

## The Literature of Exhaustion

YES, WELL.

"Every man is not only himself," says Sir Thomas Browne: "Men are lived over again." At one point during my tenure at Penn State, a fellow with the same name as mine in that big-university small town was arrested on charges of molesting a young woman. His interesting defense was that he was a Stanislavsky Method actor rehearsing for the role of rapist in an upcoming student-theater piece. For some while after, his fans occasionally rang me up by mistake. One of them, when enough conversation had revealed his error, said "Sorry: You're the wrong John Barth."

Not for that reason, in 1965 I moved my family from Pine Grove Mills—an Allegheny mountain village not far from State College, Pennsylvania—up and over the Appalachians to Buffalo, where for the next seven years I taught in the new and prosperous State University of New York's operation at the old University of Buffalo. In time I was appointed to that university's Edward S. Butler Professorship, endowed by and named for a late local philanthropist. Thus it came to be declared, on the jackets of some editions of the books I published in those years, that their author "is currently Edward S. Butler Professor of Literature at the State University of New York at Buffalo." And sure enough (O world out there, what innocents you harbor!), mail began coming in addressed to "Edward S. Butler, Professor of Literature," and author—under that *nom de plume du jour*, I presume the authors of those letters to have presumed—of *Giles Goat-Boy*, *Lost in the Funhouse*, and *Chimera*.

Those years—1965–1973—were the American High Sixties. The Vietnam War was in overdrive through most of the period; the U.S. economy was fat and bloody; academic imperialism was as popular as the political kind. Among Governor Nelson Rockefeller's ambitions was to establish major university centers at each end and the middle of the Thomas E. Dewey Thruway (Stony Brook, Albany, Buffalo) as a tiara for the Empire State's 57-campus university system. SUNY/Buffalo therefore was given virtual *carte blanche* to pirate professors away from other universities and build buildings for them to teach in: At one dizzy point in its planning, Gordon Bunshaft's proposed new campus complex

for the school was reported to be the largest single architectural project in the world, after Brasilia. Eighty percent of the populous English department I joined had been hired within the preceding two years, as additions to the original staff; so numerous were our illustrious immigrants from raided faculties, troubled marriages, and more straitlaced life-styles, we came to call ourselves proudly the Ellis Island of Academia. The somewhat shabby older buildings and hastily built new ones, all jam-packed and about to be abandoned, reinforced that image.

The politically active among our faculty and students had their own ambitions for the place: the Berkeley of the East. They wanted no part of Mr. Bunshaft's suburban New Jerusalem rising from filled-in marshland north of the city ("All great cultures," my new colleague Leslie Fiedler remarked, "are built on marshes"). In some humors, as when our government lied with more than usual egregiousness about its war, they wanted little enough of the old campus, either. They struck and trashed; then the police and National Guard struck and trashed *them*. Mace and peppergas wafted through the academic groves; the red flag of communism and the black flag of anarchism were literally waved at English Department faculty-student meetings, which—a sight as astonishing to me as those flags—were attended by *hundreds*, like an Allen Ginsberg poetry reading with harmonium and Tibetan finger-cymbals.

Altogether a stimulating place to work through those troubled years: Pop Art popping at the Albright-Knox Museum; strange new music from Lukas Foss, Lejaren Hiller, and their electronic colleagues; dope as ubiquitous as martinis at faculty dinner parties; polluted Lake Erie flushing over Niagara Falls ("the toilet bowl of America," our Ontario friends called it); and, across the Peace Bridge, endless Canada, to which hosts of our young men fled as their counterparts had done in other of our national convulsions, and from which Professor McLuhan expounded the limitations, indeed the obsolescence, of the printed word in our electronic culture.

The long novel *Giles Goat-Boy* done, I took sabbatical leave from novel-writing and, inspired by those lively new surroundings and by the remarkable short fiction of the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges, which I'd recently come to know, I spent two years happily fiddling with short narrative: never my long suit. In the salad of a writer's motives, trifling ingredients are tossed with more serious. Among my ambitions in writing *The Sol-Weed Factor* was to perpetrate a novel so thick that its title could be printed horizontally across its spine; among my reasons for writing *Lost in the Funhouse*—a series of short fictions for print, tape, and live voice—was that novelists aren't easily included in anthologies of fiction.

But I was interested also in exploring the oral narrative tradition from which printed fiction evolved. Poetry readings became popular in the Sixties, but except in the areas of folktales and oral history there was not much interest in "live" narrative, in fiction as a performing art. For several weeks one summer, the university's English Department leased the Music Department's electronics studio, complete with its audio engineers, for the use of any students or staff interested in experimenting with electronic means in verse or fiction. I took the op-

portunity to record (for use in my once-a-month lecture visits) the taped portions of several tape-and-live-voice pieces from *Lost in the Funhouse*.

In that time and place, *experimental* was not yet an adjective of dismissal. On the contrary: As in the European Nineteen Teens, artistic experiment was in the Buffalo air. Even our less sophisticated undergraduates, many from the New York City area, seemed to breathe it in with the other hydrocarbons, the perfumes of Lake Erie and the Love Canal. Unaware in many cases of the history of, say, edible or self-destructing art, they had nevertheless a kind of media street-smarts; if their experiments (which, sure enough, included edible and self-destructing narratives) most often failed, they failed no more often than non-"experimental" apprentice work. For apprentices, *all* work is experimental, as in another sense it is even for seasoned professionals. In my own literary temperament, the mix of romantic and neoclassical is so mutable that I hold no particular brief either for or against programmatic experimentalism. Passion and virtuosity are what matter; where they are, they will shine through any aesthetics. But I confess to missing, in apprentice seminars in the later 1970s and the 1980s, that lively Make-It-New spirit of the Buffalo Sixties. A roomful of young traditionalists can be as depressing as a roomful of young Republicans.

In 1967 I set down my mixed feelings about the avant-gardism of the time in the following essay, first delivered as a Peters Rushton Seminars Lecture at the University of Virginia and subsequently published in the *Atlantic*. It has been frequently reprinted and as frequently misread as one more Death of the Novel or Swan-Song of Literature piece. It isn't. Rereading it now, I sniff traces of tear gas in its margins; I hear an echo of disruption between its lines. Its urgencies are dated; there are thin notes in it of quackery and wisecrackery that displease me now. But the main line of its argument I stand by: that virtuosity is a virtue, and that what artists feel about the state of the world and the state of their art is less important than what they do with that feeling.

I want to discuss three things more or less together: first, some old questions raised by the new "intermedia" arts; second, some aspects of the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, whose fiction I greatly admire; third, some professional concerns of my own, related to these other matters and having to do with what I'm calling "the literature of exhausted possibility"—or, more chicly, "the literature of exhaustion."

By "exhaustion" I don't mean anything so tired as the subject of physical, moral, or intellectual decadence, only the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities—by no means necessarily a cause for despair. That a great many Western artists for a great many years have quarreled with received definitions of artistic media, genres, and forms goes without saying: Pop Art, dramatic and musical "happenings," the whole range of "intermedia" or "mixed-means" art

bear recentest witness to the romantic tradition of rebelling against Tradition.

A catalogue I received some time ago in the mail, for example, advertises such items as Robert Filliou's *Ample Food for Stupid Thought*, a box full of postcards on which are inscribed "apparently meaningless questions," to be mailed to whomever the purchaser judges them suited for; also Ray Johnson's *Paper Snake*, a collection of whimsical writings, "often pointed," the catalogue assures us, and once mailed to various friends (what the catalogue describes as The New York Correspondence School of Literature); likewise Daniel Spoerri's *Anecdoted Typography of Chance*, "on the surface" a description of all the objects that happen to be on the author's parlor table—"in fact, however . . . a cosmology of Spoerri's existence."

