

"Strange Displacements of the Ordinary": Apple, Elkin, Barthelme, and the Problem of the Excluded Middle

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1

Of course one knew it hadn't died—had glimpsed it at the supermarket, observed it at the movies, was aware of it wheezing in one's livingroom. But it had surely seen its best days, had, as one of the specialists on the case observed, "shifted from the peaks to the deadly plains of contemporary literature."¹ On the other hand, and as later events showed, one ought to have been more observant, ought to have taken in the significance of the signs, scattered though they were: get-well cards from Gerald Graff, greetings from David Lodge, a bouquet from Linda Nochlin.² But then friends naturally expect the best, hoping against the evidence. Actually, it was the confirmation by *The Times* that forced a reconsideration of the whole matter, made one realize—however hard it was to believe—that after so many relapses realism was back, vital as ever. One couldn't be mistaken; *The Book Review*, despite its unassertive deference to various experts, knew. Listen: "As we move into the 80's, what is happening to fiction? Is it becoming more realistic and less experimental? Are writers more concerned with historical and nonfictional material and less interested in being 'self-referential,' in writing about writing? Are we really living, as one critic put it, in a Golden Age of the American Novel?"³

The final question, vibrant with capitals, is the giveaway, a collective sigh of relief—heartfelt for all its tentative indirection, confident for all its wide-eyed wonder—at sanity's return. Why exactly the thought of realism's renaissance should induce such relief is another matter, best postponed for the moment. The more immediate problem is to isolate the major assumptions that underlie *The Book Review's* essentially rhetorical questions and, further, to determine their source. The assumptions, which are neither especially profound nor original—but which are for that reason all the more seductive and misleading—can be formulated as follows: 1) experimental fiction of the last few decades defines itself essentially, even exclusively, by its adherence to the strategies and beliefs of reflexive writing; 2) realism and experimentalism describe mutually exclusive modes of perceiving and rendering the world that, between them, exhaust the possibilities of contemporary literature; and 3) the supposed decline of experimental fiction entails the ascendancy of its putative rival.

It's easy enough to understand the attraction of these propositions. Eminently simple and elegant, they gratify our age's need to make sense of vertiginous change and, in the seesaw model of development they imply, they make the dynamics of change itself comprehensible. But at a cost. The coherence and persuasiveness of *The Book Review's* covert judgments depend upon our willingness to accept the unexamined terms that effectively shape those judgments and that, in their monolithic force, smooth out all the rough variousness of contemporary literature. Or, to put the matter more directly, by constricting the notion of experimentalism too narrowly and the sense of realism too broadly, it becomes possible, indeed necessary, to overlook a large body of work that eludes both categories.

That work is the subject of this essay, but before coming to it directly, I want to pause briefly over those antithetical elements from which *The Times's* symmetries are fashioned. To begin with the somewhat less perplexed of the terms: I've intimated already that the equation of reflexive with experimental writing is a case of the part swallowing the whole and arrogating to itself the claims and titles of its more versatile relation. Taken by itself, reflexivity, at least in its most recent incarnation, is in every way an altogether smaller affair than *The Book Review's* urgently singleminded questions suggest; and one is tempted to respond to the claims made for it (and by it) with no more than an empirical shrug: a simple listing of names—Elkin, say, or Apple, Charyn, Boyle, Irving, Pynchon—of writers whose novels and stories demand to be thought of as experimental, certainly, but not primarily, or at all, as self-referential. Further, if one excludes from the ranks of reflexivists—and the exclusion seems to me a plausible one—others like Barthelme and Coover whose allegiance is sporadic or partial and restricts the term to those like Gass, Federman, Sukenick, and the Barth of *Lost in the Funhouse* whose concern is entirely and wholeheartedly with "writing about writing," it becomes easier still to identify self-consciously reflexive writing as

no more than one component of the far larger and more heterogeneous mix that constitutes experimental fiction today.

Reflexivity is best viewed, then, as experimentalism's far-left wing, its most boisterous, theoretical, and self-congratulatory faction, and its most obvious, if not its most legitimate, claimant to the mantle of the avant-garde. That writing of this kind—or, to give it some of its more fashionable and provocative names, meta-, Sur-, Super-, or post-contemporary fiction—possesses any less of a following today than it has had during the last ten or fifteen years seems to me, *The Times* notwithstanding, doubtful. Probably it comes closer to the truth to say that, as such fiction has become less unfamiliar and therefore less threatening, it has increased slightly its margin of actual readers. At the same time, since postmodern reflexive writing remains a rather special, not to say exotic, taste, its status in purely quantitative terms hardly seems to matter very much. What does matter is that the attention bestowed on it by its patient and resolute followers has more to do with the prominence of metacriticism—in particular the Barthesian notion that literature, as one among many self-enclosed sign systems, presents us in our search for reality with nothing more than an always receding series of semiotic copies—than it does with the intrinsic worth of metafiction itself. Or, rather, that its vitality and interest are largely a function of the theories it so self-consciously and relentlessly seeks to illustrate.

