigilance with which Friedman patrols the border separating black humor from other forms of adventurous new fiction, it is not exactly surprising to find James Purdy's name in the table of contents as well. Certainly we find in Purdy's early work—the first short stories, the novella *63: Dream Palace*, and *Malcolm*—an often grim humor that is dark and disturbing enough. *Malcolm* in particular could still credibly be classified as black humor. Still, Purdy's subsequent work clearly came to seem much less appropriately placed in this category (he is not mentioned in Schulz's book), as the term doesn't seem accurate at all in describing *The Nephew* or *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, and while *Cabot Wright Begins* is undeniably a comic novel, with a premise that in some ways could not be a more outrageous one in which to find "humor," the comedy in this novel does not really exist "somewhere out beyond satire" but

is in fact unmistakably satirical in a straightforward kind of way that black humor usually avoids. The satire in this novel is unremittingly savage, but finally this reflects the intensity of Purdy's satirical purpose, which is to point out the folly of just about every social and cultural assumption governing postwar American life.

It is also understandable why Friedman chose the story representing Purdy in the anthology, "Don't Call Me by My Right Name." This story, if not exactly humorous, introduces an immediate incongruity the effects of which produce an escalating series of apparent misunderstandings. Mrs. Klein, formerly Lois McBane, can no longer conceal the fact that "She liked everything about her husband except his name and that had never pleased her."

Lois Klein, she often thought as she lay next to her husband in bed. It is not the name of a woman like myself. It does not reflect my character.

After drinking too much at a party, Lois confides to her husband that she would like him to change his name:

He did not understand. He thought that it was a remark she was making in drink which did not refer to anything concrete, just as once she had said to him, "I want you to begin by taking your head off regularly."

Mrs. Klein can never quite explain, either to her fellow partygoers or to herself, exactly why she doesn't want to be called by her right name, except that "If you all were called Mrs. Klein. . .you would not like to be Mrs. Klein either." Although his immediate response is to disregard his wife's words as the product of drink, Mr. Klein turns very quickly from annoyance to anger and taking her drink from her, he "struck her not too gently over the mouth." That the story erupts suddenly into outright violence after initially establishing a faintly absurdist tone is perhaps what led Bruce Jay Friedman to include this story, as the turn of events is decidedly "black," although these days we are not likely to find either Lois Klein's ambivalence about her marital status or her husband's physical abuse to be appropriate sources of laughter. And indeed, it is not likely that Purdy wanted us ultimately to find the story's developments very funny, as Mr. Klein later hits Lois hard enough to send her to the pavement. "You have hurt something in my head, I think," she tells him, and the story concludes with Lois striking her husband back and cursing him.

Read in isolation in 1965, "Don't Call Me by My Right Name" might have seemed at the least to have a kinship with other works being classified as black humor, but read now in the context of Purdy's later fiction we can see more its consistencies with Purdy's body of work as a whole than any allegiance to the black humor movement. Lois Klein will certainly not be the last woman in Purdy's fiction to suffer from a man's lack of comprehension or concern for her emotional well-being (although few of those men will resort to fisticuffs), and Lois's grappling with her sense of identity is of course a common theme in Purdy's work, to be taken up again as soon as *Malcolm*. The shocking resort to violence will also be featured in some of Purdy's most notorious works as well, most graphically perhaps in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* and *Narrow Rooms*. And surely Lois Klein joins that very long list of Purdy characters who know that things are "not quite right" with themselves and the world they inhabit but can't (in some cases won't) quite express what's wrong and don't exactly know what to do about it. Formally as well, "Don't Call Me by My Right Name" turns out to be quite typical of Purdy's approach to fiction, with its preference for dialogue and a generally restrained kind of narrative exposition, together working to emphasize showing over telling (a method that Purdy pursues in an even more direct way in his concurrent career as a playwright).

Probably even by 1965, discerning readers of his fiction realized that James Purdy could not easily be categorized or labeled, even if he seemed to share with other writers of the 60s a focus on extreme situations and states of being and an often disturbing vision. The very fact that Purdy's work eludes available classifications perhaps explains why Purdy's work after the 1960s gradually but inexorably lost both readers and critical attention, to the point that by his final years it was justified to say he had been forgotten. If in the 60s and 70s being known as a black humorist was to some extent a way to retain some visibility as a representative of a still significant literary movement, when Purdy's work lost salience as black humor, literally knowing how to read it became less certain. Since Purdy could not comfortably be called a postmodernist (while some of his fiction could loosely be called metafictional, including *Cabot Wright*, much of it could also plausibly qualify as straightforward realism and naturalism), or a magic realist, or a surrealist, or a minimalist, and since neither could Purdy's novels be identified as mainstream "literary fiction," his novels consequently had increasingly weaker appeal to book marketers and reviewers (in Purdy's last years, to publishers as well).

To say that James Purdy's fiction is ultimately truly singular, unclassifiable when considered against the "main currents" of postwar American fiction, is not to insist that his novels and stories cannot among themselves be described in ways that help us assimilate their broadest formal features, or grouped together according to shared characteristics and assumptions. In my view, the most enlightening taxonomical scheme is the one proposed by Don Adams, by which he sorts Purdy's fiction into satires, allegorical tragedies, and pastoral romances ("James Purdy's Allegories of Love"). These categories encompass much of Purdy's work from the 1950s and 60s, with *63: Dream Palace* and *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* belonging to the tragedies, *Cabot Wright Begins* exemplifying satire, and *The Nephew* representing the first pastoral romance. (Adams discusses *In a Shallow Grave* as his representative romance, but in my view *The Nephew* has more than a little in common with this later novel.) An immediate proviso to accepting this typology is that almost all of Purdy's novels incorporate, to one degree or another, all of these modes—the tragedies laced with satire, the romances touched with tragedy, the satires extending to the reader, if not always to the characters, the chance for redemption that is offered to some of the characters in the romances. As Adams puts it, "Purdy's satires attempt to jolt us out of our daze"—being thus jolted an apt description of the condition to which, say, Alma Mason arrives at the conclusion of *The Nephew*.

If this is indeed a useful perspective from which to consider Purdy's practice as a writer of fiction, surely his work in these three modes is altogether distinctive. If *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* is a tragedy, its source lies in the violence of Jacobean drama rather than in Shakespeare, and readers could be forgiven if they register less Daniel Haws's role as a tragic hero whose inability to acknowledge his genuine feelings leads to his downfall than the horrific details of Daniel's victimization at the hand of Captain Stadger, himself pathologically self-destructive and in denial of his own nature. Perhaps these readers would find Stadger's actions a graphic demonstration of the consequences of self-denial, although it is likely to seem a bitter lesson that Daniel does not live to apply. *Eustace Chisholm* may draw on the narrative tradition bequeathed by Greek and Jacobean tragedy, but the way it is used to depict the human propensity to emotional degradation and sadism is pure Purdy. Similarly, readers may have trouble identifying *Cabot Wright Begins* as satire if they expect the kind of "prescriptive" satire that characterizes the mainstream satirical tradition, which asks us to laugh at human folly in the name of correcting it. Purdy ridicules his characters' folly, but doesn't encourage us to believe it

can be corrected. As Susan Sontag wrote in her review of *Cabot Wright*, "the particularities of social satire [in the novel] are not so particular as they might seem, but rather the vehicle for a universal comic vision. It is a bitter comic vision, in which the flesh is a source of endless grotesqueries, in which happiness and disaster are equally arbitrary and equally unfelt."

Sontag's explication of Purdy's "universal comic vision" indicates that Purdy could at the time still be perceived as at least inhabiting the same literary neighborhood with the black humorists, who also could be said to express such a vision, although the "bitter" comedy of *Cabot Wright Begins* contrasts with the almost vaudevillian comedy of Heller, Pynchon, or Friedman. Still, the publication of *The Nephew* four years earlier should certainly have signaled that Purdy had no plans to settle in that neighborhood. "Pastoral romance" in some ways could not be farther removed from "black humor fiction," and *The Nephew* in fact may be, with the possible exception of *In a Shallow Grave*, Purdy's gentlest, most hopeful and forgiving novel. The trajectory of Alma Mason's story is toward greater self-understanding, exactly the state that for so many of Purdy's characters is impossible to reach. Alma comes to recognize her own illusions, although the strongest illusion she must learn to see through is the belief that it is possible to genuinely know another human being, even when (perhaps especially when) the "other" is a family member with whom a close relationship is taken for granted. "There's so much we can never know about everything and everybody" Alma confesses near the end of the novel. Alma finally comes to accept this kind of ignorance about her missing-in-action and presumed dead nephew, and if this a difficult acceptance, it does bring Alma a measure of equanimity by the novel's conclusion, one tinged with melancholy, to be sure, as Alma's enlightenment has come late, and she and her brother Boyd are left peacefully to contemplate the encroaching darkness (even while through the window catching the scent of "the faint delicious perfume of azaleas").

