



# American Postmodern Fiction

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## INTRODUCTION

Although these are essays that have appeared variously over the past decade or so, usually on the publication of a new work by the writer at hand (obviously the Hawkes essay is an exception, as is the omnibus review that begins the collection), they were almost all written as part of an effort on my part to “cover” as many classic postmodern writers as I could while also in individual reviews and essays examining the formal features and stylistic tendencies, as well as discernible commonalities of insight and perspective, associated with American postmodern fiction in general. Ideally, then the reader would find in the following selections both close readings of an individual author’s work and accumulating commentary on the nature, assumptions, and identifiable practices of postmodern fiction.

The earliest of the essays is the first, which was published in 2003. Even though it discusses books published in the earliest years of the “new millennium,” and postmodernism is now a phenomenon rooted even more firmly in the past, I have chosen it as a keynote essay of a sort because it announces some of the themes pursued further in the subsequent essays and identifies important postmodern writers, some of whom are discussed at greater length in the essays, while those who are not at least receive some attention in this omnibus survey. I hope it also demonstrates that this volume is not intended to merely celebrate American postmodern fiction but to make considered judgments about the success or failure of the kinds of literary experiments undertaken by postmodern writers. This issue is sharpened most obviously in the analyses of John Barth’s fiction, which is criticized in the first essay but highly esteemed in the second. In some ways Barth may be the boldest of the experimental writers linked to postmodernism, but this also means he takes the most risks, among which may be that his experiment doesn’t work.

This volume is certainly not comprehensive, although I believe it includes most of the important postmodern writers. One prominent omission is Willian Gaddis, whom I discuss in the first essay but for whom I do not subsequently provide a more specific reading. I hope to include Gaddis in a future installment of this volume, as well as a few other postmodern writers such as Ronald Sukenick and Harry Mathews. It is regrettable there are no women writers here, but I have assembled a separate volume on innovative women writers, most of whom simply did not rise to prominence in the initial wave of postmodern fiction in the 1950s and 1960s. This seems

to me simply an historical reality and does not reflect a belief on my part that no women writers could stand comparison with the writers I have included.

Many readers will probably think these essays are rather opinionated (thus not very “scholarly”), but I think I have provided rigorous enough descriptions of the works discussed and the writers’ typical practices that my judgments and interpretations can be justified. I began my reading of most of these writers as I was contemplating a career as an academic specialist on this period in American fiction. That career fizzled, for reasons too tedious to belabor here, but I never lost my desire to reckon with the achievement of this group of audaciously adventurous writers who, astonishingly enough, emerged together at a tumultuous time in American history to unsettle and then transform American fiction.

## **POSTMODERN FICTION IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM**

Although the term has come to identify a general attitude toward traditional intellectual assumptions or, more specifically, discernibly related practices in philosophy, the social sciences, and all of the arts, "postmodern" was originally a critical label attached to an emergent group of American fiction writers perceived to be challenging established literary convention. Conventional storytelling and the protocols of realism had been challenged, to be sure, by the previous generation of modernist writers, but this new fiction was "post-modern" in extending the modernist rejection of existing assumptions to include assumptions even the modernists still accepted, about the integrity of character, for example, or about the intricate effects of "point of view." Among the writers identified as postmodern were John Barth, Donald Barthelme, John Hawkes, Robert Coover, William Gass, and Thomas Pynchon. Certainly each of these writers differed, sometimes profoundly, in the ways in which they attempted to continue to "make it new," but that they were clearly enough engaged in the attempt seemed to warrant something like the designation of their work as postmodern.

Exactly how a concept originating in literary criticism came to carry the great cultural weight it now bears is a potentially confusing story relevant to a consideration of postmodern fiction only in that it highlights the extent to which it was identified, at least for a time, as an avant-garde movement calling into question not only particular literary practices but also more generally held beliefs about the value of representation, whether in art or in critical and philosophical discourse, as well as about the capacity of language itself to represent "reality" in any ultimately trustworthy way. These characteristics, however accurately they may have been ascribed to the original American postmodernists, have largely been appropriated to the broader cultural concept of postmodernism and its various academic branches. As a result, postmodern fiction has been left as a kind of curious collection of eccentric works, vaguely considered "experimental" at best, frivolous or unnecessarily difficult at worst, and, for many, already mostly a historical phenomenon with little if any relevance to current writers and their work.

Some more recent writers do continue to be identified as postmodernists (David Foster Wallace most obviously), or at least as influenced by various of the first-wave postmodernists; other writers, while not necessarily embracing the postmodern approach directly, nevertheless to varying degrees produce works of fiction not assimilable to the assumptions and methods of

neorealism now predominant in American fiction, and could be said to be fellow travelers along the modernist/postmodernist route of literary innovation. But it was probably inevitable that such a radical shift in sensibility as literary postmodernism was originally perceived to be, would in time be declared passé, if not mostly misguided in the first place. Postmodern American fiction has come to be regarded with some hostility from a number of critical quarters, in some cases united only in this hostility, which suggests there is something in the experimental or postmodern approach that many literary journalists and certain kinds of academic critics find fundamentally objectionable.

Although the heyday of literary postmodernism has certainly passed, many of its practitioners remain and, aging to be sure, continue to publish fictions defiant of mainstream assumptions about literary correctness. Since many of these current assumptions were adopted largely through a reaction against postmodernism, a survey of some of these more recent works might additionally reveal the source of the antipathy to postmodern experimentation as well as the possibilities, if any, that might still be discovered in these kinds of literary experiments. Given what is sometimes presented as the uncertain status of imaginative writing itself in relation both to an American culture ill prepared to support it and to the rise of "alternative" media, one might even say that the very future of literature is to a degree at issue in such an effort. Should writers of fiction define their mission down to meet the depreciated capabilities of the available audience, or attempt to challenge that audience to revise its expectations?

Two of the writers to have published significant books at the turn of the millennium, Curtis White and David Markson, are postmodernists whose most notable work appeared in the 1980s and 1990s rather than in the 60s or 70s. For this reason and others, one might legitimately question whether they should finally be classified as postmodernists at all. They could as easily be read simply as writers of unconventional, formally inventive fiction that otherwise expresses no particular common outlook nor exhibits an allegiance to a shared approach or program, either in relation to one another or to the better-known first-wave postmodernists. To the extent that all of the writers discussed here share a commitment to formal innovation, their work does justify critical examination according to a very broad attribution of common identity, but "postmodern" is not a term that exactly captures that identity and likely it will not survive its association with a specific phase of literary history. That some other critical label ought to replace it is a dubious

proposition, perhaps, but to refer to such fiction only very imprecisely as "experimental" probably will not do it great service either.

However, like White's *Requiem*, Markson's *This is Not a Novel* (2001) is as resolutely experimental in the most literal sense of the term as any work of fiction is likely to be while still making a plausible claim to be considered a novel at all (despite the title). Markson's book is actually a sequel to or variation on his previous novel, *Reader's Block*, which takes essentially the same form: each book is constructed of brief comments on the lives, deaths, and works of past writers and artists, in some cases direct quotations or simple statements of fact. In *This is Not a Novel* these entries are presented to us as the notations of a writer, explicitly called "Writer," whose situation is described succinctly in a few additional narratorial notations on the novel's first page:

Writer is pretty much tempted to quit writing.

Writer is weary unto death of making up stories.

Writer is equally tired of inventing characters.

Although the ennui expressed here by Writer is exaggerated, certainly extreme, perhaps even a put-on, one could say that some such dissatisfaction with business as usual in the writing of fiction has all along motivated writers drawn to postmodern experiment, as well as readers who are as impatient with fossilized conventions as the writers themselves. But simply to confound convention is in itself an insufficient strategy if the creation of literary art is ultimately the goal. As the narrator indicates a few pages later: "Actionless, Writer wants it . . . Which is to say, with no sequence of events . . . Which is to say, with no indicated passage of time. Then again, getting somewhere in spite of this." The accomplishments of postmodern fiction, in other words, have been not in the various dismantlings of convention—the denial of plot or character—but instead in inventing new ways of "getting somewhere in spite of" the refusal to take the established path.

Markson generally succeeds in this task, although a fan of *Reader's Block* could conclude that this new installment is somewhat duplicative of the approach taken in the earlier book. Nevertheless, *This is Not a Novel* is ingenious, even entertaining, in juxtaposing the bits of information disclosed with the circumstances of Writer's own ongoing attempt to create a work

of literary art, resulting in a coherent whole that kaleidoscopically illuminates the nature and the consequences of that attempt. One finishes both *This is Not a Novel* and *Reader's Block* feeling that the implications of creative endeavor have been plumbed to a deeper level, an achievement produced through deceptively simple, in some ways incongruous, means.

While the impulse behind a work like *This is Not a Novel* is an entirely serious one—the impulse to create a work of fiction worthy of being regarded as an original work of art, as literary in the purest sense of the term—the humor of the book should not be discounted. Humor, or more precisely, comedy, is a distinguishing characteristic of postmodern fiction, especially among American writers, in whose work a view of the world as absurd, farcical, or alien in a fundamentally comic way is as close to an overarching "theme" to be found in literary postmodernism. (Paradoxically, most of the negative critical responses to postmodern fiction have themselves tended to be dour and humorless, disapproving in an almost schoolmarmish kind of way, as if the comedic vision itself is what truly offends.) One might say that this comic view extends even to the ambitions and authority of literature, that the fragmentation, distortion, parody, and strategic deconstruction of traditional form amount to a comic reduction of "serious" fiction to a level where, among other things, it might be regarded more as an always renewable resource rather than as an already completed model to be emulated with all due deference.

Gilbert Sorrentino has long been perhaps the foremost literary comedian among American postmodernists. Whether Sorrentino would welcome such a designation may be questionable, given its connotations of good-natured frivolity or mere amusement. But Sorrentino's fictions are both hilariously funny and corrosively provocative, offering a scathing portrayal of the manifold inanities of American culture as well as entertainingly outrageous comic performances. *Little Casino* (2002), while duly comedic, is also somewhat more accessible to the uninitiated reader, although by no means conventional. Compared to Sorrentino's immediately preceding novel, *Gold Fools* (2001), written entirely in interrogative sentences, it is a work of metafiction of a relatively recognizable type. A series of very brief anecdotes, vignettes, and verbal portraits followed by direct self-reflexive commentary, it creates a fragmentary but ultimately apprehensible picture of a bygone Brooklyn, not unlike a previous Sorrentino novel, *Crystal Vision*.



As an introduction to Sorrentino's work, in fact, *Little Casino* would probably serve quite well. Unorthodox without being intimidating, it evokes an ultimately cogent fictional world through unusual but not overly complicated means. Once the reader accepts the idea of a novel without narrative—which for readers of serious fiction ought not by now be in itself a terribly radical notion—to catch on instead to an alternative structure in which "chapters" are more like a series of verbal photographs or brief film clips followed by self-reflexive annotations, is not likely to seem overly difficult. The acerbic humor of many of the former and the arrant sarcasm of the latter ("Herbert Hoover died at the age of 137, of course. It is said that he never ate a steak in his life, and that his favorite dinner was farmer cheese on soda crackers with skim milk") should seem as well an adequate substitute for whatever forward movement or dramatic tension may seem at first to be absent from *Little Casino*

Sorrentino remains something of a paradox, an author both impressively prolific (well over twenty books, both fiction and poetry) and not well known (much less read) except to long-established fans and devotees of the most uncompromising brand of postmodernism. Curtis White, less prolific (but younger), nevertheless also subscribes to this brand of postmodern formal defiance. Like Sorrentino, White confronts conventional narrative strategy with contrarian relish and great comic energy, especially in his most recent novels, *Memories of My Father Watching TV* (1998) and *Requiem* (2001). But White's fiction as well evidences a desire for direct political relevance and social engagement one doesn't really find in Sorrentino's perhaps more self-consuming comedy. Not exactly satire, a work like *Memories of My Father* still seems in its phantasmagoric travesty both of television "entertainment" and the notion of the innocent American childhood to be designed as a critique—a particularly ferocious one, certainly—of American culture for which an experimental iconoclasm in technique serves as a kind of formal analogue to the thematic iconoclasm the novel equally seeks to communicate.

The same is true of *Requiem*, perhaps White's most ambitious work to date, both in its formal structure and its explicit cultural commentary. Each of these attributes is captured in the novel's title. Adopting the model of the Mass for the Dead, the novel's seven sections contain in turn otherwise unrelated chapters, some of them extended through multiple episodes, others not, some of them in narrative form, others in various alternative forms (an interview with a fictional author conducted by "Terry Gross" of public radio's *Fresh Air*, for example). Among these

chapters are several concerning real composers and real requiems, most of which illustrate the difficulties faced by serious artists in a world largely hostile to serious art, which is one of the embedded and interconnected themes that provide the book with its most obvious source of unity and its overriding message: that American culture (modern Western culture more generally) debases human potential and has itself become a kind of death cult.

Thus, while the novel is undeniably clever in its intertwining of means and ends, and many of its episodes are provocative and compelling (especially those that follow "The Life of Chris," the fictional author, and those examining the influence of the virtual reality of cyber culture), *Requiem* ultimately seems somewhat overdetermined, its discontinuities strangely enough too calculated. In the best postmodern fiction invention has always preceded expression (in the sense of having something "to say"), with paraphrasable intent or meaning generally left to take care of itself. This is partly why writers like Markson and Sorrentino have not really broken out beyond a small connoisseur-type audience. Most readers of even serious literary fiction expect a novel or short story to disclose its meaning in some directly discernible way; when it doesn't seem to do so readily or according to recognizable methods, some readers no doubt conclude that such fiction has no meaning to disclose. (And perhaps it doesn't, if to be meaningful requires accepting the standards associated with the view of fiction as a fixed form of discourse.) White, on the other hand, seems determined to invest the experimental approach with if anything expanded powers of signification. In this view of postmodern strategy, only radically disruptive techniques are able to adequately represent the runaway excesses of current reality. Ultimately a novel like *Requiem* seeks its own kind of mimesis, an effort to represent the world as it presents itself to us, however unconventional the methods used to attain it.

While one might respect the integrity of White's vision of the present state of our civilization, as well as his skill in realizing it through the unorthodox approach he has taken, at its core *Requiem* has surprisingly close affinities with the novel of social criticism (albeit of a particularly unrelenting intensity), at times even taking on the character of a moral treatise. At the least, the novel's exhaustive treatment of its central conceit sometimes threatens to negate the effects of its structural innovations, perhaps with some readers bringing into question the need for such innovations in a work so focused on such a palpable theme. Indeed, it would be difficult

to fully counter the charge that for all its energy *Requiem* eventually induces a kind of numbness, its alternating but parallel episodes finally seeming not insightful so much as repetitious.

Although it is a widely shared perception that postmodern fiction amounts to formalist game-playing that disdains mere ordinary "content," there have always been among the ranks of American postmodernists those writers whose work strongly accentuates content, who adopt unconventional strategies in order to more forcefully draw attention to the underlying representations of contemporary life. Ronald Sukenick has perhaps been the most prominent of these writers, a novelist who could truly be said to produce "antinovels"—novels that seek to banish "illusion" from fiction altogether in favor of something Sukenick would want to call reality. Paradoxically, this effort requires the author to emphasize continually the artificial nature of the text he composes, most often through typographical manipulations but also through fantasies and narrative disjunctions, so that the reader will never mistake "book" for the fabricated stories of "fiction": The book becomes an authentic opportunity to convey the truth.

This method has arguably been most successful in *98.6* and *Long Talking Bad Conditions Blues*, but *Mosaic Man* (1999) is also a compelling illustration of Sukenick's approach. Like *Little Casino*, this novel is somewhat more accessible than the author's other books, in this case taking the form of what could be taken as autobiography. Sukenick's project has always led him to use his own experiences, barely if at all disguised, as the (so to speak) pretext for his writing, but *Mosaic Man* literally moves from childhood experiences to the author's current status as an aging writer. In the interim, the book serves as a meditation (often an entertaining one) on, among other things, what it means to be Jewish in the postwar world, as well as to be a writer in that world. Especially notable is Sukenick's use of Jewish legend and folk narrative forms, but the novel also contains a full complement of black humor and self-reflexive commentary. *Mosaic Man* ultimately provides as well a satisfying case in both aesthetic and philosophical terms for the postmodern conceit of the decentered subject implicit in the novel's title.

William Gaddis, John Barth, and Robert Coover are no doubt among the postmodernists whose accomplishments are most universally acknowledged. Gaddis's *Agape Agape* (2002) is, unfortunately, posthumous. A writer whose fiction was essentially rediscovered rather late in his life, Gaddis's reputation rests on just four books, *The Recognitions*, *JR*, *Carpenter's Gothic*, and *A Frolic of His Own*. *Agape Agape* provides a kind of coda to Gaddis's career: short where the

other novels tend to be massively long, a continuation of the idiosyncratic method used in all of his books, more than anything a crystallization of the themes in one way or another pursued in the other novels as well. For these reasons, it might give Gaddis initiates a manageable sample of what they might find in the longer books, but certainly it would not suffice to give such readers an adequate idea of what those books are like. Of all the postmodernists, Gaddis is perhaps the most difficult to read proficiently, although the rewards for doing so are considerable.

Like the previous fiction, *Agape Agape* is a text that emerges from Gaddis' s skillful simulation of the human voice, but whereas the longer novels are complex orchestrations of multiple voices ("dialogue" doesn't really come close to capturing the effect of these voices), this last fiction fittingly enough concentrates on the single voice of a dying writer trying to bring some kind of order to the materials of his final project—a history of the player piano. As scholar/critic of postmodern fiction Joseph Tabbi sums up the situation succinctly in his "Afterword," the writer "worries that his books will be left on the shelf, unread, while his unpublished research molders in the boxes stacked around him. But as long as he goes on reading, revising, adding to the manuscript, he will stave off death and madness and keep the work from becoming what it's about: entropy, chaos, loss, and a mechanized culture indifferent to the cultivation of particular, individual talents." These are, of course, what Gaddis's work has always been "about," and the monologist of *Agape Agape* can almost certainly be taken as a stand-in for Gaddis himself. Gaddis's work has some fundamental similarities with Sukenick's: both emphasize "talk," both reject the artificial narrative devices that encourage "suspension of disbelief." Like Sukenick, Gaddis seems to have approached writing novels as a form of truth-telling, however expansive and arduous the pursuit of truth becomes. *Agape Agape* might be taken as one final attempt to speak directly about the truth such a lifelong pursuit of it has revealed.

If *Agape Agape* seems an appropriate if modest finale to Gaddis's career, John Barth's *Coming Soon!!!* (2001)—which Barth presents (perhaps only playfully) as a finale of his own—unfortunately features many of Barth's more consistent weaknesses as a writer with few if any of his considerable compensatory strengths on display. Arguably the most influential and important of the first-generation postmodernists, Barth frequently enough allows his fertile self-reflexive imagination to wander too far and with too few constraints. At its worst, this tendency results in

stories that are tediously byzantine rather than clever, simply self-involved rather than illuminating of the capacities of storytelling. *Coming Soon!!!* succumbs to both of these miscalculations; where Barth at his best can be brazen and audacious but also hilarious, here he is undeniably self-indulgent and, finally, dull.

Barth must be given credit, however, for keeping up with the technological times and for a willingness to explore the narrative possibilities of newly emergent (and directly competitive) media. Not exactly "hypertext" fiction but instead a print-bound imitation of it, *Coming Soon!!!* presents the contest between Cyberspace and print as a simultaneous literary and generational rivalry between the aging father-figure novelist (Barth) and an aspiring son-substitute, a metafictional account of the anxieties of influence. The rivalry is intensified when the aspiring writer becomes a performer on the "Floating Opera" that was the inspiration for Barth's first novel by that name. The story of the rivalry itself is chronicled in the twin competing novels being written by "John Barth" and the young contender, both of which are introduced to us as found on a computer disk washed up on the Chesapeake shore. . . . Etc. The echoes of Barth's previous fiction are deafening, and, of course, intended, resulting in a book that is an unexpected chore to read and likely not very interesting even to those who count themselves fans of Barth's work. (I am one such. Barth explores the possibilities of an e-fiction/printed-page fusion much more effectively in a short story called "Click.")

Such a failure as *Coming Soon!!!* is probably inevitable—perhaps even desirable—from writers who are truly and resolutely "experimental." Not all experiments succeed, and failures can be at least as instructive as resounding triumphs (if not necessarily "good reads"). One might hope that a writer like Barth, entering what must be taken as a "late phase," at the very least, would have become sufficiently adept at balancing his commitment to narrative experiment with a concern for its likely effect on readers to have avoided a work quite as insular and ultimately as slight as *Coming Soon!!!* turns out to be. (Although it might also be argued that at least Barth, even near the conclusion of his career, refuses to concede anything to popular tastes or reader passivity.) However, the potential benefits to literature for persevering in the attempt to push at the constraints of already established practice are illustrated with gratifying success in Robert Coover's *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*, a novel that not only stands out among the more recent fiction of the American postmodernists but also serves to validate the postmodern approach—

which is really an affirmation of the continuing possibilities of fiction as a form of serious literature—beyond the confines of a specific era or prevailing critical fashion.

*The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* shares some superficial characteristics with *Coming Soon!!!*. Both novels in their way depict an artistic career in its waning days; formally, both as well produce this elegiac or autumnal tone through an effort to exploit the operations of another medium—in this case, film. But Coover does not merely create a verbal facsimile of a film, as in a previous book, *A Night at the Movies*. Rather, the world presented to us in *Lucky Pierre* is itself a cinematic world, an indefinite loop in which the title character, a celebrated star of pornographic movies in a cine-world defined by porn, finds himself trapped in one film scenario after another, at the mercy both of the determining lines of force in the stories themselves and of the directors—all women, all Pierre's co-stars—in the process of filming these scenarios. In those few moments when Pierre seems to be free of such external control, the simulated world he inhabits is depicted as a cold, dank, dismal place where the ubiquity of the sexual has rendered it tepid and one-dimensional. Having accepted the reductionist vision of the porn film as their reality, the citizens of "Cinecity" have become entangled in its underlying and inherently dehumanizing premises.

This kind of confusion of reality with a fantasized or artificial alternative version has long been both theme and method in Coover's fiction, from *The Universal Baseball Association* to *Ghost Town*, the work that appeared immediately prior to *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*. *Lucky Pierre* is perhaps the most impressively sustained of Coover's evocations of the sources of these fantasias, along with the imaginary baseball season in UBA and the public spectacle that gives *The Public Burning* its title, and the treatment of the theme is also among the most provocative in Coover's work. Neither a fantasy of mythopoeic or political grandiosity as in these two books, nor a nightmare of domestic disintegration as in "The Babysitter" or *Gerald's Party*, *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* depicts the way in which even the most universal and potentially life-affirming of human activities—sex—can become the basis for an imperious and life-denying master narrative. As a character, Pierre himself is in some ways comparable to the Richard Nixon figure in *The Public Burning*: each of them bears some responsibility for perpetuating if not creating the master narrative, but both of them also are capable of eliciting sympathy from the reader in their efforts to comprehend and combat its influence on them. Coover's extended re-

creations of the sex scenarios and the filmic effects from which Pierre is perpetually unable to escape are ingenious as well as outrageous, and the novel's portrayal of the vicissitudes of male potency set off against the resiliency of female desire is both comedically skilled and almost certainly accurate. However, as with almost all of the American postmodern writers, it is Coover's uninhibited prose style that registers the most immediate and ultimately most consequential impact:

Through the city, through the snow, under the gray belly of metropolitan morning, walks a man [Pierre], walks the shadow of a solitary man, like the figure in pedestrian-crossing signs, a photogram of a walking man, caught in an empty, white triangle, a three-sided barrenness, walking alone in a lifelike parable of empty triads, between a pair of dotted lines, defined as it were by its own purpose: forever to walk between these lines, snow or no snow, taking his risks-or rather, perhaps that is a pedestrian-crossing sign, blurred by the blowing snow, and, yes, the man is just this moment passing under it, trammeling the imaginary channel, the dotted straight and narrow, at right angles. . . .

However much formal experiment—even, with White, Barth, and Coover, experiments across formal boundaries—one encounters in postmodern American fiction, at the same time the overwhelming impression made by these writers and their work is that this is an intensely, enthusiastically written fiction, an attempt to above all keep writing itself alive as the material and medium of art—in other words, to preserve the idea of literature as a distinctive, perhaps necessarily even a self-consciously distinctive, order of writing. This might seem an overly genteel, positively conventional aspiration, but such a view is actually more consistent with what has been, and continues to be, the practice of "postmodern" writers than either the lifeless, theory-laden accounts offered by many of those ostensibly regarded as the advocates of postmodernism or the myopic, facile, often uninformed charges of rootless radicalism and idle gamesmanship leveled by many of its critics.