The document listing these items is—"on the surface," at least—the catalogue of The Something Else Press, a swinging outfit. "In fact, however," it may be one of their offerings, for all I know: The New York Direct-Mail-Advertising School of Literature. In any case, their wares are lively to read about, and make for interesting conversation in fiction-writing classes, for example, where we discuss Somebody-or-other's unbound, unpaginated, randomly assembled novel-in-a-box and the desirability of printing *Finnegans Wake* on a very long roller-towel. It is easier and more sociable to talk technique than it is to make art, and the area of "happenings" and their kin is mainly a way of discussing aesthetics, really; of illustrating more or less valid and interesting points about the nature of art and the definition of its terms and genres.

One conspicuous thing, for example, about the "intermedia" arts is their tendency to eliminate not only the traditional audience—those who apprehend the artist's art (in "happenings" the audience is often the "cast," as in "environments," and some of the new music isn't intended to be performed at all)—but also the most traditional notion of the artist: the Aristotelian conscious agent who achieves with technique and cunning the artistic effect; in other words, one endowed with uncommon talent, who has moreover developed and disciplined that endowment into virtuosity. It is an aristocratic notion on the face of it, which the democratic West seems eager to have done with; not only the "omniscient" author of older fiction, but the very idea of the controlling artist, has been condemned as politically reactionary, authoritarian, even fascist.

Personally, being of the temper that chooses to rebel along traditional lines, I'm inclined to prefer the kind of art that not many people can do:

the kind that requires expertise and artistry as well as bright aesthetic ideas and/or inspiration. I enjoy the Pop Art in the famous Albright-Knox collection, a few blocks from my house in Buffalo, like a lively conversation; but I was on the whole more impressed by the jugglers and acrobats at Baltimore's old Hippodrome, where I used to go every time they changed shows: not artists, perhaps, but genuine *virtuosi*, doing things that anyone can dream up and discuss but almost no one can do.

I suppose the distinction is between things worth remarking and things worth doing. "Somebody ought to make a novel with scenes that pop up, like the old children's books," one says, with the implication that one isn't going to bother doing it oneself.

However, art and its forms and techniques live in history and certainly do change. I sympathize with a remark attributed to Saul Bellow, that to be technically up-to-date is the least important attribute of a writer—though I would add that this least important attribute may be nevertheless essential. In any case, to be technically *out* of date is likely to be a genuine defect: Beethoven's Sixth Symphony or the Chartres cathedral, if executed today, might be simply embarrassing (in fact, they *couldn't* be executed today, unless in the Borgesian spirit discussed below). A good many current novelists write turn-of-the-century-type novels, only in more or less mid-twentieth-century language and about contemporary people and topics; this makes them less interesting (to me) than excellent writers who are also technically contemporary: Joyce and Kafka, for instance, in their time, and in ours, Samuel Beckett and Jorge Luis Borges. The intermedia arts, I'd say, tend to be intermediary, too, between the traditional realms of aesthetics on the one hand and artistic creation on the other. I think the wise artist and civilian will regard them with quite the kind and degree of seriousness with which he regards good shoptalk: He'll listen carefully, if noncommittally, and keep an eye on his intermedia colleagues, if only the corner of his eye. Whether or not they themselves produce memorable and lasting works of contemporary art, they may very possibly suggest something usable in the making or understanding of such works.

Jorge Luis Borges will serve to illustrate the difference between a technically old-fashioned artist, a technically up-to-date non-artist, and a technically up-to-date artist. In the first category I'd locate all those novelists who for better or worse write not as if the twentieth century didn't exist, but as if the great writers of the last sixty years or so hadn't existed.

Our century is more than two-thirds done; it is dismaying to see so many of our writers following Dostoevsky or Tolstoy or Balzac, when the question seems to me to be how to succeed not even Joyce and Kafka, but those who *succeeded* Joyce and Kafka and are now in the evenings of their own careers.\* In the second category—technically up-to-date non-artists—are such folk as a neighbor of mine in Buffalo who fashions dead Winnies-the-Pooh in sometimes monumental scale out of oilcloth stuffed with sand and impales them on stakes or hangs them by the neck. In the third category belong the few people whose artistic thinking is as *au courant* as any French New Novelist's, but who manage nonetheless to speak eloquently and memorably to our human hearts and conditions, as the great artists have always done. Of these, two of the finest living specimens that I know of are Samuel Beckett and Jorge Luis Borges—with Vladimir Nabokov, just about the only contemporaries of my reading acquaintance mentionable with the "old masters" of twentieth-century fiction. In the unexciting history of literary awards, the 1961 International Publishers' Prize, shared by Beckett and Borges, is a happy exception indeed.

One of the modern things about these two writers is that in an age of ultimacies and "final solutions"—at least *felt* ultimacies, in everything from weaponry to theology, the celebrated dehumanization of society, and the history of the novel—their work in separate ways reflects and deals with ultimacy, both technically and thematically, as for example *Finnegans Wake* does in its different manner. One notices, for whatever its symptomatic worth, that Joyce was virtually blind at the end, Borges is literally so, and Beckett has become virtually mute, musewise, having progressed from marvelously constructed English sentences through terser and terser French ones to the unsyntactical, unpunctuated prose of *Comment C'est* and "ultimately" to wordless mimes. One might extrapolate a theoretical course for Beckett: Language after all consists of silence as well as sound, and mime is still communication ("that nineteenth-century idea," a Yale student once snarled at me), but by the language of action. But the language of action consists of rest as well as movement, and so in the context of Beckett's progress, immobile, silent figures still aren't altogether ultimate. How about an empty, silent stage, then, or blank

\* Author's note, 1984: Did I really say this remarkably silly thing back in '67? Yup, and I believed it, too. What I hope are more reasonable formulations of the idea may be found in the Friday-pieces "The Spirit of Place" and "The Literature of Replenishment," farther on.



pages\*—a “happening” where nothing happens, like Cage’s 4’33” performed in an empty hall? But dramatic communication consists of the absence as well as the presence of the actors; “we have our exits and our entrances”; and so even that would be imperfectly ultimate in Beckett’s case. Nothing at all, then, I suppose; but Nothingness is necessarily and inextricably the background against which Being, et cetera. For Beckett, at this point in his career, to cease to create altogether would be fairly meaningful: his crowning work; his “last word.” What a convenient corner to paint yourself into! “And now I shall finish,” the valet Arsene says in *Watt*, “and you will hear my voice no more.” Only the silence *Molloy* speaks of, “of which the universe is made.”

After which, I add on behalf of the rest of us, it might be conceivable to rediscover validly the artifices of language and literature—such far-out notions as grammar, punctuation . . . even characterization! Even *plot*!—if one goes about it the right way, aware of what one’s predecessors have been up to.

Now, J. L. Borges is perfectly aware of all these things. Back in the great decades of literary experimentalism he was associated with *Prisma*, a “muralist” magazine that published its pages on walls and billboards; his later *Labyrinths* and *Ficciones* not only anticipate the farthest-out ideas of The Something Else Press crowd—not a difficult thing to do—but, being excellent works of art as well, they illustrate in a simple way the difference between the *fact* of aesthetic ultimacies and their artistic *use*. What it comes to is that an artist doesn’t merely exemplify an ultimacy; he employs it.

Consider Borges’s story “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote”: The hero, an utterly sophisticated turn-of-the-century French Symbolist, by an astounding effort of imagination, produces—not *copies* or *imitates*, but *composes*—several chapters of Cervantes’s novel.

It is a revelation [Borges’s narrator tells us] to compare Menard’s *Don Quixote* with Cervantes’s. The latter, for example, wrote (part one, chapter nine):

... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, the future’s counselor.

\* An ultimacy already attained in the nineteenth century by that *avant-gardiste* of East Aurora, N.Y., Elbert Hubbard, in his *Essay on Silence*, and much repeated to the present day in such empty “novelties” as *The Wit and Wisdom of Lyndon Johnson*, etc.

Written in the seventeenth century, written by the “lay genius” Cervantes, this enumeration is a mere rhetorical praise of history. Menard, on the other hand, writes:

... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, the future’s counselor.

History, the *mother* of truth: the idea is astounding. Menard, a contemporary of William James, does not define history as an inquiry into reality but as its origin.