How faithfully it illustrates them is a different and more complex question. Proclaiming his twin beliefs that "to create fiction is, in fact, a way to abolish reality" and that "there cannot be any truth nor any reality exterior to fiction," Raymond Federman, the most articulate and energetic of the Surfictionists, celebrates the liberation of imagination and invention.⁴ And, as a corollary, the superfluity of those formal imperatives that are the most potent emblem of modernism's response to the world: "It [the new fiction] will be deliberately illogical, irrational, unrealistic, non sequitur, and incoherent" (p. 13). And indeed, measured against the modernists, with their urgent desire for order and control, postmodernism's aesthetic radicals seem at first glance to be engaged in an altogether more robust, spontaneous, and freewheeling enterprise: a release, it would appear, of long pent-up energies. But appearances are in this case more than usually deceptive. Ostensibly welcoming the world's chaos, writers like Sukenick and Federman come close to depriving it of its substantiality, as the modernist balance of art and life or, more accurately, the overwhelming tension of constraining and resistant forces, gives way to far more reductive, abstracting forms of order, which operate in the name of free play but in the service of an imperiously transformative, idealizing consciousness. In short, at issue is a contemporary, covert aestheticism whose manifestations are ultimately to be found in structures that, for all their ostensible incoherence, in reality betray the ordering coercions of the artist's subjectivity. Indeed, reading the Surfictionists or, still more, William Gass, one often experiences a shock of eerie recognition, as the mangled shadow of significant form

falls raggedly across the page; but in these instances form functions neither as an avenue to reality nor as its counterweight but as a notably peculiar mirror, which reflects from its deliberately fragmented and randomized surface an image more controlled and controlling than any imagined by the modernists. That image, I'm suggesting, is of the self (the nonexistent self, as it is seen by these writers), which, substituting for an engagement with the world its invention, validates only its own identity: its unacknowledged status as the inheritor of the Romantic and modernist traditions—and, ultimately, their dead end.

All of this is to say that contemporary reflexive writing generally compromises the interaction of fiction and reality, the "play of competing ontologies," that Robert Alter postulates as the basis of what he calls the "self-conscious novel"; and one understands why considerably fewer novelists than critics are willing (except when, as so often among Surfictionists, the two are the same) to subscribe to the dogmas of current reflexivist theory—and in particular to the arrogant claims made for the constituting imagination, which, lacking modernism's always troubled and dialectical awareness of the imperial mind confronting a recalcitrant world, effectively deprive literature of all its referential function.

To maintain that literature is referential is not, however, to suggest, as Gerald Graff does, that it is therefore realistic or that writers whose work demonstrates a concern with the world are for that reason to be regarded as realists. Elaborating on Karl Popper's response to Kant ("Our knowledge of the world . . . owes as much to the resisting reality as to our self-produced ideas"), Graff argues: "It is this 'resisting reality' that the current way of talking about fictions fails to respect. Certain common experiences of this resisting reality possess so high a degree of unrefusability that they have the force of givens in our everyday experience. . . . The reality of the physical world, the inevitability of death, the social nature of man, the irrevocability of historical events and changes—these are facts we cannot possibly *not* know, though we can argue infinitely about their significance and how we ought to understand them" (*LAI*, p. 204). Now, given so sane and undogmatic a defense of the facticity of our experience, it is hard to imagine anyone (other than the reflexivists I've been discussing) likely to refuse the evidence of a reality independent of our impositions and indeed at least partly determinative of our perceptions. On the other hand, so minimal a notion of what it is we share (note Graff's final, concessive clause) can hardly be said to provide the grounds for a new realism, even if it succeeds in refuting the extreme presuppositions of reflexivity. Elsewhere in his study Graff writes: "My assumption throughout this book has been the simple one that writing requires a convincing understanding of the world" (*LAI*, p. 207), but surely, in these vexed times at least, the assumption is anything but simple—in fact contravenes most writers' sense of the dynamics of their undertaking.

No doubt it is true (the point is central to Graff's discussion)

that "even a work which asserts that truth is totally problematic, unknowable, relative, or a function of multiple perspectives makes the same kind of truth-claim as do such assertions outside of literature" (*LAI*, p. 162). But formulated more narrowly, the proposition inevitably becomes more questionable. Consider, for example, this statement: "The perception that reality is problematic is itself a mimetic perception, presupposing an objective distance between the observer and what he observes" (*LAI*, p. 11). If "objective distance" signals no more than the minimal detachment necessary to articulate one's sense of the world's indeterminacy, there is no need to quarrel. (One need not, after all, be very far removed from any phenomenon, nor need one see it steadily and whole, in order to react to it.) But if, as seems likely, the phrase implies some Archimedean point from which we can, without obscurity or obstruction, take the world's measure and render it back with manifest accuracy and fidelity, then something far less self-evident is at stake: namely, the possibility of a distinctively mimetic fiction.