## **POSTMODERNISTS 1.0**

### ***Twice-Told Tales:***

#### **John Barth**



The four books of short fiction that John Barth has published (all now reprinted by Dalkey Archive as *Collected Stories*) offer a usefully synoptic view of Barth's signature moves as a writer of fiction—or at least those moves with which he is likely to remain most identified. Although Barth advises the reader in his brief introduction to *Collected Stories* that his “authorial inclination” has always been “toward books rather than discreet, stand-alone short stories,” the very ways in which he endeavors in each of these collected books to unify the series of “discreet” stories are revealing of Barth's fundamental assumptions and ambitions. Thus, while it may be true that “short fiction is not my long suit,” as Barth puts it, these collected stories do illuminate the ultimate purposes of Barth's literary art.

Clarity about Barth's artistic principles is necessary because his fiction is often mischaracterized, sometimes deliberately caricatured, and readers are still likely to be familiar with his reputation as a “difficult” writer given to “playing games,” obsessed with his own narrative tricks rather than telling a story about “life.” Certainly books like *Lost in the Funhouse* and *On With the Story*, both appearing here in full, are among the most comprehensively self-reflexive works of fiction published by an American writer (or any writer). Both as individual stories and as a whole, such books readily acknowledge the artifice of their own making, but if this is to be regarded as playing a “game” with the reader, it is a game that transcends frivolity, serving aesthetically serious and thematically consequential goals. If the prevailing tone in these books is playfulness, this should not be mistaken for whimsicality, for arbitrary (or even contemptuous) humor to no justifiable artistic effect.

Barth's earliest novels, *The Floating Opera* and *End of the Road*, offer a certain conviviality of tone (if more muted), but they are also fundamentally serious books. Both take on the weightiest of topics—the nature of human values, the meaning of existence itself—in a mode that critics at the time associated with the then-notorious existentialist philosophy proclaimed by Jean-Paul Sartre. Indeed, Barth himself has referred to the novels as explorations of nihilism, hardly a subject to be taken lightly, which Barth treats with all due sobriety and without resort to narrative “trickery” (although neither could really be called works of conventional realism of the kind that had come to dominate American fiction in the immediate postwar period).

*The Sot-Weed Factor* was intended to be the final installment of a “nihilist trilogy,” as Barth himself has called it, but while this novel does have some thematic affinities with *The*



*Floating Opera* and *End of the Road*, it instead became the first of Barth's truly "experimental" works, arguably the first recognizably "postmodern" novel by an American writer. (Barth would later duly cite the importance of such predecessors as Borges and Beckett in pushing him in this new direction.) A "self-conscious" novel, it doesn't so much call attention to the process of its own creation as make the reader aware of its status as an anachronistic work, a pastiche of an 18th-century novel in the mold of Fielding and Smollett. It is as if Barth is attempting to move the novel as a form forward by taking it backward, reminding us of its roots. The 18th-century English novel is indeed notable for a high degree of authorial self-consciousness (*Tristram Shandy* being the most radical example), an additional sign that Barth is working toward a complete break with the conventional realist novel and its transparent narrative in favor of a kind of storytelling (Barth never abandons story) that is unafraid to acknowledge its inherent artifice.

Barth's follow-up to *The Sot-Weed Factor*, *Giles Goat-Boy*, similarly foregrounds its artifice, but in this case it is not the artifice of storytelling that is most emphasized, although there is some metafictional maneuvering in the story's setup. Barth creates an artificial, alternative reality, a fictional world depicted as a University Campus that marks the limit of the characters' awareness. In this world, it is possible for a boy to grow up with goats only to discover he is a boy, then go on a heroic quest to free his world from an autocratic computer that rules the Campus and to achieve spiritual enlightenment. The novel's allegory—essentially a restaging of the Cold War as a contest between "East Campus" and "West Campus"—is not subtle, and much of the novel's humor comes from the overstated parallels between conditions on Campus and the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, juxtaposed with the modes and conventions of the mythic quest as described by Joseph Campbell and others.

Barth has judged *Giles Goat-Boy* his least favorite among his novels "because the overstatement is overdone—the novel itself is too long, the subject is inevitably dated, the setting borders on the jejune." Whether or not Barth had reservations at the time about his turn, in both *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Boy*, to this large-canvas, Rabelaisian satire (what at the time was called "black humor"), his next book would nevertheless be very different, conspicuously reduced in size. *Lost in the Funhouse* distills the essential elements in Barth's shift to more experimental work—heightened awareness of fiction as a literary form, preoccupation with the process of writing, an interest in the source and structure of storytelling—

and refashions them as shorter, more concentrated stories that challenge the conventions of the short story as much as *Sot-Weed* and *Giles* challenge those of the novel. The result is a book that, more than any other, defines “metafiction” as a distinctive variant of literary postmodernism, a book that is certainly one of the most important of the 1960s, arguably one of the most important produced by a postwar American writer.

While numerous works prior to *Lost in the Funhouse* clearly enough now seem classifiable as postmodern (including Barth’s own previous two novels), it also now seems clear that this book is most responsible for clarifying (and raising) the stakes involved in what by the time it appeared was obviously among younger, more adventurous writers a rejection of the reigning practices of the immediate postwar years in favor of a more formally audacious kind of fiction. Barth, along with such generational colleagues as Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, and William Gass, no longer took for granted a definition of fiction that ties it to traditional conceptions of narrative and its fixed elements (“character development,” “point of view,” etc.). Of course, most readers still take such a definition for granted, and so, although *Giles Goat-Boy* had achieved surprising popularity for a book of its heft and eccentricities, Barth’s reputation as a difficult writer whose work disrupts our customary reading habits would only expand after the publication of *Lost in the Funhouse*.

Here Barth challenges the reader to accept that ultimately fiction is something made, a construction of language. A “story” is just that, an ordered contrivance that is not a direct reflection of “reality” but an alteration of it, its transformation by art. By calling attention to his narrators narrating, to the “storyness” of stories, or to seemingly more straightforward narratives as allegories of storytelling (“Night-Sea Journey,” “Lost in the Funhouse”), Barth implicitly asks readers to reconsider their expectations of a work of fiction, to acknowledge that the writer might use the form in a different way, might in fact abandon the form in its traditional guise altogether. Does fiction as literary art consist only of the skill with which the writer carries out the familiar narrative strategies, or can the writer achieve other kinds of aesthetic effects, arising from alternative arrangements of form and language?

*Lost in the Funhouse* is anchored by three stories (including the title story) that feature the character named Ambrose Mensch, narratives that are actually somewhat conventional in that they tell discernible stories about a recognizable type of fictional character (a young boy on the

verge of maturity), related more or less transparently from an unbroken point of view. Taken together, they make the book's preoccupation with the nature of literary creation visible in the most accessible way, by making it the "theme" of the stories' depiction of Ambrose's realization that authoring fictions will be his ambition ("he will construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator"). On the other hand, stories like "Echo," "Title," "Life-Story," and "Menelaiad" are the most explicitly self-reflexive, and can stand as the archetypal works of metafiction, a term first used in 1970 by William Gass (who mentions Barth specifically as an example). Although this term has come to designate any work of fiction that even vaguely calls attention to itself or the situation of the writer writing, Gass used it to draw an analogy between "meta" procedures in other disciplines, such as mathematics and ethics (as Gass puts it, "lingos to converse about lingos"), and the rise of self-aware, formally intricate fiction. In such fiction, "the forms of fiction serve as the material upon which further forms can be imposed" ("Philosophy and the Form of Fiction").

The self-reflexivity of metafiction, in Gass's conception, mirrors a previous act of reflection on the writer's part, reflection about "the forms of fiction" and their suitability to the needs of the modern writer. Metafiction is not mere gesture, the superficial kind of game-playing for which too many works of pseudo-metafiction are indeed blameworthy. John Barth's form of game-playing is more ambitious, and its ambition is ultimately quite considerable: to give fiction the same sort of grounding as these other disciplines. If abstraction in painting and serialism in music had freed those arts from rigid canons of practice, metafiction attempts the same sort of liberation for narrative practice, at once both exposing all fiction as the artificial ordering of language and making possible the further advancement of fiction through embracing this fact. Metafiction helps us see works of fiction not as a means of accessing reality, but, in Gass's words as "additions to it."

In his essay "The Literature of Exhaustion," Barth himself explains the motive of metafiction as the attempt to confront "the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities" by turning this exhaustion "into material and means for [the writer's] work." As the narrator of "Title" puts it:

Plot and theme: notions vitiated by this hour of the world but as yet not successfully succeeded. Conflict, complication, no climax. The worst is to come.

Everything leads to nothing: future tense, past tense, present tense. Perfect. The final question is, Can nothing be made meaningful?. . . .

The answer to the narrator's question, which he asks as he is trying to write a story after realizing "everything's been said already over and over," is actually "yes," if we accept that indeed "Everything leads to nothing." A story doesn't "lead" to anything beyond itself. To think otherwise is to believe that a work of fiction has value only in the external meaning to which it points us. The work itself—the work as embodied language—disappears, something that metafiction does not allow to happen. Nothing can indeed be made meaningful if what fiction does lead to—its own verbal texture, the formal structures language builds—is the "meaning." As Barth puts it in the later *Chimera*, "the key to the treasure is the treasure."

Not all of the stories in *Lost in the Funhouse* are as purely metafictional as "Title" or "Life-Story" but are more generally "experimental." "Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction" is a process-oriented story that narrates its own coming-into-being; it is most noteworthy for appropriating the tape recorder as a literary stratagem, presenting itself as the transcription of an audio recording. The story thus cleverly foregrounds the role of "voice" in fiction. "Glossolalia" is also meant to be heard aloud—only in this way can the underlying rhythms of the Lord's Prayer that unite the six otherwise unrelated spoken fragments, including one literally spoken in tongues, really be detected. Perhaps the most infamous experimental "story" in the book (experimental in asking for the reader's active participation and attempting to expand our conception of what properly constitutes "writing") is the first one, "Frame-Tale," in which the reader is instructed to take a pair of scissors to the page: "Cut on the dotted line. Twist end once and fasten AB to ab, CD to cd." The result is a Mobius strip forming an endless loop of "Once upon a time there was a story that began."

Barth would not return to the short story (at least in book form) until 1996's *On With the Story*. In the meantime, he had written several very long novels demonstrating that, however much he calls into question many axiomatic storytelling conventions, Barth had by no means abandoned storytelling. These books are stuffed full of story, although they also concern themselves directly with the purpose and effects of stories, continuing in the metafictional mode introduced by *Lost in the Funhouse* but in a more fully elaborated, structurally consistent way. If *Lost in the Funhouse* is more purely experimental, the novels that follow it both further explore

the use to which self-reflexivity might be put in replenishing the resources of narrative and establish a signature type of narrative practice that can be seen as identifiably “Barthian.”

This signature is fully evident in *On With the Story*, even if the book doesn’t have the heft of the novels preceding it. It most immediately differs from *Lost in the Funhouse* in being not merely a series of stories but an integrated series, a book in which the whole is meant to be more than the sum of its parts. *On With the Story* is unified in several ways, both formally and thematically, beginning with the frame-tale Barth has interpolated throughout the text: an unnamed man and woman, the former the teller of the tales, the latter their audience and critic, discuss the quality and implications of the tales, providing the book its self-reflexive commentary. Although the writer figure in these scenes is pretty clearly a version of John Barth (as are the protagonists of many of Barth’s later novels), he is presented as a character in the larger fiction that incorporates the individual fictions the character relates. We could call this larger fiction the story of a storyteller.

The narrative structure is metaphorically reinforced by a motif that recurs throughout the book, a motif drawn from quantum physics. It is made most explicit at the beginning of the story, “Waves, by Amien Richard,” one of whose characters asks, “Are we particles . . . or waves?” At first the preoccupation with the “particle wave duality”—whereby a particle of matter sometimes manifests as a wave, depending on how it is observed—might seem curious, but ultimately we can see it is a conceit that reflects the book’s own status: We could regard each story individually, as if it were a particle, or we can consider the book in its entirety, as a wave proceeding with its own forward momentum.

Barth further extends this metaphor to apply as well to another theme expressed in several of the stories, the relationship of “story” to “life,” a question, embodied in the title, first raised by “Life-Story,” one of the central stories in *Lost in the Funhouse*. If life is a wave, then a story is particle, momentarily anchoring the life in a “fixed position,” altering it in the process. The hyphen in the title “Life-Story” enforces a separation between the two, and in *On With the Story* Barth reaffirms that this separation is necessary if we are to properly take the measure of each. “Our lives are not our stories,” concludes one of the tales. “Life” may ultimately and inevitably retain dominion over “story,” but stories allow us to put life on pause, to arrest time in its onward course:

The middle of the story nears its end, but has not reached it, not yet. There's time still, still world enough and time. There are narrative possibilities still unforeclosed. If our lives are stories, and if this story is three-fourths told, it is not yet four-fifths told; if four-fifths, not yet five-sixths, et cetera, et cetera. . . .

Indeed, the story in which this passage appears, "Ad Infinitum: A Short Story," doesn't quite come to narrative closure itself; its twin characters remain suspended between the wife's task of informing the husband about a phone call that has clearly related bad news and its actual completion, the wife grimly advancing toward the husband blithely tending his garden, unaware of the probably life-changing information he's about to receive. We may be tempted to conclude that we nevertheless "know" that the news will be delivered and the couple will endure their hour of suffering, except that this would be the case only if we were witnessing such a scene in life, or, as the narrator has it, "non-narrated life." In a story, the dreaded moment doesn't have to arrive. The narrative moment can be deferred, in effect, forever.

*The Book of Ten Nights and a Night* (2004), like *On With the Story*, also acts as a kind of anatomy of storytelling, although in this case the self-reflexive gestures are more circumscribed, on display most prominently in the framing story with which Barth has again surrounded a collection of otherwise unconnected stories. Although the use of this device in both books is of course in homage to *One Thousand and One Nights* (one of Barth's persistent influences), *The Book of Ten Nights* signals the allusion most explicitly. Barth's frame tale reverses the situation we find in the narrative of Scheherazade regaling the King with stories: Barth (lightly fictionalized as "Graybard") relates his stories to a nymph-like Muse with whom Graybard has "congress" during the interludes between the tales. All in all, the conceit is very similar to that used in the meta-narrative of *On With the Story*, and, by this stage in Barth's career, the reiteration of his debt to the metafictional strategies of *One Thousand and One Nights* has perhaps begun to wear thin.

Not only is the device repetitious, but the interactions between writer and muse are extended (one might say labored) enough that they overwhelm what are finally rather marginal stories. Only "Click," Barth's first attempt to reckon with the online medium as competitor with print, could be considered a significant addition to Barth's larger body of work. The author has further burdened *Book of Ten Nights and a Night* with the weight of topicality. A book that

began as a more “sportive” affair, Graybard informs us in the “Invocation,” was altered when he realized that “for him to re-render now, in these so radically altered circumstances, Author’s eleven mostly Autumnal and impossibly innocent stories, strikes him as bizarre, to put it mildly indeed—as if Nine Eleven O One hadn’t changed the neighborhood.”

Barth seems to have bought into the notion, perpetrated by some after the events of 9/11/01 that this day entailed a loss of credibility for the sort of postmodern fiction Barth’s work prominently exemplified. But the charge made against postmodern irony was certainly not that it was “innocent”; rather, it was all too knowing, too detached and clever by half in its preference for stylistic and formal displays over engagement with reality. The call for writers to awaken from their postmodern-induced slumber and acknowledge that reality is itself actually a bid to return fiction to a state of literary innocence, to the belief that reality can be directly represented in a work of fiction that sticks to the narrative basics. *Book of Ten Nights and a Night* winds up mildly reaffirming the value of “irrelevant” stories in the face of real-world trouble, but a better way to assert that value may have been to present these stories according to the original, less fretfully earnest plan, the state of the “real world” outside the text notwithstanding.

*The Development* (2008) as well suggests a retreat from the most overt displays of postmodern artifice and metafictional trickery. The book can be read as a more or less conventional series of linked stories about a retirement community, Heron Bay Estates, that houses its share of “autumnal resignation and quiet turmoil,” although Heron Bay’s ultimate demise is far from quiet, as it is ravaged by a tornado spun off from a late-season tropical storm moving up Barth’s cherished Chesapeake Bay. While the stories are not completely free of passages meditating on the act of storytelling (it is still Barth, after all), *The Development* is otherwise entirely accessible to most readers as a kind of slice-of-life realism depicting American life as lived by those nearing its conclusion. Even the at times fustian mannerisms of Barth’s late style, which particularly encumber *Book of Ten Nights and a Night*, is here toned down to something closer to a conventional expository style.

*The Development* succeeds relatively well in what it sets out to do, although it is inevitably disappointing that it sets out to do so little. It is of course not surprising that a writer now in his mid-80s would turn to themes of aging and taking stock, but one might wish that Barth had done so without defaulting to such conventional methods of presenting these themes.



(Barth's follow-up to *The Development*, the novel *Every Third Thought*, is a return to the fustian style, but unfortunately it also doesn't show him discovering freshly innovative strategies for realizing the themes.) *Collected Stories* thus allows us to see the arc of Barth's career, from vanguard experimental writer to one less-inspired but still dedicated to his ideal of storytelling. *Collected Stories* provides valuable testimony to the shape of this career, but finally it will be most valuable if it brings new readers to *Lost in the Funhouse* and *On With the Story*.

### **William Gass**

If writers such as Gary Lutz, Diane Williams, and Christine Schutt have brought increased attention to the sentence as the fundamental, perhaps even self-sufficient, source of aesthetic interest in fiction, the most important precursor to their particular kind of inspired sentence-making must be William H. Gass. While these writers cite Gordon Lish and his notion of "consecution" as the most immediate influence on their own practice of allowing form to evolve from the serial progression of meticulously constructed sentences rather than regarding form as the pre-existing container to be filled with the writer's words, Gass was exploring the potential of the sentence as the focus of the writer's art before Lish began exhorting his cadre of students to embrace this approach. All of the adventurous, "postmodern" writers of the 1960s and 1970s, among whom is Gass is usually placed, wanted to redirect readers' attention to the "play" of language, but arguably William Gass (perhaps along with Stanley Elkin) was always the writer who most consistently demonstrated that such play is in fact the very essence of all serious literature.

The care Gass devotes to his sentences can be seen in his earliest work of fiction, "The Pedersen Kid," as well as more generally in the stories collected in *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* (1968). "Mrs. Mean" in particular reveals Gass's way of converting specific details of observation into verbally sensuous language:

Now the blood lies slack in her but the pressure mounts, mounts slowly. The shears snip and smack. She straightens like a wire. She strides on the house, tossing her lank hair high from her face. She will fetch a rake; perhaps a glass of water. Strange. She feels a dryness. She sniffs the air and eyes a sailing cloud. In the first shadow of the door she's stunned and staggered. There's a blaze like the blaze of God in her eye, and the world is round. Scald air catches in her throat and her belly convulses to throw it out...



Although it will become even more pronounced in his later fiction, here we already see Gass's characteristic use of alliteration, assonance, and consonance, as well as the cadenced rhythm and startling figures of speech that can make Gass's prose seem to dance on the page.

But it is in Gass's first novel, *Omensetter's Luck* (1966), that we can really see he is no ordinary stylist content with merely "lyrical" ornamentation. Especially in the longest section of this novel, devoted to the internal monologue of the Reverend Jethro Furber, Gass uses language not to depict scenes that in effect pre-exist the words that describe them but to bring the scenes and characters into their distinctive mode of being in the first place. Reverend Furber exists for us mostly, if not solely, through the verbal expressions that evoke his hyperactive consciousness. By contrast, his foil, Brackett Omensetter, has only the most rudimentary relationship with language at all, and as a character he thus is largely an absence in the novel that bears his name, as he and his "luck" are conveyed through the obsessions of Furber and the novel's other important character, Henry Pimber. Both Omensetter's absence and these characters' obsessions work to make Omensetter a rather elusive and mysterious figure, but paradoxically he remains a character entirely enveloped in language—just not his own.

The strategy Gass uses in *Omensetter's Luck* could be described as the "free indirect" method of narration (called by Henry James "3rd-person central consciousness"), and indeed the internal perspective giving rise to the narrative makes *Omensetter's Luck* the Gass novel most reminiscent of Faulkner. Still, the ambition of the novel is not to give us access to the minds of the characters so that we might better glimpse their mental processes, understand their "thinking" separate from its necessary embodiment in language, but precisely to make a certain kind of language visible as a style. Gass's prose doesn't so much "reflect" his characters' pre-verbal consciousness as itself create an artifice of consciousness that exists only as a phenomenon of language. In Gass's next works, *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* (1968) and (after an interval of over twenty-five years) *The Tunnel*, language is treated even more obviously as the primary object of interest, although in these books language isn't merely "style" in the conventional sense, the usual sequence of sentences and paragraphs; instead, Gass allows form to emerge as an extension of the disposition of language in an especially literal way, as the words on the page migrate here and there, arrange themselves into unorthodox shapes and patterns, and call attention to themselves through the use of variable fonts and shades, including colored ink.

These books gained William Gass the reputation of a “postmodern” writer indulging in verbal “tricks” and “games.” Gass’s new novel, *Middle C*, is likely to strike most readers as less dependent on language games, but such an impression would ultimately be only superficial, based on the novel’s fewer explicit graphical flourishes and a return to the central consciousness strategy. At the core of this narrative is the protagonist’s own obsessive language game, as throughout the novel he recasts and revises a single sentence, turning it around, expanding and contracting it, not so much to get its meaning “right” (the point it makes is entirely clear from the first version and never really changes) but to explore its variability, to treat the words and their place in the sentence in a way analogous to the treatment of notes in the twelve-tone method in music pioneered by Arnold Schoenberg. Indeed, the novel comes to its real conclusion when protagonist Joseph Skizzen judges that the initial sentence—“The fear that the human race might not survive has been replaced by the fear that it will endure”—has reached its final form in a sentence of “twelve tones, twelve words.”

Joseph Skizzen is himself a music professor, a self-proclaimed Schoenberg scholar, although eventually we learn that his credentials to be the former are fraudulent and his interest in being the latter mostly feigned. The novel essentially tells us the story of Skizzen’s life, from his birth in London during the Blitz to his emigration to Ohio with his Austrian-born mother to his ultimate crisis when he fears the college that employs him has found him out. But the narrative is related in a discontinuous if still orderly and ultimately coherent way that could be said to mimic the serialism of Schoenberg or Anton Webern. The story of Skizzen’s life gets told, just as all the notes in the twelve-tone scale are played and heard, even if it is accomplished while avoiding the kind of “development” expected of both conventional narrative and music, and while preserving the possibility of surprise and evocative juxtaposition. The musical parallel is certainly not exact, and the novel can be read simply as an episodic if fragmented sort of immigrant narrative, or even a coming-of-age story, but clearly enough *Middle C* wants us to be aware that such a parallel is possible, whereby the role of language goes beyond the “meaning” we can derive from it and does become a more self-sufficient medium, an arrangement of words analogous to music as the arrangement of sounds.

Appropriately enough, this conception of literary language is perhaps best exemplified in the pages devoted to Professor Skizzen’s lectures on modern music:

The materials of a work of art, my dears, appear first as simple differences but then begin to migrate into oppositions and into pairs. For instance, the cleeks and buzzes of insects in the night, each with their own scratch on the face of darkness, sidle alongside the clarinet's happy candy like ants to a melt of chocolate—apparently an enemy of our pleasure. No matter how pure a note is, when singly sounded, we realize its man-made character and its preordained place in the confectional box, the musical scale: whereas we trace nighttime's clatter back to the cricket, who is broadcasting its lust, first in one direction, then in another, with sharp chirps like the crepitations the locust makes by bowing its legs vigorously back and forth upon steadied wings to signal its presence and advertise its need... These little wails of music, or bits of ragged scrape, are seeking a companion, a connection, even if only momentary, but always so they may give more sense to their sounds and make more of meaning's music.