Et cetera. Borges’s story is of course a satire, but the idea has considerable intellectual validity. I declared earlier that if Beethoven’s Sixth were composed today, it might be an embarrassment; but clearly it wouldn’t be, necessarily, if done with ironic intent by a composer quite aware of where we’ve been and where we are. It would have then potentially, for better or worse, the kind of significance of Warhol’s Campbell’s Soup cans, the difference being that in the former case a work of art is being reproduced instead of a work of non-art, and the ironic comment would therefore be more directly on the genre and history of the art than on the state of the culture. In fact, of course, to make the valid intellectual point one needn’t even recompose the Sixth Symphony, any more than Menard really needed to re-create the *Quixote*. It would have been sufficient for Menard to attribute the novel to himself in order to have a new work of art, from the intellectual point of view. Indeed, in several stories Borges plays with this very idea, and I can readily imagine Beckett’s next novel, for example, as *Tom Jones*, just as Nabokov’s recentest was his multivolume annotated translation of Pushkin: I myself have always aspired to write Burton’s version of *The 1001 Nights*, complete with appendices and the like, in ten volumes, and for intellectual purposes I needn’t even write it. What evenings we might spend discussing Saarinen’s Parthenon, D. H. Lawrence’s *Wuthering Heights*, or the Johnson Administration by Robert Rauschenberg!

The idea, I say, is intellectually serious, as are Borges’s other characteristic ideas, most of a metaphysical rather than an aesthetic nature. But the important thing to observe is that Borges *doesn’t* attribute the *Quixote* to himself, much less recompose it like Pierre Menard; instead, he writes a remarkable and original work of literature, the implicit theme of which is the difficulty, perhaps the unnecessary, of writing original works of literature. His artistic victory, if you like, is that he confronts an intellectual

dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work. If this corresponds to what mystics do—"every moment leaping into the infinite," Kierkegaard says, "and every moment falling surely back into the finite"—it's only one more aspect of that old analogy. In homelier terms, it's a matter of every moment throwing out the bath water without for a moment losing the baby.

Another way of describing Borges's accomplishment is with a pair of his own terms, *algebra* and *fire*. In one of his most often anthologized stories, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, he imagines an entirely hypothetical world, the invention of a secret society of scholars who elaborate its every aspect in a surreptitious encyclopedia. This *First Encyclopedia of Tlön* (what fictionist would not wish to have dreamed up the *Britannica*?) describes a coherent alternative to this world complete in every respect from its algebra to its fire, Borges tells us, and of such imaginative power that, once conceived, it begins to obtrude itself into and eventually to supplant our prior reality. My point is that neither the algebra nor the fire, metaphorically speaking, could achieve this result without the other. Borges's algebra is what I'm considering here—algebra is easier to talk about than fire—but any smart cookie could equal it. The imaginary authors of the *First Encyclopedia of Tlön* itself are not artists, though their work is in a manner of speaking fictional and would find a ready publisher in The Something Else Press. The author of the story *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, who merely *alludes* to the fascinating *Encyclopedia*, is an artist; what makes him one, of the first rank, like Kafka, is the combination of that intellectually serious vision with great human insight, poetic power, and consummate mastery of his means—a definition which would have gone without saying, I suppose, in any century but ours.

Not long ago, incidentally, in a footnote to a scholarly edition of Sir Thomas Browne, I came upon a perfect Borges datum, reminiscent of Tlön's self-realization: the actual case of a book called *The Three Impostors*, alluded to in Browne's *Religio Medici* among other places. *The Three Impostors* is a nonexistent blasphemous treatise against Moses, Christ, and Mohammed, which in the seventeenth century was widely held to exist, or to have once existed. Commentators attributed it variously to Boccaccio, Pietro Aretino, Giordano Bruno, and Tommaso Campanella, and though no one, Browne included, had ever seen a copy of it, it was frequently cited, refuted, railed against, and generally discussed as if everyone had read it—until, sure enough, in the *eighteenth* century a spurious work appeared with a forged date of 1598 and the title *De Tribus*

*Impostoribus*. It's a wonder that Borges doesn't mention this work, as he seems to have read absolutely everything, including all the books that don't exist, and Browne is a particular favorite of his. In fact, the narrator of *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* declares at the end:

... English and French and mere Spanish will disappear from the globe. The world will be Tlön. I pay no attention to all this and go on revising, in the still days at the Adroque Hotel, an uncertain Quevedian translation (which I do not intend to publish) of Browne's *Urn-Burial*.\*

This "contamination of reality by dream," as Borges calls it, is one of his pet themes, and commenting upon such contaminations is one of his favorite fictional devices. Like many of the best such devices, it turns the artist's mode or form into a metaphor for his concerns, as does the diary-ending of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or the cyclical construction of *Finnegans Wake*. In Borges's case, the story *Tlön*, etc., for example, is a real piece of imagined reality in our world, analogous to those Tlönian artifacts called *hrönir*, which imagine themselves into existence. In short, it's a paradigm of or metaphor for itself; not just the *form* of the story but the *fact* of the story is symbolic; the medium is (part of) the message.

Moreover, like all of Borges's work, it illustrates in other of its aspects my subject: how an artist may paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of our time into material and means for his work—*paradoxically*, because by doing so he transcends what had appeared to be his refutation, in the same way that the mystic who transcends finitude is said to be enabled to live, spiritually and physically, in the finite world. Suppose you're a writer by vocation—a "print-oriented bastard," as the McLuhanites call us—and you feel, for example, that the novel, if not narrative literature generally, if not the printed word altogether, has by this hour of the world just about shot its bolt, as Leslie Fiedler and others maintain. (I'm inclined to agree, with reservations and hedges. Literary forms certainly have histories and historical contingencies, and it may well be that the novel's time as a major art form is up, as the "times" of classical tragedy, Italian and German grand opera, or the sonnet-sequence came to be. No necessary cause for alarm in this at all, except perhaps to certain novel-

\* Moreover, on rereading *Tlön*, etc., I find now a remark I'd swear wasn't in it last year: that the eccentric American millionaire who endows the *Encyclopedia* does so on condition that "The work will make no pact with the impostor Jesus Christ."

ists, and one way to handle such a feeling might be to write a novel about it. Whether historically the novel expires or persists as a major art form seems immaterial to me; if enough writers and critics *feel* apocalyptic about it, their feeling becomes a considerable cultural fact, like the *feeling* that Western civilization, or the world, is going to end rather soon. If you took a bunch of people out into the desert and the world didn't end, you'd come home shamefaced, I imagine; but the persistence of an art form doesn't invalidate work created in the comparable apocalyptic ambience. That is one of the fringe benefits of being an artist instead of a prophet. There are others.) If you happened to be Vladimir Nabokov, you might address that felt ultimacy by writing *Pale Fire*: a fine novel by a learned pedant, in the form of a pedantic commentary on a poem invented for the purpose. If you were Borges you might write *Labyrinths*: fictions by a learned librarian in the form of footnotes, as he describes them, to imaginary or hypothetical books. And I'll add that if you were the author of this paper, you'd have written something like *The Sot-Weed Factor* or *Giles Goat-Boy*: novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author.

If this sort of thing sounds unpleasantly decadent, nevertheless it's about where the genre began, with *Quixote* imitating *Amadis of Gaul*, Cervantes pretending to be the Cid Hamete Benengeli (and Alonso Quijano pretending to be Don Quixote), or Fielding parodying Richardson. "History repeats itself as farce"—meaning, of course, in the form or mode of farce, not that history is farcical. The imitation, like the Dadaist echoes in the work of the "intermedia" types, is something new and *may be* quite serious and passionate despite its farcical aspect.