I can think of few, if any, other postwar American writers whose work ranges as freely, and as successfully, over all three of these literary modes as does James Purdy's fiction. What makes Purdy's fiction even more singular, however, is that despite the real tonal and formal differences among his novels, they are still of a piece, immediately recognizable as the work of James Purdy. Purdy's novels from *63: Dream Palace to Eustace Chisholm* introduce character types—the great lady, the orphan, the failed writer—that will recur throughout his fiction,

introducing as well the alternating setting in the predatory city and the deceptively placid countryside, which harbors its own secrets and unleashes its own tempests, and the alternation between past and present (with the former increasingly prominent in the later work). Regardless of setting, the characters suffer from the effects of isolation and abandonment, are driven by needs that are felt but can't be acknowledged or expressed, the latter because language itself is unable to articulate those needs, serving as much to hinder self-comprehension as encourage it and stifling communication between people as much as enabling it. These inadequacies of language (or at least the habitual abuse of it) are literally enacted in the failed writers and failed writing depicted in *The Nephew*, *Cabot Wright Begins*, and *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, the role of which in linking these novels despite their other differences is examined closely by Tony Tanner in his book, *City of Words*.

Perhaps the continuities in Purdy's work are easier to see in retrospect, or required a contemporaneous critic especially attuned to Purdy's methods. Certainly the apparently quite radical shift represented by *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* as the follow-up to *Cabot Wright Begins*—shifts in mode (satire to allegorical tragedy), setting (from present-day New York to depression-era Chicago), milieu (from the affluent classes and trendy New York publishing to the seedy side of town and its less respectable residents), and, most of all, tenor (from outrageous satirical comedy to a much more muted humor that gradually edges into grim realism and ultimately outright horror) could have seemed so radical—as *Cabot Wright* was a radical shift from *The Nephew*—that some readers and critics were led to conclude that Purdy was a mercurial or inconsistent writer whose moves were too elusive to anticipate. The reviewer for the *Saturday Review* confessed his expectations had been set by *Malcolm* and *The Nephew* and that "where we have once found it we want and expect it again and again," finding the "rare experience" he was after in neither *Cabot Wright* nor *Eustace Chisholm*. Other reviewers echoed the preference for the earlier books, particularly *The Nephew*, judging *Eustace Chisholm* "too baroque" in comparison.

Not all of the reviews were negative, but all of them took note of the fact that this was Purdy's most direct and extended treatment of homosexuality to date. Some of the responses to this aspect of the novel are now quite startling, although perhaps they shouldn't be. Francis Hope, reviewing the novel in the TLS, quotes a line, "Amos adjusted the folds of his scrotum with

deliberate ostentation," immediately remarking that this line "might be an allegory of his creator's literary method." In his 1975 Twayne book on Purdy, which generally expresses admiration for Purdy's work, Henry Chupak opines that "Publicity in the last few years has thrown much light on homosexuality and on the attendant circumstances and conditions from which it evolves. And, while thoughtful citizens may become more understanding and more aware of this sexual phenomenon, we query whether a novel almost totally involved with this subject is not inflating an aspect of human existence that is at best only an abnormal sexual experience." It would seem that by 1975 Chupak realized he could not taunt Purdy in quite so brazenly a homophobic way as the TLS reviewer, but instead framed his objection as an aesthetic one, even though his way of voicing it still can't seem to avoid the homophobic cultural assumptions of the time: "So distorted are the sexual relationships in the novel that never once is a normal love affair between a man and a woman portrayed as it might have been to serve as a contrast."

This sort of queasiness about the now forthright portrayal of homosexual characters in his fiction no doubt contributed to the increasingly restricted coverage of new work by Purdy after *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*. Unfortunately, while it might have been expected that Purdy would receive added attention as a "gay writer" from gay-themed and gay-friendly publications, Purdy's own refusal to identify himself as a gay writer, along with the tendency of gay characters in his fiction to have the same flaws and weaknesses as other human beings, and to sometimes behave quite badly indeed, meant that his work did not exactly gain the approval of what would become the gay literary establishment and only recently has really received attention from gay and lesbian studies scholars. As Purdy's last editor wrote in *Lambda Literary* last, "his books were sometimes considered too queer for straight people but not queer enough for gay people." Purdy coveted his status as an outsider, but he must have known that so steadfastly pursuing such an uncompromising vision for so long was going to leave his work far enough outside all official measures of acceptability that seeing it ignored and neglected was almost inevitable. If not all of Purdy's fiction after the 60s would focus on "abnormal sexual experience," it already had a sufficient reputation for emphasizing the perceived "abnormal" (not just regarding gay people) that this continued to be the primary legacy of Purdy's work of the 1960s, however inadequate such a perception is in appreciating the fictional world he creates. If "black humor" is finally not

exactly true to the unsettling character of that world, to describe it as merely concerned with the aberrant or the freakish is not really to recognize it at all.

A course on "black humor fiction of the sixties," could plausibly include *Malcolm* on the syllabus, however. Although Adams classifies it as a satire, it nevertheless seems to me that here Purdy is working "somewhere out beyond satire." The satirical element in this novel is incidental to the thoroughly caustic portrayal of the characters, each of whom is introduced as someone who might help Malcolm find his "place" in the world in which he is the eternal orphan, but instead through their self-involved, predatory behavior exemplify why there can be no place in their world for one as radically innocent, except as prey. Stories of innocence lost depict innocence confronting the inherent corruptions of the world of human experience, but in *Malcolm* the corruption is pervasive, inflicted on Malcolm by the very people who would be providing him guidance in his journey of self-discovery. For all their surface eccentricities, none of these characters are portrayed as intrinsically evil, which would reduce the narrative to melodrama. They are, sadly, all-too-human.

The complicating factor in considering *Malcolm* as black humor is that if Malcolm is indeed on a journey of self-discovery, it is not finally certain that he truly has a self to discover. Malcolm is sufficiently a cipher that it is difficult to feel either pity for him or anger at him as his picaresque story unfolds and he fails to find either meaning or contentment in the relationships formed with the people he meets. Purdy deliberately induces this effect, putting us at a distance from a character whose ultimate fate thus seems quite horrifying to be sure, but in another way the episodes chronicling Malcolm's progression toward his fate are also farcical, especially in retrospect. Malcolm is presented to us as a blank slate on which the world might write, but in the way James Purdy appears to refrain from inscribing very deeply on that slate himself, we are left unsure whether the world has simply defaced it with its chaotic script, or whether the slate actually remains blank, because finally it resists all efforts to fill it.

## ***WHAT'S HUMOROUS ABOUT BLACK HUMOR?***

### **Terry Southern**

It is tempting to conclude that Terry Southern has faded from the cultural memory because his work feels unavoidably "dated" due to its contemporaneous references, its time-bound subjects, the decidedly démodé familiarity of its postwar disaffection. From this perspective, Southern was essentially a topical satirist, and, as eventually happens with almost all such satire, what on its appearance seemed keenly alert to the pervading cultural winds seems to languish in stale allusions once the winds have shifted. Even an accomplishment as unequivocal as *Dr. Strangelove* can be harder to appreciate when the political circumstances within which it acquired its comic edge no longer apply.

However, while Southern's screenplays (not just *Strangelove* or *Easy Rider* but also the British film version of *The Magic Christian*) inescapably reflect the convulsive sociohistorical currents of the 1960s, his novels, with the possible exception of *Blue Movie*, really do not as much depend on their topical details. Indeed, one could say that *Candy* and *The Magic Christian* did much to rouse the insurgent spirit of the 60s, but acknowledgment of their literary virtues is not necessarily contingent on their status as documents of their time. Although of course like any literary work in which later readers not part of its initial audience might still take an interest, both of these novels include details and references such readers may not immediately recognize, but neither of them require familiarity with historical and cultural context for their themes and formal strategies to achieve their effects. *Candy* in particular has somewhat lost its ability to shock, as the sexual and literary taboos it was notorious for breaking are no longer much in force, but this might actually allow us to perceive its less sensationalist, more purely literary qualities even more clearly.