Recent defenders of mimesis tend, on the whole, to ground their arguments in two claims. It is held, first of all, that literature is capable of representing, actually of re-presenting, reality. But for a good many of today's writers and thinkers the world offers itself not as a fully realized datum but as a potential to be activated by human beings situated directly in its midst. The task becomes, then, not one of re-presentation but (as Graff, whose incidental remarks are often more flexible than his central point, sometimes concedes) of re-creation. So Pierre Thévenaz writes: "Consciousness 'lives' itself immanently, as the giver of sense, as the source of meaning for the world." And if one accepts this phenomenological position, in which consciousness and the world reciprocally imply one another, and accepts in addition the parallel between our way of perceiving and our mode of translating our perceptions into works of art, it follows that mimesis (unless one defines the term as broadly and plially as Auerbach does) contravenes our experiential and aesthetic response to the world, our sense that the world, though determinative of our perceptions and of our literature as well, is not therefore their final and fully determinate cause.

Graff's call for "a representation of the social world" (*LAI*, p. 221) leads to the second of the claims made on behalf of mimesis: the assertion that, because of its resistance to "our self-produced ideas," reality emerges from the manipulative grip of idealism as not only personally but *collectively* significant. Our conjured world becomes, *sub specie rationis*, a shared world: the locus of common meanings available to any mind unclouded by the shadows of latter-day subjectivities. But this is surely to make things too simple. The "unrefusability" of certain aspects of our experience in no way guarantees the inherent purposefulness or coherence of experience as a whole; and if writers feel the need to reconstitute rather than reproduce their world, it is because that world is perceived less as the arena of the problematic than as its source. In what is probably the

best book on the subject, J. P. Stern speaks of realism in terms of "a fundamental assent" (OR, p. 44) and, again, of "a rudimentary approval of the world" (OR, p. 76). This important point is modified to a degree and subtilized in a later remark: "Reality," Stern writes, "may well be nothing nobler, or more stable, or less contingent, than 'the *fable convenue* of the philistines'; indeed, not much fastidiousness is needed to look askance at those who would greatly extol its virtues. But, whatever else may be said for or against them, the realists don't worship at its shrine, or at any other. They merely take reality for granted" (OR, p. 145).⁹ But taking reality for granted is precisely what contemporary experimental writers do not and cannot do; and however much one may agree with Graff about the referential nature of even the most chaos-ridden literature, it remains difficult, in the absence of Stern's "shared reality" (OR, p. 145), to see such writing as, in any strict sense, mimetic or realistic.

This is not to say that realism is impossible today—only that it is not, any more than Surfiction, a major option for most serious writers. (There are exceptions, naturally; and I don't mean to minimize the work of such novelists.) Indicative and subjunctive, realism and reflexivity mark out the extremes of contemporary literature, leaving between them, as I suggested earlier, yet another class of works whose mood is one of interrogation: a questioning of, among other things, the validity of certainties—both those that take the world for granted and those that set it at naught (the dogmatically uncertain being no less absolute than its less self-conscious opposite). How to define this middle ground? Stern once again provides a clue, and I want to return to a remark I've already quoted, restoring it now to its context. "In realism," he suggests, "the relation that obtains between a work of literature and the world outside is positive, expressive of a fundamental assent, whereas in idealism it is negative, expressive of a problematic attitude toward the world," which is, in turn, based upon "a radical alienation and distancing from those given realities of life" (OR, p. 44). Recalling Graff's "objective distance," one notes, to begin with, just how slippery this particular metaphor of perspective is, functioning as it does, alternatively, as the essential condition of one mode of perception and the inevitable stigma of the other. But more to the point is the inadequacy of Stern's (and Graff's) binary categories. For the fiction I'm edging toward manages to combine the problematic *and* the assentive—though assent in this case is to be understood as strictly limited, qualified, and local: a gesture of affirmation against a background that remains, if not negative, at least refractory and contingent. Perceiving the world as neither objectively knowable nor as totally opaque, making reference to experience without pretending or indeed wishing to re-present it, such fiction comprises the tertium quid of current literature: experimentalism's poor relation, realism's militant and rebellious heir, but, finally, and most importantly, something independent of both—an integral, self-sufficient mode of apprehending and expressing the world, which, for want of an adequate designation, continues to languish in the out-back of current criticism.

The first order of business, then, is a name; the second, which will occupy the rest of this essay, its justification. But first things first. The name I want to propose, obviously on the model of metafiction but—because of the pronounced tilt of that useful and apparently durable term toward the reflexive—still more emphatically in contradistinction to it, is *midfiction*.¹⁰ The reasons for my choice have been partly suggested in the earlier discussion of referential, non-mimetic literature as an alternative tradition, a *via media* between the extremes of realism and reflexivity. Others will become apparent shortly when I engage a group of works intended both to justify and further illustrate the term; but before considering them I want to test briefly the usefulness of one other, more traditional classification, parable, whose generic (formal and methodological) properties strikingly resemble those to be found in the sort of novels and stories I'm concerned with here. (It is probably prudent, in any case, to exhaust the possibilities at hand before adding yet another newly minted term to our already abundant supply of critical neologisms.)