This is the difference between a proper, "naïve" novel and a deliberate imitation of a novel, or a novel imitative of other kinds of documents. The first sort attempts (has been historically inclined to attempt) to imitate actions more or less directly, and its conventional devices—cause and effect, linear anecdote, characterization, authorial selection, arrangement, and interpretation—have been objected to as obsolete notions, or metaphors for obsolete notions: Alain Robbe-Grillet's essays *For a New Novel* come to mind. There are replies to these objections, not to the point here, but one can see that in any case they're obviated by imitations-of-novels, for instance, which attempt to represent not life directly but a representation of life. In fact such works are no more removed from "life" than Richardson's or Goethe's epistolary novels are; both imitate "real" documents, and the subject of both, ultimately, is life, not the documents.

A novel is as much a piece of the real world as a letter, and the letters in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* are, after all, fictitious.

One might imaginably compound this imitation, and though Borges doesn't, he's fascinated with the idea. One of his more frequent literary allusions is to the 602nd night in a certain edition of *The 1001 Nights*, when, owing to a copyist's error, Scheherazade begins to tell the King the story of the 1001 nights, from the beginning. Happily, the King interrupts; if he didn't, there'd be no 603rd night ever, and while this would solve Scheherazade's problem, it would put the "outside" author in a bind. (I suspect that Borges dreamed this whole thing up; the business he mentions isn't in any edition of *The 1001 Nights* I've been able to consult. Not yet, anyhow: After reading *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, one is inclined to recheck every semester or so.)

Borges is interested in the 602nd night because it's an instance of the story-within-the-story turned back upon itself, and his interest in such instances is threefold. First, as he himself declares, they disturb us metaphysically: When the characters in a work of fiction become readers or authors of the fiction they're in, we're reminded of the fictitious aspect of our own existence—one of Borges's cardinal themes, as it was of Shakespeare, Calderón, Unamuno, and other folk. Second, the 602nd night is a literary illustration of the *regressus in infinitum*, as are many other of Borges's principal images and motifs. Third, Scheherazade's accidental gambit, like Borges's other versions of the *regressus in infinitum*, is an image of the exhaustion, or attempted exhaustion, of possibilities—in this case literary possibilities—and so we return to our main subject.

What makes Borges's stance, if you like, more interesting to me even than, say, Nabokov's or Beckett's, is the premise with which he approaches literature. In the words of one of his editors: "For [Borges] no one has claim to originality in literature; all writers are more or less faithful amanuenses of the spirit, translators and annotators of pre-existing archetypes." Thus his inclination to write brief comments on imaginary books: For one to attempt to add overtly to the sum of "original" literature by even so much as a conventional short story, not to mention a novel, would be too presumptuous, too naïve; literature has been done long since. A librarian's point of view! And it would itself be too presumptuous if it weren't part of a lively, relevant metaphysical vision, slyly employed against itself precisely to make new and original literature. Borges defines the Baroque as "that style which deliberately exhausts (or tries to exhaust) its possibilities and borders upon its own caricature."

While his own work is *not* Baroque, except intellectually (the Baroque was never so terse, laconic, economical), it suggests the view that intellectual and literary history has been Baroque, and has pretty well exhausted the possibilities of novelty. His *fictiones* are not only footnotes to imaginary texts, but postscripts to the real corpus of literature.\*

This premise gives resonance and relation to all his principal images. The facing mirrors that recur in his stories are a dual *regressus*. The doubles that his characters, like Nabokov's, run afoul of suggest dizzying multiples and remind one of Browne's remark that "every man is not only himself . . . men are lived over again." (It would please Borges, and illustrate Browne's point, to call Browne a precursor of Borges. "Every writer," Borges says in his essay on Kafka, "creates his own precursors.") Borges's favorite third-century heretical sect is the Histriones—I think and hope he invented them—who believe that repetition is impossible in history and who therefore live viciously in order to purge the future of the vices they commit; to exhaust the possibilities of the world in order to bring its end nearer. The writer he most often mentions, after Cervantes, is Shakespeare; in one piece he imagines the playwright on his deathbed asking God to permit him to be one and himself, having been everyone and no one; God replies from the whirlwind that He is no one either: He has dreamed the world like Shakespeare, and including Shakespeare. Homer's story in Book IV of the *Odyssey*, of Menelaus on the beach at Pharos, tackling Proteus, appeals profoundly to Borges: Proteus is he who "exhausts the guises of reality" while Menelaus—who, one recalls, disguised his own identity in order to ambush him—holds fast. Zeno's paradox of Achilles and the Tortoise embodies a *regressus in infinitum* which Borges carries through philosophical history, pointing out that Aristotle uses it to refute Plato's theory of forms, Hume to refute the possibility of cause and effect, Lewis Carroll to refute syllogistic deduction, William James to refute the notion of temporal passage, and Bradley to refute the general possibility of logical relations. Borges himself uses it, citing Schopenhauer, as evidence that the world is our dream, our idea, in which "tenuous and eternal crevices of unreason" can be found to remind us

\* It is true that he asserts in another place that the possibilities of literature can never be exhausted, since it is impossible to exhaust even a single book. However, his remark about the Baroque includes the *attempt* to exhaust as well as the hypothetical achievement of exhaustion. What's more, his cardinal themes and images rather contradict that passing optimism—a state of affairs reminiscent of the aesthetics of Tlön, where no book is regarded as complete which doesn't contain its counterbook, or refutation.

that our creation is false, or at least fictive. The infinite library of one of his most popular stories is an image particularly pertinent to the literature of exhaustion: The "Library of Babel" houses every possible combination of alphabetical characters and spaces, and thus every possible book and statement, including your and my refutations and vindications, the history of the actual future, the history of every possible future, and, though he doesn't mention it, the encyclopedia not only of Tlön but of every imaginable other world—since, as in Lucretius's universe, the number of elements and so of combinations is finite (though very large), and the number of instances of each element and combination of elements is infinite, like the library itself.

That brings us to his favorite image of all, the labyrinth, and to my point. *Labyrinths* is the name of his most substantial translated volume, and the only current full-length study of Borges in English, by Ana María Barrenechea, is called *Borges the Labyrinth-Maker*. A labyrinth, after all, is a place in which, ideally, all the possibilities of choice (of direction, in this case) are embodied, and—barring special dispensation like Theseus's—must be exhausted before one reaches the heart. Where, mind, the Minotaur waits with two final possibilities: defeat and death or victory and freedom. The legendary Theseus is non-Baroque; thanks to Ariadne's thread he can take a shortcut through the labyrinth at Knossos. But Menelaus on the beach at Pharos, for example, is genuinely Baroque in the Borgesian spirit, and illustrates a positive artistic morality in the literature of exhaustion. He is not there, after all, for kicks; Menelaus is *lost*, in the larger labyrinth of the world, and has got to hold fast while the Old Man of the Sea exhausts reality's frightening guises so that he may extort direction from him when Proteus returns to his "true" self. It is a heroic enterprise, with salvation as its object—one recalls that the aim of the Histriones is to get history done with so that Jesus may come again the sooner, and that Shakespeare's heroic metamorphoses culminate not merely in a theophany but in an apotheosis.

Now, not just any old body is equipped for this labor; Theseus in the Cretan labyrinth becomes in the end the aptest image for Borges after all. Distressing as the fact is to us liberal democrats, the commonalty, alas, will *always* lose their way and their soul; it is the chosen remnant, the virtuoso, the Thesean *hero*, who, confronted with Baroque reality, Baroque history, the Baroque state of his art, need *not* rehearse its possibilities to exhaustion, any more than Borges needs actually to write the *Encyclopedia of Tlön* or the books in the Library of Babel. He need only be aware of

their existence or possibility, acknowledge them, and with the aid of very special gifts—as extraordinary as saint- or hero-hood and not likely to be found in The New York Correspondence School of Literature—go straight through the maze to the accomplishment of his work.