Whether or not we consider Southern to be a satirist, certainly a primary feature--perhaps the essential feature--of his work is its humor, if not satirical humor per se then a mode of humor that goes beyond traditional forms of amusement. Southern surely intends the comedy in his scenes, stories, and extended jokes to be both funny and disturbing, in some ways disturbing because it is funny (or vice versa). During the postwar period this sort of humor was referred to

variously as "absurdist," as "sick" humor, or as "black humor." While there is some justification for placing Southern's fiction into each of these categories, "black humor" seems more useful (and less morally freighted), especially as it ties Southern's work to that of other writers of his generation who not merely depicted a world that seemed "absurd" in its loss of coherence following on two shatteringly destructive world wars and the rise of a new order of ideological conflict and the threat of nuclear annihilation, but did so by employing forms of humor, often drawn from popular culture, that were not traditionally "literary" and often had the effect of provoking laughter perceived as unsuitable to the subjects and situations portrayed.

Southern's fiction makes extensive use of this sort of humor, from the prolonged seduction scenes of *Flash and Filigree* to the crude sex jokes of *Candy* to the elaborate put-ons staged by Guy Grand in *The Magic Christian*. Indeed, Southern suffered throughout his career from a perception among readers and critics of a more refined literary sensibility (those playing the "quality lit game," in Southern's words) that his work went too far in its iconoclasm, sacrificing subtlety and craft for often coarse humor. Similar objections could be made, of course, to the work of numerous other modern writers, from Beckett to Genet to Joseph Heller, although the argument that any of these writers, in the process of evoking what Bakhtin called a "carnavalesque" kind of humor, also abandoned "craft" cannot ultimately be sustained. The question, then, is not whether Terry Southern uses this kind of humor appropriately (by definition it involves a certain degree of "excess"), but whether the comedy he does employ is in any discernible way different or distinctive in the effects it creates and the purposes to which it is directed.

In his book on Southern, *Terry Southern and the American Grotesque*, David Tully attempts to place Southern's work in the tradition of American fiction associated with the "grotesque" invoked in the book's title, a tradition most immediately identified with the fiction of Poe and Hawthorne. Tully's attempt to locate Southern in the American nonrealist tradition represented by these two writers is compelling and entirely justified, and his claim that Southern's fiction "neither evades nor embraces morality but simply perceives morality as part and parcel of a cultural artifice that seeks to evade or conquer nature," an effort that is doomed to failure, provides a useful interpretive tool for discerning an underlying theme uniting all of Southern's work, especially the fiction. But if Tully's view of Southern as a "decadent" Romantic

adapting the worldview of Poe and Hawthorne to the conditions of mid-20th century America does give coherence to Southern's body of work, illuminating what indeed seems to be a theme to which Southern consistently returns, in his discussions of individual works he still leaves a distorted impression of the way Southern's novels and screenplays treat this prevailing theme.

"It is often difficult for people to take comedy seriously," Tully writes in his introduction, "but Southern, for all his grotesque comedy, is a deadly serious writer." That a predominantly comic vision and formal strategy can also be taken seriously is certainly an important point. Much modern and postmodern literature (not to mention 18th and 19th century writers such as Sterne, Dickens, and Twain) would have to be rejected as insufficiently serious if we were to disregard this truth. However, the "deadly" in "deadly serious" leads Tully not to point out the ways in which comedy, in Southern's work or others', is itself a representational mode well worth taking seriously for its inherent aesthetic qualities and implications, but to focus narrowly on the "serious" themes Southern explores. In this analysis, Southern is a writer determined to "say something" about modern American life--about human existence in general. Consideration of the specific ways those themes are realized by rendering them through often extreme episodes of burlesque, parody, and comic exaggeration is almost nonexistent in Tully's book, however much, as the only extant critical consideration of the work of Terry Southern, it remains a worthwhile reading of that work.

Of course, Tully is not alone in implicitly devaluing comedy except to the extent it is clearly satirical, in which case readers can in effect overlook the silliness and exaggeration in favor of the larger satirical intent—the "message" the satire wants to convey. What was called black humor disrupts the normal expectations of this kind of satirical comedy, presenting instead an apparently non-instrumental humor that does not simply subject perceived folly or corruption to the kind of ridicule that seeks correction of objectionable behavior, but treats all human activity as essentially comic, equally deserving of unqualified laughter. Such an approach certainly implies a worldview of sorts, if only that the appropriate response to the world we inhabit is to laugh at it. (That it is fundamentally absurd is indeed a perspective adopted by a number of midcentury writers, but this is not a necessary inference to be drawn from the expression of a radically comic vision--and can equally well be suggested through non-comedic means.) However, what is most provocative about this mode of black humor is not the

philosophy of modern life it might advance but its challenge to our notions about the justified objects of humor, the phenomena of modern life at which it is acceptable to laugh.

Terry Southern's fiction undoubtedly belongs generally to the informal movement of writers converging around what Bakhtin called "absolute" comedy, but whether his form of such humor is similar enough to that of prototypical black humorists like Joseph Heller or Bruce Jay Friedman to comfortably link it to their work could be questioned. Since David Tully's description of Southern as offering a variant of the "grotesque" is otherwise accurate in capturing one of the qualities that defines Southern's fiction, perhaps to more fully account for its total effect we should regard the novels as examples of a kind of grotesque comedy in which "comedy" is not merely an accompaniment, an efficacious embellishment of the primary object of interest, Southern's representation of the grotesque in modern American culture. Instead, comedy doesn't reflect or duplicate the grotesque as encountered in reality but works to produce it. (Poe and Hawthorne do as well, of course, albeit through different means.) Through characters, scenes, and situations marked by his typically unrestrained brand of humor, Southern invokes a grotesque comic world resembling our own ordinary world just enough for us to laugh at it in recognition.

Southern was most successful in realizing this project in *The Magic Christian*, probably the least successful in *Blue Movie*. However, both *Flash and Filigree* and *Candy* may in fact offer a more purely grotesque depiction of its characters and their milieu, in the sense of the term Tully has in mind when he describes the American version of the grotesque as "the freakish aspect of the carnival that is American culture." *Flash and Filigree*, Southern's first novel, still retains its "freakish" quality (no doubt even more striking to readers in the late 1950s), which arises from the deadpan manner adopted by the novel's narrator, beginning with the extended dialogue between a doctor, Dr. Eigner, and his patient that occupies the first chapter.

Dr. Eigner sat quietly, his white drawn hands clasped, resting on the desk, his lips parted in an almost weary smile, perhaps only tolerant of his own opening cliché, inevitable, as he asked:

"And what, Mr. Treevly, seems to be the trouble?"

"Yes, replied the young man, sitting forward in the chair at first, then back easily, crossing his legs.

"Well, I don't think it's much really. I have, or rather did have, . . . a certain lesion. A lesion which wouldn't or at least didn't. . . close. A rather persistent. . . ."

"I see, said Dr. Eigner, unclasping his hands and placing them flat on the desk before him. "And where is the--this lesion?"

Mr. Treevly shifted in his chair, as though about to stand. "Well," he replied instead, with a certain smugness, "at first it was only a pustule. . . ."

"May I," interrupted the Doctor again, now with the faintest pained smile, ". . . may I see it?"

"Of course," said the other, speaking pleasantly, but he followed the remark with a look of extreme care. "I should like to give you some particulars. . . which may facilitate, or rather, have some-bearing-on. . . the diagnosis.

"Yes," said Dr. Eigner after a pause. "Yes, of course," and leaned back, a little heavily, perhaps even in resignation . . . .

Of course, that a doctor would be having such a conversation during an office visit is not itself at all unusual, but most readers no doubt were not accustomed to finding lesions and pustules the immediate subject under discussion in the opening pages of a novel. Southern's placement of the scene as the novel's first, as well as the poker-faced narration, help make the scene seem altogether grotesque indeed, certainly to the extent the term can be taken as synonymous with "weird." The same effect is produced two chapters later as Dr. Eigner is preparing to leave the Clinic in his imported luxury car. As he departs we are told he is given to driving "extremely fast," which he demonstrates forthwith:

These canyon roads toward noon blazed with heat, and now the sun lay afire on the mountain land, striking every light surface with wild refraction. Dr. Eigner turned down the green glass visor and floored the throttle, racing up along a slow rise in the highway road. The Delahaye touched the crest of the hill with a whirlwind drone and plunged into the descent as for an instant the black sedan was lost behind. . . .

Dr. Eigner is involved in an accident at the bottom of the hill toward which he is racing (literally, it turns out), the repercussions of which provide the novel the series of events that could be called its plot (although a parallel sequence of events follows a callow young man's efforts--ultimately successful--to seduce Babs Mintner, a nurse who works at the Clinic.) While *Flash and Filigree* is no lost classic, Southern's initial foray into the comically grotesque is still effectively creepy, and both its episodic structure and uncluttered style establish the approach Southern will take in his subsequent novels as well, giving them a consistency of tone that probably should not be surprising, since all three of the novels were written almost concurrently, their publication history jumbled.