So, like what I'm calling midfiction (but unlike metafiction), parable founds itself on the interaction of plausible characters and consequent, if often unexpected, events in a narrative whose setting is deliberately and determinedly concrete, sensuous, and ordinary—though as a rule none of these features is developed as it is in the traditional, verisimilar novel. Like midfiction again, parable, especially as defined by recent commentators, intends to render more fluid and existential our sense of the world's meaning and, equally, of our connection with it. (Unlike realism, parables are not about the world but about human beings' relation to it.) As a consequence, the strategies of parable characteristically involve the exploitation of ambiguity and indirection and a preference for open over closed form. Which is to say that the pressure of meaning and therefore the summons to interpretation that parable and midfiction alike impose are in excess of anything narrative (even symbolic narrative) ordinarily exacts from its readers. Thus Thomas C. Oden, writing of Kierkegaard, comments that "the parables seek intensely to actualize what the whole authorship is after: to facilitate the birth of selfhood";¹¹ and Sallie McFague, probably the sanest and most comprehensive of recent theological critics, speaks of parable as "a highly risky, uncertain, and open-ended enterprise—a maneuver of desperation, if you will—in spite of the straightforward grammatical structure of a metaphorical statement" (metaphor being for her the basis of parable).¹²

It should probably be noted at this point, though other comparisons remain to be made, that, like other such capacious and supple genres, parable, while retaining a core of centrally defining features, lends itself to a process of continual alteration, whether by parabolists themselves in their reworking of the form or—and it comes to much the same thing—by critics intent on redefining it.

Thus the qualities I've been describing are to be seen at once as intrinsic to the tradition and as modifications of it; but it is the modifications that are most relevant to midfiction, and these are, in turn, the work of revisionary theologians like those I've just quoted, whose intention it has been in recent years to dislodge (once again) the orthodoxies of religious thought. More specifically, theologians are attempting to undermine the hegemony of systematic theology, to replace it with, or at any rate subordinate it to, a less dogmatic "intermediary or parabolic theology," justified by the belief that "the theological temper of our time is such that the form which holds the mystery in solution is more needed than the one that confronts it directly" (SP, pp. 2 and 81n).¹³ In short, analytical, propositional discourse is at a discount, and biblical parable, far from being, as dictionaries and literary handbooks have it, a simple moral tale, becomes, in Louis Marin's formulation, "a genre . . . whose characteristic is to offer itself immediately to interpretation while making it impossible to confine it to a univocal allegorization."¹⁴

A distaste for the discursive and paraphrasable is, of course, at the heart of modernism, and there is no question but that in its redefinition of the parabolic tradition intermediary theology owes a debt of some magnitude to modernist literature and criticism. But in its rejection of aesthetic self-sufficiency, in its demand for active engagement on the part of the reader or listener, it clearly exceeds its model and points on the one hand toward a looser, less autonomous conception of form and, on the other, toward a more exigent dynamics of response—that is, in the direction of postmodernism in general and of midfiction in particular. To quote McFague again: "The heart of the new hermeneutic project is . . . not the interpretation of the parables, but the interpretation of the listeners by the parables" (SP, p. 75), a belief that entails, not surprisingly, a stress "on confrontation and decision" (SP, p. 73) and an awareness that "the goal of a parable is finally in the realm of willing, not of knowing" (SP, p. 80).

Parable, then, in challenging both the passivity of our responses and the completed, perfected, autotelic quality of the work of art, raises fundamental questions about the moral effects and demands of literature upon us. But that problem is one I want to bracket for now, since a more immediate and more strictly aesthetic matter—specifically, how to distinguish parable (and midfiction) from other genres demands prior consideration. So, in suggesting, as I mean to do, that the final point of resemblance between parable and midfiction lies in the fact that each is recognizable as such by some technical *écart*, a formal swerve that bends or twists the work away from its own normative procedures, am I not saying what is true of *all* literature? My answer, obviously, is no, at any rate a qualified no; for it seems to me that whereas literature in general does in fact trade in deviance from established patterns (compare the notion of foregrounding), parabolic and midfictional works do so to a degree that makes, finally, for a difference in kind. Accomplished in a variety of ways (McFague instances "exaggeration, hyperbole, dislocations"

[SP, p. 78], and one could add such devices as paradox or radical tonal and narrative shifts), the parabolic swerve, or rather the very possibility of such a maneuver, depends upon the quality of the work's texture, upon a fabric that is neither (as in reflexive fiction) so heteroclitic as to blur the presence of the dissonant nor (as in realistic fiction) so uniform as to render the deviant improbable. It requires, in short, the kind of texture to be found in midfiction, which in this respect as well mediates the polarities of contemporary writing.