Such a passage, of course, conveys an important sense, "meaning" about the nature of musical art that Gass no doubt wishes to communicate, but it is a sense that is inseparable from its sense-centered images and the sensuous unfolding of Gass's sentences, their distinctive wordplay (made even more pronounced when read aloud). Among his contemporaries, only Gass's friend Stanley Elkin can rival him as a stylist who offers an alternative version of "style" in which the aesthetics of prose does not consist of adding the occasional felicitous phrase or figure to the otherwise utilitarian stream of sentences that set scenes and advance plots, but instead extends to the way plot, setting, and even character are conjured from the verbal wizardry devoted to almost every sentence. Both writers make it very difficult to ignore style as the central, irreducible element of fiction, the pleasures of which in the work of Gass and Elkin precede and determine the other pleasures of plot or character.

In some ways the pleasures of this particular passage are largely separate from a consideration of character, since Skizzen's lecture seems at least as much like an essay interpolated into the text as it does a recitation in his own voice—indeed, an essay very much of the kind we might expect from William Gass in his work as an essayist. That Skizzen possesses at best a self-education in music and has dubious enthusiasm for modern music in the first place only makes his disquisition all the more artificial, less a window onto Skizzen's character than an

opportunity for Gass implicitly to align his own art, the art of the novel we are reading, with that of a modernist such as Bela Bartok, although in doing so he is also thus engaging in the kind of self-reflexive gesture that would associate the novel with the postmodern in fiction. While *Middle C* is certainly less explicitly metafictional than *Willie Master's Lonesome Wife*, and contains fewer textual embellishments than *The Tunnel* (although Gass has suggested in interviews that in his original conception *Middle C* would have included more of these), by focusing so intently on music it nevertheless clearly invites the parallel between musical art and the art of fiction, at least as practiced by William H. Gass.

Still, this is probably Gass's most accessible work of fiction in the way it provides a conventional emphasis of sorts on character and events, even if finally the reader must be wary of extending complete sympathy to Joseph Skizzen, or even of entirely trusting that we have gotten a strictly accurate account of Skizzen's life. The novel's final episodes involve Skizzen's potential exposure as a fraud, the story he has created about himself and his life a fiction. Although we already know his academic credentials are fake, we are still tempted to take Skizzen's side, to hope he will not be exposed by the powers that be at Whittlebauer College. And when indeed it turns out that the college is after someone else, this seems to be a happy ending, one that will allow Skizzen to continue to live out his fiction. If, instead, we think that Skizzen is morally culpable for perpetrating this fiction and should have to reveal his "true self," which of the three selves he himself identifies as both marking the stages in his life's progress and continuing to co-exist in the present construct "Skizzen" should we recognize? Joey, the immigrant boy? Joseph, the young man trying to understand his place in the world to which he has been brought? Professor Skizzen, who has decided that this persona is the most effective buffer against that world?

It could be said that "Skizzen" is born into fakery and fiction. His father—originally Rudi Skizzen—changed his own and his family's identity more than once in migrating from Austria to England. If the elder Skizzen soon afterward disappeared, leaving his wife and children to remake themselves yet again in America, Joseph Skizzen ultimately embraces his patrimony in forging a usable identity, although where the father took on his assumed identities in order to more fully assimilate himself to human reality (at which he failed), the son assumes his in order to keep his distance from that reality. Joseph Skizzen in fact is so alienated from the world made

by human beings that he curates his own “Inhumanity Museum,” cataloguing the atrocities people have inflicted on each other. Skizzen wants nothing more than to hide his “true self” from this abhorred reality. The question finally is whether such a self even exists, so thoroughly has he hidden it from possible contamination by the virus of intimate human contact.

It is the triumph of Gass’s novel, however, that, through the energy and prodigious invention of his singular prose, he is able to transform his protagonist’s evasions and attempted disguises into a fully revealed, intricately composed work of literary art.

### **Robert Coover**

Robert Coover has been a presence on the American literary scene for over 50 years now. In many ways, the critical response to each new book he publishes continues to register the perception that he remains an adventurous writer who repeatedly offers challenges to convention, a perception in which Coover himself must take considerable satisfaction, as he is indeed one of the most consistently audacious and inventive of the first generation postmodernists. Coover’s novels and stories subvert both the abiding myths and shibboleths—sometimes outright lies—that animate American history, and the formal assumptions of literary storytelling, often by adopting the ostensible conventions of such storytelling but subjecting them to a kind of straight-faced parody. In *Huck Out West*, Coover turns to such a strategy, in this case not simply mimicking the patterns or manner of an inherited narrative form, but creating a new and extended version of a specific, already existing work—a sequel, but one intended to provoke reflection on the earlier work’s cultural implications and its literary authority.

Coover has drawn on the elemental power of stories and storytelling going back to his first novel, *The Origin of the Brunists*, as well as the story collection *Pricksongs and Descants*, the latter including such stories as “The Door,” “The Gingerbread House,” and “The Magic Poker,” all of which invoke fairy tales and fables as both form and subject. Coover is one of the central figures in the rise of what came to be called “metafiction,” but where, say, John Barth wrote in books like *Lost in the Funhouse* a blatantly self-reflexive kind of story that proclaims its own fabrication, Coover dramatized the conditions of fiction-making allegorically, making storytelling itself the story. This is perhaps best illustrated in his novel *The Universal Baseball Association*, still arguably his best book and the most revealing of his fundamental preoccupations as a writer. The novel’s protagonist, J. Henry Waugh (JH Waugh), is the God-

like creator of a fictional world that is ostensibly a make-believe baseball league but that de facto represents an alternative reality in which Henry can emotionally and intellectually invest apart from his unsatisfying and humdrum job as an accountant. Indeed, his investment in this reality becomes so all-encompassing that at the novel's conclusion it would seem he has disappeared into it—albeit as the now withdrawn and omniscient deity who contemplates his creation without intervention.

Although a book like *The Public Burning*, probably Coover's best-known and most controversial work, would not at first seem to feature the same sort of concerns informing *The Universal Baseball Association*—it is, after all, a novel about weighty issues related to politics and history, not about an obscure accountant dreaming his life away—but in fact *The Public Burning* is not really about politics and history—not directly, at least—but politics as representation, and the distorting effects the sensationalized and distorted forms of representation in America have on American history and culture. In both UBA and *The Public Burning*, we are shown how easily, even eagerly, human beings shape reality into fictions and subsequently insist on taking those fictions as reality, with predictably disastrous consequences. J. Henry Waugh exemplifies individually what American culture at large evidences more generally: the desire to refashion a recalcitrant reality into a simple, more manageable creation, in which we must force ourselves to believe or that repressed reality will disagreeably return.

A novel like *The Public Burning* eludes designation as a strictly “political” novel—and thus avoids seeming a dated artifact of a fading Cold War controversy—because it is not finally a representation of the Rosenberg case per se but a representation of the representations to which the Rosenberg case and its legacy have been submitted, an evocation of American depravity through the discursive forms—exemplified by the *New York Times* and *Time* magazine—and manufactured imagery—embodied in “Uncle Sam”—that shape and circulate the specific content of that depravity. If J. Henry Waugh retreats into his private invented reality to fill his own inner (and outer) void, in *The Public Burning* the emptiness is felt as a social loss, an absence of meaning, to be counteracted through the invented reality provided by Media myths and fantasies, myths that at their most destructive must be reinforced through the ritualized spectacle into which the Rosenbergs' death is organized.

Since *The Public Burning*, Coover has published numerous, consistently lively works of fiction of various length (8 novels, including the mammoth sequel to *The Origin of the Brunists*, *The Brunist Day of Wrath*, 7 novellas, and 3 collections of short fiction). While these books never seem repetitive, they do return to a few obviously fruitful subjects—sports, fairy tales, movies—and can certainly be taken as continued variations on the self-reflexive strategies introduced in *Pricksongs and Descants*, *Universal Baseball Association*, and *The Public Burning*. At times this strategy is more muted, as in *Gerald's Party*, which seems more purely an exercise in surrealism, while in other books the artifice is unconcealed, directly integrated into plot and setting, as in *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*.

Coover has also produced a series of novels and novellas that foreground their own fictionality by presenting themselves as versions of a particular mode or genre of fiction. *Dr. Chen's Amazing Adventure* is Coover's take on science fiction. *Ghost Town* is a western, while *Noir* evokes the hard-boiled detective novel (as filtered through *film noir*). Such works could not exactly be categorized as pastiche, since they are not so much imitations as efforts to distill the genre to its most fundamental assumptions and most revealing practices. Nor could they really be called parodies, since the goal is not so much to spoof or ridicule the genre but to in a sense turn it inside out, make it disclose the specific ways a particular mode of storytelling lends its conventions toward motifs and typologies that in turn have worked to substitute themselves for the actualities those conventions were created to depict, preventing anything resembling a clear perception of historical and cultural actualities apart from these archetypal representations. In novels such as *Pinocchio in Venice* and now *Huck Out West*, Coover takes this strategy of metafictional mimicry a step farther by seizing upon a specific iconic text and reworking it, both as a kind of homage to the prior work but also to create a parallel text that echoes the original while it also sounds out the work's tacit if partly concealed assumptions and elaborates on its latent if unspoken implications.

*Huck Out West* picks up Huckleberry Finn's adventures after he has indeed headed out to the territories and taken up a life as an itinerant in the American West. Essentially a drifter, Huck in this way fulfills the destiny inherent to his character as depicted in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, where he is content to float his way down the Great River to no particular destination beyond a loosely defined "freedom." If the objective in *Huckleberry Finn* for both



Huck and his friend Jim (who seeks literal freedom from bondage) is obstructed through the auspices of Tom Sawyer, likewise in *Huck Out West* Tom causes his supposed best friend (“pards,” they call each other) mostly trouble for their friendship—in fact, in *Huck Out West* Tom threatens to hang Huck, an act only the most naïve reader would believe he does not intend to carry out. Tom, who literally rides back into Huck’s life (a little over halfway into the novel) on a white horse, again proves unreliable and self-serving, although in *Huck Out West* these character traits, which Coover has keenly abstracted from the portrayal of Tom in Twain’s novel, are much more deadly in their potential consequences (not only to Huck) than when expressed by Tom Sawyer the 12-year-old boy.

Before Tom makes his reappearance and ultimately sends Huck off on the same kind of open-ended adventure that concludes *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck brings us up to date on his life since his journey down the river, which includes riding along with Tom for the Pony Express. After Tom decides to head back east, nothing really captures Huck’s interest long enough for him stay in any one place, so when the novel’s present action begins he has settled into the life of a wanderer:

When [Tom] left, I carried on like before, hiring myself out to whosoever, because I didn’t know what else to do, but I was dreadful lonely. I wrangled horses, rode shotgun on coaches and wagon trains, murdered some buffaloes, worked with one or t’other army, fought some Indian wars, shooting and getting shot at, and didn’t think too much about any of it. I reckoned if I could earn some money, I could try to buy Jim’s freedom back, but I warn’t never nothing but stone broke.

Huck must decide whether to buy Jim’s freedom because shortly after heading west, Tom Sawyer consigned Jim back to slavery by selling him to a band of Cherokee Indians. Huck is regretful about this decision, but does not look for Jim after all. Eventually Huck does serendipitously encounter Jim, who has indeed attained his freedom and is now traveling with a wagon train of settlers that Huck is hired to guide. He has become a devout Christian and forgives Huck for apparently abandoning him, but this is the last we see of Jim in *Huck Out West*. It is on the one hand disappointing that Coover chooses not to engage with the specific racial issues raised by *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (as John Keene does in his updating of the novel in his book *Counternarratives*), but on the other hand, he does in effect transfer the



theme of white American treatment of racial and ethnic minorities to the eliminationist campaign against Native Americans during the post-Civil War migration to the western “territories.” This campaign is represented most directly in the character of Custer (“General Hard Ass,” as Huck refers to him), but the historical forces portrayed in all of the novel’s actions converge around a broad account of a rapacious, mercenary America determined to extend its sovereignty over all the land it can exploit, with little regard for the devastation and suffering this expansion leaves in its wake.

Ultimately *Huck Out West* does mirror the Huck/Jim relationship of *Huckleberry Finn* in Huck’s pairing with a Lakota tribesman, Eeteh, who shares with Huck a general disinclination to bear down and work hard, preferring his own kind of independence, but who is nevertheless an adept storyteller in the Lakota tradition and regales Huck with tales about the trickster figure, Coyote. It is Eeteh who directs Huck to the Black Hills in order to elude General Hard Ass, whom Huck fears wants him imprisoned, or worse, for refusing an order, even though Huck was serving only as a civilian scout. Thus Huck finds himself living in a teepee in Deadwood Gulch, a pristine creek valley when Huck arrives but soon transformed into a muddy slough overrun with prospectors, their hangers-on, and all the hastily constructed buildings erected when gold is discovered. It is into this suddenly chaotic place that Tom Sawyer arrives as well, allegedly deputized by the federal government to bring order. What Tom really seeks to do in Deadwood Gulch is seize the main chance, to use it as the opportunity for the same sort of self-aggrandizement that is always Tom Sawyer’s ultimate motivation.

Huck can never quite accept this, even after Tom has threatened to hang him for defying Tom’s wishes. Rescued from Tom’s bluster by Eeteh (who brings along a few Lakota warriors for good measure), Huck replies to Tom’s predictable apology: “You’re my pard, Tom, always was. But it ain’t tolerable here for me no more. If you want to ride together again, come along with us now.” Tom demurs, and Huck rides off with Eeteh, but in this case lighting out for a territory more informed by Eeteh’s spontaneous, generally elastic storytelling than by the “stretchers” told by Tom, lies he tries to believe are true—or tries to convince others they should believe. Huck himself has earlier indicated he already understands the difference between Tom’s stories that hide reality and the kind of story that might be truer to Huck’s sense of reality: “Tom is always living in a story he read in a book so he knows what happens next, and sometimes it

does. For me it ain't like that. Something happens and then something else happens, and I'm in trouble again."

*Huck Out West* is not as purely a picaresque narrative as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, but Coover has certainly captured the nomadic state of Huck Finn's soul. He has cannily discerned the essential nonconformity manifest in the character created by Mark Twain, and memorably transformed the adolescent's lack of ambition into a more self-aware skepticism toward social expectations and cultural practices—while still preserving in Huck an ingenuous outlook that acknowledges what the world is like but remains free of malice or resentment. This quality is reflected in the colloquial eloquence of Huck's narrative voice, which again Coover has adapted from the same quality found in Twain's novel but has further developed into what may be the most impressive accomplishment in *Huck Out West*. Huck doesn't merely sound "authentic"; his idiomatic expressiveness is sustained throughout the novel less to provide "color" than to establish Huck as a character able to render his circumstances persuasively through the integrity of his verbal presence.

If *Huck Out West* disappoints at all, it is in the invocation of Custer as Huck's *bete noire* and scourge of the West. This move threatens to make the novel too reminiscent of Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man*, whose narrator also relates his peripatetic adventures in the Old West in a vernacular-laden voice. Perhaps this only indicates how much Berger himself may have been influenced by *Huckleberry Finn*, and the work of Mark Twain in general, but Berger's Jack Crabb is primarily the means by which the novel effects its darkly comic burlesque of American myth-making. *Huck Out West* engages in its fair share of this sort of lampoonery as well, but ultimately it goes farther. Robert Coover provides a new version of the twice-told tale offering a radical representational strategy that still allows for dynamic storytelling, even as it interrogates its own process of representation.

### **Raymond Federman**

Raymond Federman was generally associated with those American writers who in the 1960s and 70s began writing what is now called "metafiction," but there was always something about Federman's work that seemed different, its self-reflexivity even more radical and enacted in a more aggressive way. Where Barth and Coover laid bare the devices of fiction allegorically (J. Henry Waugh as "author" of his fictional baseball world) or through the occasional narrative

disruption (the "author" making his presence known, as in Barth's "Life-Story"), Federman's fiction was more direct and unremitting in its undermining of narrative illusion. With its prose freed from the constraints of typographical bondage, climbing up, down, across, and around the page, and its "stories" of writers attempting to tell a story without quite succeeding, Federman's fiction as represented in *Double or Nothing* (1971) and *Take It or Leave It* (1976), still his most important books, challenged not only reader's preconceptions about fiction but also basic assumptions about reading itself.

Federman rejected both "metafiction" and "experimental fiction" more broadly as labels accurately describing his work, instead coining the term "surfiction" to sum up what he—as well as other innovative writers, such as Ronald Sukenick—was after. In his essay, "Surfiction--Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction," Federman defines the term:

. . .the only fiction that still means something today is that kind of fiction that tries to explore the possibilities of fiction; the kind of fiction that challenges the tradition that governs it: the kind of fiction that constantly renews our faith in man's imagination and not in man's distorted vision of reality—that reveals man's irrationality rather than man's rationality. This I call SURFICTION. However, not because it imitates reality, but because it exposes the fictionality of reality. Just as the Surrealists called that level of man's experience that functions in the subconscious SURREALITY, I call that level of man's activity that reveals life as a fiction SURFICTION.

It is not altogether clear what Federman mean by the last part of this formulation, that surfiction "reveals life as fiction." In the next paragraph, he adds: "fiction can no longer be reality or a representation of reality, or an imitation, or even a recreation of reality; it can only be A REALITY—an autonomous reality whose only relation to the real world is to improve that world. To create fiction is, in fact, a way to abolish reality, and especially to abolish the notion that reality is truth." To "abolish the notion that reality is truth" is not, it seems to me, the same thing as revealing "life as a fiction." Denying that reality is the arbiter of "truth" does help to preserve the "autonomous reality" of fiction, but for fiction to be "a" reality, it would seem necessary that "reality" itself exist, to which fiction provides an alternative or a complement. If fiction is reality and life a fiction, then Federman is paradoxically valorizing realism after all, though not for "recreating" reality. Fiction is its own arbiter of truth, the realm where "life" is

really to be found. This all seems a rather byzantine way to arrive at the conclusion that fiction is a creation, not a recreation of anything.

Indeed, if fiction is an act that "renews our faith in man's imagination," then it largely undermines the appeal to imagination to burden it with the task of rendering itself reality—unless you simply want to defend imagination as a process that's as real as any other human activity, and perhaps as revelatory of "life" as documentary-style realism. Certainly *neither Double or Nothing* nor *Take It or Leave It* themselves do very much to expose life as fiction, or, for that matter, "abolish reality." But they both do display the literary imagination at its most adventurous through exploring "the possibilities of fiction" and by challenging "the tradition that governs it." It seems to me that these are impressive enough accomplishments that asking them further to disclose "man's irrationality" or to abolish reality only threatens to saddle them with extra philosophical weight they don't really need to bear.

The reader encountering *Double or Nothing* for the first time surely becomes most immediately aware of its inherent playfulness. Riffing through the book, one finds pages arranged in multiple shapes and irregular spacings, its words cascading here and there, printed in various fonts and shadings. Some pages don't so much contain writing as words arranged into images and pictographs. It is apparent right from the start that this is a work that challenges our assumption that when we pick up a novel we will be reading "prose" that unfolds through the usual, orderly blocks of print that define the reading experience in its most fundamental form. Both *Double or Nothing* and *Take It or Leave It*, which is also typographically adventurous, can be read as prose narratives of a sort—albeit narratives preoccupied with their own narration—but they at a minimum require the reader to reconsider his/her expectations of reading and to forsake dependence on the usual and the ordinary.

If the reader begins with the impression that *Double or Nothing* will be a mischievous, thoroughgoing challenge to the conventions that dominate the writing and reading of fiction, this impression should only be reinforced by the experience of the text itself, although that experience will surely exceed in its realization the pallid generalization of this description. The challenge of the novel is such that attentive readers will find it invigorating, an invitation to revise their notion of the reading experience as an essentially passive activity but also to find the

kind of active reading it encourages a rewarding alternative. Above all, *Double or Nothing* is an entertaining novel, enjoyable to read in its very refusal to play by the rules.

The "plot" of *Double or Nothing* is announced--and more or less completed--in its opening lines:

Once upon a time **two or three weeks ago**, a rather stubborn and determined middle-aged man decided *to record for posterity*, exactly as it happened, word by word and step by step, the story of another man **for indeed what is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal**, a somewhat paranoiac fellow **unmarried, unattached, and quite irresponsible**, who had decided to lack himself in a room **a furnished room with a private bath, cooking facilities, a bed, a table, and at least one chair**, in New York city, for a year **365 days to be precise**, to write the story of another person—a shy young man of about 19 years old—who, after the war **the Second World War**, had come to America **the land of opportunities**, from France under the sponsorship of his uncle—a journalist, fluent in five languages—who had himself come to America from Europe **Poland it seems, though this was not clearly established**, sometime during the war after a series of gruesome adventures, and who, at the end of the war, wrote to the father **his cousin by marriage** of the young man whom he considered as a nephew, curious to know if he **the father** and his family had survived the German occupation, and indeed was deeply saddened to learn, in a letter from the young man—a long and touching letter written in English, not by the young man, however, who did not know a damn word of English, but by a good friend of his who had studied English in school—that his parents **both his father and mother** and his two sisters **one older and the other younger than he** had been deported **they were Jewish** to a German concentration camp **Auschwitz probably** and never returned. . . .

Immediately we are introduced in this passage to the structure and strategies that will be further elaborated throughout the text that is *Double or Nothing*. Though initially less radical than the typographical play still to come, the use of bold type and italics here still seems disruptive, even arbitrary, although, as with all the other graphic devices in this novel, they actually work in part to substitute for more conventional grammatical and syntactical markers. The first boldfacing—"two or three weeks ago"—is clearly employed for humorous effect, but in general these

interruptions provide a kind of rhythm and a different sort of visual orientation for a prose that otherwise abandons the traditional mechanics of prose.

The discursive situation set up here—a narrator relating the story of a writer preparing to write a story—is by now a recognizable move in postmodern writing, but in *both Double or Nothing* and *Take It or Leave It* Federman uses this trope more thoroughly than almost any other postmodern writer, and in addition integrates it more seamlessly with the theme motivating his narrative maneuvers. Each of these novels takes as its secondary subject—the primary subject being writing itself—episodes in the life of a French immigrant to America whose biography in most ways mirrors Raymond Federman's. In *Double or Nothing*, this character's story is being told, or being attempted, by a second character, the "rather stubborn and determined middle-aged man" who is also a seeming facsimile of Raymond Federman in his later incarnation as writer. The difficulty of "getting it right" in recounting the experiences of the "shy young man" becomes the novel's central conflict, memory and fiction unavoidably merging as the middle-aged author struggles to get the story told. The story of the story is not just self-reflexive sport (although it is that) but also the most honest opportunity to get at something close to "truth."

This is perhaps the truth that fiction can provide, but ultimately what a work like *Double or Nothing* dramatizes is that the "truth" of fiction lies not in its fidelity to external events but to its own necessities. Federman uses his "life experiences" as material on which to perform the imaginative turns fiction always performs, but in Federman's case the performance is made "concrete," conducted on the page without disguise. *Double or Nothing* is the epitome of that modern/postmodern text that, in Jerzy Kutnik's words, "not so much says something about reality but, by its occurrence and presence, does something as a reality in its own right." I would add to this that it is a literary text that is allowed to "be something" as well. In both its emphasis on "performance" and its ultimate status as an object of aesthetic perception, *Double or Nothing* is less a rendering of experience (at least as a realistic representation of "life") than it is an experience "in its own right." In its very refusal to accept the established practices determining where the "art" of fiction is to be found, *Double or Nothing* establishes itself as art in the most compelling way possible, by providing the reader with a unique aesthetic experience.

Although *Take It or Leave It* continues to experiment with the dynamics of the printed page in an approach similar to *Double or Nothing*, it is both more and less radical than its

predecessor. It contains fewer word-pictures and other extreme acrobatic notational flourishes, but it also takes the self-reflexive portrayal of the fiction-writing process even farther. Kutnik begins to get at this feature of *Take It or Leave It* when he notes of the twentieth century novel in general that often "the question 'What does fiction say (mean)?' was replaced by the question 'How is fiction constituted?'" as the focus of the writer's attention" (37). *Take It or Leave It* moves ahead in the life of the "shy young man" to a period in which he is serving in the U.S. military and focuses on a single episode in which he drives from North Carolina to upstate New York to collect his misdirected pay and from which he intends to drive across the country for further deployment. Although he does finally make it to the first destination, the relation of the second leg of the journey is permanently deferred as the narrative is punctuated by various digressions and a kind of internal drama carried out by multiple versions of the author, in this case split into three roles, as well as the implied reader.