*Flash and Filigree* was initially published only in England, while *Candy* appeared in the U.S. several years after the publication of *The Magic Christian*, even though *Candy* was written first. The circumstances surrounding *Candy* are further clouded by the fact that it is to an extent a collaboration, co-written with poet and friend Mason Hoffenberg. However, evidence suggests that the novel was written mostly by Southern, whose idea it was and who had already written a substantial part of it when Hoffenberg joined him (Tully). Moreover, the novel is so much of a piece with the rest of his fiction it seems entirely justified to regard it as just as representative of Southern's work as his other novels and screenplays (many of the latter also written in collaboration). Written for a somewhat disreputable French publisher specializing in "erotic" fiction, the situation if anything allowed Southern to more freely indulge his inclinations as a writer drawn to outrageous situations.

The most immediate connection between *Candy* and *Flash and Filigree* is the way in which the former takes the latter's episodic structure and amplifies it into a fully picaresque story that has a plot only in the sense that one thing happens after another (often the same thing in a slightly different iteration). Indeed, this use of picaresque narrative to depict the journey of an innocent confronting the iniquities of the world is the primary parallel between *Candy* and its presumed namesake, Voltaire's *Candide*. Southern's revision of Voltaire perversely twists the conventions of the picaresque narrative when he portrays Candy Christian as essentially still an innocent even after she has experienced degradation at every stage of her journey. Although *Candy* manages to retain her virginity for early two-thirds of the narrative, all of the men she meets, before and after, treat her as a purely sexual object, but she never really manages to

perceive herself as a victim nor to understand the inherently dehumanizing attitude the men take toward her. Candy herself possesses an inherent goodness that prevents her from recognizing their predatory behavior as anything other than a momentary lack of control (a weakness she thinks she may be guilty of provoking).

Although Southern uses Candy Christian and her travails to exemplify the clash between naïve presumption and the hard truth of reality (the metaphysical theme running throughout Southern's work), the novel also depicts egregious exploitation of Candy's good nature for male sexual gratification, with little regard for her sexual agency. Whether Southern's concern for Candy's plight extends to her status as a woman in a sexist, patriarchal society is debatable; while Southern's prominent women characters are depicted as victims, their stereotypically "feminine" identities are generally reinforced, their exploitation not so much a potential opportunity to escape their confinement in prescribed gender roles through resistance but the inevitable consequence of their status as the weaker, more vulnerable sex. Candy Christian is perhaps allowed more room for development as a character beyond this reductive role, as she actively struggles to maintain her human dignity, but it would be a stretch to say she is presented as a sort of proto-feminist heroine.

This problematic depiction of hyper-sexualized, mostly passive women is no doubt most pronounced in *Blue Movie*, Southern's pastiche of the Marquis de Sade updated to 1960s Hollywood. The novel chronicles the production of a pornographic "art" film concocted by a well-regarded director for whom the film is a vanity project that prompts him to take advantage of his reputation as a serious filmmaker to attract big-name stars to his production, although he doesn't quite reveal to them what kind of film they're signing up for. While ultimately the director and his collaborators (primarily a screenwriter with more than a little resemblance to Terry Southern, and an unctuous producer) are the objects of the novel's satire (and it is largely a satirical novel), revealing themselves to be utterly indifferent to the suffering they cause in their blindness to any interests other than their own, the sex scenes they stage are especially demeaning to the women actors, whose bodies are relentlessly treated as object of potential violation. Southern himself, of course, doesn't necessarily share his characters' casual contempt, but the episodes are narrated with sufficient relish that the effect now is at least as obnoxious as it is disturbing or darkly satirical.

Because it is emphatically focused on the escapades of its male protagonist, with women playing really only subsidiary roles (principally in the novel's frame-tale), *The Magic Christian* mostly escapes the period-specific cultural assumptions that, to one degree or another burden the other three novels. While it would, strictly speaking, be misleading to call the novel autobiographical (no one has ever quite managed to carry out the kinds of actions performed by Guy Grand), as reflected in its main character's bearing toward the world, his insouciant abandon in realizing ever more outrageous acts of impish sabotage, surely Guy Grand does implicitly represent Southern's own comic method as a writer. Like Guy Grand, Southern attempts to undermine the established order through an artful mockery, to expose the hubris and folly that have created and maintained the social order, even as it deadens the lives of those who must subsist in it, and who themselves contribute to their own degradation by willingly submitting to it. Both Guy Grand and Terry Southern subject not just authority or particular kinds of social behavior to incessant ridicule, but the whole of social existence as manifested in postwar America.

In *The Magic Christian* Southern takes the picaresque strategy and makes it serve most persuasively to provide aesthetic and thematic unity. The picaresque structure doesn't just accommodate Terry Southern's penchant for episodic development but is inseparable from the comic vision that inspires the main character and his exploits. Guy Grand exemplifies Southern's anarchic spirit in his iconoclasm and ingenuity, and is Southern's greatest fictional creation. If any work of fiction from the 1960s could be said to epitomize or presage the raucous spirit of the period itself--which in many ways owes much to Terry Southern's influence--it would be *The Magic Christian*, even if Guy Grand achieves his dissident goals through subterfuge rather than confrontation.

It is tempting to think of Southern's kind of humor as centering around the joke (as does the humor of Heller and Friedman), but it would be more accurate to say that Southern writes, even in his fiction, extended sketches the humor of which is not proclaimed loudly but arises from the implicit incongruity of the situations portrayed and from the characters' often impassive responses to the situation. These situations are not so much absurd (as in the logically skewed episodes of *Catch-22*, for example) as progressively more outlandish, sustained send-ups of our belief in an underlying normality of "civilized" behavior. This belief is exposed as an illusion by

Southern's unrelenting burlesque, the effect of which is in some ways only intensified by the cool narrative manner Southern's 3rd-person narration typically assumes.

This manner is first of all a product of Southern's mostly utilitarian, mostly expository style. Seldom does Southern pause from the immediate storytelling task to indulge in flights of sensory description--certainly there are few of the kinds of figurative embellishments and finely wrought imagery that leads to a writer being praised as an admirably "literary" writer. And, on the one hand, it is true that, since most of Southern's kind of comedy is essentially plot-based--the product of what happens, however loosely structured--an especially fussy, ostentatiously lyrical style would likely interfere with his preferred comic effects, taking attention away from the outrageous situations depicted and in effect placing it on the writer and his skills as a prose stylist. On the other hand, while he is by no means deficient as a writer of prose, clearly Southern himself must have concluded that his talents were finally more suitable for film writing, since for the most part after writing the script for perhaps the most important black humor movie of the 1960s, *Dr. Strangelove*, he devoted his time to writing screenplays (most of them not produced). Aside from *Easy Rider*, none of these came close to equaling what he had accomplished in *Strangelove* or in his early fiction.

It is true that movies have been especially adept at a certain kind of broad comedy abiding somewhere between silliness and satire. It is also true that precisely this sort of comedy was used by many of the black humorists (indeed, by such precursors to the black humorists as Nathanael West and Samuel Beckett), which at the time provoked skepticism among some critics and readers but in retrospect seems perhaps the most important legacy of black humor fiction. Terry Southern made an important contribution to this legacy, but in turning directly to movies (an ironic move to some degree, since Southern in a prominent book review, "When Film Gets Good," complained that too many writers were writing fiction that wanted to be movies) as the vehicle for his comic imagination, he seemed to reject the further possibilities of fiction as the form that might expand his comic vision. Given the genuine achievement of *The Magic Christian* and the dubious success of his later efforts at film writing, he probably made the wrong choice.

## Top of the Bill: Stanley Elkin

If we are to come to some conclusion about whether it is useful to think of Stanley Elkin as an “American Jewish writer,” we should make a distinction between those Jewish writers—Singer, Malamud, Steve Stern—who habitually write about Jewish characters and customs, often in a recognizably Jewish milieu, and those who happen to be Jewish but whose identity as a Jewish American plays no more or no less role in their work than does the ethnic or cultural background of any other writer. Elkin seemed to place himself in the latter group when he told an interviewer in 1976 that he was “a writer who happens to be Jewish, happens to be an American, and happens to be a writer.”

Yet Elkin may not fit so comfortably among writers who “happen to be Jewish” after all. It is certainly true, as most critics who have addressed this question about Elkin’s work have admitted, that, as Maurice Charney put it in “Stanley Elkin and Jewish Black Humor,” Elkin “avoids any sentimental identification with Jewish characters and most of his protagonists are not specifically Jewish at all.” But the lack of a “sentimental” identification does not mean the absence of any identification, nor does the fact that many of Elkin’s characters are not “specifically” Jewish establish that they exhibit no characteristics associated with Jewish habits of thought and behavior or that clearly enough arise from a Jewish background. Many of Elkin’s characters do in fact carry Jewish surnames—Feldman, Perlmutter, Finsberg—and many of these characters are identifiably Jewish, whether in speech, outlook, or even occupation. In regard to the latter in particular, one of Elkin’s novels, *The Rabbi of Lud*, emphatically features a “specifically Jewish” protagonist and is perhaps Elkin’s most intensely Jewish novel in general, for reasons that go beyond “sentimental” attachment or the surface characteristics of the protagonist.