## More Troll Than Cabbage

INTRODUCTION FOR  
TAPE-AND-LIVE-VOICE PERFORMANCES  
FROM THE SERIES *LOST IN THE FUNHOUSE*

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AS A BOY experimenting with sin, I once hollowed out a book—it was called *365 Bedtime Stories*—to hide a pack of Chesterfield cigarettes in, the way Renaissance princes sometimes packed pistols in eviscerated prayer-books. It had been my thought while writing the series *Lost in the Funhouse* to publish the finished book with a tape cassette enclosed in that same fashion. I have however a *daimon* like Socrates's, who seldom tells me what to do, but (less dependably than Socrates's) sometimes whispers "For pity's sake, don't do *that*." Distinctly, when the time came, it announced that the tape-in-a-book idea was an egregious gimmick; that even to print the tape-and-live-voice pieces in reading-script format would be tiresome, unbecoming. In 1968 the book appeared therefore by my own decision in ordinary left-to-right roman type as if composed for print alone like any other book, at cost of part of the sense and most of the entertainment of the tape pieces, which to the eye alone may be wearisomely self-reflexive exercises in hyperselfconsciousness. That's show business; and for writers as writers, show business is no business.

As show business, on the other hand, those little experiments worked well for a season or two on the campus circuit, until my nay-saying *daimon* whispered that it was time to close a run that began at the Library of Congress on Mayday, 1967.

Why should a mere introduction to a program of readings be here collected and printed? Because this Friday Book is also a resumé of my Stories Thus Far and an account of what I believe myself to have been up to in writing them.

I have a program of readings from my novels that I've given here and there on university campuses in the last year. It's called "The Heroical Curriculum"; what it consists of is a series of excerpts from *The Floating Opera*, *The End of the Road*, *The Sot-Weed Factor*, and *Giles Goat-Boy*, selected ostensibly to illustrate some of their common themes—that self-knowledge-is generally bad news, for example; or that if you don't look



*On rare occasions it may even be mainly about itself, though it is almost never exclusively about itself, even when it seems to be. And the same may go for such remarks as these, even when they claim to be about "aboutness."*

## The Literature of Replenishment

### POSTMODERNIST FICTION

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ANOTHER Friday-piece from 1979, meant as a companion and corrective to my 1967 essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" and published in *The Atlantic* in January, 1980. In 1982 the Lord John Press of Northridge, California, brought out the twin essays in a slim, handsome volume for which I wrote the following headnote:

Not every storyteller is afflicted with the itch to understand and explain, to himself and others, why he tells the stories he tells the way he tells them, rather than some other sort of stories some other way. It is well that this is so. The gifts of doing and explaining are notoriously not the same: An eloquent artist may sound like a mumbler, a crank, a soulless pedant—may be those unadmirable things—when he sets about accounting for what he has perhaps brilliantly done. And first-rate critics may write fifth-rate fiction.

But there are those who are thus afflicted; who for better or worse want every dozen years or so not only to get a working perspective on what they and their contemporaries are up to, but to publish their ruminations. I am of that number. The two essays which constitute this book were written in that spirit and published less to share my convictions than to share my speculations, so that others more expert in the matters dealt with could improve my working perspective. In this respect they have succeeded quite.

"The Literature of Exhaustion" was written in 1967 in Buffalo, New York, during the troubles at the state university there and in our land. (See my headnote to it earlier in this *Friday Book*.) "The Literature of Replenishment" was written twelve years later in a calmer place and time—Johns Hopkins, Jimmy Carter—and has a more tenured, middle-aged air about it. My purpose was to define to my satisfaction the term *postmodernism*, which in 1979 was everywhere in the air. Almost no one agrees with my definition, but I remain satisfied with it.

Both essays appeared originally in *The Atlantic*; each has been several times reprinted and translated. Readers in countries like Romania and mainland China find such pieces fascinating less for their arguments, which may strike them as unintelligible or hopelessly luxurious, than for the particular artists and artworks mentioned in passing, unavailable to them but possibly

touchstones among us—just as their interest in American films may be less in the stars and stories than in details of dress, furniture, the passing scene. It is sad, for a storyteller, to see his opinions read where his stories cannot be.

But it is pleasing to have these essays, separated since birth, here for the first time reunited. May their two-part harmony make clear their song: that what matters is not the exhaustion or the replenishment, both of which may be illusory, but the literature, which is not.

The word is not yet in our standard dictionaries and encyclopedias, but since the end of World War II, and especially in the United States in the latter 1960s and the 1970s, "postmodernism" has enjoyed a very considerable currency, particularly with regard to our contemporary fiction. There are university courses in the American postmodernist novel; at least one quarterly journal is devoted exclusively to the discussion of postmodernist literature; at the University of Tübingen last June (1979), the annual meeting of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Amerikastudien took as its theme "America in the 1970s," with particular emphasis on American postmodernist writing. Three alleged practitioners of that mode—William Gass, John Hawkes, and myself—were even there as live exhibits. The December annual convention of the Modern Language Association, just held in San Francisco, likewise scheduled a symposium on "the self in postmodernist fiction," a subtopic that takes the larger topic for granted.

From all this, one might innocently suppose that such a creature as postmodernism, with defined characteristics, is truly at large in our land. So I myself imagined when, in preparation for the Tübingen conference, and in response to being frequently labeled a postmodernist writer, I set about to learn what postmodernism is. I had a sense of *déjà vu*: About my very first published fiction, a 1950 undergraduate effort published in my university's quarterly magazine, a graduate-student critic wrote: "Mr. Barth alters that modernist dictum, 'the plain reader be damned': He removes the adjective." Could that, I wondered now, be postmodernism?

What I quickly discovered is that while some of the writers labeled as postmodernists, myself included, may happen to take the label with some seriousness, a principal activity of postmodernist critics (also called "metacritics" and "paracritics"), writing in postmodernist journals or speaking at postmodernist symposia, consists in disagreeing about what postmodernism is or ought to be, and thus about who should be admitted to the club—or clubbed into admission, depending upon the critic's view of the phenomenon and of particular writers.

Who are the postmodernists? By my count, the American fictionists most commonly included in the canon, besides the three of us at Tübingen, are Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Stanley Elkin, Thomas Pynchon, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Several of the critics I read widen the net to include Saul Bellow and Norman Mailer, different as those two writers would appear to be. Others look beyond the United States to Samuel Beckett, Jorge Luis Borges, and the late Vladimir Nabokov as engendering spirits of the "movement"; others yet insist upon including the late Raymond Queneau, the French "new novelists" Nathalie Sarraute, Michel Butor, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Robert Pinget, Claude Simon, and Claude Mauriac, the even newer French writers of the *Tel Quel* group, the Englishman John Fowles, and the expatriate Argentine Julio Cortázar. Some assert that such filmmakers as Michelangelo Antonioni, Federico Fellini, Jean-Luc Godard, and Alain Resnais are postmodernists. I myself will not join any literary club that doesn't include the expatriate Colombian Gabriel García Márquez and the semi-expatriate Italian Italo Calvino, of both of whom more presently. Anticipations of the "postmodernist literary aesthetic" have duly been traced through the great modernists of the first half of the twentieth century—T. S. Eliot, William Faulkner, André Gide, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, Robert Musil, Ezra Pound, Marcel Proust, Gertrude Stein, Miguel de Unamuno, Virginia Woolf—through their nineteenth-century predecessors—Alfred Jarry, Gustave Flaubert, Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, and E. T. A. Hoffmann—back to Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1767) and Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1615).

On the other hand, among certain commentators the sifting gets exceedingly fine. Professor Jerome Klinkowitz of Northern Iowa, for example, hails Barthelme and Vonnegut as the exemplary "postcontemporaries" of the American 1970s and consigns Pynchon and myself to some 1960ish outer darkness. I regard the novels of John Hawkes as examples of fine late modernism rather than of postmodernism (and I admire them no less for that). Others might regard most of Bellow, and Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, as comparatively premodernist, along with the works of such more consistently traditionalist American writers as John Cheever, Wallace Stegner, William Styron, or John Updike, for example (the last of whom, however, Ihab Hassan calls a modernist), or those of most of the leading British writers of this century (as contrasted with the Irish), or those of many of our contemporary American women writers of fiction, whose main literary concern, for better or worse, re-

touchstones among us—just as their interest in American films may be less in the stars and stories than in details of dress, furniture, the passing scene. It is sad, for a storyteller, to see his opinions read where his stories cannot be.