In addition to the fictionalized Federman (for the purposes of this novel named "Frenchy") whose story is the ostensible subject of the novel, we are confronted with two different "tellers" of the story, one presumably an older Federman/Frenchy, who conveys the younger Frenchy's adventures to a second teller, who takes on the job of official narrator and who is the stand-in for Raymond Federman, author of *Take It or Leave It*. Later, the second teller leaves the narrative for a while, so that Federman/Frenchy must temporarily tell the story himself, and at another point the novel's implied readers (residing in the future) intrude on the narrative by sending a proxy to see for himself what the young Frenchy is really up to.

In this way the actual reader of *Take It or Leave It* is exposed to a representation of "how fiction is constituted," or, as Kutnik puts it, to "the novel's internal space as the place where the text gets written, where it performs its own self" (202). Yet, this evocation of the "inner space" is also wildly funny, making *Take It or Leave It* in its way one of the most entertaining novels of its time. It stands with Gilbert Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew* as a great "postmodern" novel that is great because, while rejecting the elements of fiction writing most familiar to most readers, it manages to substitute for those elements a strategy that such readers could still enjoy if they gave themselves over to its alternative logic. Like *Mulligan Stew*, *Take It or Leave It* provides readers with a "good read" that is "good" both because it makes for a pleasurable reading experience and



because in the process it stimulates the reader to reflect on the conventions of reading—conventions that might otherwise exclude novels like these as simply curiosities.

At the same time that *Take It or Leave It* attempts to undermine the authority of conventional approaches to the writing and reading of fiction, it also evokes one of the first great novels in the tradition, Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. Both are narratives about the impossibility of producing a narrative that doesn't leave out everything that's important. Both illustrate this dilemma by hilariously interrupting the narrative in progress through seemingly endless diversions and divagations. Sterne's novel at the very beginning of the modern history of fiction questioned the adequacy of "telling a story" as the justification of the form, and *Take It Or Leave It* renews that effort as provocatively as any work of fiction since.

### **Gilbert Sorrentino**

In Barry Alpert's 1974 interview with him, Gilbert Sorrentino declares that he is "an episodic and synthetic writer. . .I don't like to take a subject and break it down into parts, I like to take disparate parts and put them all together and see what happens." In his late works *Little Casino*, *Lunar Follies*, and *A Strange Commonplace*, Sorrentino demonstrates that he continues to pursue this "synthetic" approach to the writing of fiction, if anything to even more deliberate and concentrated effect. So dedicated are these books to the juxtaposing of "disparate parts," they seem to have brought Sorrentino to a point where all conventional expectations of continuity and development in character or story are simply irrelevant, vestiges of a prior of conception of fiction that no longer has much force.

Readers whose assumptions about the novel still depend on notions of plot and character development are likely to have trouble identifying *A Strange Commonplace* as a novel at all. Some might think of it as a collection of sketches and short tales, but even if we were to take the "episodic" nature of the book as far as this, we would, of course, be privileging the "disparate parts" over the effort "to put them all together" and would be missing the aesthetic point altogether. This is a unified work of fiction, however much Sorrentino makes us participate in the act of synthesizing its elements so that, along with the author, we readers can "see what happens."



The contents page of *A Strange Commonplace* signals immediately that the reader should be alert to the novel's structural patterns, to whatever relationships might be revealed through the arrangement of its parts. "Book One" and "Book Two" each consist of twenty-six sections, the titles of which are identical across both books, although presented in a different order. Thus, we can read a pair of "chapters" called "In the Bedroom," "Success," "Born Again," etc., although, as we discover, in the second set of episodes the cast of characters changes and the stories related are different—except insofar as all of the separate tales depict a post-World War II America of faded dreams, dysfunctional families, adultery-ridden marriages, and often wanton cruelty. Inevitably, this device tempts us actively to seek out correspondences between these episodes; perhaps such correspondences can indeed be found, but one suspects that Sorrentino himself would be less interested in leading his readers to the "meaning" that might be gleaned from this approach than in the process—unconventional and unorthodox—by which they are led there.

This process is intensified by Sorrentino's use of a few recurring names for his characters and recurring images and motifs. Two stories are called "Claire," but the characters involved are, for all we can tell, not the same Claire, and other characters in other stories also bear the name. The same is true of stories whose characters are named "Warren," "Ray," "Janet," and "Inez." A pearl gray homburg hat appears in numerous stories, frequently we find ourselves at Rockefeller Center, and Meryl Streep is the subject of several conversations. Surely at least here we might regard the homburg as a symbol of the recognizable sort, the other repeated elements similarly placed to provoke us into reflecting on the deeper meaning to which they point? Experienced readers of Sorrentino's fiction know that such symbol-hunting leads us down a blind alley, that this approach to reading fiction is relentlessly mocked in many of his books, the very notion of "deeper meaning" made the subject of some of his best jokes.

So what does *A Strange Commonplace* have to offer the reader willing to allow it its strangeness, its determination to render the commonplace actions of its interchangeable characters in an uncommon way? Partly the same pleasures to be found in all of Sorrentino's work: mordant humor (although rather less broad in this case), a delight in exploring formal conceits as far as they will go, a prose style that, although entirely free of affectation and ornamental flourishes, is both energetic and inventive, recognizably Sorrentinoesque. Here in its entirety is the first of the two sections called "Snow":

The tunnel in the snow leads to a warm kitchen, vinegary salad, ham and baloney and American cheese, white bread from Bohack's and tomato-rice soup and bottles of ketchup and Worcestershire sauce, coffee. It leads to heaven. Who is the strange and beautiful man at the far end of the tunnel he has just dug from the black Packard sedan to the white door of the little frame house? And who is the woman, who smells of winter and wool and perfume, of spearmint and whiskey and love? He gets out of the car and the woman holds his arm as he starts down the thrilling tunnel, through the snow banked above him on both sides, to the man in the navy blue overcoat and pearl gray homburg who waits, down on one knee, his arms held out to him. This will never happen again, nothing like it will ever happen again. The child begins to laugh joyously in the crepuscular gray light of the magical tunnel, laughing in the middle of the knifing cold of the January day, laughing since he does not know, nor do his mother and father, in their youth and beauty and strength, that this will never happen again, and that the family is almost finished and done. His father wears a white silk scarf with blue polka dots.

Even this brief passage exhibits some of Sorrentino's signature stylistic traits: the first sentence with its list, the exposition-through-questions, the mock lyricism, in this instance leading us to the sudden reckoning with reality: ". . .the family is almost finished and done with. His father wears a white silk scarf with blue polka dots."

As playful, even extravagant, as Sorrentino's fiction can sometimes seem, his best work always represents a reckoning with reality. Books like *Steelwork* and *Red the Fiend* perhaps address hard-bitten realities somewhat more directly (but only somewhat) than books like *Mulligan Stew* and *Blue Pastoral*, but ultimately all of his books are aesthetically provocative efforts to get at the prevailing features of postwar American life, at what the title of one of his best books calls the "imaginative qualities of actual things." *A Strange Commonplace* indeed. This book will probably strike readers less familiar with Sorrentino's work (for whom it would make a perfectly good introduction) as especially concerned with depicting these prevailing features, most of them disturbing if not actively repugnant, as well as the ways in which its characters attempt to cope with their circumstances. If the novel seems unfamiliar in its method of portraying these characters, their mostly unsuccessful strategies will undoubtedly seem very familiar, the kaleidoscopic picture of ourselves that emerges all too recognizable.

In his last works of fiction, beginning with *Little Casino* (2002), Gilbert Sorrentino began composing slim, fragmented texts that he continued to identify with the designation “novel,” but that more or less dispensed completely with the elements usually associated with novels, especially narrative continuity and extended character development. Each of these works presents instead a series of episodes, anecdotes, memories, or observations—in *Lunar Follies* (2005) pieces of critical discourse about art—that are tenuously connected as narrative, although *Little Casino* ultimately does provide a kaleidoscopic portrayal of a Brooklyn neighborhood and *Lunar Follies* unites its parodic discourse in a scathing satire of the “art world.” (*A Strange Commonplace* makes an ostensibly more direct effort to unite its narrative fragments through a Oulipian repetition of chapter headings and character names, but the connection is still more suggestive than definitive.) “Character” is equally, and literally, in name only, as individual figures, often anonymous, make brief appearances but refuse to “jump off the page,” as Sorrentino has previously and mockingly described the hallmark of “believable” characters in fiction.

In his posthumously released (and presumably final) novel, *The Abyss of Human Illusion*, Sorrentino again offers a relatively brief work (150 pages) built out of narrative fragments. As Christopher Sorrentino points out in his introductory note, the most obvious features of the novel’s formal structure are its division into fifty numbered sections that gradually increase in length, from sections comprised of only a paragraph or so to the final sections extending to three or four pages. *The Abyss of Human Illusion* also echoes *Little Casino* in its inclusion of textual notes, in this case labeled “commentaries” and appended to the “main” text.

Given Sorrentino’s longstanding predilection to formal experiment and manipulation, already it is tempting to look for clues to the novel’s formal patterning, which might ultimately provide the key to interpreting it, in these immediate characteristics of the text. Why fifty sections? Do the sections increase in length according to some identifiable principle governing the “rules and procedures” that Christopher Sorrentino reminds us have always been partly determinative of the formal qualities of his father’s fiction? If in *Little Casino* the notes discretely follow each section while in *The Abyss of Human Illusion* they are listed together at

the end of the text, does this mean we should read the two novels differently, in the latter case first reading the main entries and then moving on to the commentaries as a whole? Would this make for a significantly different reading experience, adding or altering meaning in the process?

One is almost compelled to read each of the fifty sections looking for apparent correspondences between them, whether of character, setting, action, or image. And there are indeed correspondences—an orange glow in the first few sections, the perspective through a window in many of them, references to the Milano restaurant, characters who move to St. Louis, an aging writer figure who keeps writing because it's all he can do. Most of these correspondences are probably either trivial or accidental, while others are simply consequences of the setting of many of the episodes in Brooklyn and of characters no doubt in one way or another created from the experiences of the author. Perhaps these motifs were conjured by Sorrentino to help him develop the book's structure organically, from episode to episode, but one can also imagine Sorrentino taking delight in the possibility they would lead some readers on a hunt for "meaning" that would ultimately prove fruitless. Even so, following along through his formal and stylistic turns, even when they entangle us in their convolutions, has always been one of the pleasures of reading Gilbert Sorrentino's fiction, and so it is also in this novel.

The most consistently maintained correspondence linking the condensed stories related in *The Abyss of Human Illusion* is thematic. Each of the stories tells of characters caught in the "abyss" named in the book's title. Some of the characters realize the depth of their illusions, while others remain possessed by them. Some are elderly, most often male, facing what now seems to them the emptiness of their lives, while others are still in the midst of carrying out their illusions. Infidelity, divorce, and general domestic unhappiness play prominent roles, resentment, envy, and an emotional numbness often the accompanying states of being. The overall tone conveyed by the stories is a fairly brutal frankness about the disappointments and futility that frequently enough define human existence.

While such a disabused portrayal of his characters' motives and behavior is common in Sorrentino's fiction, rarely is it made quite so relentlessly the focus of interest as it is in *The Abyss of Human Illusion*. Sorrentino's view of the role of "theme" in fiction has always been that it undercuts the aesthetic integrity of the work when conceived as the act of "saying something" through the work rather than as simply "something said," thematic implications that arise from

the work as it pursues its own aesthetic logic. It is entirely possible that Sorrentino began this work with the brief image described in the first section—a young boy sitting at a kitchen table on top of which are placed a bottle of French dressing, a bowl of salad, and a bottle of Worcestershire sauce—and that all of the succeeding sections developed from this base and in imaginative interaction with each other, but the ultimate effect of the central conceit is to leave the impression the novel is a “commentary” of sorts on our capacity for self-delusion.

The coherence this conceit provides could make *The Abyss of Human Illusion* perhaps a more accessible work than some of Sorrentino’s other fiction, in which complexity is built out of simplicity. This last novel more nearly reverses that process, producing apparent simplicity from a deceptive complexity. Whether this inversion of his normal practice is a structural device Sorrentino intended us to notice probably cannot now be known, but it does draw our attention to structure in a way that is consistent with his distinctive brand of metafiction more generally and especially with the three novels preceding *The Abyss of Human Illusion*. Together, this quartet concludes Gilbert Sorrentino’s career by reinforcing that career’s implicit insistence that “fiction” identifies not a specifiable form but an opportunity for the resourceful writer to further specify through example its yet unexplored forms.

Often enough a good way to get a quick introduction to an author’s work is to start with one or another collection of that writer’s short fiction. Frequently the short stories will provide a helpful if preliminary sense of the writer’s preoccupations, strategies, preferred subjects, stylistic tendencies, etc. If this writer is also a novelist, one can then decide whether to devote the greater time and commitment needed to tackle the longer works. Unfortunately, this does not really prove to be the case with Gilbert Sorrentino. Although Sorrentino is in my opinion among the most accomplished (and will, I believe, in the long run be among the most influential) post-WWII American novelists, *The Moon and Its Flight*, a more or less omnibus collection of his short fiction, does not present Sorrentino either at his best or his most representative.

The book does manage to hang together thematically as a portrait of American life in the twenty or so years following on the end of the second world war, or at least of a certain segment of American society characterized by its aspirations to a pseudo-bohemian way of life vaguely associated with art or writing or the academy. The portrait that emerges of this class of

intellectual pretenders is a decidedly sour one, their lives notable mostly for their casual betrayals, petty spite, their lassitude and spiritual drift. Indeed, the overall view of human endeavor that seems to pervade *The Moon in Its Flight* is overwhelmingly pessimistic, even misanthropic. The narrator of “Decades” writes: “The fashionably grubby artistic circles in New York are filled with people like me, people who are kind enough to lie about one’s chances in the unmentioned certitude that one will lie to them about theirs. Indeed, if everyone told the truth, for just one day, in all these bars and lofts, at all these parties and openings, almost all of downtown Manhattan would disappear in a terrifying flash of hatred, revulsion, and self-loathing.” The narrator of “In Loveland” remarks on his own writing ambitions that “The desire to add some more stupid clutter to the clutter of the vacuous world is virtually unquenchable.”

Of course, one ought to hesitate in associating the comments of these first-person narrators with Sorrentino himself, but the world-weariness and sense of futility these characters express are reinforced in many of the other stories as well. The impression conveyed in such retrospective stories as the title story, “Facts and Their Manifestations,” “Life and Letters,” “Gorgias,” and “Things That Have Stopped Moving” is of failure, lost opportunities, not just regret for squandered lives but a feeling that such lives were always doomed to be squandered. This is one of the ways in which *The Moon in Its Flight* seems a departure from most of Sorrentino’s other work, which is marked, even when treating similarly disturbing material, by a sense of creative playfulness and an all-encompassing kind of comedy that is missing from most of these stories. But perhaps they are simply the flip-side of such comedy, the more sober depictions of the stupidity and folly that also fuels the comic novels.

Not all of the stories depart from the mode of all-out experimentation one expects from Sorrentino’s novels, however. “A Beehive Arranged on Humane Principles,” written entirely in interrogative sentences, is the obvious precursor to the later *Gold Fools* (and, it must be said, the technique works better in the shorter form); of “Times Without Numbers” we are told in a concluding note that “the story comprises 177 sentences, 59 of which are taken from 59 separate works by 59 different authors. The remaining 118 sentences are from one of my own earlier stories.” “The Sea, Caught in Roses” seems to be built on some principle of repetition or accretion, taking the initial image named in the title and working it through a series of

emendations and authorial comments. Or it may just be a spoof of romantic imagery and “picturesque” subjects.

Although most of the stories are metafictional in various fairly minimal ways— Sorrentino always reminds us that such stories have been subject to imaginative re-creation, are at least “twice-told” even when they seem to be sliced from life—few of them are as outrageously and systematically self-reflexive as his better-known novels. “Sample Writing Sample” is a story about making up stories, while several others are directly about writers, and examine the consequences and ramifications of what they’ve written. “It’s Time to Call It a Day” is a fairly thinly-disguised attack on the banalities of conventional fiction as well as current publishing practices, but a rather entertaining attack (and implicit statement of Sorrentino’s own principles) nevertheless:

This latest novel, created to satisfy the desires of an audience, as Clifford’s editor had characterized it, “too hip to actually read a lot,” educated, so to say, and busy, so, so busy, was, he hoped, the very thing to interest those readers among the favored “target group” who had progressed from slop-and-ramshackle best-sellers to the sort of fiction admired by professional reviewers—well-written, with fully developed character, a nicely turned plot, and something important to say. It was, that is to say, designed for a particular kind of success, a “literary” success, and one that was, God knows, long deserved. So Clifford thought in righteous irritation. His first three novels should have been better received than they were—as he often complained to his wife. She thought of him as “neglected,” not, as he was, ignored. The books had been painstakingly constructed, modern in their “sensibility,” whatever he meant by that, accessible and possessed of accessible, contemporary motifs, dialogue, and sex scenes. They were, to be blunt, absolute failures, and each got a handful of mostly snide, semi-literate reviews, featuring the self-satisfaction of the ignorant. These were, of course, the usual, but Clifford was astonished by their blithe savagery.

(Although not astonished enough that he would want to stop trying to please them.)

The two concluding stories in this volume, “In Loveland” and “Things That Have Stopped Moving,” in some ways sum up both the strategies and the themes of *The Moon in Its Flight*. “In Loveland” begins, “I have attempted to tell this story many times over the past years,



the past decades, for that matter. I've not been able to bring it off, for I've never been able to invent—inhabit, perhaps—the proper narrational attitude. I begin to invent plausible situations that soon enough falsify everything, or unlikely situations that, just as soon, parody everything. I have even, at times, tried to tell the undecorated truth. . .” and goes on to tell a story of marital failure and self-disgust similar to a few of the earlier stories, but it is more amply told, with some compelling details. It concludes with these reflections, which add in a satisfying way to the story's dramatic resonance and aesthetic implications: “Reality, or, if you will, that which we constrain ourselves to believe is, beyond all philosophies, also that which we make of what happened. Unexpected connections do, of course, sometimes make for unexpected forms. For instance, I see that this story is, essentially, about a set of disappearances. I had not intended that to be its burden, although any further attempt to say what I meant to say is out of the question.”

“Things That Have Stopped Moving” at first seems a retelling of the earlier story “Decades” (Ben and Clara Stern are the principals in the latter story, Ben and Clara Stein in the former), but manages to leaven its narrator's account of the empty and adulterous sexual encounters between himself and Clara with some rather heart-felt reminiscences of his parents. It, too, comes with a metafictional conclusion:

This story is dotted with flaws and contradictions and riddled with inconsistencies, some of which even the inattentive reader will discover. Some of these gaffes may well be considered felicities of uncertainty and indeterminacy: such is prose. The tale also, it will have been clear, occasionally flaunts its triumphs, small though they may be. I am afraid that the final word about the gluey, tortuous, somehow glamorously perverse relationship that Ben and Clara and I constructed and sent shuffling into the world hasn't been arrived at, but perhaps the unspeakable has had created some sad analogue of itself, if such is possible. Something has been spoken of, surely, but I can't determine what or where it is.

Both of these stories are successful demonstrations of the way in which self-reflexivity can actually contribute to the emotional impact of a work of fiction, while continuing to draw the reader's attention to the artificial devices by which, unavoidably, aesthetically cogent fiction must be created.

*The Moon in Its Flight* is a book that fans of Sorrentino's fiction will want to read, but it is more interesting as a minor side attraction amid the greater pleasures of Sorrentino's carnivalesque novels. Curious readers would be better off to start with *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things*, a provocative but also compelling work of metafiction, perhaps then going on to what is in my view Sorrentino's masterwork, the sui generis *Mulligan Stew*. Those interested in Sorrentino's fictional depictions of Brooklyn (in which several of the stories in *The Moon in Its Flight* are set) might also try *Steelwork* or *Crystal Vision*. The biggest problem with *The Moon in Its Flight* is that unwary readers might take some of the more tepid and unfocused stories in this book as representative of Gilbert Sorrentino's achievements as a writer of fiction and might pass on the more important novels. If they did so, they would be missing out on the opportunity to read one of the most invigorating and audacious bodies of work in 20th century American fiction.

### ***Calibrated Iconoclasm:***

#### **Donald Barthelme**

It was never clear why Donald Barthelme chose to re-publish his stories in collected, compendium editions, first in *Sixty Stories* and then in *Forty Stories*. The very titles of these books obscured the playful and distinctive signposts provided by the original volumes in which these stories appeared, bearing as they did such colorful, and ultimately revealing, titles as *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* and *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts*. (Some of the later titles—*City Life*, *Sadness*—were more elegantly succinct, but they also signified a thematic association among the included stories that is lost, and to some degree impoverishes the reader's response, when the stories are reprinted in an omnibus form.) More importantly, what encountering Barthelme's fiction in these collected volumes, the latest of which, *Flying to America*, includes all of the stories not found in the first two, really threatens to de-emphasize—or even eliminate—is the more carefully calibrated iconoclasm, the redoubled assault on convention, that one experiences when reading Barthelme's stories in their original book-bound form.

Presumably, Barthelme reprinted in *Sixty Stories* the stories he most wanted to highlight. To this extent, these must have been what Barthelme (or Barthelme and his editor) considered the "best" of what is now apparently his 145 short stories (forty-five are included in *Flying to America*). Likewise, it must be presumed that the 40 stories of the second volume were second-

tier stories of a sort, while the remainder as collected in this new volume unfortunately must be counted as Barthelme's least essential efforts. If this is not the impression that Barthelme, and now the editor of *Flying to America*, Kim Herzinger, wanted to convey, it nevertheless does seem an unavoidable consequence of these publishing decisions. As I read the stories in *Flying to America*, some of them are indeed failed experiments, others simply not fully realized (always a potential hazard with short fiction as inveterately risk-taking as Barthelme's). But others are Barthelme stories I would not want to be without—"Edward and Pia," "The Big Broadcast of 1938"—and it seems to me a very unhappy fate for these stories that they in effect remain buried in a volume that is likely to be regarded, should these omnibus collections become the only point of access to his work, as containing Barthelme's least substantial pieces.

Certainly not all of the stories to be found in either *Sixty Stories* or *Forty Stories* are gems either, although this is more a function of Barthelme's relentlessly experimental approach than it is a judgment on his skills as a writer. Though there is something identifiably Barthelmean in all of his stories—a voice, a familiarity with many different cultural domains, a comedian's sense of timing and effect—what characterizes his body of work as a whole is an always adventurous determination to reconceive the form and the discursive assumptions of the short story as inherited by mid 20th-century writers. Rarely does Barthelme stick to a previously employed method or device (with the possible exception of the "dialogue" stories—stories written entirely in dialogue—that Barthelme wrote throughout his career but especially in the mid-to-late '70s). One of the pleasures of reading Barthelme's stories as they appeared, both in *The New Yorker* and in the subsequent books, was anticipating what new challenge to our assumptions about the nature of the short story Barthelme would offer. Many of these stories were indeed among the most innovative works of fiction in a period marked by a renewal of innovation by American fiction writers, but inevitably Barthelme's insistent experimentalism would provide hits and misses, failed experiments as well as transformative triumphs.

The opportunity to witness this process of experimentation with the conventions of fiction, however, may be lost to future Barthelme readers (except for those intrepid few who resolve to recreate the process as adequately as possible by tracing it through the collected volumes, reading each story in order of publication). These readers will encounter stories from every period in Barthelme's writing career indiscriminately mixed together, many of them no

doubt still provoking the surprise and wonder that their original readers experienced, but others inevitably more disappointing, their strangeness less well-tempered absent the context provided both by the original volumes and by the ongoing course of his development as a writer. For some, no doubt, focusing attention on an author's most successful work would seem only the most sensible way to sample that author, but in Barthelme's case it is arguably at least as important to gain a broader perspective on the direction in which his fiction sought out its own possibilities.

Regrettably, a book like *Flying to America* allows neither for the presentation of Barthelme's lasting work nor for a survey of his experimental evolution. The 45 stories are, as far as I can tell, arranged according to no particular view of the trajectory of his career; nor is any particular sense of thematic or formal progression evident. (Herzinger's preface provides a few brief and very general remarks about the "aesthetic and cultural issues that engaged Barthelme throughout his writing career," but otherwise does not explain why we are reading the stories in the order in which they're re-presented.) Indeed, the very first story in Barthelme's very first book, "Florence Green Is 81," appears as the next-to-last selection in *Flying to America*, immediately prior to "Tickets," the last of his stories to be published in *The New Yorker* (in 1989), a choice that does not seem to reflect much concern for an informed consideration of Barthelme's work. "Florence Green" is not one of Barthelme's very best stories, but anyone who really wants to understand where Barthelme started as a published writer should in fact begin with this story. Given "Florence Green's" place as the first story of Barthelme's first collection, readers ought to be able to evaluate its influences and preoccupations as the keynote among Barthelme's stories it actually is, not as a disassociated story hidden at the end of a third-string collected volume.