Not only is the protagonist of *The Rabbi of Lud* obviously Jewish by religion and profession, as the narrator of the novel he is also perhaps the most direct embodiment of a sensibility informing all of Elkin’s fiction, one that seems to me decidedly “Jewish.” Elkin’s work is not merely notable for its fundamentally comic outlook—a quality Elkin shares with many of the “postmodern” writers of the 1960s and 1970s—but is actively “comedic” in the more specific tradition of American vaudeville or Borscht Belt comedy. Elkin’s fiction is full of sketches and routines, monologues and patter. The reader who in effect reads past these comic

turns for the sake of the “story” they presumably advance is really missing the point of Elkin’s narratives, which are structured not by “plot” as such but by the accumulation of these bits from a comedy act, bits that might end in a grand finale of sorts (the “love night” Travel Inn episode in *The Franchiser*, for example) but rarely conclude in a resolution of conflict that casts the preceding scenes as points in an orderly procession toward narrative closure. The picaresque structure of Elkin’s narratives allows an emphasis on the comedy routines for their own sake, each helping to build a network of correspondences—of tone, trope, and joke—that gives Elkin’s novels their distinctive shape.

As the narrator of *The Rabbi of Lud*, Rabbi Jerry Goldkorn as often adopts the persona of the tummler, the Catskills comic, as he does that of the religious leader. But, as Albert Goldman once wrote, “‘Jewish’ and ‘comic’ are words that slot together like ‘Irish’ and ‘cop,’ ‘Chinese’ and ‘laundry,’ ‘Italian’ and ‘tenor’” (“Laughtermakers,” *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor*). Only a few paragraphs into his account, Rabbi Goldkorn is already telling a joke, and his narrative voice often mimics the delivery of the stand-up comic:

Anyway, when the sickness—we’ll call it New World fever—broke out and made its way under the pales and pickets and over the posts of their little Jewish stockade, and the Angel of Death took off with most of his family, the founding Jew guy was probably caught short. . . .

. . . So this is the thing. Buckskin or no buckskin, pales and pickets or no pales and pickets, they had some incredible artisans back in those days. You think they couldn’t build a monument? They could build a monument. And when they wanted to they could build a monument like nobody’s business! . . .

. . . I’ll be frank with you. If I don’t sound to you like the Rabbi of even Lud, maybe it’s because I never had a true calling in the conventional sense. Sue me. The fact is our Christian friends have the music and that’s half the battle right there. I’m not even thinking about plainsong, Gregorian chants, the hard-core liturgical stuff. I discount madrigals, chimes, ding-dongs from the carillon. I’m not even thinking of the dirges, dead marches, oratorios and canticles. Just ordinary hymns! Forget the “Hallelujah

Chorus.” . . . We don't even have good chants. There are saffron-robed kids in the airports with better. What do we have, “Bei Mir Bist Du Schon”? . . .

Let me interrupt myself here a minute. You know what's largely responsible for the increased popularity of Judaism in America? In America. Not closing the camps, not the new state of Israel. What's largely responsible for the increased popularity of Judaism in America was the development of the printed invitation. I mean things like when raised lettering came within the price range of the middle classes. I mean when they perfected that transparent tissue paper. . . .

Rabbi Goldkorn exemplifies the extent to which the religious impulse in Judaism and the impulse to laughter in Jewish culture may stem from the same existential condition. Sarah Blacher Cohen finds the source of Jewish humor precisely in the relationship to God:

. . . The butt of a cruel joke, [the Jews of Eastern Europe] found that God had singled them out to be a light unto the nations, but had given them a benighted existence. Powerful in interpreting the vast complexities of sacred texts, they were powerless in their dealings with brainless peasants. Priding themselves on the cohesiveness of their private world, they felt isolated from the world at large. To cope with the anxiety produced by these incongruities, they created a humor in which laughter and trembling were inextricably mixed (Jewish Wry).

If Goldkorn never quite reaches the level of “trembling,” he is nevertheless constantly in the presence of death, as Lud, New Jersey, is essentially a town that exists to support its cemeteries, at which it is Goldkorn's duty to officiate during funeral services. That Elkin in such a setting would portray his rabbi as a stand-up comedian is surely incongruous enough.

Rabbi Goldkorn and the role he plays in *The Rabbi of Lud* make more directly visible Elkin's invocation of the devices of popular joke-telling and slapstick comedy, but these devices are also always at work in his other fiction, even those works in which the characters and situations are indeed not identifiably Jewish, such as *The Dick Gibson Show* or *George Mills*. A

character like Dick Gibson finally shares most of the qualities we find in Leo Feldman (*A Bad Man*) or Ben Flesh (*The Franchiser*) or Jerry Goldkorn. They are all obsessive figures preoccupied with the incongruities and reversals they experience, which are most suitably represented through comedy routines. (In Dick Gibson's case, his radio broadcasts often provide him the "stage" for his own tumbler act.) One could perhaps argue that the style of comedy associated with the vaudeville or burlesque comic became, through its modifications on the television variety show and in the performance of nightclub comedians, so thoroughly associated with the conventions of American "comedy" in general that it would be available to any writer attracted by the possibility of integrating the "low" and the literary, but *The Rabbi of Lud* at least suggests that Elkin remained aware of the source of this comedy in a specifically Jewish practice.

In his essay on "The Nature of Jewish Laughter," Irving Howe maintains that "strictly speaking, Jewish humor is not humorous. It does not make you laugh uproariously nor does it provoke a carefree guffaw." He further contends that the sort of Jewish humor that "percolated into American life" was a "sad substitute" for the real thing, consisting, for example, of "the Broadway clowns who can only vulgarize Jewish humor." That Jewish humor isn't merely "humorous" is a cogent enough point, and certainly Stanley Elkin's "humor" isn't frivolous in the manner that word sometimes implies. While Elkin's comedy certainly does "make you laugh uproariously" and often does indeed provoke "guffaws," it accomplishes this not by providing an escape from reality but by forcing a confrontation with reality, a confrontation that reveals human experience to be "uproarious" in its senselessness and absurdity. It is possible Howe would have regarded Elkin's use of the showbiz antics of the "Broadway clowns" to be "vulgar," but Elkin's humor is also free of the weight of the "social relevance" and the reformist impulse Howe attributes to Jewish humor that "mocks pomp and wealth" and "upholds the poor and suffering."

If Howe is correct that Jewish laughter is primarily a meliorating force, then perhaps this is a way in which Stanley Elkin's comedy is finally not so "specifically" Jewish but instead participates in the larger phenomenon of the 1960s by which many writers attempted to incorporate broadly comic elements into otherwise "serious" fiction. Elkin's comedy does not direct us to seek our solace in laughter or to enlist it in the cause of social criticism. It does reimagine the world as a hilarious vaudeville show that never closes. This reimagined world is

thoroughly shaped by Elkin's ability to elicit a "guffaw" at all the preposterous circumstances of human existence. Such an achievement may or may not rise to the moral requirements proposed by Irving Howe, but it certainly does rise to the challenge of creating satisfying comic art.

### **Kurt Vonnegut**

It's hard to know why the Kurt Vonnegut stories collected in *Look at the Birdie* were published—literally. The book includes a brief introduction by Vonnegut's friend Sidney Offit, who tells us they may have remained unpublished because "for one reason or another they didn't satisfy Kurt" but otherwise gives no reason why Vonnegut's dissatisfaction needed to be overridden and this book made available. No dates of composition are given so that the reader might judge the stories in the context of Vonnegut's development as a writer, no editorial discussion of that development is provided. The best Offit can do is suggest that the "stories selected for this collection are reminiscent of the entertainments of that era [presumably the 1950s, although Vonnegut continued to write short stories into the 1960s]—so easy to read, so straightforward as to seem simplistic in narrative technique, until the reader thinks about what the author is saying." This is not much of an endorsement of work by a writer most of whose other fiction surely did ultimately transcend "entertainments of that era" to become anything but "simplistic in narrative technique."