On the other hand and in deference to its adaptive capacities, it probably should be said that there is in all literature the *potential* for parable,¹⁵ although it is only when that potential is fully realized that we are, and know we are, in the presence of the thing itself. In any case, on this reading, midfiction would appear to be doubly (that is, virtually and actually) parabolic; and yet, while the analogy will continue to prove useful, it seems to me that one must at last reject the notion of the two as altogether congruous. The rock on which the identification founders is, of course, religion, for midfiction is essentially a secular form;¹⁶ and though McFague, for example, maintains that "parable is the form for a secular people" (SP, p. 141), though she instances *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a parabolic story, still, for all her openness to human complexity and doubt, her eye is, in the final analysis, on other worlds. It's worth quoting at some length from *Speaking in Parables* to observe the inevitable modulation of her argument as she approaches and then veers away from the consequences of a thoroughgoing skepticism: "When the narrative form lacks integrity" as it seems to for many contemporary novelists, it cannot," she insists with conviction, "be insisted upon. It may be that the parable, while itself a story of a certain kind, is a more appropriate genre for our time, for unlike more developed narratives it does not call for the same degree of faith in cosmic or even societal ordering. It is a more skeptical form with regard to such matters, insisting that the gap between the human and the transcendent is closed only through personal risk and decision." So far, so good, provided that one chooses not to dwell on or make overly explicit the allusion to the transcendent. Nevertheless, the first note has been sounded, and others follow, creating a music that is no less comforting for the distance of its sonorities. The passage continues: "It *only* insists that the secular and the human is the place of God's presence—a presence for the most part hidden under the ordinary events of everyday life. It insists, in other words, on faith, not on an ordered structure built into the nature of things upon which the individual can rely" (SP, p. 141; my italics).

What can one say to this measured and tolerant affirmation other than that *deus absconditus* is *deus* still, and that in his wake follows everything against which postmodernism reacts, notably, depth, distance, essentialism, and the belief that meaning is something not to be forged or generated but, with however much difficulty and uncertainty, to be discovered—and to be discovered, moreover (one is again reminded of modernism) in pursuit of "the desire for

fulfillment, for ultimate consummation, of one's entire being" (SP, p. 58)? Postmodernism's aims, at least those of midfiction, are more modest than this, as is its sense of possibility. In place of McFague's "experience of coming to belief" (SP, p. 120), midfictionists reveal the consequences of disbelief; instead of "faith in the ultimate reality of order and life,"¹⁷ their stories betray a sense of life's essential disorder; in response to "the basic parabolic impulse, the perception of the extraordinary in the ordinary" (SP, p. 173), they insist that the ordinary, in all its secularity, *is* extraordinary. In brief, what we are dealing with here is an attitude I have elsewhere called *suspensive*,¹⁸ that is, the recognition of life's randomness and contingency and the acceptance of that awareness as a condition of one's participation in the world. Given this indecisiveness about the meanings and relations of things and the nonmodernist willingness to make do without other, compensatory orders (we are, it needs to be stressed, in the presence of something more radical than McFague's "necessarily ... somewhat hidden and ambiguous" meaning [SP, p. 108]), reflexivism becomes an understandable temptation and realism, at its best (witness recent movements like photorealism or an artist like Philip Pearlstein), the fantasicated attempt to recuperate an innocence no longer quite feasible in our self-conscious times.

In a humorously plaintive acknowledgment of that impossibility, Max Apple, the first and most realistic-seeming of the writers I want to consider, delivered himself of the following miniature apologia: "This may sound crazier than any of my fiction, but I consider myself a realistic writer. I want to imitate Tolstoy or Chekhov but what happens is just like daily life. A few important characters take over, businessmen, fighters, promoters, aggressive types. When they start making trouble, I'm just a 120 pound weakling with a ball point trying to maintain a little order."¹⁹ The takeover is evident in a recent story called "Small Island Republics," which, as its opening line ("Inudo was probably the world's tallest Japanese-American")²⁰ and its title make clear, bases itself on the deceptively simple metaphor of size. Obviously physical and territorial in its application, the metaphor functions too and more importantly as an index to the psychology of its protagonist, supplementing and surrounding Inudo's own sense of contradiction ("He was big, very big, but he felt small and he understood smallness" [p. 120]) with far more subversive paradoxes whose full force emerges only at the story's end. In fact, it is only there, after much talk of helping "small island republics to maintain their identity" (p. 122) and with the hilarious and unexpected revelation (it is the story's *écart*) that Inudo has "saved" Taiwan by leasing it to an American corporation—"Taiwan, a no-man's land, becomes a Disneyland," he announces proudly. "What bananas are to so-called banana republics, electronics is to Disneyland. It was a marriage made in Heaven" (p. 125)—only there and then does the reader grasp completely the complexity of his character. An oversize man dreaming oversize dreams of smallness, his concern with smallness at the mercy of a *folie de grandeur* that means to correct the lapses of

history and forge the destiny of the twenty-first century, Inudo is an anticapitalistic capitalist, an anti-Western imperialist, who identifies with history's losers ("Hannibal of Carthage was his hero" [p. 113]) but skillfully masters the modern world's techniques of conglomeration.

But if the complexity of "Small Island Republics" is in part a function of the contradictions embodied in Slim Inudo, it is still more the result of the narrator's ambivalent attitude toward him, which announces itself in the story's first sentences: "Inudo was probably the world's tallest Japanese-American. Six-five-and-a-half barefoot, he also had extra measures of Oriental cunning and agility. He was good at basketball and paper folding. He honored his parents and got all As at Harvard where he majored in American history" (p. 113). Blandly reportorial, it seems, the description manipulates its hyperboles and incongruous juxtapositions in such a way as simultaneously to amuse and unsettle, thereby preparing us for the mixture of sympathy and irony that determines Apple's tone throughout. Or to put this another way, the story, as much as Inudo himself, embodies antithetical impulses, namely (and as in "The Oranging of America"), an admiration for enterprise and adventure and a typically postmodern preference for smallness. Furthermore—and this is the important point—if "Small Island Republics" seems in its final disclosure to pass judgment on Slim, inviting us as readers not only to share its insight into his self-deception but to make that insight the basis of some easy moral lesson, in fact it does something quite different. Recognizing that Taiwan's "merger with a corporate identity" (p. 125) does after all preserve its integrity (in perhaps the only way it can be preserved), we are forced by Apple to agree that if his hero's success is his failure, his failure is also his success.