And "Florence Green is 81" does provide significant insight into Barthelme's clearly unconventional brand of fiction. In a book (*Come Back, Dr. Caligari*) that conspicuously heralds an approach to fiction radically different from that which had dominated American fiction in the 1950s, "Florence Green Is 81" offers us a writer uninterested in the usual methods of short story composition—methods emphasizing narrative continuity, consistency of character, thematic coherence, etc.—and much interested in alternatives to those methods. In its refusal to "develop," to create characters whose actions make "sense" according to ordinary protocols of

logic, it might be said that the story simply subverts inherited story conventions, settling for a kind of reflexive surrealism. But the story has its own logic, its own set of compositional principles that make it something other than a mashup of existing storytelling strategies: repetition of phrases, names, and images in constantly revised contexts, the juxtaposition of such images and phrases in startling ways, often producing wildly funny effects. “Florence Green Is 81” introduces us to a writer who wants to challenge our complacent reading habits, but whose work will also continue to be “entertaining” in its own way, even if as readers we must always allow for an aesthetics of surprise and reinvention.

Above all, perhaps, “Florence Green” introduces us to a narrative voice that will remain identifiable across Barthelme’s stories, even as it is employed to fragment narrative and convey a world often held together only by the narrator’s conviction that its various elements actually do belong together.

Dinner with Florence Green. The old babe is on a kick tonight: I want to go to some other country, she announces. Everyone wonders what this can mean. But Florence says nothing more: no explanation, no elaboration, after a satisfied look around the table bang! she is asleep again. The girl at Florence’s right is new here and does not understand. I give her an ingratiating look (a look that says, “There is nothing to worry about, I will explain everything in the privacy of my quarters Kathleen”). Lentils vegetate in the depths of the fourth principal river of the world, the Ob, in Siberia, 3200 miles. We are talking about Quemoy and Matsu. “It’s a matter of leading from strength. What is the strongest possible move on our part? To deny them the islands even though the islands are worthless in themselves.” Baskerville, a sophomore at the Famous Writers School in Westport, Connecticut, which he attends with the object of becoming a famous writer, is making his excited notes. The new girl’s boobies are like my secretary’s knees, very prominent and irritating. Florence began the evening by saying, grandly, “the upstairs bathroom leaks you know.” What does Herman Kahn think about Quemoy and Matsu? I can’t remember, I can’t remember . . .

Not only does *Flying to America* contribute to a distortion of Barthelme’s body of work by obscuring the significance of a story like “Florence Green Is 81”; it further works to erase Barthelme’s achievement as it was embodied in his original books by gathering so many of the

stories published in the earliest of those books (by my count, nine from *Caligari* alone). Of course, this was not per se an editorial decision on Herzinger's part, bequeathed as she was with all of the leftovers not already included in the first two omnibus volumes. Nevertheless, the effect is the same. Readers curious enough about the provenance of the stories in this book to scan the "Notes" section can't help but wonder whether *Caligari* or *Unspeakable Practices* might just have been apprentice work, interesting in an archival sense but finally dispensable, when in fact each still provides a bracing reading experience over 40 years after they first appeared and contains such classic Barthelme stories as "Me and Miss Mandible," "The Joker's Greatest Triumph," "A Shower of Gold," "The Indian Uprising," "The Balloon," and "Robert Kennedy Saved From Drowning." The man who wrote these stories was already in full possession of his literary powers, but future readers of Barthelme will have a much diminished appreciation of this fact if *Caligari*, *Unspeakable Practices*, and *City Life* are not available, or at least if some future collected edition of Barthelme's fiction does not maintain these books' complete contents as its organizing principle.

*Flying to America* does, on the other hand, collect a few of Barthelme's stories that have never before appeared in book form (in some cases, never before published), and to that extent does perform a useful service to Barthelme's readers. It allows us to read both what the editor identifies as Barthelme's first published story, "Pages from the Annual Report," and what may be his final story, "Pandemonium." (Although, again the reasons for their placement in the book, as nos. 24 and 33, respectively, are not in any way clear.) If anything, "Pages" demonstrates that Barthelme's peculiarly angled vision was fully focused when he began publishing short fiction, as it is a recognizably Barthelmean portrayal of the essential absurdity of post-World War II American life that could easily have been included in *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*. "Pandemonium" shares the earlier story's setting in a white collar workplace, but unfortunately this story doesn't really seem much of an advance beyond the kind of skewed satire at which "Pages" already shows Barthelme to be especially adept. Perhaps if "Pandemonium," as the editor suggests, was left incomplete, Barthelme might still have made something more distinctive of it; as it is, the story testifies to a continuity in Barthelme's career that needs to be acknowledged, although ultimately *Flying to America* provides little or no context or critical framework within which to profitably consider the interplay of continuity and innovation in Barthelme's work.

The packaging of the fiction of a writer like Donald Barthelme in such an assortment as *Flying to America* raises important questions, not just about perceptions of Barthelme's career as a short story writer but also perceptions of the status of short stories in general. Because Barthelme's achievement as a writer of fiction is primarily as an author of short stories, his example is particularly resonant, but the problem of wrenching the work out of meaningful context, of isolating individual stories without reference to other work, or to the enabling assumptions the author brings to the work, is almost always present in the way our literary culture regards the short story. Stories are published in an essentially haphazard fashion, depending entirely on what a particular publication (generally disconnected from all other such publications) find "suitable" to its own editorial tastes. By and large, the publication of short stories is considered a preliminary step some writers must take to become a credentialed author, usually prior to going on to write a novel (when real recognition will occur) or as something established writers do as a kind of respite from or supplement to writing novels. Thus writers whose most representative work is in short fiction have an inherently more difficult time getting their work judged appropriately. It would seem that even as important a postwar American writer as Donald Barthelme ultimately might not be read in the way—with the right kind of attention—his fiction deserves.

In his introduction to *Not-Knowing*, a previous collection of Barthelme's nonfiction (also edited by Kim Herzinger), John Barth refers to that book, as well as the "story-volume" that will become *Flying to America*, as a "booksworth of encores," suggesting these volumes are simply intermediary repackagings that will in turn lead readers "back and back again to the feast whereof these are end-courses: back to *Come Back, Dr Caligari*, to *Unspeakable Practices*, to *Snow White* and *City Life*, and the rest." If the collected versions of Barthelme's stories do indeed act merely as "end-courses" that for now keep his work in the literary public's awareness in the years following his death, yielding eventually back to the books both Barth and I think are the core of Barthelme's accomplishment, then the publication of *Flying to America* will have done little harm and arguably some good. But I fear, given the economics of American publishing, that the original books will not be readily available and that Barthelme will be known to future readers mostly through the assembled miscellanies—perhaps only by *Sixty Stories*. This will be a sad (and avoidable) injustice to a great writer.



Although Donald Barthelme is not finally a “difficult” writer—“strange” or “disorienting” might be words that would apply—his fiction does surely pose some challenges to a novice reader. Fabular without quite becoming fables, satirical without really being definable as satire, presenting a skewed and inside-out view of reality without exactly qualifying as surrealism, his stories are on the one hand disarmingly entertaining, but on the other the source of their appeal must seem obscure at first.

Their verbal humor is palpable enough, but since the context of situation, character, or plot often remains elusive, even deliberately ambiguous and distorted, it is finally not always clear why a given story should be so satisfying. If only for this reason, readers would be well-advised to begin reading Barthelme not through one of the omnibus anthologies but by beginning literally with his first book, *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*. This book contains fewer of Barthelme’s best-known, most anthologized stories (although “The Joker’s Greatest Triumph” and “A Shower of Gold” have to rank with his best), but taken together they introduce his signature techniques and effects and form a well-integrated, if off-kilter, whole. Indeed, almost all of Barthelme’s books formed such integrated contexts, and almost all of Barthelme’s stories provide the most resonant reading experience when considered in their original context.

Among the more sheerly amusing stories in *Caligari* has to be “Me and Miss Mandible,” but this story also warrants closer attention to those qualities that inform most of Barthelme’s fiction, however much his later stories become more intricate and even more removed from the conventions of character development and narrative logic, as well as most of the other elements traditionally associated with the short story as a form. “Me and Miss Mandible” is likely to attract most readers’ attention immediately, given its outrageous premise. A 35-year-old man has been sent back to grade school for “reeducation” due to his failure to adapt himself satisfactorily to adult life: “a ruined marriage, a ruined adjusting career, a grim interlude in the Army when I was almost not a person,” as the man, who narrates his own story, diary-form, eventually sums up his failures. The man begins the story by noting that “Miss Mandible wants to make love to me but she hesitates because I am officially a child; I am, according to the records, according to the gradebook on her desk, according to the card index in the principal’s office, eleven years old.”

If we suspect that Miss Mandible and her student will act on their adult attraction (“I know very well what to do with Miss Mandible if she ever makes up her mind,” the man tells us), our suspicions prove correct, and the story holds our attention in part through the rather basic device of encouraging us to wonder, “what will happen next?”. But the story also works through the incongruities implicit in the situation and in the characters’ response to it. The narrator seems aware of the peculiarity of his situation, although not enough to declare it to anyone. Miss Mandible and the children, however, treat the narrator as if he is indeed an eleven-year-old boy (Miss Mandible nevertheless obviously sensing something is wrong). The effect is humorous but also potentially disturbing—does Miss Mandible really know this student is a grown man, or is she having inappropriate feelings for a student?

Perhaps we could say that in this story Barthelme is working in a vein of American absurdism, but it is an absurdism in which the characters proceed as if the absurd was normal, or perhaps as if adherence to “normal” routines prevents the perception of a lurking absurdity. Although to an extent the absurdism of a story like “Me and Miss Mandible” might be analogous to that of, say, *Catch-22* (published at about the same time), it and Barthelme’s subsequent work is less reliant on the joke as a structural principle and is closer to a variety of what John Barth called “irrealism,” an approach that, in Barthelme’s case, simply disregards “realism,” as well as the notion there is some stable version of “reality” it is the fiction writer’s job to capture.

What most truly unifies “Me and Miss Mandible” is finally the dazed but intrepid voice of the narrator surreptitiously recording his experience. While the ironies and absurdities ongoing around him are obvious enough, he himself does not view what is happening to him from an ironic perspective. Such is also typically the case in Barthelme’s later short fiction: “voice” dominates, and although the stories are replete with what has been called postmodern irony (they are perhaps in some ways the very definition of postmodern irony), the narrative voice is not itself the source of such irony. (Everything the narrator of “The Balloon” says, for example, could and should be taken as utterly sincere, even if the situation, the “plot,” is manifestly unreal.) The resulting tension between voice and event helps produce the “postmodern” comedy of Barthelme’s fiction, and, among its other virtues, “Me and Miss Mandible” presents us with an initial instance of his characteristic manner.

**John Hawkes**

In a recent interview, Ben Marcus resisted being called an "experimental writer," asking rather impatiently, "Does anyone self-identify as experimental? Anyone?" Apparently Marcus is not much aware of his predecessor, John Hawkes, who once told an interviewer, "Of course I think of myself as an experimental writer," regretting only that "the term 'experimental' has been used so often by reviewers as a pejorative label intended to dismiss as eccentric or private or excessively difficult the work in question." Marcus seemed to be decrying the expectation that he should always be sufficiently experimental, but Hawkes never wavered in his determination to challenge entrenched habits and complacent practices in both the writing and reading of fiction. In the same interview, he asserted that "I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting, and theme, and having once abandoned these familiar ways of thinking about fiction, totality of vision or structure was really all that remained." Hawkes endeavored throughout his career as a writer to validate this assumption, producing a series of novels that do indeed discard the "familiar ways of thinking" and attempt to substitute for them a "totality of vision or structure."

By both articulating a commitment to "experimental fiction" and putting into practice a coherent conception of what such fiction should do, John Hawkes established himself as perhaps the most essential experimental writer in the postwar period, perhaps in all of American literature. Furthermore, his novels remain as thematically provocative and aesthetically fresh as they were when published — Hawkes's first novel, *The Cannibal*, was published in 1949, while his final novel, *Sweet William*, was published in 1993, five years before his death at the age of 72. Unfortunately, these novels have largely faded from literary-cultural consciousness, as has Hawkes himself, perhaps precisely because he did make such an effort to create radically varied works, each novel taking experimental fiction in a somewhat different direction (in some cases even critiquing the previous novel) so that no one work can really be identified as a "typical" Hawkes novel — all of them are typical. While any one of the novels provides its own rich and unique experience, to "get" Hawkes might require reading all of them, and perhaps that is more effort than most readers want to make.

However, those readers who are willing to devote some time to Hawkes's work, and to judge the novels on their own terms — since Hawkes himself devoted much effort to establishing those terms — would surely find it a rewarding, if at times also rather disquieting,

experience. And although appreciation of Hawkes's achievement can't finally rest in singling out his "best" or most "representative" novel, it is possible to focus first on a particularly dynamic period in Hawkes's career, a period in which Hawkes produced several novels that both illustrate his inveterate experimentation and stand on their own as satisfying works of literary art. The set of novels beginning with *The Lime Twig* (1961) and including *Second Skin* (1964), *The Blood Oranges* (1971), and *Travesty* (1976) could serve as the foundation of a revival of interest in Hawkes's fiction. Each of them succeeds in redeeming the ambitions of experimental fiction, while, together, they are as impressive a group of books as any written by a postwar writer.

Not only is *The Lime Twig* the first in this succession of novels, it is also probably the first more or less "accessible" novel Hawkes published. His previous books were surrealistic parables that, like all of Hawkes's fictions, feature a sharp, evocative prose emphasizing focused, vivid, visual imagery and employ an essentially poetic structure to embody the "totality of vision." These early novels, however, are especially unconcerned to resolve their images and events into a rationally linear narrative. The surrealism is startling, suggestive, and ultimately coherent to the vision presented, but readers who want this vision translated into aesthetically familiar terms will likely be (and were) disappointed by *Charivari*, *The Cannibal*, *The Goose on the Grave*, and *The Owl*. *The Beetle Leg* (1952), on the other hand, more directly anticipates *The Lime Twig* by using as its narrative scaffolding a parody of genre fiction — in this case, the Western — and by focusing on somewhat more "lifelike" characters and setting, however much both are distorted by the "vision" controlling the parody. *The Beetle Leg* teases us with the prospect of narrative transparency, with the possibility the novel's scenes and images will come together as part of a conventionally intelligible formal structure, but while it by no means lacks structure, it finally won't be revealed through passive reading, the expectation on the reader's part that "meaning" will be communicated by already established literary strategies.

*The Lime Twig* calls more on "established" strategies than *The Beetle Leg*, although it would still be a mistake to expect that the effect of those strategies is a reassuring return to a familiar aesthetic order. In this novel, Hawkes once again employs genre parody, this time of the crime thriller, but *The Lime Twig* reinforces few if any of the formal or thematic assumptions of the genre. Instead, it explodes those assumptions, turning them back on the reader. As Donald Greiner, who has perhaps offered the most insightful consideration of Hawkes's work in his book

*Comic Terror*, puts it, "All of the violence, sadism, and general sordidness which we associate with the world of detective fiction are used and mocked" even as Hawkes further "suggests that while outwardly repelled, we subconsciously long for the thrills of violence and possible death which we normally experience vicariously while reading a detective novel." *The Lime Twig* offers the reader enough of the recognizable elements of character and plot associated with crime fiction to sustain the possibility it might resolve itself into a conventional "good read," but along the way it presents an even more violent and disturbing account of the criminal milieu it portrays than the typical crime novel, and ultimately provokes a kind of disgust with the notion that stories of murder and brutality would be the basis of a "good" read in the first place.

This novel prominently portrays the interaction between innocence and corruption that will also animate the series of novels to follow. It focuses on an ordinary, bored English couple who become involved with gangsters planning to steal a prize-winning racehorse. By the end of the novel, two of the main characters have been murdered, including the wife, who is savagely beaten first. Hawkes does not merely incorporate these events as plot points advancing a crime narrative, however, but dwells on them, in effect slows down the narrative to render them more starkly. The beating of Margaret Banks is particularly discomfiting:

His arm went up quivering, over his head with the truncheon falling back, and came down hard and solid as a length of cold fat stripped from a pig, and the truncheon beat into her just above the knee; then into the flesh of her mid-thigh; then on her hips; and on the tops of her legs. And each blow quicker and harder than the last, until the strokes went wild and he was aiming randomly at abdomen and loins, the thin fat and the flesh that was deeper, each time letting the rubber lie where it landed then drawing the length of it across stomach or pit of stomach or hip before raising it to the air once more and swinging it down. It made a sound like a dead bird falling to empty field. Once he stopped to increase the volume of the radio, but returned to the bedside, shuffling, squinting down at her, his mouth a separate organ paralyzed in the lower part of his face, and paused deceptively and then made a rapid swing at her, a feint and then the loudest blow of all so swiftly that she could not gasp. When he finally stopped for good she was bleeding, but not from any wound she could see.

The aftermath of the beating is prolonged over several more pages, before Margaret is finally killed by her assailant, Thick, an underling who has been assigned the task in response to her husband Michael's dalliance with the top gangster's moll, Sybilline. It is a scene like this, no doubt, that gained Hawkes some notoriety as a writer focused on sex and violence, but Hawkes's preoccupation with violence is not merely sensational. As Leslie Fiedler put it in his introduction to *The Lime Twig*, Hawkes "finally avoids the treacherous lucidity of the ordinary shocker, the kind of clarity intended to assure a reader that the violence he relives destroys only certain characters in a book, not the fabric of the world he inhabits. In a culture where even terror has been so vulgarized by mass entertainers that we can scarcely believe in it any longer, we hunger to be persuaded that, after all, it really counts. For unless the horror we live is real, there is no point to our lives; and it is to writers like Hawkes that we turn from the wholesale slaughter on T.V. to be convinced of the reality of what we most fear."

The innocence that Michael and Margaret Banks must lose is an innocence of the consequences of their drive for a more exciting life, consequences toward which they are perhaps willfully innocent and the reality of which they are subsequently made horribly aware. As readers, we too are deprived of our innocence in reading *The Lime Twig*, our own willful innocence about the reality of violence and about the implications of our fascination with it as portrayed in fictionalized forms. The death of Margaret Banks shocks us into reflecting on the attraction of violence-driven narratives — if we don't simply turn away from it as intolerably threatening to that assurance that the violence we confront "destroys only certain characters in a book, not the fabric of the world" to which we must return.

*The Lime Twig* features two additional structural devices that mark this novel as a significant development in Hawkes's career and specifically in his ongoing effort to overturn the "familiar ways of thinking about fiction." The novel begins with an excerpt from the racing column of "Sydney Slyter," who similarly introduces each chapter with his observations on the racing scene. In some ways his presence in the novel acts as a kind of chorus commenting on the events, while in others he seems a stand-in of sorts for the author, adding a metafictional level to the narrative design (really the only time in Hawkes's fiction that such an effect is created explicitly — Hawkes could be called "postmodern" in his assumptions about form, especially in his use of parody and other essentially comic aesthetic strategies, however mixed with horror,

but he is not a metafictionist). But really the most noteworthy role Sydney Slyter plays is as a "voice" separate from the predominant third-person voice relating most of the rest of the narrative. However, immediately following this initial installment of "Sydney Slyter Says," another first-person account is presented to us, in this case the narrative of his life by William Hencher, a gangster ultimately responsible for tempting Michael and Margaret Banks into the horse theft scheme, who tells us how he found himself at the Banks's home, which happens to be the home Hencher once shared with his mother. Along with the interludes by Sydney Slyter, Hencher's introductory narrative represents Hawkes's first use of the first-person point of view, his first attempt to present character by employing the character's own narrative voice.

Trying out the possibilities of first-person narrative is a familiar enough practice among novelists. But in Hawkes's case this common literary experiment opened up avenues to further test the potential for point of view to produce the "totality of vision" he wanted his fiction to achieve. This focus on the radical implications of first-person narration brings immediately fruitful results in his next novel, *Second Skin*, a remarkably skillful and fully-executed first-person narrative that could be enjoyed simply as such. But the apparent accessibility of this novel is finally only a lure to readers, who, if following the narrative through both its stated and unstated contexts and connections, will find their perceptions of the narrator and his tale complicated in a way that only makes the novel more resonant as a literary creation. At the same time, these reversals of perception call into question the reader's efforts to arrive at a trustworthy interpretation of the story we are told — implicitly, all efforts to find stability of perspective in much of modern fiction.

*Second Skin*, *The Blood Oranges*, and *Travesty* together form perhaps the most thoroughgoing, radical experiment in unreliable narration in the history of fiction. (Another novel, *Death, Sleep, and the Traveler*, published in 1974 also participates in this collective experiment, but is a less compelling work.) On the one hand, Skipper, the middle-aged narrator of *Second Skin*, provides this novel, through the consistency of voice he brings, with a more obviously unified "vision" than in Hawkes's previous fiction. On the other, this surface unity is ultimately deceptive, since much of what we need to know about Skipper and the misfortune that assails him must be gathered by reading between and around the words he actually communicates. In an essay on *Second Skin*, Richard Yarborough contends that "the information



the reader receives has been formed by two artistic consciousnesses. There is Hawkes, who ultimately retains control over, and responsibility for, the character 'Skipper' and Skipper's story; however, the events as the reader sees them have also been shaped and colored by the mind of the narrating character. Skipper himself is very much the creative artist, ordering and manipulating his materials" (*Critical Essays on John Hawkes*). This is, to an extent, undeniable, but the problem with calling Skipper a "creative artist" is that what his creation — his account of himself and his travails — reveals is that his "creativity" amounts to a deliberate strategy of avoiding the truth. The creative artist remains John Hawkes, whose creation of Skipper-as-narrator is "shaped" and "colored" by what he implies and conceals as much as by what he has that narrator express directly in his otherwise admittedly forceful narration.

That forcefulness is evident in the novel's very first paragraph:

I will tell you in a few words who I am: lover of the hummingbird that darts to the flower beyond the rotted sill where my feet are propped; lover of bright needlepoint and the bright stitching fingers of humorless old ladies bent to their sweet and infamous designs; lover of parasols made from the same puffy stuff as a young girl's underdrawers; still lover of that small naval boat which somehow survived the distressing years of my life between her decks or in her pilothouse; and also lover of poor dear black Sonny, my mess boy, fellow victim, and confidant, and of my wife and child. But most of all, lover of my harmless and sanguine self.

Nothing Skipper tells us is exactly untrue, but his rhetorical exaltation and self-reinforcement mark the source of this exuberance in the profound sadness he must feel about the course his life has taken, especially in regard to the harrowing fates suffered by almost all of his loved ones: his father a suicide, his mother gone from his life very early and her whereabouts afterward mostly unknown, his alcoholic first wife also a suicide, his son-in-law, apparently a gay man, horribly beaten to death, and finally his daughter a suicide as well, an outcome Skipper tries, and fails, to prevent. The details of all of these horrific events remain more or less undisclosed in Skipper's narrative (his daughter's suicide completely so). At most we get glimpses, as in a brief scene describing Skipper's discovery of the son-in-law's bloodied corpse, as if Skipper simply cannot acknowledge the full force of the horror he has endured, only to have the return of the repressed burst into his account nevertheless.

Under these circumstances, it is hard to accept Skipper's subsequent claim he is a "man of courage," although he must feel that indeed his good cheer and his ebullient language are themselves evidence of his bravery, of his ability to not merely survive the traumas his life has inflicted but to dismiss those traumas in triumph. But the more persistent Skipper remains in his denials, the more those denials come to seem a form of willed innocence, a refusal to countenance human violence and depravity, even though his experience has surely demonstrated they are fundamental conditions of existence. This refusal influences Skipper's narrative of ongoing events as well, since he is equally reticent to report fully on what's happening to him, leaving us frequently puzzled about the turns the narrative takes.