Jerome Klinkowitz, perhaps Vonnegut's most loyal defender among scholarly critics, also wonders, why this book was published, averring that "one fears that by publishing such self-apparently weak work his executors may provide ammunition for those who would discount the author's entire legacy." It could be argued that having more of Vonnegut's work in print serves a scholarly purpose, but *Look at the Birdie* is clearly not aimed at a scholarly audience, and its wider dissemination could indeed lead to a diminished estimation of Vonnegut's fiction considered as a whole, at least among not already confirmed Vonnegut fans. The rave reviews accorded to *Look at the Birdie* by some of those fans only lead me to believe that something like this will happen, since no one coming to this collection without much previous acquaintance with Vonnegut's fiction could conclude it is the work of an important writer.

Despite the scholarly unfriendliness of the book's presentation, it does have value for a broader critical perspective on Vonnegut's work. It demonstrates that Vonnegut was correct in

resisting the publication of his "magazine fiction," not just in this miscellany of unpublished/rejected stories, but also most of those collected in *Bagombo Snuff Box* (a second cut among the published stories), as well as, quite frankly, many of those to be found in *Welcome to the Monkey House*, the initially sanctioned collection of the magazine stories that appeared as Vonnegut rose to fame in the late 1960s. Vonnegut was not very good at short stories, except insofar as he was able to produce the kind of story the commercial magazines wanted and get many of them published. Most of his stories are conventionally plotted, stylistically bland, melodramatic, often sentimental. The science fiction-y stories, such as "Harrison Bergeron" and "Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow" are the best, but there are too few of them to compensate for the formula pieces and dull domestic dramas to be found in *Bagombo Snuff Box* and, especially, *Look at the Birdie*. For a writer whose later work challenged readers' expectations of fiction, Vonnegut's short stories are disappointingly tame. That he didn't return to the form after the success of *Slaughterhouse-Five* suggests that he himself recognized it didn't really suit his talents as a writer.

It took Vonnegut a while, however, to locate his talent. In addition to the lackluster quality of most of his magazine fiction, his first novel, *Player Piano*, is mostly warmed-over Huxley and Orwell. Along with the stories, what it illustrates most of all is that Vonnegut was not a very competent writer when employing a conventional third-person narrator. The narrator of this novel is more or less omniscient, informing us, for example, that the novel's protagonist, Paul Proteus, "was the most important, brilliant person in Ilium, the manager of the Ilium Works, though only thirty-five. He was tall, thin, nervous, and dark, with the gently good looks of his long face distorted by dark-rimmed glasses." At times, it ventures the central-consciousness or "free indirect" approach:

As Paul walked out to his car in the pale March sunlight, he realized that Bud Calhoun would have a mouse alarm designed--one a cat could understand--by the time he got back to the office. Paul sometimes wondered if he wouldn't have been more content in another period of history, but the rightness of Bud's being alive now was beyond question. Bud's mentality was one that had been remarked upon as being peculiarly American since the nation had been born--the restless, erratic insight and imagination of a gadgeteer. This

was the climax, or close to it, of generations of Bud Calhouns, with almost all of American industry integrated into one stupendous Rube Goldberg machine.

The narrative of *Player Piano* is a consistently linear one, and the narrator hews very closely to Paul Proteus's perspective throughout. It makes for a very dull reading experience, even duller than *1984*, which similarly employs plain language and transparent storytelling but which employs plot devices so overwrought and melodramatic it at least arouses some sensational fascination. *Player Piano* is a rather tepid satire of America's fetishizing of technology and its meritocratic enablers, a theme that seems apropos for Vonnegut but that in this novel is not adequately enlivened.

What *Player Piano* lacks is the presence of that narrative voice readers eventually will come to recognize as Kurt Vonnegut—or at least "Kurt Vonnegut," a fictional stand-in for the author who otherwise takes on the author's biographical identity. This voice first announces itself as the author in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but earlier first-person narratives such as *Mother Night* and *Cat's Cradle* show Vonnegut shrugging off the confines of conventional third-person storytelling, both in the manipulation of point of view and the stylistic variety that brings, and in abandoning the requirement of strictly linear narrative. It seems to me that this combination of an emancipated narrative voice and more casual plot development characterizes Vonnegut's most signature work, and while it is missing from the early fiction, it does begin to be discernible in his second novel, *The Sirens of Titan*.

*The Sirens of Titan* begins in an oracular voice not at all attached to any particular character, unafraid to signal its detached viewpoint:

Everyone now knows how to find the meaning of life within himself.

But mankind wasn't always so lucky. Less than a century ago men and women did not have any access to the puzzle boxes within them.

They could not name even one of the fifty-three portals to the soul

Gimcrack religions were big business.

Mankind, ignorant of the truths that lie within every human being, looked outward--pushed ever outward. What mankind hoped to learn in its outward push was who was actually in charge of all creation, and what creation was all about.

This is not quite Vonnegut speaking to us in his own voice about his own war experience in the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but it is a step in that direction. The narrator does not explicitly reveal himself as Kurt Vonnegut or otherwise draw attention to his status as the story's creator, but he clearly occupies a space outside the tale itself, apart from the characters' view of things. As the story proper commences, there is no attempt to "inhabit" the world view of the characters, merely to describe them, to delineate their actions and report their conversations. The narrative voice continues to hover above the invoked world, but never finally departs from the role of omniscient narrator so thoroughly as to become explicitly metafictional, as in *Slaughterhouse-Five* or *Breakfast of Champions*.

One might say that the narrator occupies his own "chrono-synclastic infundibulum," a warp in space and time that allows a character in *The Sirens of Titan*, Winston Niles Rumfoord, to be everywhere all the time and to see how "all the different kinds of truth fit together." To carry out this effect, and to create a narrative about a world in which someone might get caught up in such a thing and have access to the entire universe, requires the broader scope of a novel, and I would contend that *The Sirens of Titan* shows Vonnegut exploiting the formal flexibility of the novel in a way the short story—at least the kind of commercial story Vonnegut tried to write—could not sustain. That it is a work of science fiction perhaps partly explains the loosening of constraint--certainly few people at the time expected an adherence to decorum from the genre--but I doubt that many hardcore SF advocates would now cite *The Sirens of Titan* as a representative science fiction novel from the period. Too much of it is played for laughs, too little effort is made to fashion a story and create characters that can each be perceived as more than obvious artifice, a vehicle for the author's whimsical notions.

If it would be nice to know how "all the different kinds of truth fit together," this does not mean that those truths add up to some final knowable truth—or if it does, it's the truth that the truth is hard to find, since it must be filtered through the brain of such a fallible creature as a human being. Winston Niles Rumfoord offers a version of the truth in his invented religion, The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, which is that the search for truth is futile in a universe

governed by a God who doesn't care, and the novel's ultimate revelation is that human history has been guided by an effort by the planet Tralfamadore to supply one of its space travellers with a spare part (Stonehenge and the Great Wall of China are messages to this traveller, stranded on Saturn's moon Titan). There are those who think Vonnegut is a sentimental writer, or that he wrote on behalf of some amorphous version of liberal humanism, but it seems to me that such readers willfully overlook the fact that Vonnegut ultimately writes out of a profoundly disenchanted view of the human species and consistently represents existence as finally meaningless. Whatever suggestion we might indirectly derive from Vonnegut's work that we should change our behavior, that human society might be reformed, must be received with this context in mind.

*Mother Night* is probably the most sustained portrayal of moral ambiguity and the elusiveness of truth among Vonnegut's novels. Anyone who thinks Vonnegut offered simplistic and unequivocal moral judgments in his fiction has not taken sufficient account of this work. Is Howard Campbell a Nazi collaborator or an American spy who helped defeat the Nazis? If he is morally culpable, is it through active sympathy with fascism or a kind of moral laziness? Which would be worse? Is he finally just an opportunist? Is his final act of hanging himself a confession of his culpability, a gesture of self-loathing, or just another implicit plea for moral absolution? I don't think any of these questions are decisively answered by the novel, however much we might want to take it as an essentially political book indicting all sides in the mid-20th century geopolitical miasma.

Vonnegut has only increased the moral ambiguity of this novel by making it a first-person narrative (albeit "edited" by "Kurt Vonnegut"). *Mother Night* is certainly not the first novel to take advantage of the fact that an extended first-person narrative can induce reader sympathy for even the most morally questionable characters through the narrator's voice and implicit manipulation of perspective, but it inevitably does work in this way. Vonnegut is able to invest Howard W. Campbell, Jr. with a lively enough style and an air of sufficient self-questioning that we come to believe his attempt to reckon with his actions is sincere and perhaps that he deserves some lenience. This only makes it harder to determine the extent to which Campbell is telling the complete truth and the degree to which the proper response to his life story should be disgust and disquiet.