It follows that "Small Island Republics" accepts the contradictions of which its protagonist is unaware and thus becomes, above all, a study in perspective. The "swerve" of the ending, we come to realize, has been prepared for from the start; and though thematically the story appears to attain a kind of ironic closure as Slim consummates his international deal, formally it opens out into a vision of far more unresolved and reverberating ironies, whose effect is to affirm, or at any rate to accept, the problematic, and whose source is Apple's always genial and quietly spirited voice, establishing the undogmatic tone of the fiction through the subtle variousness of its texture.

Part of this variousness derives from the chorus of other voices (his parents', his girlfriend's, his employer Bo Huang's) that surrounds Inudo and qualifies further our assessment of him and his final coup. For if all of these subsidiary characters agree with Bo Huang that Slim "is a giant, truly a giant, not in body alone" (p. 123), each interprets the perception, ruefully, hopefully, or confusedly, in his or her own way; and each is in turn the object of an irony that undermines that perception, dissolving its kernel of truth in a haze of wishes and desires. "Everywhere," Inudo announces, "the big eat the small. It may be pure physics, the whole universe as hungry as gravity" (p. 122);

but it is only fitfully, if at all, that the others glimpse their own status vis-à-vis the world's tallest and hungriest Japanese-American. The story's last words—"A small island republic is just a start. Someday he'll be a senator" (p. 125)—belong to Slim's mother, and they seal our awareness that none of its characters' perspectives is to be received by us as privileged or final. Nor is the aim, as in modernist epistemology, to multiply perspectives until we see beneath shifting surfaces a stable depth. The intention is rather to call into question the very notion of reconciling depths and the corollary consolations of form that even the most perplexed of modernist fictions provides.

To be sure, Apple as narrator offers us at the last a perspective unclouded by the personal interests of his characters. But that is not to say that he offers us answers.²¹ Instead, the openness of the form enacts, as Inudo himself does not, the attitude of suspensiveness I've proposed as one of the characteristics of midfiction; and it is left, finally, to the reader to negotiate (or to accept) the story's contradictory impulses. According to Samuel Hynes, the parabolists of the thirties attempted to offer "models of the problem of action" (AG, p. 15). Apple's more hesitant and oblique morality investigates the necessarily ambiguous properties of action and invites us to consider his story not, in the modernist fashion, as "an alternative world" (AG, p. 46) but as a way of inhabiting this one.²²

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The elusive but inescapable presence of the world—or its meaning—is also the subject of Stanley Elkin's *The Making of Ashenden*, which, like "Small Island Republics," but with greater abandon, engages in a send-up of its central character. Surely one of the most outrageous figures in contemporary literature, Brewster Ashenden acts out the fall from innocence that is the novella's most obvious if, finally, only its enabling theme. But the innocence is at the same time (for the two are by no means incompatible) a matter of extravagant pride and self-deception; and no sooner do we hear Ashenden begin to speak than we anticipate not only the inevitability but the precipitousness of his descent. "One of the blessed of the earth," as he describes himself, one among its "only three or four dozen truly civilized men," he is, by his own estimate, the cynosure of the universe: "I come of good stock—" he says, referring to the source of his ancestors' considerable fortunes, "real estate, mineral water, oxygen, matchbooks: earth, water, air and fire, the old elementals of the material universe, a bellybutton economics, a linchpin one."²³

It is clear already that Ashenden sees himself mythically and his world aesthetically. "A heroic man" (p. 132), he becomes a character in his own elaborate romance. But if, as he puts it, he is "classical, drawn by perfection as to some magnetic, Platonic pole, idealism and beauty's true North" (p. 133), he is still more emphatically a romantic, his potentially glacial assurance neatly compromised by what is, given his age, a somewhat incongruous search for identity.

For Ashenden is, and is meant to be, considerably less tragic than comic in his fall; and his need to know, indeed his assertion that he "know[s] everything" (p. 149), is in reality hostage to a more urgent need for stability and order, which betrays itself in the hilarious credo that is his final comment on the world's balky diversity: "You can learn almost all there is to learn," he tells a friend, "if you leave out the mystery and the ambiguity. If you omit the riddles and finesse the existential" (p. 149).