The narrative itself is literally bifurcated, one strand concerning Skipper's stay on an island off the coast of Maine, the other, actually the true "present" of the novel, relating his life on a tropical island to which he has fled, but the majority of the narrative relates how his experience on the first island led to his retreat to the second, which is where we find him "lover of the hummingbird that darts to the flower beyond the rotted sill where my feet are propped." The two islands are juxtaposed both climatologically (the first cold and harsh, the second warm and languid) and in circumstance (on the first island more misfortune befalls Skipper, while on the second comfort reigns — or so he reports), but beyond this thematic pairing, the trajectory by which Skipper and his daughter Cassandra find their way to the first island and subsequently by which Skipper becomes a resident of the second is only fitfully traced. The events that take place on the coastal island are also recounted in an elusive sort of way, mostly because to do otherwise would require Skipper to reveal more about the circumstances that have made Cassandra suicidal. It would force him to reveal those of his own weaknesses and evasions that help explain his behavior but that also would make the behavior of other characters toward him more comprehensible as well. Skipper's treatment at the hands of the femme fatale "Miranda," for example, would seem less unmotivated if we had a firmer sense of Skipper's habitual actions toward and behavior around women.

But then, ultimately, Hawkes wants us to find the motivations of the characters obscure if not absent. As in *The Lime Twig*, the violence and cruelty exhibited is all the more disturbing because motives can't be discerned and thus don't explain the outbreak and intensity of violent behavior. Hawkes's vision is of a world punctuated by violence and cruelty, and Skipper's

unreliable, unforthcoming narrative is what gives this vision in *Second Skin* its disconcerting power. It also provides the novel Hawkes's signature merging of the appalling and the comic. Skipper's withholding of the context of events often makes his actions seem ludicrously funny. We might feel more empathy, for example, when he is enlisted in a belly-bumping contest (and actually wins it) if we could perceive more directly his discomfort with the situation, if we knew more fully why Skipper seems to invite the kind of disrespectful treatment he receives when, shortly after this event, he is pelted with snowballs in the parking lot. But instead we can only laugh at his haplessness in such episodes, a response Skipper appears unable to anticipate.

Yet the reader doesn't finally quite disrespect or dislike Skipper, however unreliable or even unfathomable he sometimes seems. Ultimately his very unreliability can prompt us to reevaluate our response to him as narrator and protagonist. It pushes us to understand his narrative as part sublimation, part wish fulfillment and as itself evidence of the serial horror he has experienced. But if *Second Skin* leaves us trying to sort through our judgment of Skipper and our conclusions about his story (should we be pleased he has apparently found happiness in the paradise of the Caribbean island, or is this just more denial of reality?), we don't have to resolve our ambivalence about the narrator/protagonist of Hawkes's next novel, *The Blood Oranges*. Ambivalence is likely to turn to outright disdain for, or even a kind of horror of our own at, the protagonist's actions—although it is possible the narrator's performance seems so adept some readers might take his ultimately deceptive account of himself and the effects of his behavior on others at face value.

This seems to be what happened to one contemporaneous reviewer of *The Blood Oranges*, Roger Sale, who made the now infamous accusation that "Hawkes has always seemed to me more an unadmitted voyeur of horror than its calm delineator, but in this new novel the pretense that what is being described is horrifying is dropped, and we have only the nightmare version of a narrator unable to see how awful he is." The narrator of *The Blood Oranges* is Cyril, who, along with his wife, Fiona, has apparently become a semi-permanent resident of the fictional country of "Illyria" (presumably located in southern Europe). Cyril and Fiona meet a vacationing couple, Hugh and Catherine, with whom they form a sexual quadrangle. Both Cyril and Fiona are sexual opportunists who apparently have an "open" marriage in which each is encouraged to take other partners. Cyril is especially aggressive in his celebration of this

arrangement, becoming a philosopher of erotic entanglement (or a "sex singer," as he fancies himself). Roger Sale seemed to believe that Hawkes is encouraging identification with Cyril, that because he simply allows Cyril to expound that philosophy without some clear signal we should question it, we are somehow disarmed of a critical response to Cyril and required to passively accept his discourse on love.

But this is surely a constricted view of the purposes of fiction and an ungenerous conclusion about both the author's intentions and the reader's role in the aesthetic exchange that characterizes the reading experience. *The Blood Oranges* challenges us to discard our habitual, unexamined deference to the perspectival integrity of the fiction we read, our assumption that the story can be accepted as presented. It provokes us to consider Cyril's chronicle of his and Fiona's sexual idyll as at best an exercise in self-deception that unwittingly draws in Hugh and Catherine and ends in tragedy, at worst a deliberately destructive indulgence in human exploitation that leads to an inevitable outcome: Catherine is lured into a sexual affair with Cyril she knows she will regret, while Hugh is led to fall in love with Fiona, which he resists vehemently enough that, together with his jealousy toward Cyril, it drives him to hang himself.

Hawkes to be sure does not make it easy for us to see through Cyril's self-serving rhetoric, so compelling can it often be. Here, Cyril describes one of the couple's interludes, in which they have brought another young native woman into their circle:

But she would not stop, was unquenchable, even while I raised my eyebrows and smiled and demurred and Fiona, lovely tense barelegged Fiona, opened the widemouthed sack and passed around the cherries. No, hands laden with that suggestive fruit and mouth stuffed with cherries, lips pursed to spit out the stones, on she talked — singling out each one of us for analysis, glancing to the rest of us for confirmation of her judgment, her appreciation, her right to associate herself with our mystery, our beauty. She overlooked Hugh's missing arm, was simply not interested in his missing arm, but concentrated instead on Hugh's little black pointed beard, reached up and stroked it with fingers juice-stained and knowing. She had tousled with the horns of the largest goat, she knew that the affinities between certain men and certain animals were to be respected. She touched her bare foot to Fiona's bare foot, giggled when Fiona giggled, then swung about and

exclaimed over Catherine's breasts and filled her wet hands with Catherine's hair. And then she turned to me.

Cyril's style is of a piece with Hawkes's prose style in general, as evidenced in his other novels. It is precise and controlled, even while individual sentences can be quite lengthy and incantatory. It is intensely visual, often accumulating images and detail, breaking into a figure only when to do so sharpens the image (the young woman's fingers are "knowing"). The atmosphere conjured in the passage above is one of comfort and contentment, and perhaps we are understandably not quick to judge someone who often evokes such scenes and who writes with such authority. But Cyril's narrative threatens to lull us into a kind of complicity with his own moral blindness if we don't remain wary of his charms.

It is as if Hawkes has found the most seamless way to integrate his suspicion of fiction as subject to overly "familiar" structures with his desire to create alternative structures that have aesthetic worth. In *The Blood Oranges*, he fashions a sleek, sinuous structure, one that is even attractive according to the norms of traditional fiction, only to bring that structure down, without necessarily appearing to do so. The pleasures that come from an appreciation of this observable structure, even the pleasures of Hawkes's own prose, are undermined for the sake of a more comprehensive pleasure, one that sees through all efforts to construct permanent aesthetic structures in works of fiction. The "totality of structure" in *The Blood Oranges* consists in part of its own negation, and what remains is the "vision" that the reader has helped to invoke.

For this reason, *The Blood Oranges* is Hawkes's most intricate and perhaps most important novel. It "abandons" the conventional novel by offering a simulated version of it, inviting the reader to assist in the experiment that reveals it as a façade. It provokes the reader to demand of fiction a more vibrant reading experience in general, and to recognize that all the conventions supposedly involved in writing "quality" fiction are also just façades that can easily be, in some cases might need to be, dismantled. In particular, *The Blood Oranges* exemplifies the subtle yet far-reaching possibilities in experiments with point of view, possibilities that, if anything, are taken even farther in Hawkes's 1976 novel, *Travesty*. If *The Blood Oranges* dramatizes the potential for a narrator's words to be deceiving, and for the "truth" to be outside of these words, *Travesty* raises the prospect that the narrator's words describe no "true" events at all,

that the story is entirely the narrator's fantasy, even perhaps a delusion, making the question of narrative reliability almost infinitely unanswerable.

*Travesty* is narrated by a man who calls himself "Papa," and his narrative is implicitly enclosed within quotation marks, indicating ostensibly that we are to take his account as a spoken one, a monologue delivered in the presence of his daughter, Chantal, and her lover, Henri. Chantal and Henri are compelled to listen: they are passengers in a car that Papa is driving, and he informs them that he intends to crash the car into a wall. In the meantime, they must attend to his rambling explanation of how they have arrived at this moment. Or at least this is the situation as "Papa" informs us. The structure of the novel (which is brief, only 128 pages in the original hardbound edition) allows for no interaction with Chantal and Henri — Papa speaks for them — and once Papa's words are marked as provisional by their status as recitation, we can't simply take for granted that he is speaking to anyone, or that he is really speaking at all (who recorded this monologue?). Of course, all fiction relates events that are not "real," but the "story" Papa tells is so radically contingent it could just as easily be taken as an artifact of his troubled mind, and thus not real even within the fictive context.

What troubles Papa seems to be not just Henri's affair with Chantal but also his previous affair with Papa's wife, which Papa claims to have known about and tolerated. However, given the low regard in which Papa apparently holds Henri, it has now become only more evidence of his own lack of control, control which he is in the process of reasserting. *Travesty* thus parallels *The Blood Oranges* in its focus on a love quadrangle and the consequences of erotic adventurism, although in this novel Papa's response to the perceived harm of this adventurism is wildly excessive. *The Blood Oranges* depicts one man's destructive indifference to the effects of his actions when they don't conform to his grandiose notions. *Travesty* depicts one man's deliberate attempt to destroy those (including himself) whose actions have provoked him into formulating some pretty grandiose notions to explain his own final act.

Papa tells Chantal and Henri that he regards this act as embodying a strategy of "design and debris." The seemingly random debris that will be left by the final collision with the wall will also manifest the "design" that he has brought to the conception and carrying-out of his plan. He reflects on the scene:

Well, you understand that . . . I would prefer that the remains of our crash go undiscovered, at least initially. I would prefer that these remains be left unknown to anyone and hence unexplored, untouched. In this case we have at the outset the shattering that occurs in utter darkness, then the first sunrise in which the chaos, the physical disarray, has not yet settled — bits of metal expanding, contracting, tufts of upholstery exposed to the air, an unsocketed dial impossibly squeaking in a clump of thorns — though this same baffling tangle of springs, jagged edges of steel, curves of aluminum, has already received its first coating of white frost. In the course of the first day the gasoline evaporates, the engine oil begins to fade into the earth, the broken lens of a far-flung headlight reflects the progress of the sun from a furrow in what was once a field of corn. The birds do not sing, clouds pass, the wreckage is warmed, the human remains are integral with the remains of rubber, glass, steel. A stone has lodged in the engine block, the process of rusting has begun. And then darkness, a cold wind, a shred of clothing fluttering where it is snagged on one of the doors which, quite unscathed, lies flat in the grass. And then daylight, changing temperature, a night of cold rain, the short-lived presence of a scavenging rodent. And despite all this chemistry of time, nothing has disturbed the essential integrity of our tableau of chaos, the point being that if design inevitably surrenders to debris, debris inevitably reveals its innate design.

Papa has clearly thought through the details of his projected act (almost like an artist envisioning the completed work). In fact, so completely has he laid out the "design" that emerges from the wreckage he imagines will result from that act we might indeed conclude the real design is Papa's discourse itself, bringing order to the debris littering his unsettled mind.

Numerous commentators have singled out the notion of "design and debris" as perhaps a name for the aesthetic philosophy at work not just in this novel, and not just in Hawkes's work as a whole, but in the collective practice of "postmodern" experiment in general: the existing conventions of fiction are smashed, but this smashing is itself purposeful and amid the debris a new design can be discerned. This is a compelling enough argument, but in the case of *Travesty*, *The Blood Oranges*, and *Second Skin* "design and debris" could be applied even more specifically to the effect of Hawkes's experiments in point of view. Hawkes so thoroughly hollows out the presumptive authority of the first-person narrative that this mode collapses of its



own weight. Yet the novels still reveal an "innate design," partly to be found in the artful way that collapse is effected, through which the dominating "vision" is expressed. And while the terms of that vision are distinctive to each individual work, it is the kind of dark vision one might expect from a writer who believed that fiction should compel readers to confront the realities of human experience, not through the formulas of "realism" but through a kind of experimental writing that doesn't allow us our own usual evasions.

### **Ishmael Reed**

Since *Juice!* is Ishmael Reed's first novel in almost twenty years, many of its potential readers, intrigued perhaps by its treatment of the O.J. Simpson murder trial, will probably be encountering Reed's work for the first time. Perhaps these readers are aware of him as an op-ed controversialist critical of media portrayals of African-Americans, particularly African-American men, skeptical of the achievement of African-American women writers such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, and a bete noire of white feminists and of the "liberal class" in general. That Reed was at one time controversial as the first, and arguably only, African-American "postmodern" writer of fiction, compared to Thomas Pynchon and Donald Barthelme in his expression of the postmodern worldview and his disruptions of form and style, is likely at best merely an historical echo, however. Doubtless there are fewer readers now who can readily judge a new work by Ishmael Reed in the context of this earlier work and of his still-evolving career as a whole.

Those who have followed Reed's career as a writer should immediately recognize the significant differences between *Juice!* and the novels that initially brought attention to his unconventional fiction, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967) and *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969). In consonance with the defiant, iconoclastic spirit of the period, these novels employ a kind of surrealist farce that travesties all that it encompasses, including fictional form itself. They exhibit what will become Reed's signature hallucinatory imagery—"Hairy Sam" ruling over his urban kingdom (also called Hairy Same) from his seat on a toilet in *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*—casual anachronism—although ostensibly a period Western, in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* characters listen to soul music and come across "old Buicks and skeletons of washing machines"—and outrageous names—Bukka Doopeyduk, Zozo Labrique, etc. They are entertaining in a deliberately zany kind of way, which on the one hand invests them with the

spirit of postmodern comedy other writers of the time were venturing as an alternative to the sober realism of the 1950s, but on the other hand draws attention to the underlying racial and cultural issues more vividly than such sober realism could any longer achieve.

Even in their displacements and distortions, these two early novels maintain narrative coherence by adhering to an essentially allegorical structure through which the reader clearly is to discern a critique of American racial attitudes (on the part of both white and black characters) as manifested in the present as well as in the historical American past (the two sometimes intersect, as they will also in the later *Flight to Canada* (1976)). *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* is a coming-of-age story of sorts, tracing its protagonist's recognition of the cultural and political corruption of his immediate environment and of the futility of his own attempts to accommodate himself to this society, given its ultimate hostility to his interests and its disregard for his well-being. While to a degree *Pallbearers* is a parody of the coming-of-age story (Bukka Doopeyduk doesn't survive to apply the lessons he's learned apart from the way he applies them by narrating his story from the grave), *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* is an out-and-out parody of the Western genre. Its protagonist, the Loop Garoo Kid, also confronts a white authority figure, the rancher Drag Gibson, although in this mock Western the rancher and the outlaw (John Wesley Hardin) are united in their racism and in their efforts to do in the Loop Garoo Kid, who has escaped a Drag-directed massacre and is hiding out in a cave in the hills.

From the cave, Loop begins practicing a form of necromancy related to voodoo, an activity or state of being Reed will later explicitly identify as "Neo-HooDooism." (In *Yellow Back Radio*, the Loop GarooKid is at one point called a "HooDoo cowboy.") The nature of this endeavor is suggested when we are told he performs "a tailor made micro-HooDoo mass to end 2000 years of bad news in a Bagi he had built in the corner of the cave." Although the spell is directed first of all at Drag Gibson and the town of Yellow Back Radio, the significance of Neo-HooDoo as a trope in Ishmael Reed's fiction is announced at the end of Loop's ceremony when he entreats "Black Hawk American Indian houngan of Hoo-Doo" to

open up some of these prissy orthodox minds so that they will no longer call Black People's American experience "corrupt" "perverse" and "decadent." Please show them that Booker T. and the MG's, Etta James, Johnny Ace and Bojangle tapdancing is just as

beautiful as anything that happened anywhere else in the world. Teach them that anywhere people go they have experience and that all experience is art.

While the anachronism involved here is hilarious, this incantation also rather succinctly expresses the philosophy of Neo-Hoodooism as it is further invoked in Reed's subsequent novels. "HooDoo" is the approach to both experience and art that, while most identified with the black culture of the Carribean, later imported to New Orleans, is, in Reed's version, attributable to all non-white and indigenous cultural groups in the Western hemisphere that have in one way or another resisted the wholesale incorporation of "Western" values and practices. The spirit of HooDoo thus animates the music of Booker T. and the MG's and the dance steps of Bojangles Robinson, and it affirms "Black People's American experience," which, although very "American" in the way it is shaped as a response to the conditions of these groups' encounter with Western values as embodied in the dominant culture, is finally not entirely assimilable to that culture. Ishmael Reed's fiction is both a celebration of the HooDoo aesthetic and itself an illustration of that aesthetic. Thus Reed writes novels, but, whether one finds them aesthetically satisfying or not, they are surely unlike novels written by anyone else in the way they explode expectations of what novels should be like.

*Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) and *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (1974) are Reed's most thorough treatments of Neo-Hoodooism, through the figure of Papa LaBas, portrayed as the most explicit example of what one critic has called a "HooDoo trickster." According to James Lindroth, the trickster "is driven by a mocking wit that subverts white authority and destroys white illusions of superiority while simultaneously promoting numerous value-laden symbols of black culture." ("Images of Subversion: Ishmael Reed and the HooDoo Trickster.") In *Mumbo Jumbo*, probably Reed's most intricate, resonant novel, the essence of HooDoo is evoked in "Jes Grew," a kind of spiritual distillation of HooDooism that first manifested itself in a 19th century New Orleans dance but that has its origins in ancient Egypt. Jes Grew has unmoored itself and inhabited the work of other artists and musicians. It encourages emotional release, as opposed to Western rationalism. In the words of Kathryn Hume, "those who practice the Jes Grew philosophy live for the present to enjoy every moment to the fullest, not simply to become something else in the distant future." ("Ishmael Reed and the Problematics of Control.")

Acceptance of this philosophy of course threatens the established order, which profits from the ideological emphasis on "future," and so a secret society of the elite is trying to wipe it out.

Papa LaBas has been enlisted to foil this secret society and to recover an ancient text describing the original dance. He succeeds in the first task but fails at the second. Jes Grew is too appealing to too many to be stamped out, but it is also too dynamic and spontaneous to be adequately encapsulated in a single text. It has "grown" in too many directions, draws on too many different mediating inspirations to be given an authoritative expression. This variety is reflected in the form and style of Reed's novels, especially these earliest novels, which are characterized by what one critic calls their "syncretism," paralleling the syncretism of Jes Grew/Neo-HooDooism: "In Reed's novels, it is not uncommon to find the formal blend of language mixed with the colloquial, as it is Reed's contention that such an occurrence in the narrative is more in keeping with the ways contemporary people influenced by popular culture really speak." (Reginald Martin, "Ishmael Reed's Syncretic Use of Language: Bathos as Popular Discourse.") The central narrative voice primarily acts as the facilitator of the "blend of language," allowing the different modes of language to come into contact. This voice otherwise is notable for its directness and its avoidance of "literary" dressing.

Reed's syncretism extends to the formal structures of his novels as well—although Reed uses variety and juxtaposition largely to undermine structure as associated with the conventional novel. Other texts and narrative forms are freely interpolated into the main narrative to create a collage-like effect, the phantasmagorical qualities of which are only intensified in works like *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* and *Flight to Canada* by the blurring of time and rapid shifting between characters and subplots. The latter novel may represent Reed's last really satisfying use of the syncretic method to create a broadly surreal comedy that keeps Reed's satire from becoming merely polemical. Although it focuses directly on the source of the American racial divide, slavery, in its story of an escaped slave's quest for freedom in Canada, as a parody of a slave narrative it doesn't exactly present an orthodox account of the Civil War period and the struggle for emancipation. While the portrayal of its white characters, including an antebellum slave master and Abraham Lincoln, is excoriating enough (in Reed's typical cartoonish mode), its black characters are certainly not portrayed one-dimensionally as victims in the way we would expect of a slave narrative. Both of the main characters incorporate elements of the Trickster

figure, while the novel ultimately discredits the notion of "freedom" associated with the flight "north." The white-dominated culture created in North America won't willingly extend its concept of freedom to non-whites, ultimately making Reed's Neo-HooDooism a permanent form of resistance.

In the novels Reed has published after *Flight to Canada*, the satirical range has become much more constricted, the targets more personal, the issues at stake arguably more idiosyncratic. *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986) takes aim at feminism, depicting it in particular as hostile to African-American men and initiating that phase of Reed's career in which he became a scourge of white feminists (although *Reckless Eyeballing* represents black feminists as also joining in on the abuse). *Japanese by Spring* (1993) is an academic satire that savages all the scholarly tendencies of the university as excuses for self-aggrandizement and individual agendas and depicts the academy as the redoubt of cowards and knaves. Aesthetically, this narrowing of satirical purpose has resulted in novels that are less adventurous, less interested in creating their own reality, more focused on evoking and critiquing existing reality. The humor is still there, but in this context of reduced satirical ambitions, Reed's mockery can seem heavy-handed, his exaggerated situations and behaviors merely contrivances. At the end of *Japanese by Spring*, when "Ishmael Reed" takes over as the main character, what could be if handled more nimbly an amusing metafictional conceit becomes instead just an opportunity for Ishmael Reed to editorialize and declaim.

Reed's chief editorial concern has become the problem of the besieged black man, and *Juice!* is wholly dedicated to elucidating that problem. The novel's protagonist is a cartoonist, Paul Blessings, who is fixated on O.J. Simpson, all of his trials, and the public reaction to Simpson as the embodiment of the image of the black man as killer, as "all black men rolled into one." Blessings keeps track of Simpson developments in minute detail, and his account moves back and forth from the original Simpson trial to the later civil trial to the incident in the Las Vegas hotel room that eventually led to his conviction for robbery, to other episodes relating to Simpson as well as all of the media response to and commentary about Simpson's actions. Reed uses the Simpson case to lambaste the American news media as the mouthpiece of cultural prejudice responsible for perpetuating stereotypes of the black man as Other. Since the criticisms made by Blessings (also known as "Bear") are the same criticisms—not just of media but also of

feminists, academics, homosexual activists, politically correct liberals, as well as racist conservatives—made by Reed in his previous novels and in numerous of his public pronouncements, it is surpassingly obvious that Bear is a mouthpiece for Ishmael Reed, making the novel perhaps the most transparently polemical one Reed has written. It is as if the O.J. Simpson case provided Reed a fortuitously convenient instance that brings together all of his critical targets and allows him to take aim with an especially obsessive focus.

Paul Blessings' own obsession with Simpson is nothing if not comprehensive, and his insistence not just that racial fears contributed to the national fascination with Simpson's murder trial but that he was actually innocent of the charges against him initially give the novel a certain contrarian appeal. In addition, Blessings' surveys of the facts of the case and his media critique, while they occupy a large portion of the narrative, are not the only features of his story. Blessings is himself a media figure of modest renown, his cartoons featured on a public television station, in the transformation of which from an independent hippie station to a kind of low-rent Fox News he becomes involved. With O.J.'s downfall as a cautionary tale illustrating the dangers awaiting a black man who doesn't stick to the role assigned him, Blessings mutes the social commentary of his cartoons and plays along with the station manager and his reactionary agenda, even though that agenda includes using someone like Blessings to provide multicultural cover. Blessings even wins a prestigious cartoonist society prize for a cartoon perceived to be anti-O.J.

Reed thus implicates his protagonist in the very cultural practices the novel condemns, and in the process complicates our response to Paul Blessings as character and narrator enough to give *Juice!* some aesthetic credibility as a work of fiction rather than merely an extended screed masquerading as a novel. To an extent Reed holds his narrator up to satirical examination as well, if only to suggest how difficult it is to avoid reinscribing corrupt behavior while still trying to negotiate one's way in a corrupt system. But the satirical veneer is nevertheless very thin, and few readers will think that Blessings' demonstrated flaws as a human being are what invalidate his views of the O.J. Simpson case or gainsay his analysis of American society's attitude toward black men. Some, perhaps many, readers will find these views unconvincing and the analysis tendentious, but responding to the novel's argument as an argument is ultimately unavoidable given that so little effort is made to keeping that argument implicit, as is generally

done in the best satire, while much is devoted to fleshing out the argument in exhaustive and explicit detail.