Yet another level of complication is added to the novel by the metafictional editorial apparatus through which Campbell's narrative is presented to us. One could view the "Editor's Introduction" explaining how the "confessions of Howard Campbell, Jr." (in its American edition) took the form in which we find it as simply a perfunctory device needed to account for the existence of the narrative—Campbell is dead—but in identifying himself as the editor, Vonnegut calls immediate attention to *Mother Night* as a fiction, a gesture that would seem to foreground "truth" as an already qualified goal. Of course, "qualified" does not mean nonexistent; fiction can reveal truth in its way, even if it is fundamentally a "lie." Vonnegut in the Editor's Introduction indirectly affirms this role in commenting on Howard Campbell's motivations for lying:

. . . To say that he was a playwright is to offer an even harsher warning to the reader, for no one is a better liar than a man who has warped lives and passions onto something as grotesquely artificial as a stage.

And, now that I've said that about lying, I will risk the opinion that lies told for the sake of artistic effect--in the theater, for instance, and in Campbell's confessions, perhaps--can be, in a higher sense, the most beguiling forms of truth.

Vonnegut (the author Vonnegut, not this fictional editor) here openly associates the "lies told for the sake of artistic effect" that might be attributed to Howard W. Campbell with the "lie" that is *Mother Night* itself. While one could question the extent to which Campbell's lies—if so they are—are primarily for "artistic effect," the "truth" that emerges from our reading of his confessions as the novel *Mother Night* is the same. One might even conclude that this truth can indeed be captured in what Vonnegut (in the actual introduction appended to the 1966 reprint of the book) calls the moral of the story, that "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be," but this statement is much less obvious in its application than might at first appear. Pretending to be a Nazi while actually spying for the Allies does not seem a morally hazardous enterprise, however physically hazardous it might prove to be. Pretending to be a reformed Nazi is a more serious offense, but there really isn't much evidence from his confessions that Campbell actually remains a Nazi sympathizer.

To me, the most cogent interpretation of Howard W. Campbell's plight is that he really doesn't know who he is and that the various pretenses in which he engages is a manifestation of

this indefinite sense of identity. If he is morally blameworthy, it is because he seems most interested in maintaining his own comfort. His actions are perhaps motivated by moral laziness, which leads him to avoid disruptive change, but this does not make him a monster, just as it prevents him from being a hero. It makes him, in fact, a fairly representative human being, who, like most people, can't really be condemned for acting in ways it is in his nature to act. This portrayal of human behavior is a consistent feature of Vonnegut's work, summed up in his most famous catch-phrase: So it goes.

*Cat's Cradle* might be a more transparent moral fable, but the burden of its message isn't likely to be congenial to those seeking inspiration or reassuring bromides. While the novel does allegorically reinforce a view of the world in which scientific/technological overreach threatens to destroy the world and the proper response to this threat is to live simply and in humility, such overreach is not easily combated and living simply is no doubt an unreachable ideal. To this extent, Vonnegut's popularity among younger readers in the 1960s and 1970s has always seemed somewhat puzzling. Vonnegut was more or less adopted as the novelist of the counterculture, but while his fiction certainly indicts the reigning socio-technological "establishment," it does so from such a disenchanting view of human nature it's hard to see the appeal to more idealistic readers who might think it can still be reformed. Perhaps the suggestion that we should get over all our hang-ups and love one another because the world is a cesspool might indeed be the ultimate countercultural statement, but in retrospect it surely doesn't seem the message to motivate a cultural revolution.

Of course, one quality of Vonnegut's work that certainly must partly explain its appeal is its humor, which on the one hand somewhat brightens the underlying gloom, giving the novels a tone of melancholy rather than outright despair, but on the other hand really only reinforces the portrayal of a human reality that is laughably impaired. *Mother Night*, seemingly his most straightforwardly serious novel (no role for beings from Tralfamador, no violations of the space-time continuum), is not an exception to the predominantly comic vision of Vonnegut's fiction, even if, given the subject, comedy does not seem a very suitable approach. Indeed, it is no doubt the way in which in this novel, as Klinkowitz puts it, Vonnegut "mixed the loftiest of moral thoughts with the most vulgar forms of slapstick comedy" (*The Vonnegut Effect*) that explains why his fiction was initially labelled "black humor." The characterization of, for example, white

supremacist "The Reverend Doctor Lionel Jason David Jones , D.D.S., D.D." (publisher of *The White Christian Minuteman*) and his associates as a group something akin to *The Three Stooges* is both an audacious aesthetic strategy and disarmingly entertaining. In this way, Vonnegut's work is consistent with much "postmodern" American fiction of the 60s and 70s, which does not shrink from a comic treatment of all human behavior.

In *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut returns to a comedic perspective on religion, supplementing it with a story about the end of the world as we know it. "Bokononism," a religion created by a renegade leader on a Caribbean island, seems a somewhat more thought-out version of *The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent*, and Vonnegut seems to be using it for a similar purpose, as a proposed substitute for traditional religions that encourage people to focus their attention on gaining the next world rather than making the most of this one. Since human beings appear to have an inherent need to take instructions from an established authority, perhaps a "spiritual" authority that tells the least harmful lies possible—and that acknowledges it is telling such lies—is the best we can hope for. Bokononism is ultimately a self-negating religion that is both a recognition of the limitations of the human species and itself a manifestation of these limitations. That we would need such a religion-in-place-of-religion in the first place is a pretty sad commentary on us, although Vonnegut makes it overtly comic, as evidenced for one by the wacky names he gives to certain key elements of Bokononism: "foma"; "granfalloon"; "wampeter."

Vonnegut also in *Cat's Cradle* again uses a first-person narrator whose presence as filter and arranger has to be reckoned with. In this case, "Jonah" is himself a convert to Bokononism, so of course the "worldview" associated with such a way of thinking conditions both the tale and the telling. The story of how the various characters in the novel happened to come together on a remote island in a series of events that leads to the catastrophe that ensues after the accidental unleashing of "ice-nine" is a specific instance of the Bokononist concept of the interrelatedness of things. As character and narrator, Jonah develops from being more or less a passive observer to becoming an active participant in these events, mirroring his progressive immersion in and commitment to the axioms of Bokononism. Since these axioms are finally deliberate if benign lies, a careful reader would want to consider, as with Howard Campbell, the degree to which one should invest fully in Jonah's account, although I don't think it can be said that he emerges

seeming more admirable than he deserves or less forthcoming than he should be. It might be said that the novel itself, like all fiction, is a benign lie, encouraging us through its narrator to come up with our own alternative to the ways of thinking that lead only to misery and destruction.

Howard W. Campbell and Jonah allow Vonnegut to explore the possibilities of voice and the role of subjectivity in fiction. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, this will become Kurt Vonnegut speaking in his own dynamic voice and exploring the subjectivity of fiction itself.

### **On Joshua Ferris**

For all of the ambivalence it seems to provoke in many readers and critics, the American fiction of the 1960s and 1970s (with scattered precursors in the 1950s and a few lingering appearances in the 1980s) that probably will now permanently be called "postmodern" continues to make its influence felt. Whether one should speak of this influence as a shadow cast over current writers or as an enduring light that still inspires through its brilliant illumination is perhaps a point of dispute, depending on one's view both of the legacy of postmodernism and the state of current fiction, but even writers who resolutely hew to the conventional can only do so because they consciously reject the legacy of experiment in fiction initiated by the modernists and quite self-consciously extended by the postmodernists. I would maintain that very little serious fiction published in the last thirty years could be said to be free of the effects of this legacy, either through the concerted attempt to evade it or through the direct inspiration many writers find in the work of numerous postmodernists.

The first and most notable group of writers to directly respond to the perceived excesses of postmodernism--although the term itself was not yet then in use--were the minimalists, in particular Ann Beattie and Raymond Carver, whose early work in its pared-down style and lack of affect was extensively discussed as the antithesis of the stylistic overflow and formal profusion (maximalism rather than minimalism) of postmodern fiction. If these writers and those they influenced returned to realism of a sort, their stories offered a portrayal of ordinary reality every bit as mundane and colorless as the avoidance of it by the postmodernists seemed to imply it was. Later, more regressive realists such as Richard Ford, Kent Haruf, and Richard Russo adopted a more fully conventional kind of realism, but it is very hard to imagine these writers would initially have been taken very seriously had not the minimalist neorealism of Beattie and Carver first established itself as a credible practice by which to "move on" from postmodernism.

By now the work of such writers has become so conventional in approach that it represents a full-scale retreat to the assumptions of 19th century realism, but finally the very fact that this sort of backwards-looking fiction persists in spite of the modernist/postmodernist legacy gives it its ultimate significance as a steadfast refusal to "experiment" with alternatives to traditional narrative.