Whether or not it was so intended, Elkin's novella provides, as will become apparent, a virtual compendium of modernist themes; and when it introduces Jane Loës Lipton, the second of its major characters, it engages what is perhaps the most suggestive of them: the projection of the ego into its double. As the object of Ashenden's quest for perfection and as his mirror, Jane is our major clue to him and to the underside of that vaunted civilization to which both pay tribute. The fact that the two come together for the first time at an estate whose park is an enormous private zoo and whose owner inclines to see his friends in terms of his beasts ("A man concerned with animals must always be conscious of who goes into the cage with whom" [p. 157], he says, worrying about the meeting of his guests) gives us our first hint of what has so far been hidden. The revelation that Jane suffers from *lupus erythematosus*—"the intelligent, wolfish mask across her beautiful face" (p. 162)—is the next. And the last, which proceeds from Jane's refusal of Brewster's proposal (because he has been impure) and which sets him off "to undo defilement and regain innocence, to take an historical corruption and annulled, whisking it out of time as if it were a damaged egg gone y on a conveyor belt" (p. 164), this final one lets us know for certain that we are in the presence of Romanticism's and modernism's pervasive primitivist dream. For Jane's rejection bespeaks a claim to innocence even greater than her lover's and, since they are doubles, indicates the unwillingness of both to accept the conditions of the fallen world, the imperfections of life in time. Typically, since he is adept at self-justification, Ashenden achieves the impossible (it is the farcical climax of the novella's first part), "the self-loathing that is purity" (p. 167) and that, in restoring him to innocence (as he sees it), makes him worthy of Jane: "See, morality's easy, clear, what's the mystery?" (p. 167). But Jane, that flawed emblem of completeness, disappears now, too static to interest us for long, leaving behind unsettling whiffs and intimations of an otherness that will in time overtake and overmaster Ashenden himself. In other words, whereas Jane embodies the state of unreal perfection, Ashenden figures its pursuit: the quest that reveals him, over and again, as a prig of the extraordinary and the victim of his own heroic myth.

Ashenden's swerve, its *écart*, is effected by a switch in point of view, as we move, suddenly and unexpectedly, from first to third person about two-thirds of the way through the work. But though we now see Brewster from the outside, the world remains what it has always

been, *his mirror*: "a crèche of the elements" (p. 167), an image of "paradise" (p. 168), a landscape that charms him by its resemblance (here at least he is right) to the works of painters. "I am in art, he thought, and thus in nature too" (p. 172), he adds with a Popean delight in order. The eruption at this point of a ruttish bear into the frame that methodizes nature as Ashenden's myth aestheticizes his life promises a challenge different from any he has heretofore known and, it is to be imagined, one that will lay waste his awesome self-satisfaction. And so it does up to a point, urging him into emotions he has not known till now. But habits of mind die hard; and though he is hardly in a position to deny the fact of the bear, the interpretation of the encounter, Elkin indicates, remains very much his: "The confrontation was noble, a challenge (there's going to be a hell of a contest, he thought), a coming to grips of disparate principles. . . . He believed not that the bear was emblematic, or even that he was, but that the two of them there in the clearing . . . somehow made for symbolism, or at least for meaning" (pp. 174-75).

Not surprisingly, since nothing for Ashenden can be simply itself, the presence of the bear repeatedly translates itself (an affectionately parodic allusion to Faulkner here?) into a test: "Oh Jesus, he thought, is this how I'm to be purified? Is *this* the test? Oh, Lord, first I was in art and now I am in allegory" (p. 179). And if in what follows—his unavoidable lovemaking with the bear, the description of which is one of Elkin's most prodigious tours de force—he is at last forced out of his complacency, it is only superficially so. Even while stretching to encompass a new content—"But then I am beast too, he thought. . . . What this means . . . is that my life has been too crammed with civilization" (p. 179)—his mind retains its fundamental structures of thought and perception; and fatuous to the end, he manages at once to glimpse the truth about himself ("I have the tourist's imagination, the day-tripper's vision") and to transform it into a matter for self-congratulation ("God, how I honor a difference and crave the unusual" [p. 185]).

Brewster's post-coital resolution (Jane is now not only out of sight but out of mind) to "book passage to someplace far, someplace wild, further and wilder than he had ever been" (p. 187) testifies both to his inexhaustible capacity for fantasy (still finessing the existential, "fleeing the ordinary" [p. 185], he will, we recognize, always be en route and possibly *en ruf*) and to the wonderful plasticity of his innocence. Reconstituted in the aftermath of Jane's rejection ("So innocence is knowledge, not its lack" [p. 167]), it undergoes a more bizarre and paradoxical recovery during his "ecstatic, transcendent" union with the bear (p. 186), for, as he thinks later: "Maybe I was the virgin. Maybe I was. It was good news" (p. 188). Good news indeed: a gospel of infinite possibility, renewal, and redemption, but Elkin's final comment ("He started back through art to the house" [p. 188]) enforces that we will not miss the irony—not only that Ashenden is off on the track of still wilder myths; or that like Dick Gibson's, in another of Elkin's novels, Ashenden's is an apprenticeship that will never end;²⁸

and not only that his taste for the extraordinary is undiminished; but that (it is Elkin's most illuminating insight into modernism's thematic ideals and resolutions) the aesthetic and the primitivist are two sides of a single coin: the one, *pace* Forster, Lawrence, Woolf, and Joyce, the echo rather than the antithesis of the other.