It seems likely that Reed considers his audience to be mostly hostile to the argument. While it is possible that readers sympathetic to O.J. Simpson would enjoy Paul Blessings' contrarian account, the novel is most provocative as a challenge to readers who believe Simpson was guilty of double murder and subsequently received just, if insufficient, punishment. However, it doesn't seem likely that either set of readers would find the elaborate exposition of this account other than tedious after a while, although perhaps all readers might be persuaded to take seriously the notion that more than concern for O.J. Simpson's victims were involved in the media coverage and commentary surrounding the "trial of the century." But at this point one might well ask: Why not offer an actual media or social critique, an essay or book on the public response to the Simpson trial and its aftermath, not a novel narrated by a substitute media critic in the guise of a fictional character? Surely Reed's opinions on this subject are not so outrageous they couldn't be sustained through a straightforward nonfiction analysis or be accepted as seriously intended. Indeed, few people will read *Juice!* and not understand that the opinions expressed by Paul Blessings are consistent with the author's.

Certainly Ishmael Reed has always been a writer whose novels provide social and cultural commentary, often explicit rather than subtle. But some of those novels also provide complexity of form, style, and theme, as well as a more raucous kind of humor, missing from *Juice!*. Reed's best work qualifies as satire, but the satire of *Juice!*, as well as *Japanese by Spring* before it, has become disappointingly laborious, degenerating into a kind of ridicule without humor. Further, the narrowness of focus in both *Japanese by Spring* and *Juice!* means that future readers will probably find the subjects dated—in fact, they may already be dated—and the details included impenetrable. While I think readers will still come to *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, and *Mumbo Jumbo*, the arc of Reed's career nonetheless can be taken as illustration of what can happen to a writer who uses fiction as a medium for "saying something." However much what Reed wants to say leads in his best work to imaginative creations in which the "message" is just part of the interest we might as readers take in them, in *Juice!* the message now seems about the only thing of interest to the author.

**Thomas Pynchon**



That Thomas Pynchon would come to draw on the resources of the detective novel is not really surprising. As many reviewers of *Inherent Vice* correctly pointed out, Pynchon's fiction has long incorporated the mystery plot as its essential narrative device, with characters such as Herbert Stencil, Oedipa Maas, and Tyrone Slothrop taking on the role of "detective." What Will Blythe says of Doc Sportello, private eye protagonist of *Inherent Vice*, is true of these other characters as well: "Doc attempts to solve a mystery that may or may not be solvable, so dense are the thickets of information through which he must hack, so opaque the motives of nearly everyone he comes across" ("Conspiracy in a Different Key").

It might be said that this portrayal of Doc Sportello as a kind of perplexed if intrepid jungle explorer makes *Inherent Vice* a pastiche of the detective novel, or even a parody, an exercise in genre revisionism that takes the epistemological core of the detective narrative—the search for knowledge—and uses it to mock the pretensions of such narratives to finally arrive at "truth" and to satirize the very notion that a "search for knowledge" in modern America is even possible. There is some accuracy in such an interpretation, of course, but Pynchon's novel surely is not simply a burlesque of the detective novel and nothing more. The touchstone for *Inherent Vice* is pretty clearly the fiction of Raymond Chandler in novels such as *The Big Sleep* and *Farewell, My Lovely*, and it could equally be said that Chandler's own work evinces a good deal of epistemological skepticism itself, as Philip Marlowe is frequently portrayed attempting to hack his way through "thickets" of misdirection. Marlowe often seems just as confused by the opaque motives of those he encounters as Doc Sportello.

*Inherent Vice* is at least as much a homage to the radicalism of writers like Chandler and Ross McDonald, a testament to the adaptability of the detective novel to various settings, styles, and concerns, especially in contexts in which the very possibility of uncovering "truth" is or ought to be a lingering question. Doc Sportello may seem a sorry excuse for a private eye—a shambolic, laid-back stoner—but he's also dogged and perceptive, and he feels a sense of duty toward those he is enlisted to help. If he is led through some mazes that remain mazy, and if the full import of what he discovers is not altogether assimilated, this is only par for the course in Pynchon's fiction, and having gone through the process of seeking the truth has been more enlightening than not, both for Doc and for the reader. Through Doc's peregrinations around Los Angeles, he and we become more fully aware of the historical and cultural forces at work that

will transform the hippie haven of Gordita Beach into just a memory of personal and countercultural resistance to the encroaching power of new technologies and an unleashed capitalism that will shut down the brief emergence of a more humane way of life--the way of life associated with "the sixties"--before it could become more than a fragile utopian moment.

What ultimately makes *Inherent Vice* compelling is that in accepting the narrative protocols of the detective novel—which includes the obligatory visit of the femme fatale who initiates the action, an encounter with goons that leaves Doc unconscious, episodes of verbal sparring between Doc and a cop, etc.—Pynchon also manages to produce a novel that is recognizably Pynchonian. The detective novel is used to his purposes and is thus in this instance transformed into a comic picaresque in which, as with most picaresque narratives, characters are thinly developed beyond a few essential features, their adventures themselves of more importance than what these adventures might add to our sense of the characters as "rounded" individuals. (Thus the frequent enough criticism that Pynchon's characters are "cartoonish" is completely misconceived.) Thomas Jones writes that

the Anglophone novelist whom Pynchon most closely resembles – with his delight in silly names, scatological jokes, wild digressions and impromptu outbursts of song lyrics, his disregard for distinctions between fact and fiction, his scientific background, his belief in the randomness of the world and fascination with the patterns that appear in the chaos – is Tobias Smollett.

In such novels as *The Adventures of Roderick Random*, *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle*, and *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*—even the names of the protagonists are appropriately Pynchonesque—Smollett helped establish the picaresque as a narrative strategy in the early English novel, but despite Smollett's influence on, for example, Charles Dickens, both he and the kind of picaresque narrative emphasizing "randomness" and digression was superseded by the post-Flaubert novel of realism and the "well-made story." Writers like Pynchon and John Barth partially revived the picaresque strategy in the 1960s, and surely both *V* and *Gravity's Rainbow* can usefully be read as picaresque accounts of randomness and incipient chaos.

What really unites Pynchon and Smollett is an essentially comic vision of the world, a world full of mishaps, bad luck, and evil portents, that presents itself not as an orderly arrangement of plot points but as an entirely contingent series of events—one thing leads to

another. And it is a comic vision that at its best is also greatly entertaining. Pynchon's best work is above all funny, and the most unfortunate consequence of the scholarly attention Pynchon's fiction has gathered over the years is that too much emphasis has been put on "paranoia" and "entropy" and other weighty matters, obscuring the fundamental fact that Pynchon is in the line of great American literary comedians. His work is "postmodern" to the extent it is comic in a particularly extreme way, not because it invokes the second law of thermodynamics or posits the existence of global conspiracies. When his fiction becomes bloated and leaden, as I would argue it does in both *Mason & Dixon* and *Against the Day*, it is because he has lost this comic facility, or is intentionally disregarding it.

In this way *Inherent Vice* marks a return to the approach he seemingly abandoned after *Vineland*. It takes us on a comic/picaresque journey around southern California at the turn of the seventies, playing much of what it records for laughs even as it exposes us to acts of murder, brutal violence, drug trafficking, sadism, and economic rapacity—all the "inherent vice" to which humanity inevitably succumbs. The detective novel conventions give the novel a structural spine that helps to focus the novel's comedic energies while also allowing Pynchon the flexibility of form that characterizes his best work. Some might say the kind of pothead humor that arises from his choice of milieu and protagonist sometimes descends to the level of Cheech and Chong, but this is arguably a necessary side effect of the aesthetic strategy Pynchon employs: the world in which Doc Sportello roams is comic precisely because of the perspective the dope-smoking detective provides.

If finally *Inherent Vice* is somewhat less satisfying than Pynchon's other two California novels, *Vineland* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, not to mention *V* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, I would identify its most serious flaw as a kind of sentimentality about the vanished hippie world it evokes. It's a sentimentality only reinforced by the novel's conclusion—Doc driving in the inland fog, clearly enough symbolic of the coming cultural fog of the 1970s—although the novel's strongly sympathetic portrayal of the hippie scene has by then long since itself settled in. Perhaps it has been lurking in Pynchon's work all along, but the wistful tone of innocence lost pervades this novel, perhaps a little too obviously. The characters in *Inherent Vice*, including Doc Sportello, are subject to a mild degree of comic mockery, but not enough to deprive them of their status as heroes of naivete.

Surely if 9/11 conspiracy theories had not already arisen, like the dust plumes from the Twin Towers, Pynchon would have invented some. As it is, those existing theories seem to have been propounded by readers of *The Crying of Lot 49* or *V*, novels whose plots imply endlessly ramifying connections, always complex, if ultimately mystifying, alternatives to simpler explanations, and leave the impression that if no final explanation is really satisfying, that's because the actions to be explained are so puzzling, the conspiracies so potentially vast. Certainly the world evoked by 9/11 conspiracy theories seems very much a Pynchonian kind of world.

The same thing could be said about the Internet. With its origins in the U.S. Defense department, the "world-wide-web" is in some ways a predictable phenomenon emerging from the corporate-military structure whose power and potential reach are depicted in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Given the pervasive "connectivity" made possible by the Internet, the mischief such connectivity enables, and the existence of the "Deep Web," lurking beyond the "surface" web accessible to ordinary searches, it would probably seem odd if Pynchon never did address the development of the web as an all-encompassing presence in American life. Although much of Pynchon's fiction employs a historical setting, works such as *Crying of Lot 49*, *Vineland*, and parts of *V* examine the present circumstances (at the time) of American society. Even the historical novels are not really concerned with history per se but with the ongoing continuities between past and present, the portents in the past of what in the present has become only more ominous.

Thus *Bleeding Edge* comes to us so instantly recognizable as a work by Thomas Pynchon that after we have read even the jacket copy (or any of the publicity materials), we might feel we have read this novel already. It does indeed tell a story set in New York City immediately prior to the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, and the story does traverse some of the darker regions of the Internet, which in 2001 was a more mysterious, if less enormous, place than it is today. And, as we likely suspect, the attack itself is surrounded by its share of possible shadowy participants, making it even more nefarious and frightening than the official version would have it. The Internet, particularly in the environs of the Deep Web, is a zone of unreality whose best

and worst qualities are that it reinforces the unreality of the “real” world. The cyber reality in which Pynchon’s protagonist, Maxine Tarnow (a “fraud investigator”), finds herself enmeshed focuses her attention on the sheer lunacy of the reality we Americans have created for ourselves at the same time it promises to intensify that lunacy.

Maxine handles the paranoia-inducing discoveries she makes about the lengthening tentacles of oligarchical control and an underworld of secretive cyberspace with rather more equanimity than do most of Pynchon’s previous protagonists, who of course inhabit similarly paranoia-soaked worlds. As with many of these characters, following Maxine through such a world reveals why paranoia is a justified response to modern experience, and through her Pynchon works to give shape to the paranoid outlook. Considering that she is also struggling with professional setbacks (her Certified Fraud Examiner license has been revoked and she is now working freelance) and family problems (she is separated from her husband and raising two children on her own), Maxine steadfastly maintains her purpose in investigating the affairs of Gabriel Ice, a financial wheeler-dealer whose activities lead Maxine to websites involved in abetting his fraudulent financial transactions but that also lead her to other denizens of the Web, some clearly sinister in their intentions, others more benign, technogeeks motivated by the sort of idealism that seemed to accompany the early days of the Internet. In part, *Bleeding Edge* shows how that idealism was inevitably going to be submerged by the overwhelming force of American profit-making, destined to be the handmaiden of oligarchs like Gabriel Ice. The initial dot com boom and bust, the immediate precursor to the events in *Bleeding Edge*, was just the presage to the complete commodification of the Web.

Not only is Maxine Tarnow impressively reliable as our guide through this cyber underworld, as well as pre- and post-9/11 New York, she is probably the most compelling, fully-developed female character in all of Pynchon’s fiction. She plays the same role as P.I. Doc Sportello in *Inherent Vice*—both novels could be seen as variations on the detective novel—and she is at least as tenacious as he is, her efforts as effectual in “getting to the bottom” of the situation she confronts—although finally in neither novel is there really a “bottom” to the possible depths of contingency and corruption they otherwise do make visible. Certainly both of these characters are more effectual than Pynchon’s schlemiel characters such as Benny Profane and Tyrone Slothrop, although in some ways it is the latter two’s slacker-like qualities that make

them as appealing as they are. Maxine Tarnow has her undignified moments (especially where sex is concerned), treated with the usual Pynchonian slapstick comedy, but finally she seems perhaps the most self-possessed adult character Pynchon has created.

Still, it may be Maxine's strengths as a character that make the familiarity of *Bleeding Edge*'s narrative less a sign of the continuity in Pynchon's work than of lagging inspiration, a willingness to go with the expected plot devices. If Maxine is a more rounded character than we have come to expect from a Thomas Pynchon novel (to say that for the most part he has relied on caricature and other forms of comic flattening is not a criticism), the story for which she provides the focus seems curiously less interesting than she is. Pynchon has given us this different kind of character only to involve her in the same kind of paranoia narrative experienced by Oedipa Maas or Tyrone Slothrop, but since Maxine has a different relationship to this narrative, the effect is to make it almost perfunctory, simply the sort of thing a Pynchon character must undergo.

Oedipa and Slothrop are subjected to the forces prompting the paranoid response in a much more threatening way (especially Slothrop, who at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow* almost literally falls apart), threatening both physically and psychologically. Both are profoundly affected by what they discover and by the events unfolding around them. It could be said their whole way of being in the world is altered, as is, potentially, the reader's as well, as a result of witnessing these events (or at least their impact on the characters). Maxine is certainly affected by what she discovers, but she seems to find her experiences less personally unsettling, less likely to force an existential crisis, however extreme they may be. Often Maxine acts more as an observer of the spooky world she encounters than as someone irredeemably spooked by it. The ultimate effect is that, on the one hand, Maxine consistently proves a steady navigator through this world, but, on the other, her stability of perception also makes the novel something closer to straight satire or even a kind of journalistic expose than one would expect from the author of *Gravity's Rainbow*.

475 pages worth of cultural satire can come to seem a bit excessive, although not in the sense that the novel goes too far but in the sense that it attempts too little beyond drawing our attention to cultural folly. Portraying the deeper dangers of such folly while also suggesting it is quite likely to persist has always given Pynchon's more satirical impulses an extra edge, taking his fiction beyond conventional satire into what in the 1960s was called "black humor" but in

Pynchon's case encompassed a more distinctive kind of comic vision that combined low-brow, farcical humor and existential dread. In *Bleeding Edge* the danger seems muted because it doesn't fully extend to Maxine herself, who is too intrepid to succumb to terminal angst. The humor is still here, but it is more diffuse and sporadic, manifested in wiseacre dialogue and the narrator's sarcastic asides (usually reflecting Maxine's sarcastic attitude) rather than through such extended set pieces as, for example, the "Byron the Bulb" episode in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

*Bleeding Edge* is in general a much more dialogue-dependent novel than *Gravity's Rainbow* or *V*. Indeed, much of the novel's "action" is related not through its direct depiction but by reports conveyed through the dialogue, to the point that this can seem less a novel concerning the events to which it mostly alludes (including the 9/11 attacks) than talk about these events. Some of the talk is mordant and witty in the usual Pynchon fashion, but much of it is surprisingly routine, an impression left only more insistently by the novel's formal arrangement as essentially a series of scenes organized around verbal exchanges between the characters. Those of us who admire the stylistic audacity and rhetorical power of Pynchon's prose in previous novels get very little of either in *Bleeding Edge*.

*Bleeding Edge* is a book worth reading simply because it's by Thomas Pynchon, although anyone contemplating it as an introduction to Pynchon's work should instead go immediately to *V* or *Gravity's Rainbow* or even *The Crying of Lot 49*, which, although now apparently somewhat disdained by Pynchon, has long served as a more accessibly condensed example of Pynchon's literary strategies and worldview. Ultimately, however, *Bleeding Edge* is not so much "minor" Pynchon as it is a kind of synthetic replica of a Thomas Pynchon novel, all the more disappointing because it was written by Pynchon himself.

### **Don De Lillo**

Among the writers commonly labeled postmodern, the two most immediately mentioned are usually Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo. Since the term was first coined to describe a turn away from the reemergent realism of the post-WWII years, it has been defined and redefined to the point that it has lost any coherent meaning. That it now so reflexively brings to mind the work of these two writers is a telling indication that it has come predominantly to refer to recurrent themes, a "worldview" more than formal innovation. To write postmodern fiction is to



find the form that adequately reflects a postmodern reality, not to extend form beyond its purely functional assignment to reflect reality in the first place.

If the relevant touchstone is the work of John O'Hara or J.D. Salinger, then of course the narratives of Pynchon and DeLillo are far from orthodox or familiar. While by no means does either writer abandon storytelling—their stories in fact can be very dramatic, the action at times extreme—the narrative structure in their novels highlights discontinuity and indeterminacy, creating plots that wobble and loop, ultimately suspending rather than resolving themselves. Readers seeking a conventionally immersive “good read” generally do not find the novels of Pynchon and DeLillo suitable candidates, although the prevailing comic tone and the extremity of situation and character in them can certainly be provocative and entertaining. These qualities, however, do not substantially distinguish the work of Pynchon and DeLillo from black humor, absurdism, or many other recognizable practices of modernism still influencing adventurous writers after World War II. The formal features of their fiction would not alone prompt us to put it in a separate category designated “postmodern.”

When we do discuss Pynchon and DeLillo as postmodernists, then, we are talking about a certain sensibility that is attuned to a world that is itself postmodern, with the characteristics attributed to it by such theorists as Fredric Jameson and J.F. Lyotard—a world without universal or metaphysical grounding, vulnerable to randomness and drift, dominated by forms of technology that both accelerate and mark the loss of presumed coherence. Pynchon and DeLillo depict this world with particular force and insight, paradoxically making their novels, ostensibly challenges to ordinary realism, works of especially compelling realism (metaphysical realism, perhaps), able to represent a suddenly fractious reality more faithfully than existing modes of social realism. If modernist “stream of consciousness” was not really a subversion of realism but an intensification of it, its extension to a deeper level of human perception, so too are the unconventional narrative strategies of *Gravity's Rainbow*, *White Noise*, or *Underworld* not really an abandonment of realism but its reconfiguration.

Such a description applies to DeLillo's work even more directly than Pynchon's, as few if any of DeLillo's novels really depart much from the protocols of realism (except perhaps *Ratner's Star*, which remains his most Pynchonesque novel). Indeed, after the shifts in time and space, the seemingly random occurrences, and trademark set-pieces are accounted for as devices

meant to amplify, not undermine, the evocative power of narrative, it could be argued that the fundamental aesthetic assumptions of DeLillo's fiction are realist, albeit a realism thoroughly informed by the strategies of formal disruption made available to the novelist by modernism. If it seemed to many observers that the events of 9/11 were like excerpts from a DeLillo novel, this is because in his novels he had so accurately portrayed the forces at loose in the world that made something like the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, as well as their immediate aftermath, seem almost inevitable. DeLillo's new novel, *Zero K*, about cryonic preservation, could be described as a straightforwardly realist novel, indeed the most linear exercise in realism he has yet produced. The subject of this novel may seem exotic and excessive in its portrayal of unrestrained technology, but once we accept that the sort of death-defying technology the novel invokes has actually been developed (though perhaps not as extravagantly), its narrative is not at all implausible. Many of us might find the behavior depicted all too recognizable.

Perhaps we should say that DeLillo has a postmodern vision, an especially acute perspective on the particular ways the late 20th century (and now early 21st) has simultaneously fostered the dissociation of belief from a central, commonly available source of value and meaning, while also generating counter-movements, some laudable, some desperate, some purely destructive, that attempt to assert a substitute for the lost center. DeLillo's fiction is a chronicle of such attempts. His first four novels provide a template for the portrayal of this dynamic, introducing the range of responses to the postmodern condition to which DeLillo consistently returns throughout his work. In *Americana* (1971) and *Great Jones Street* (1973), the effects of mass media and consumerism are the focus of attention, themes that become even more pronounced in later novels such as *White Noise* (1985), *Mao II* (1991), *Underworld* (1997), and *Cosmopolis* (2003). *End Zone* (1972) announces the interest in language that on one level preoccupies much of De Lillo's fiction, as does the more general consideration of the dominion of science and technology depicted most directly in *Ratner's Star* (1976).

The effects of media and the triumph of consumerism are of course in DeLillo's fiction baneful and corrupting, the product of a misbegotten response to the postmodern loss of moral and epistemological stability whereby representations of reality replace reality and acquisition for its own sake replaces all other values. The cultural ravages of these phenomena are closely linked to the deep dysfunction of the current political order, the dark recesses of which De Lillo

began to explore in his late 70's novels, *Players* (1977) and *Running Dog* (1978). Here conspiracies and random violence have more adherents than anything resembling democracy.

If DeLillo's portrayal of an increasingly globalized capitalist culture that has lost its bearings but attempts to exploit that loss for profit seems to many readers a startlingly familiar rendering of the world they live in, it also lends DeLillo's fiction some of the characteristics of social satire. While only the first four novels could really be called "humorous" in any conventional sense, the later novels certainly have a critical edge that can be regarded as satirical, even though the implicit absurdity of speech and action they register is related in a deadpan and affectless tone that has become DeLillo's signature mode of expression. This is the quality of DeLillo's fiction that most creates the impression his work is postmodern, as the cool and detached narration—often via DeLillo's trenchant, honed dialogue—only intensifies the disturbing ambience that permeates DeLillo's created worlds. But the effect of this device is less the impression of a wholly fabricated world than of one just a few degrees of knowing transfiguration away from the world we actually inhabit.

DeLillo's postmodern vision thus seeks its own kind of representational coherence, but such coherence is challenged by the element in DeLillo's fiction that has the best claim to be called postmodern, the underlying examination and critique of the signifying function of language first featured prominently in *End Zone* but identifiable, sometimes more, sometimes less explicitly, in most of DeLillo's subsequent novels as well. *End Zone* uses the language of football and warfare (the two being closely associated throughout the novel) in its portrayal of its football-playing protagonist and his philosophically-informed meditations on words and their meaning. ("It was a sinister thing to discover at such an age, that words can escape their meaning," Gary Harkness muses at one point. "A strange beauty that sign began to express.") *The Names* makes DeLillo's interest in the power of language to both shape and misshape perception most directly the subject of the novel, and is probably his most sustained treatment of the role language plays in creating the conditions that make the postmodern world possible.

*The Names* alerts us to its dominant theme in its title, which refers to a "language cult" that ritually murders people whose initials correspond to those of the places where they are killed. What seems random to the outside world is for the cult the enforcement of order and pattern, the kind of order produced by words and the meaning they provide. However, the

language cult merely exaggerates (to a deadly degree) our habitual orientation to the language we use, which we assume is transparent in its meaning and direct in its authority. DeLillo's fiction consistently questions these assumptions, never more directly than in *The Names*, and many of the oblique, discontinuous stylistic features of his novels can be explained as a prolonged response to the critique of language it also works to disclose, offering an alternative practice that acknowledges the instability and uncertainties of human language. The need to cultivate a different, less transcendental relationship with words and their use is explicitly depicted in *The Names*, whose protagonist comes to appreciate the "cadences" of language, and can accept "the rise and fall of the ironic voice."

This acquiescence to the inconclusive nature of language is echoed in the formal and narrative structures of the novels as well. Most of them feature characters engaged in a search for meaning or enlightenment, only to have the search frustrated, become hopelessly convoluted. Such a narrative scheme is most visible in *Libra* (1988), in which the invented character of Nicholas Branch seeks to assemble a CIA secret history of the Kennedy assassination, but can only conclude that the "real" story will never be known, so thoroughly confused, contradictory, and circuitous is all the "evidence" he encounters (a judgment that doesn't so much gainsay the parallel narratives relating the story of Lee Harvey Oswald and the plot to assassinate the President as it makes all three narrative strands essentially indeterminate, impossible to reconcile). A novel like *Libra* explodes the human propensity to seek order and pattern by invoking a patterning that is out of control, susceptible to an endless loop of explication and interpretation. It also works to reveal the kind of order and pattern fiction itself offers, which also prompts indefinite explication and interpretation rather than providing fixed meaning. What is most meaningful in a work of fiction is found in the process of reading, not in the resolution of conflicts or mysteries.

The gravest threat to our presumption of meaning and coherence is surely the prospect of our own death. If death is final, oblivion looms, annihilating any meaning we try to force on existence and making belief in immanent order or beauty pointless. Fear of death pervades DeLillo's fiction, but—at least before *Zero K*—probably most directly in *White Noise*, whose main characters are preoccupied with death (including Murray Siskind, who is no doubt the preeminent philosopher of death in DeLillo's fiction, especially in his notorious lecture on the

supermarket as America's way of deflecting consciousness of death) and the plot of which incorporates the literally free-floating allegorical specter of death, the "airborne toxic event" that sends the novel's protagonist on his own journey of reckoning with death's reality. For all of the ways the postmodern condition as depicted in DeLillo's fiction is characterized by the attempt to fill a void, the ultimate void left by human mortality looms even more ominously, resistant to our efforts to lower its horizon.