"Experimental" as a term for categorizing works of fiction that embrace this legacy may have become contentious (mostly because of its association with the laboratory), but certainly words such as "unconventional" and "innovative" are still privileged in the literary discourse surrounding new fiction, especially the discourse used by the editors of literary magazines, whose calls for submissions routinely use the words to describe the sort of fiction they'd like to publish, even when a perusal of the fiction they actually publish reveals it to be entirely orthodox in both form and style. Clearly the postmodern attempt to make fiction more aesthetically audacious has had a lasting effect in giving terms like these an increased honorific value, but it is certainly questionable whether those now using them really understand them in quite the same way as such truly innovative writers as Donald Barthelme or Gilbert Sorrentino might have understood them.

There are of course writers whose work directly shows the influence of the first-wave postmodernists, writers such as Jonathan Lethem or George Saunders, although the influence results more in echoes and resemblances between their fiction and that of writers like Kurt Vonnegut and Thomas Pynchon than in the inspiration to create something comparably new. The same is true of Joshua Ferris, whose first novel, *Then We Came to the End*, elicited many comparisons to Don DeLillo and Joseph Heller. This novel is especially reminiscent of Heller's *Something Happened*, but finally it seems more an updating of the previous novel, transferring its vision of American corporate life to the current, hipper milieu of an advertising office, than an attempt to extend the possibilities of the kind of "black humor" fiction Heller's novels most cogently exemplified. It uses the model provided by a once-audacious approach and adapts it to much less adventurous purposes.

The "humor" in *Something Happened* is itself of a different sort than in *Catch-22*, less vaudevillian if no less disquieting, produced by the half-terrorized tone of its narration by protagonist Bob Slocum. Of course, its mode of narration is the most remarked-on feature of

discussions of *Then We Came to the End* as well, its own mode of humor created through the use of a 1st-person collective narrator who certainly also expresses a great deal of anxiety that is uneasily humorous. But while both of these books could be called comic novels, the comedy of *Something Happened* could be called existential, the comedy of a successful, if ordinary, man struggling with his realization that he doesn't understand his life, that life itself frightens him more than anything else. Bob Slocum's way of relating this struggle, combining hysteria with brutal honesty, both makes us laugh aloud and cringe in recognition of our shared fate.

*Then We Came to the End*, however, is closer to social satire, its collective narration a way of observing the internet age office workplace, a version of Mike Judge's *Office Space* focusing on corporate "creatives" rather than directly on high tech drudges. The narrator provides the story just enough subjective flavoring, a way of registering the characters' own perspective on their circumstances, to give the novel a source of interest beyond the implicit commentary on economic arrangements under "late capitalism," but ultimately the anxiety caused by internal competition, negotiating a hierarchical structure that pretends not to be such, and coping with the dislocations caused by an economy in seemingly perpetual recession is all on the surface, felt by the narrator and all the employees he/she represents as an obstacle to happiness as job satisfaction, not as a fundamental affliction of the soul. Heller's novel uses the workplace setting to stage one man's struggle to find the meaning of existence. Ferris uses it to dramatize the perils of the postindustrial economy.

Ferris's second novel, *The Unnamed*, at first appears to move away from the social observation of *Then We Came to the End* and to indeed focus on the existential crisis experienced by its main character, although finally we can't be entirely sure exactly what has caused protagonist Tim Farnsworth's affliction, an uncontrollable impulse to walk, often for hours and days at a time. Is it a physical (i.e., neurological) impairment? A psychological disorder? An imperfectly repressed desire to escape his prototypical middle-class existence? Whatever the diagnosis, Farnsworth's condition results in a great deal of suffering indeed, both for himself and his family, suffering not redeemed by the novel's decidedly unhappy ending.

That the novel does not answer these questions for us is one of its strengths, but surely the last one is a question the novel tempts, and to the extent *The Unnamed* emphasizes Farnsworth's implicit revolt against a settled life and adult responsibilities, it, like Ferris's first

novel, does seem at least partly intended as social commentary, although in this case there is really very little laughter in the protagonist's dilemma, except in the sense that it is certainly a very strange one. The novel's title suggests the influence of Beckett, but where Beckett, in both his fiction and his plays, employs a seemingly allegorical structure ultimately to empty allegory of its purported meaning, in *The Unnamed* Ferris leaves the possible allegorical meaning of Farnsworth's grim fate as the novel's primary source of interest, since formally it is the sort of extended picaresque narrative the subject almost necessarily entails (in fact extended well past its usefulness in illustrating Farnsworth's plight), and since neither Farnsworth nor any of the other characters really have much intrinsic interest beyond their role as the victims of these inexplicable circumstances.

In his most recent novel, *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour*, Ferris again changes tack, almost as if seeking to engage aesthetic elements neglected in the first two books. Thus it employs a first-person narration that at times appeals through strength of voice in a way comparable to *Then We Came to the End* but also works to evoke character and emotion more directly than the quasi-objective narration of the previous novel is able to do. The narrator protagonist of *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* is the most distinctly drawn character in Ferris's fiction so far, even while most readers are likely at best to have an ambivalent response to him (at worst to actively dislike him). The immediacy created by his first-person account inevitably pulls us toward greater sympathy, but the narrator himself does little to ingratiate himself and is in fact quite honest in communicating his frequent petulance and describing his poor treatment of other people, especially those who work for him. (The protagonist, Paul O'Rourke, is a dentist.)

This tension between O'Rourke's generally quite frank and colorful narration and what that narration reveals about him for a while works fairly well to maintain the reader's interest in his further development, in the outcome of whatever actions he comes to take. O'Rourke is not so self-obsessed that he can't give us equally lively portrayals of the secondary characters as well, and *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* over perhaps the first half of the novel is compelling enough using relatively conventional appeals to character (vivid, if not exactly "well-rounded") and narrative voice. (It has some novelty appeal as well, since there aren't very many works of fiction narrated by a dentist.) When the novel's plot starts to become more apparent, however, these virtues quickly get buried by a virtually inert story about an online stalker who has somehow

hacked into O'Rourke's online accounts and assumed his identity, his subsequent attempts to track down the stalker, and a semi-mythical religious sect devoted to the denial of God's existence, a living descendant of which O'Rourke is purported to be.

Much of the novel's second half is thus structured as a mystery plot—first about the identity of the stalker, subsequently about the existence of the religious sect—but the mystery is so closely tied to O'Rourke's own inveterate atheism, endless talk about which eventually preoccupies his narrative, that by the time the purpose of the stalker's attention becomes clear one hardly cares. The intrigue surrounding the "Ulm," supposedly a lost tribe traceable to the Amalekites of the Bible, seems indebted to DeLillo (particularly *The Names*), but it retains none of the enigmatic resonance of DeLillo's invocation of ancient mystery; instead, Ferris uses the Ulm and their beliefs to straightforwardly "say something" about faith and doubt, flattening out O'Rourke as a character and reducing the novel to a symposium on religious belief in the process.

What begins as a comic novel of the sort in which comedy arises from our response to an abrasive, antiheroic character (exemplified by Philip Roth in *Portnoy's Complaint* or *Sabbath's Theater*) becomes instead a story of that character's metamorphosis or redemption. Perhaps we are to find additional humor in the fact that Paul O'Rourke's apparent conversion at the end of the novel is to a "faith" that affirms a faith in nonbelief, but by then O'Rourke has lost the very peevishness that gives him life as a character, so that *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* in effect winds up taking away with its right narrative hand what it had previously given us with its left. If at first O'Rourke presents himself as a contrarian with heterodox views and a prickly personality, at the novel's conclusion he has become duly chastened, finding solidarity with a reconstituted Ulm community in Israel, where he "never had to be lonely again."

If in the end Paul O'Rourke has tempered his own excesses, smoothed over the rough edges in both his personality and worldview, arguably Joshua Ferris in all three of his novels to date has done the same thing in their relationship to first-wave postmodern fiction. He has taken the narrative strategies, the character types, and the black humor we can find in the work of the earlier writers and employed them to much less provocative effect. These books are reminiscent enough of the work of Heller or DeLillo that we want to associate them with this earlier period in American fiction as its possible continuation, except that the three novels ultimately provide a

blanched-out version of the iconoclastic spirit shared by those writers, a version made safe for social satire and "quirky" narratives that represents a limited view of the usable legacy of postmodern practices considered collectively. While *The Unnamed* lingers in the reading memory because of the extremity of the character's circumstances, and both *Then We Came to the End* and *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* can be called, at least in part, entertaining enough to read, ultimately they together demonstrate that the postmodern legacy has to be one whose claimants attempt to exceed it, to make it seem conservative by comparison, not to do it homage through an admittedly skilled kind of impersonation.