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mains the eloquent issuance of what the critic Richard Locke has called "secular news reports." Even among the productions of a given writer, distinctions can be and often are invoked. Joyce Carol Oates writes all over the aesthetical map. John Gardner's first two published novels I would call distinctly modernist works; his short stories dabble in postmodernism; his polemical nonfiction is aggressively reactionary. Italo Calvino, on the other hand, began as an Italian new-realist (in *The Path to the Nest of Spiders*, 1947) and matured into an exemplary postmodernist (with e.g., *Cosmicomics*, 1965, and *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, 1969) who on occasion rises, sinks, or merely shifts to modernism (e.g., *Invisible Cities*, 1972). My own novels and stories seem to me to have both modernist and postmodernist attributes, even occasional premodernist attributes.

One certainly does have a sense of having been through this before. Indeed, some of us who have been publishing fiction since the 1950s have had the interesting experience of being praised or damned in that decade as existentialists and in the early 1960s as black humorists. Had our professional careers antedated the Second World War, we would no doubt have been praised or damned as modernists, in the distinguished company listed above. Now we are praised or damned as postmodernists.

Well, but what *is* postmodernism? When one leaves off the mere recitation of proper names, and makes due allowance for the differences among any given author's works, do the writers most often called postmodernist share any aesthetic principles or practices as significant as the differences between them? The term itself, like "post-impressionism," is awkward and faintly epigonic, suggestive less of a vigorous or even interesting new direction in the old art of storytelling than of something anticlimactic, feebly following a very hard act to follow. One is reminded of the early James Joyce's fascination with the word *gnomon* in its negative geometrical sense: the figure that remains when a parallelogram has been removed from a similar but larger parallelogram with which it shares a common corner.

My Johns Hopkins colleague Professor Hugh Kenner, though he does not use the term postmodernist, clearly feels that way in his study of American modernist writers (*A Homemade World*, 1975): After a chapter on William Faulkner entitled "The Last Novelist," he dismisses Nabokov, Pynchon, and Barth with a sort of sigh. The later John Gardner goes even farther in his tract *On Moral Fiction* (1978), an exercise in literary kneecapping that lumps modernists and postmodernists together without

distinction and consigns us all to Hell with the indiscriminate fervor characteristic of late converts to the right. Irving Howe (*The Decline of the New*, 1970) and George P. Elliott (*The Modernist Deviation*, 1971) would applaud—Professor Howe perhaps less enthusiastically than Professor Elliott. Professor Gerald Graff of Northwestern University, writing in *Tri-Quarterly* in 1975, takes a position somewhat similar to Kenner's, as the titles of two of his admirable essays make clear: "The Myth of the Postmodernist Breakthrough" (*Tri-Quarterly* 26) and "Babbitt at the Abyss" (*Tri-Quarterly* 33). Professor Robert Alter of Berkeley, in the same magazine, subtitles his essay on postmodernist fiction "reflections on the aftermath of modernism." Both critics proceed to a qualified sympathy for what they take to be the postmodernist program (as does Professor Ihab Hassan of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in his 1971 study *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: towards a postmodern literature*), and both rightly proceed from the premise that that program is in some respects an extension of the program of modernism, in other respects a reaction against it. The term *postmodernism* clearly suggests both; any discussion of it must therefore either presume that modernism in its turn, at this hour of the world, needs no definition—surely everybody knows what modernism is!—or else must attempt after all to define or redefine that predominant aesthetic of Western literature (and music, painting, sculpture, architecture, and the rest) in the first half of this century.

Professor Alter takes the former course: His aforementioned essay opens with the words "Over the past two decades, as the high tide of modernism ebbed and its masters died off . . ." and proceeds without further definition to the author's reflections upon the ensuing low tide. Professor Graff, on the other hand, borrowing from Professor Howe, makes a useful quick review of the conventions of literary modernism before discussing the mode of fiction which, in his words, "departs not only from realistic conventions but from modernist ones as well."

It is good that he does, for it is not only *postmodernism* that lacks definition in our standard reference books. My *Oxford English Dictionary* attests *modernism* to 1737 (Jonathan Swift, in a letter to Alexander Pope) and *Modernist* to 1588, but neither term in the sense we mean. My *American Heritage Dictionary* (1973) gives as its fourth and last definition of *modernism* "the theory and practice of modern art," a definition which does not take us very far into our American Heritage. My *Columbia Encyclopedia* (1975) discusses modernism only in the theological sense—the reinterpretation of Christian doctrine in the light of modern psychologi-



cal and scientific discoveries—and follows this with an exemplary entry on *el modernismo*, a nineteenth-century Spanish literary movement which influenced the "Generation of '98" and inspired the *ultrismo* of which Jorge Luis Borges was a youthful exponent. Neither my *Reader's Encyclopedia* (1950) nor my *Reader's Guide to Literary Terms* (1960) enters *modernism* by any definition whatever, much less *postmodernism*.

Now, as a working writer who cut his literary teeth on Eliot, Joyce, Kafka, and the other great modernists, and who is currently branded as a postmodernist, and who in fact has certain notions, no doubt naïve, about what that term might conceivably mean if it is to describe anything very good very well, I am grateful to the likes of Professor Graff for not regarding his categories as self-defining. It is quite one thing to compare a line of Verdi or Tennyson or Tolstoy with a line of Stravinsky or Eliot or Joyce and to recognize that you have put the nineteenth century behind you:

Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. (Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, tr. Constance Garnett)

riverrun, past Eve's and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodious vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs. (James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*)

It is quite another thing to characterize the differences between those two famous opening sentences, to itemize the aesthetic principles—premodernist and modernist—from which each issues, and then to proceed to a great postmodernist opening sentence and show where its aesthetics resemble and differ from those of its parents, so to speak, and those of its grandparents, respectively:

Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice. (Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, tr. Gregory Rabassa)

Professor Graff does not do this, exactly, though no doubt he could if pressed. But I shall borrow his useful checklist of the characteristics of modernist fiction, add a few items to it, summarize as typical his and Professor Alter's differing characterizations of postmodernist fiction, disagree with them respectfully in some particulars, and then fall silent, except as a storyteller.

The ground motive of modernism, Graff asserts, was criticism of the nineteenth-century bourgeois social order and its world view. Its artistic strategy was the self-conscious overturning of the conventions of bourgeois realism by such tactics and devices as the substitution of a "mythical" for a "realistic" method and the "manipulation of conscious parallels between contemporaneity and antiquity" (Graff is here quoting T. S. Eliot on James Joyce's *Ulysses*); also the radical disruption of the linear flow of narrative, the frustration of conventional expectations concerning unity and coherence of plot and character and the cause-and-effect "development" thereof, the deployment of ironic and ambiguous juxtapositions to call into question the moral and philosophical "meaning" of literary action, the adoption of a tone of epistemological self-mockery aimed at the naïve pretensions of bourgeois rationality, the opposition of inward consciousness to rational, public, objective discourse, and an inclination to subjective distortion to point up the evanescence of the objective social world of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie.

This checklist strikes me as reasonable, if somewhat depressing from our historical perspective. I would add to it the modernists' insistence, borrowed from their romantic forebears, on the special, usually alienated role of the artist in his society, or outside it: James Joyce's priestly, self-exiled artist-hero; Thomas Mann's artist as charlatan, or mountebank; Franz Kafka's artist as anorexic, or bug. I would add too, what is no doubt implicit in Graff's catalogue, the modernists' foregrounding of language and technique as opposed to straightforward traditional "content": We remember Thomas Mann's remark (in *Tonio Kröger*, 1903), "... what an artist talks about is never the main point"; a remark which echoes Gustave Flaubert's to Louise Colet in 1852—"... what I could like to do ... is write a book about nothing ..."—and which anticipates Alain Robbe-Grillet's *obiter dictum* of 1957: "... the genuine writer has nothing to say ... He has only a way of speaking." Roland Barthes sums up this fall from innocence and ordinary content on the part of modernist literature in *Writing Degree Zero* (1953):

... the whole of literature, from Flaubert to the present day, became the problematics of language.