*Zero K* illustrates how determined those efforts can be. Even more concentrated in its focus on a culture haunted by death, this novel continues the trend among DeLillo's novels after *Underworld*, his last "big" book and the one that secured his reputation as a major writer, toward a smaller canvas and a more formally condensed scale. Unlike *The Body Artist* or *Cosmopolis*, however, which in using the novella form produced enigmatic narratives that exploited the reduced scope to evoke dreamlike and more poetically charged effects, *Zero K* does little either formally or stylistically to transform its narrative beyond its relatively familiar and rather straightforward premise. On the one hand, it is not surprising that DeLillo would write a novel about obsession with death and the extremes to which human beings might go to defeat it; on the other hand, it is disappointing that the novel he wrote seems predictably the sort of thing Don DeLillo might write in addressing these themes.

The story the novel tells is certainly disturbing, but most of what is provocative about it is implicit in a brief outline of its characters and plot: A young man is invited by his long estranged father to witness the final stages of the process by which his fatally ill stepmother will be frozen in a cryogenics facility, to be revived at a time when, according to the owners of the facility, she will not only be cured of her illness but completely revitalized, brought to life in an "advanced" form. The father, nearly inconsolable at the loss of his wife but a believer in the promise of the reanimating technology, threatens to have himself frozen while still perfectly healthy, but assures his son he will not go through with it. Eventually the son finds himself back at the facility as his father does indeed choose to join his wife in the "cryostorage" section of *Zero K*. The novel chronicles what is essentially an assisted suicide, although in this case it is assisted not by a Dr. Kevorkian but by technological development itself, capitalism attempting to usurp the remaining role still mostly reserved to God—determining when the end of life should come. Ross Lockhart, a successful businessman and a millionaire several times over, genuinely longs to be reunited

with his wife, but he helped to establish Zero K (along with its accompanying philosophy of resurrection, the “Convergence”) because he shares its self-actualizing ethos, which his great wealth allows him to indulge. Clearly the Convergence appeals to his sense of self-importance: death is an especially unwelcome intrusion to someone of such wealth and status, a belief no doubt shared by most of the other “customers” now sealed in their pods awaiting their own rebirth and triumph over death. The fear of death exhibited by people like Ross Lockhart and his wife is magnified by, and closely related to, their delusions of grandeur.

The novel is narrated by Lockhart’s son, Jeffrey. The father left his first wife, Jeffrey’s mother, and their son when Jeffrey was 13, and while the son and the father eventually became closer, Jeffrey tells us he “went nowhere near the businesses he owned.” Jeffrey uses his narrative of his visits to Zero K—located in a desolate part of Central Asia—to reflect on his life with his abandoned mother and his more recent personal successes and failures (more of the latter). Unfortunately, there’s not much about Jeffrey Lockhart’s account that makes the narrator himself a very interesting character. He seems to exist mostly as the recording eye reporting to us on the startling and often bizarre things he sees and hears; indeed, the detached perspective Jeffrey assumes can seem eerily removed from the horrors he witnesses, especially as he observes his father preparing himself for what Jeffrey surely knows is a premature death:

He was naked on a slab, not a hair on his body. It was hard to connect the life and times of my father to this remote semblance. Had I ever thought of the human body and what a spectacle it is, the elemental force of it, my father’s body, stripped of everything that might mark it as an individual life. It was a thing fallen into anonymity, all the normal responses dimming now. I did not turn away. I felt obliged to look. I wanted to be contemplative. And at some far point in my wired mind, I may have known a kind of weak redress, the satisfaction of the wronged boy.

You might expect a son viewing his father “naked on a slab” under such circumstances to express somewhat more concern about the wisdom of what is happening, to find it harder to describe this scene in such clinical terms. That he doesn’t isn’t so much a character flaw causing us to lose sympathy as it is an emptying out of Jeffrey Lockhart as a character beyond his functional role as “the son” and as mouthpiece for the author. This would not be such an obstacle if the language DeLillo put in his mouth was livelier, more transformative, but unfortunately the

passage quoted is representative of the style throughout *Zero K*, mostly expository, unobtrusive, utilitarian in its descriptive language. It is a style that seeks to convey the extraordinary scenes the narrator beholds with a kind of diligence and precision, and in the process the narrator loses definition as a character who has something important at stake in the events he recounts.

The lack of affect exhibited by Jeffrey Lockhart might have produced an effectively chilling evocation of the absurdity inherent in the spectacle before him—human beings willing to die because they perceive it as a way of cheating death—through the contrast between his earnest, matter-of-fact tone and the extremity of the situation. But Jeffrey’s account throughout the novel is finally just earnest and matter-of-fact, amazingly enough helping to make an intrinsically shocking story at times verge on tedium. Perhaps it is just that the circumstances of this novel are so conspicuously, even predictably, those to which DeLillo would be drawn, or perhaps the blankness of the writing finally just represents a blankness in this character, but *Zero K* is a DeLillo novel in which the scrupulous representation of folly and madness has begun to pall. Even the video images broadcast incessantly on giant screens in the Zero K facility, serving as something between interior decoration and religious iconography and before which Jeffrey Lockhart often stands mutely, as if unable to avert his gaze from their cumulative power, devolve in Jeffrey’s recitation into a simple list of oddly prosaic summaries:

Men in black walking single-file, each with a long sword, sunup, ritual murder, black head to foot, a chill discipline marking their stride.

Soldiers asleep in a bunker, stacks of sandbags.

Exodus: masses of people carrying whatever possessions they can manage, clothing, floor lamps, carpets, dogs. Flames rising across the screen behind them.

Such images could be stolen from previous Don DeLillo novels, or at least a fancied version of a DeLillo novel. When a character in *White Noise* recites a litany of predictions made by “leading psychics” in a tabloid newspaper (“A Japanese Consortium will buy Air Force One and turn it into a luxury flying condominium with midair refueling privileges and air-to-surface missile capability”), it might superficially resemble a list like this one, but these transcribed television images seem expected, perfunctory, and without the blend of humor and foreboding



that make the earlier discursive inventory, and others like it, more rhetorically effective. In *Zero K*, this particular list seems largely redundant, an empty flourish.

*Zero K* doesn't exactly seem like self-parody, however; it is more like DeLillo has come to this DeLillo-like premise and cast of characters belatedly, after a dominant impression of "typical" DeLillo themes and motifs had been established among many readers and critics and before DeLillo himself could treat the premise with any kind of fresh inspiration or create characters that don't already seem like stereotypes. Murray Siskind seems to have anticipated the novel's focus when he describes technology as "lust removed from nature," further characterizing it as "what we invented to conceal the terrible secret of our decaying bodies." *Zero K* at times reads like a needlessly extended illustration of Siskind's point. The book is either the least postmodern novel DeLillo has written or the most: an apparently sincere and authentic effort that manages to read like a simulation, a version of the cultural moment that seems like its own antecedent.

### **Joseph McElroy**

Joseph McElroy has not really been very well served by many of his admirers, at least if the best service a critic can perform for a writer is to accurately describe the writer's work for readers preparing to read it. If not all academic critics have explicitly identified McElroy's fiction as "postmodern," he has often enough been grouped with writers such as Pynchon, DeLillo, and Gaddis as authors of long, "difficult" books that defy conventional expectations of character and plot and that frequently incorporate abstruse scientific or philosophical ideas and discourses. While most readers would certainly ultimately agree that neither McElroy's narratives nor his prose are conventionally structured, finally McElroy's departures—to the extent they are departures—from what might be considered stylistic and storytelling norms could not properly be called postmodern.

The most significant mischaracterization of McElroy's fiction comes through those conceptual and rhetorical analyses by which his strategies are made to seem more intricately difficult than they really are. Thus in his review of McElroy's previous book, *Night Soul and Other Stories* (Dalkey Archive, 2011), Gregg Biglieri attests to McElroy's "abiding concern with accurately and convincingly getting the coordinates right in space and time and from there to the experience of thinking through events, relationships, and materials, events that connect across

the span of years, stray bits of conversation that act as narrative quilting points, and the frequent sense that one is getting inside the materials” (*electronic book review*). To describe McElroy’s purpose as “accurately and convincingly getting the coordinates right in space and time” is really to say only that despite what seem to be sudden disjunctions in setting and chronology, these disjunctions are finally part of an effort to enhance narrative realism by abandoning the requirements of the linear story, which introduces its own distortions as a method of representing the world “accurately.” Similarly, invoking McElroy’s emphasis on “the experience of thinking through events, relationships, and materials” amounts to saying that he is essentially a psychological realist, often employing a particularly rigorous form of free indirect narration that frequently borders on the stream-of-consciousness technique used by Joyce and Woolf.

In this way Joseph McElroy is much closer to being a belated modernist than a postmodernist. His purpose is not to undermine established narrative strategies or question realism as an ultimate goal, but to use a now established strategy to simulate greater “depth” in his realism. Unfortunately, if McElroy is in any way “experimental” in his use of psychological realism, it is only in testing the extent to which it can in its most uncompromising application sustain such prodigious meganovels as *Hind’s Kidnap* (1969), *Lookout Cartridge* (1974), and the especially gargantuan *Women and Men* (1987). Ultimately those readers willing to take on these daunting books have to make that determination for themselves, but it seems likely to me that many readers have been defeated by them, even more so than by other notoriously “difficult” books by Gaddis or William Gass. My own experience reading McElroy’s fiction persuades me that such a response arises not from a rejection of complexity but from the uncertain reward the reader receives in attempting to find coherence in the narrative. What the conscientious reader discovers is that both the narrative fluidity and the verbal density characteristic of these novels are really just highly elaborated versions of the basic conventions of psychological realism, making them not examples of aesthetic complexity but of established literary strategies made to seem complex. McElroy’s fiction is not so much difficult to understand as it is simply laborious to read.

McElroy’s latest novel (and, as with William Gass’s most recent novel, one wonders whether it might be the aging writer’s last), *Cannonball*, unfortunately manifests this quality all too thoroughly. What at first portends to be a complicated if somewhat strange story

emphasizing seemingly chance encounters and set in a slightly skewed version of contemporary America and, secondarily, Iraq, where the novel's protagonist, Zach, is a soldier, turns out to be merely peculiar, the initial strangeness of plot and situation never becoming thematically or aesthetically resonant because finally their treatment is just uninteresting. The story twines back and forth between Zach at home, both before and after enlisting, and in Iraq, where the focus is mostly on his involvement with the "Scroll," a purported newly discovered Gospel in which Jesus extols the virtues of free enterprise and of striving for worldly success. The transitions in time and place are rendered freely and often abruptly, to a degree blurring both geographical and chronological boundaries.

This sort of shifting of narrative continuity is by now not itself an especially radical move, and readers already venturesome enough to be reading Joseph McElroy, with his reputation as a writer who challenges conventions, quite likely make every effort to assimilate the shifts in time and place that constitute the main formal principle of *Cannonball*. Ultimately the story of Zach's life as a high school diver and his friendship with Umo, who subsequently makes an appearance in Iraq while Zach is serving there and dies under ambiguous circumstances (an explosion, probably at hands of insurgents), his experiences as a soldier, and his experiences following the incident that kills Umo (and that Zach himself barely survives) can indeed be pieced together, but finally not much seems to be gained by doing so: the story never coalesces into an aesthetic whole that transcends the peculiarities and seemingly random conjunctions of its various episodes, and, more importantly, nothing is accomplished by the rupturing of narrative that could not have equally been achieved by telling the story straightforwardly. The "difficulty" of the novel's formal structure is not conceptual but lies simply in the challenge it poses to the reader's patience. This, of course, cannot be what McElroy intended, but the mere fragmentation of chronology is not itself either so bold a departure from convention or sufficiently dynamic in its execution to rescue it from the weary reader's conclusion that reading it has become more an obligation than a satisfying experience.

The story itself, with its depiction of an America asserting its will both through war abroad and propaganda at home, might at best be called a satire (without much humor) of America in the process of hollowing itself out, deliberately becoming the worst caricature of its self-proclaimed "destiny" as a nation. Ultimately, the story in all of its fluidity is unified by the

motif of the Scroll, the supposed existence and effects of which are the main source of interest if we take the novel's purpose to be primarily satirical. Clearly enough it is a hoax, but its essential message that "competition" is blessed by God after all, that Jesus implicitly approved of American-style capitalism, apparently overwhelms all credulity. The cautionary warning implicit in the novel's depiction of the corrupting effects of the real "American religion"—capitalism—is certainly salient enough as a commentary on current American culture, but as insight into the contradictions between America's religiosity and its unabashed materialism, it is hardly original; certainly whatever modest reward comes to the reader who finds the insight accurate does not sufficiently justify the circuitous and frequently enervating way by which the novel proffers it.

The most pervasive obstacle to reading *Cannonball* with either pleasure or instruction is its language, again not because it is "difficult" per se (although certainly McElroy's sentences can be lengthy and meandering) but because of the kind of prose style required to carry out McElroy's rigorous commitment to portraying psychological process over unmediated reality. Early in the novel, Zach is watching Umo perform the "cannonball" dive from which the novel's title is derived:

What could have prepared you, though, for the jump which was first that high, prancing approach hop onto the almost end of the board to depress its laminated wood-and-fiberglass core so deep—don't I myself know—it might have thrown Umo out into the street had he not landed straight up and let the board lift him—like a tool you should let do its work, as my father, a somewhat unfinished carpenter and craftsman, in the garage would sometimes say of plane or hoe or knife or tinkering with his stopwatches that would one day time Umo—upward stretched leaping like a crane to the wind rising at first eternally only at the top to become a thing compressed like a spring but turned into like a rock in space or something inevitable: and this was the cannonball later discussed, as we like to say, the mother and brother of all cannonballs to target a pool in our city: that where he hit you'd have said the water parted six feet down and within four of the turquoise-tiled bottom, indicating in the flushed pit of its absence with strange exactness the concave point of the drain that marked the graded low point of the deep end.

Even though Zach is the first-person narrator of his own experiences, in this passage both his perception of the event at the time and his later endeavor to re-create it supersede any attempt to record the event directly. If the account provided us does not strictly speaking employ the free indirect method (which represents a kind of merger between the 3rd and 1st-person perspective), it proceeds very much like free indirect narration in the way it emphasizes the digressive and fragmentary qualities of a perceiving consciousness, as well as memory in its sudden intrusions and embellishments.

McElroy's fiction, including *Cannonball*, illustrates to particularly debilitating effect how easily the unrelenting pursuit of psychological realism of the purely discursive sort can become a self-defeating strategy. Voice and style are sacrificed to the demands of a psychological verisimilitude that over the course of novels with otherwise very little formal or verbal variety or alternative sources of interest, drains them of vitality, forces us to slow march our way through thickets of prose sounding the psychological states of characters who don't possess much intrinsic interest. In *Cannonball* this problem is compounded by the way the novel's structure mirrors the narrator's scattered processing of his experiences, with the consequence that this novel repels the good faith of even the most forgiving readers. A difficult novel should be difficult because it prompts us to reexamine our facile assumptions, not because it's boring.

### **Harry Mathews**

Among all of the adventurous writers whose fiction has sometimes been described—usually contemptuously—as a form of “game-playing,” the work of Harry Mathews perhaps most literally deserves such a characterization. However, in Mathews's case, to say that his novels and short stories seem like games is not an accusation but a more or less objective assessment of the formal and narrative strategies Mathews employs. More importantly, to fully appreciate the fiction of Harry Mathews, we must take the notion of “game” not in the sense used by many critics to imply frivolity and lack of purpose, but as an activity that poses a challenge, but is also meant to provide the game-player (in this case the reader) with enjoyment and satisfaction while facing the challenge. A game is designed to be fun, and Harry Mathews's fiction offers first of all a kind of literary fun to readers willing to play the game,

Mathews, of course, was a member of the Oulipo, a group of mostly (but not exclusively) French writers famous for their advocacy of the “constraint,” a deliberate limitation imposed on

a literary work through pre-established devices or formulas. Sometimes the constraints are very conspicuous, such as in Georges Perec's *A Void*, which uses no word containing the letter "e," but often they provide the work with a formal structure and don't otherwise immediately reveal themselves, which is the case with most of Mathews's novels (at least after he joined the Oulipo in 1972). Usually the constraint in Mathews's fiction is a simple pattern that loosely determines form, but ultimately the pattern itself is sufficiently buried in the work's deep structure that readers are likely not really aware that a constraint has been applied. *Cigarettes* (1986), probably Mathews's most well-known novel, unfolds according to an underlying formula—A encounters B, B encounters C, etc.—but this rudimentary formal blueprint is hardly noticeable (and ultimately irrelevant) once the characters have been established and their intertwined fates have begun to play out. *Cigarettes* is far from a conventional novel, but the reader prepared to accept the apparent formal scheme, focusing sequentially on pairs of characters, surely finds that the formal design creates its own kind of narrative tension, even generating a kind of mystery plot, as we try to make connections among the characters and to associate images or motifs across shifts in both perspective and chronology.

This sort of formal procedure, not so much a "constraint" as an enabling device allowing the work to achieve its own particular alternative to straightforward linear narrative, can be found in Mathews's new (and unfortunately posthumous) novel, *The Solitary Twin*. The novel depicts a small group of people on an unnamed island (likely a Pacific island somewhere near New Zealand) that by all accounts seems idyllic, but of course ultimately conceals a secret the novel ultimately, if obliquely, reveals. The events chronicled in the novel are initiated when an independent publisher named Andreas and a psychologist named Berenice separately arrive at the island, each for their different purposes eager to meet with a pair of identical twins, John and Paul, who apparently avoid meeting or speaking with one another, even though in every way they act in the same ways and exhibit the same tastes and habits. Andreas wishes to sign the brothers to a book project that would account for their curious circumstances, while Berenice wants to study their behavior more closely. We are immediately introduced to Berenice and Andreas after they have begun a sexual affair, and their initial conversation establishes the novel's reliance on talk, both in dialogue among the characters and in a series of stories told by the characters as a kind of challenge they set for themselves.

All of Mathews's novels, despite their superficial oddities, their digressiveness, and their unorthodox formal structures, continue to put great emphasis on story. Indeed, his fiction is finally all about story, even as its underlying conceits distort, bend, and shuffle the elements of the stories they are also responsible for generating. The novels published prior to his membership in Oulipo, *The Conversions*, *Tlooth*, and *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*, as well as many of his earlier short stories, are generally picaresque narratives that methodically extend their surrealistic premises but accentuate contingency and irresolution. The stories move from the curious to the improbable, and end without confirming that a satisfying conclusion to an inherently purposeful journey has been reached. Nevertheless, Mathews's storytelling skills lead us through episodes and vignettes that are themselves captivating in their eccentricities if we allow the novels their own disorderly order.

*Cigarettes* and *The Journalist* (1994) in effect fragment their narratives, reassembling them according to the pre-arranged structural device. This makes it necessary for the reader to become more active in perceiving the overall contours of the story, but in the process the story itself yields in importance to other sources of interest that the formal design makes more emphatic. Thus in *Cigarettes* our attention is focused on the relationships among the characters, both in the pairings that more or less function as chapters, as well as the additional relationships among all the characters as they are also gradually disclosed over the course of the novel. In *The Journalist*, we are given a very intensive immersion into the experience of one character, as recorded in a journal he has been persuaded to keep as a kind therapy but which quickly becomes the object of his obsession. Far from relieving the journalist's mental discord, his journal—and thus the novel—reveals it instead. We are witness to his unraveling, and along the way Mathews is able in addition to enact a deconstruction of form, as the protagonist's psychological compulsions are mirrored in the hilarious notational maneuvers he contrives to capture his experience as minutely and precisely as possible.

*The Solitary Twin* is also a journal of sorts, kept by Berenice, although we don't come to realize this until near the novel's conclusion. (Revelations of this kind are common in Mathews's fiction: we do not know until nearly the end of *Tlooth* that its narrator is a woman; we don't know the true disposition of a painting whose presence recurs throughout the novel until the very end of *Cigarettes*. In this way, these novels provide a version of the climactic "payoff" readers



expect from traditional narratives, but in Mathews's fiction such ostensible resolutions don't really offer narrative closure but in fact require readers to significantly revise their previous impression of the work up to that point, to reconsider any fixed interpretations already made.) But here Berenice has used the journal to record the activities of others, specifically their speech, so that ultimately the narrator's role is mostly to supply brief expository passages connecting the extended conversations and set-piece storytelling. As with *Cigarettes* and *The Journalist*, the story in *The Solitary Twin* doesn't follow a clear narrative line—even though the sections of the journal itself proceed chronologically—but is revealed through intimation and digression.

The novel's most important revelation is that John and Paul are one and the same, although an attentive reader (perhaps especially one accustomed to Mathews's sleights-of-hand) could surely suspect as much from very early on. They clearly have managed to fool the inhabitants of the island, however, and the final discovery of the truth brings with it a flurry of action flowing from the further news that John/Paul is actually the son of one of the storytellers, Margot (who has told us a story about "Meredith" and the son she rescued from an abusive father by entrusting him to an orphanage, but then acknowledges that Meredith is in fact Margot) and has confronted his father—now resident on the island—and killed him, subsequently taking his own life as well. To add to the Oedipal dramatics, we have just learned that Margot has slept with John, although apparently neither of them was aware of the other's true identity. The novel ends on the announcement of John's murder-suicide by two members of the local constabulary in a monologue of their own. "Immersion in seawater had cleaned the remaining gristle of blood," the police captain tells the other assembled characters about discovering the murder victim's corpse. "Yet the top of his head was a perfect ruin. The Sergeant took one look at it and tossed his cookies."

If the dramatic turmoil at the novel's conclusion almost seems farcical in its sudden outbreak, its tone (and the tone of the novel as a whole) is nevertheless characteristic of all of Mathews's fiction. The stories are presented by their narrators with what seems sincere confidence in their seriousness of purpose, but the manner of telling, with its methodical detours, sometimes arcane plot details, and, in the later novels, the playfully discursive plot constructions almost unavoidably imbues the stories with a kind of facetious humor, although the characters themselves are not treated as overtly comic figures. Still, Mathews's Oulipian reliance on

formalized procedures does produce a flattening-out effect, rendering the characters in many cases not so much as two-dimensional but limited in their ability to develop conventional psychological “depth,” to “leap off the page.” (Perhaps *Cigarettes* might count as an exception, as several of these characters do achieve considerable individual authenticity.) Since *The Solitary Twin* is partly about disguise, and a number of the characters take on multiple identities, its characters (including the narrator, who is the least involved in the novel’s overarching intrigue, and otherwise acts mostly as a narrative stenographer of sorts) even more emphatically serve not as “lifelike” characters but as the agents responsible for redeeming the novel’s formative conceit. This does not mean the characters lack interest—indeed, several of them are quite vivid in their demeanor and their way of speaking—but it does arguably does create more distance between reader and character, a distance that helps to create Mathews’s deadpan style of comedy.

The conceit animating *The Solitary Twin* is not made plain, although likely it involves the requirement that all of the story’s salient details emerge through talk, as well as some pre-arranged order or pattern of speakers. Even so, finally what is perhaps most impressive about Mathews’s use of the strategy at work in this novel is not its way of realizing character or its alternative construction of plot, but its evocation of *place*, the whole small world in which the characters and their oddly crossing lives are convincingly situated. This is not done through colorful description (the narrator herself provides few such descriptions) but the gradual accumulation of apposite details, both about the physical features of the island and the habits and attitudes of the people living there. Presumably Mathews did not choose this setting arbitrarily but precisely because he could build up a portrayal of his isolated “fishing village of immemorial origin” as an arcadian paradise while at the same time beginning to disclose its less bucolic secrets, a feat he accomplishes with great subtlety and efficiency, creating a complete, credible world that is nevertheless under the author’s total control.

Perhaps it could seem to some readers that Mathews is a writer exerting too much control, as he manipulates the formulas that dictate his fictional worlds. But Mathews seems to me a writer who has effectively resolved the perennial form-content conundrum. In his fiction, content—the character, the story itself—arises from the conditions imposed by the formal order he has chosen. Yet that content is almost always so engaging, the “games” the author might be playing only compel us to play along.