This is French hyperbole: It is enough to say that one cardinal preoccupation of the modernists was the problematics, not simply of language, but of the medium of literature.

Now, for Professor Alter, Professor Hassan, and others, *postmodernist* fiction merely emphasizes the "performing" self-consciousness and self-reflexiveness of modernism, in a spirit of cultural subversiveness and anarchy. With varying results, they maintain, postmodernist writers write a fiction that is more and more about itself and its processes, less and less about objective reality and life in the world. For Graff, too, postmodern fiction simply carries to its logical and questionable extremes the antirationalist, antirealist, antibourgeois program of modernism, but with neither a solid adversary (the bourgeois having now everywhere co-opted the trappings of modernism and turned its defiant principles into mass-media kitsch) nor solid moorings in the quotidian realism it defines itself against. From this serious charge Graff exempts certain postmodernist satire, in particular the fiction of Donald Barthelme, Saul Bellow, and Stanley Elkin, as managing to be vitalized by the same kitschy society that is its target.

I must say that all this sounds persuasive to me—until I examine more closely what I'm so inclined to nod my head yes to.

It goes without saying that critical categories are as more or less fishy as they are less or more useful. I happen to believe that just as an excellent teacher is likely to teach well no matter what pedagogical theory he suffers from, so a gifted writer is likely to rise above what he takes to be his aesthetic principles, not to mention what *others* take to be his aesthetic principles. Indeed, I believe that a truly splendid specimen in whatever aesthetic mode will pull critical ideology along behind it, like an ocean liner trailing seagulls. Actual artists, actual texts, are seldom more than more or less modernist, postmodernist, formalist, symbolist, realist, surrealist, politically committed, aesthetically "pure," "experimental," regionalist, internationalist, what have you. The particular work ought always to take primacy over contexts and categories. On the other hand, art lives in human time and history, and general changes in its modes and materials and concerns, even when not obviously related to changes in technology, are doubtless as significant as the changes in a culture's general attitudes, which its arts may both inspire and reflect. Some are more or less trendy and superficial, some may be indicative of more or less deep malaises, some perhaps healthy correctives of or reactions against such malaises. In any case, we can't readily discuss what artists aspire to do and what they end up doing except in terms of aesthetic categories, and so we should look further at this approximately shared impulse called postmodernism.

In my view, if it has no other and larger possibilities than those noted by, for example, Professors Alter, Graff, and Hassan, then postmodernist writing is indeed a kind of pallid, last-ditch decadence, of no more than minor symptomatic interest. There is no lack of actual texts illustrative of this view of the "postmodernist breakthrough"; but that is only to remind us that what Paul Valéry remarked of an earlier generation applies to ours as well: "Many ape the postures of modernity, without understanding their necessity." In my view, the proper program for postmodernism is neither a mere extension of the modernist program as described above, nor a mere intensification of certain aspects of modernism, nor on the contrary a wholesale subversion or repudiation of either modernism or what I'm calling premodernism: "traditional" bourgeois realism.

To go back a moment to our catalogue of the field-identification marks of modernist writing: Two other conspicuous ones are not yet there acknowledged, except by implication. On the one hand, James Joyce and the other great modernists set very high standards of artistry, no doubt implicit in their preoccupation with the special remove of the artist from his or her society. On the other hand, we have their famous relative difficulty of access, inherent in their antilinearity, their aversion to conventional characterization and cause-and-effect dramaturgy, their celebration of private, subjective experience over public experience, their general inclination to "metaphoric" as against "metonymic" means. (But this difficulty is *not* inherent, it is important to note, in their high standards of craftsmanship.)

From this relative difficulty of access, what Hassan calls their aristocratic cultural spirit, comes of course the relative unpopularity of modernist fiction, outside of intellectual circles and university curricula, by contrast with the fiction of, say, Dickens, Twain, Hugo, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy. From it comes also and notoriously the engenderment of a necessary priestly industry of explicators, annotators, allusion-chasers, to mediate between the text and the reader. If we need a guide, or a guidebook, to steer us through Homer or Aeschylus, it is because the world of the text is so distant from our own, as it presumably was not from Aeschylus's and Homer's original audiences. But with *Finnegans Wake* or Ezra Pound's *Cantos* we need a guide because of the inherent and immediate difficulty of the text. We are told that Bertolt Brecht, out of socialist conviction, kept on his writing desk a toy donkey bearing the sign *Even I must understand it*; the high modernists might aptly have put on their desks a professor-of-literature doll bearing, unless its specialty happened to be

the literature of high modernism, the sign *Not even I can understand it*.

I do not say this in deprecation of these great writers and their sometimes brilliant explicators. If modernist works are often forbidding and require a fair amount of help and training to appreciate, it does not follow that they are not superbly rewarding, as climbing Mount Matterhorn must be, or sailing a small boat around the world. To return to our subject: Let us agree with the commonplace that the rigidities and other limitations of nineteenth-century bourgeois realism, in the light of turn-of-the-century theories and discoveries in physics, psychology, anthropology, technology, etc., prompted or fueled the great adversary reaction called modernist art—which came to terms with our new ways of thinking about the world at the frequent expense of democratic access, of immediate or at least ready delight, and often of political responsibility (the politics of Eliot, Joyce, Pound, Nabokov, and Borges, for example, are notoriously inclined either to nonexistence or to the far right). But in North America, in western and northern Europe, in the United Kingdom, in Japan, and in some of Central and South America, at least, these nineteenth-century rigidities are virtually no more. The modernist aesthetic is in my opinion unquestionably the characteristic aesthetic of the first half of our century—and in my opinion it *belongs* to the first half of our century. The present reaction against it is perfectly understandable and to be sympathized with, both because the modernist coinages are by now more or less debased common currency and because we really don't need more *Finnegans Wakes* and *Pisan Cantos*, each with its staff of tenured professors to explain it to us.

But I deplore the artistic and critical cast of mind that repudiates the whole modernist enterprise as an aberration and sets to work as if it hadn't happened; that rushes back into the arms of nineteenth-century middle-class realism as if the first half of the twentieth century hadn't happened. It *did* happen: Freud and Einstein and two world wars and the Russian and sexual revolutions and automobiles and airplanes and telephones and radios and movies and urbanization, and now nuclear weaponry and television and microchip technology and the new feminism and the rest, and except as readers there's no going back to Tolstoy and Dickens. As the Russian writer Evgeny Zamyatin was already saying in the 1920s (in his essay *On Literature, Revolution, and Entropy*): "Euclid's world is very simple, and Einstein's world is very difficult; nevertheless, it is now impossible to return to Euclid's."

On the other hand, it is no longer necessary, if it ever was, to repudi-

ate them, either: the great premodernists. If the modernists, carrying the torch of romanticism, taught us that linearity, rationality, consciousness, cause and effect, naïve illusionism, transparent language, innocent anecdote, and middle-class moral conventions are not the whole story, then from the perspective of these closing decades of our century we may appreciate that the contraries of those things are not the whole story either. Disjunction, simultaneity, irrationalism, anti-illusionism, self-reflexiveness, medium-as-message, political olympianism, and a moral pluralism approaching moral entropy—these are not the whole story either.

A worthy program for postmodernist fiction, I believe, is the synthesis or transcension of these antitheses, which may be summed up as premodernist and modernist modes of writing. My ideal postmodernist author neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his twentieth-century modernist parents or his nineteenth-century premodernist grandparents. He has the first half of our century under his belt, but not on his back. Without lapsing into moral or artistic simplism, shoddy craftsmanship, Madison Avenue venality, or either false or real naïveté, he nevertheless aspires to a fiction more democratic in its appeal than such late-modernist marvels (by my definition) as Beckett's *Texts for Nothing* or Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. He may not hope to reach and move the devotees of James Michener and Irving Wallace—not to mention the great mass of television-addicted non-readers. But he *should* hope to reach and delight, at least part of the time, beyond the circle of what Mann used to call the Early Christians: professional devotees of high art.

I feel this in particular for practitioners of the novel, a genre whose historical roots are famously and honorably in middle-class popular culture. The ideal postmodernist novel will somehow rise above the quarrel between realism and irrealism, formalism and "contentism," pure and committed literature, coterie fiction and junk fiction. Alas for professors of literature, it may not need as much *teaching* as Joyce's or Nabokov's or Pynchon's books, or some of my own. On the other hand, it will not wear its heart on its sleeve, either; at least not its whole heart. (In a recent published exchange between William Gass and John Gardner, Gardner declares that he wants everybody to love his books; Gass replies that he would no more want his books to be loved by everybody than he'd want his daughter to be loved by everybody, and suggests that Gardner is confusing love with promiscuity.) My own analogy would be with good jazz or classical music: One finds much on successive listenings or close examination of the score that one didn't catch the first time through; but the

first time through should be so ravishing—and not just to specialists—that one delights in the replay.

Lest this postmodern synthesis sound both sentimental and impossible of attainment, I offer two quite different examples of works which I believe approach it, as perhaps such giants as Dickens and Cervantes may be said to anticipate it. The first and more tentative example (it is not meant to be a blockbuster) is Italo Calvino's *Cosmicomics* (1965): beautifully written, enormously appealing space-age fables—"perfect dreams," John Updike has called them—whose materials are as modern as the new cosmology and as ancient as folktales, but whose themes are love and loss, change and permanence, illusion and reality, including a good deal of specifically Italian reality. Like all fine fantasists, Calvino grounds his flights in local, palpable detail: Along with the nebulae and the black holes and the lyricism, there is a nourishing supply of pasta, bambini, and good-looking women sharply glimpsed and gone forever. A true postmodernist, Calvino keeps one foot always in the narrative past—characteristically the Italian narrative past of Boccaccio, Marco Polo, or Italian fairy tales—and one foot in, one might say, the Parisian structuralist present; one foot in fantasy, one in objective reality, etc. It is appropriate that he has, I understand, been chastized from the left by the Italian communist critics and from the right by the Italian Catholic critics; it is symptomatic that he has been praised by fellow authors as divergent as John Updike, Gore Vidal, and myself. I urge everyone to read Calvino at once, beginning with *Cosmicomics* and going right on, not only because he exemplifies my postmodernist program, but because his fiction is both delicious and high in protein.

An even better example is Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967): as impressive a novel as has been written so far in the second half of our century and one of the splendid specimens of that splendid genre from any century. Here the synthesis of straightforwardness and artifice, realism and magic and myth, political passion and nonpolitical artistry, characterization and caricature, humor and terror, are so remarkably sustained that one recognizes with exhilaration very early on, as with *Don Quixote* and *Great Expectations* and *Huckleberry Finn*, that one is in the presence of a masterpiece not only artistically admirable, but humanly wise, lovable, literally marvelous. One had almost forgotten that new fiction could be so wonderful as well as so merely important. And the question whether my program for postmodernism is achievable goes happily out the window, like one of García Márquez's

characters on flying carpets. Praise be to the Spanish language and imagination! As Cervantes stands as an exemplar of premodernism and a great precursor of much to come, and Jorge Luis Borges as an exemplar of *der-nier cri* modernism and at the same time as a bridge between the end of the nineteenth century and the end of the twentieth, so Gabriel García Márquez is in that enviable succession: an exemplary postmodernist and a master of the storyteller's art.

A dozen years ago I published in these pages a much-misread essay called "The Literature of Exhaustion," occasioned by my admiration for the stories of Señor Borges and by my concern, in that somewhat apocalyptic place and time, for the ongoing health of narrative fiction. (The time was the latter 1960s; the place Buffalo, N.Y., on a university campus embattled by tear-gassing riot police and tear-gassed Vietnam War protesters, while from across the Peace Bridge in Canada came Professor Marshall McLuhan's siren song that we "print-oriented bastards" were obsolete.) The simple burden of my essay was that the forms and modes of art live in human history and are therefore subject to used-upness, at least in the minds of significant numbers of artists in particular times and places: in other words, that artistic conventions are liable to be retired, subverted, transcended, transformed, or even deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work. I would have thought that point unexceptionable. But a great many people—among them, I fear, Señor Borges himself—mistook me to mean that literature, at least fiction, is *kaput*; that it has all been done already; that there is nothing left for contemporary writers but to parody and travesty our great predecessors in our exhausted medium—exactly what some critics deplore as postmodernism.

That is not what I meant at all. Leaving aside the celebrated fact that, with *Don Quixote*, the novel may be said to *begin* in self-transcendent parody and has often returned to that mode for its refreshment, let me say at once and plainly that I agree with Borges that literature can never be exhausted, if only because no single literary text can ever be exhausted—its "meaning" residing as it does in its transactions with individual readers over time, space, and language. I like to remind misreaders of my earlier essay that written literature is in fact about 4,500 years old (give or take a few centuries depending on one's definition of literature), but that we have no way of knowing whether 4,500 years constitutes senility, maturity, youth, or mere infancy. The number of splendid sayable things—metaphors for the dawn or the sea, for example—is doubtless finite; it is



also doubtless very large, perhaps virtually infinite. In some moods we writers may feel that Homer had it easier than we, getting there early with his rosy-fingered dawn and his wine-dark sea. We should console ourselves that one of the earliest extant literary texts (an Egyptian papyrus of ca. 2000 B.C., cited by Walter Jackson Bate in his 1970 study *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet*) is a complaint by the scribe Khakheperresneb that he has arrived on the scene too late:

Would I had phrases that are not known, utterances that are strange, in new language that has not been used, free from repetition, not an utterance that has grown stale, which men of old have spoken.

What my essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" was really about, so it seems to me now, was the effective "exhaustion" not of language or of literature, but of the aesthetic of high modernism: that admirable, not-to-be-repudiated, but essentially completed "program" of what Hugh Kenner has dubbed "the Pound era." In 1966/67 we scarcely had the term *postmodernism* in its current literary-critical usage—at least I hadn't heard it yet—but a number of us, in quite different ways and with varying combinations of intuitive response and conscious deliberation, were already well into the working out, not of the next-best thing after modernism, but of the *best next* thing: what is gropingly now called postmodernist fiction; what I hope might also be thought of one day as a literature of replenishment.

## The Self in Fiction, or, "That Ain't No Matter. That Is Nothing."

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THE PRECEDING Friday-piece mentions a Modern Language Association symposium in San Francisco on the subject "The Self in Postmodernist Fiction." By the time the symposium was held—December 27, 1979—the topic had been broadened to "The Self in Fiction," a subject too general for meaningful discourse. The symposium was, therefore, like many another, no symposium at all: However individually interesting the presentations, they had little to do with one another. Their most apparent common ground was their authors' wish to spend a few days in San Francisco.

That was a wish I shared, and so like my fellow symposiasts—the rest of them high-tech scholars indeed—I rode my hobby-horse of the moment. Norman Holland, of SUNY/Buffalo, spoke of psychoanalysis and fairy tales. My Johns Hopkins colleague Stanley Fish spoke of the act of reading. J. Hillis Miller, of Yale, spoke of Hegel and Nietzsche. Benjamin DeMott, of Amherst, disapproved of both narcissism and incest. I spoke as best I could of the self in fiction.

Our topic is The Self in Fiction. In order to speak to it from the only competence I can bring to the subject—as a self myself who in fact writes fiction in the second half of the twentieth century—I shall set three limitations upon my remarks.

First, I'll consider only one category of the self in fiction: namely, the authorial self: the self of the writer him- or herself, participating in his or her own inventions.

Second, I'll consider only one aspect of the authorial self in fiction: namely, authorial self-consciousness, often manifested as narrative self-reflexiveness and usually condemned as the last-ditch decadence of modern self-consciousness in general.