At this point, with Ashenden dispatched and unchanged, everything seems to have fallen into place. But has it? Does this reading account for all of the work's complexity and does it account for my use of it as an example of midfiction? The fact is that in the light of Elkin's other works, even of some elements of *Ashenden*, and especially of remarks made by him in various interviews, some doubts begin to obtrude. "All characters," he says in one of these interviews, "all protagonists, are ultimately sympathetic,"²⁹ and in another: "Energy is what counts. . . . Whoever has the better rhetoric is the better man. . . . He is as far as I'm concerned the more sympathetic character."³⁰ Ashenden? Sympathetic? Is that what these comments imply? At stake is Elkin's well-known fascination with obsession, a subject to which he returns repeatedly: "I'm attracted to the extreme. . . . I'm attracted to extremes of personality too. . . . I stand in awe of the *outré*. Those characters who are exaggerated seem, to me at least, more vital than the ordinary character, certainly more energetic. It's this energy which engines my work." And again, speaking once more of his characters: "I don't regard them as losers. The fact that they may be unhappy doesn't mean that they're losers. The fact that they may be outrageous or immoral doesn't mean that they're losers. The fact that they're obsessed, that they have obsessions which would get real people arrested, doesn't mean that they're losers. It means that they are simply demonstrating the kind of extravagance—the kind of *heroic* extravagance, if you will—that makes them, in my view, winners—winners, inasmuch as they impress me."³¹

Now, Brewster Ashenden clearly belongs in the well-stocked gallery of Elkin's obsessive characters. And though he is less intense than some, notably Alexander Main in *The Bailbondsmen* or *The Franchiser's* Ben Flesh (largely because the treatment of him is so frequently broad-stroked and farcical), still he does have an incontrovertible vitality, which derives from the fact, evident in what I've quoted, that Elkin endows him—successfully, if in defiance of even the most minimal verisimilitude—with his own energetic, vivid, and disruptive language. It is that language, indeed, and the texture it sustains that act, even more than in "Small Island Republics," to alert us to the mid-fictional quality of the work. But to say this is to acknowledge just how problematical the novella is. For if Elkin, like Apple (though for less immediately discernible reasons) reacts ambivalently to his protagonist, and if (as he does) he clearly revels in the bizarre and improbable not only for their ironic potential but for their own sake, how are we to gauge the novella's attitude toward its central question of the ordinary and the extraordinary? The answer is anything but obvious, since *The Making of Ashenden* does not itself tell us unam-

biguously what, if it were not contravened by Brewster's aesthetic and primitivist impulses, the ordinary might be. Nor, until recently and especially in *The Living End*, does any of Elkin's fiction.²⁴ His works are—and the image doesn't seem excessive—a battleground in which the lure of the extraordinary, made attractive by an obsessive concern with death, time, and the unknown, is only gradually and never completely countered by a celebration, still wild and fantastic, of what Larry McCaffery refers to as "the beauty and wonder that is normally locked within the vulgar and ordinary."²⁵

Perhaps, then, the most one can say is that the good life according to Elkin steers a difficult course between a desired intensification and a possible distortion of the ordinary and that his fiction demonstrates a willingness to risk failure rather than remain passive in the face of life's ineluctable mysteries. But that isn't quite all. The title of my essay derives from another of Elkin's novels;²⁶ and its central metaphor tells us this much at least: that unlike McFague, whose language insistently points to a morphological change, a "reform[ing]" or "deformation of ordinary life" (*SP*, pp. 6, 17), that is, to an ultimate, if difficult, transfiguration of the world's body, Elkin, with his more locative notion of "displacement," seeks at most—since "there is no conventional wisdom . . . [since] truth comes in fifty-seven day-glo flavors"²⁷—a mitigation of inherent contradictions, a way, finally, of coping, which leaves the world in its essence unchanged and us, in part at least, with the job of making sense of it.

So much, then, after its brief reappearance, for parable. And for whatever else midfiction is not. One could, of course, easily enough continue to swell the catalogue of differences, noting, for example, with reference to modernist predilections for symbol and myth and with an eye to New Critical theories of resolution, that the world for midfiction presents itself neither as a veil to be penetrated nor as a disorder to be mastered, and still less as a complexity to be compelled into unity. But my major concern is to distinguish midfiction from other postmodern and contemporary forms; and the best way to do that is probably to offer now, even before coming to my final example, a working definition of what the term is meant to imply. So, to begin with what I've already tried to establish: midfiction describes a narrative form that negotiates the oppositional extremes of realism and reflexivity (both their presuppositions and their technical procedures). Further, it seeks to reveal the extraordinariness of the ordinary, frequently and paradoxically by trafficking in limit situations—thereby subjecting to interrogation the very foundations of the writer's (and the reader's) beliefs. And, finally, it invites us not *through* but *in* the relationships and actions of its characters—and by way of some strategic *écart* or swerve in its fabric—to perceive, obliquely and ironically, the moral perplexities of inhabiting a world that is itself, as "text," ontologically ironic, contingent, and problematic.

The works I've discussed so far bear out, I think, the first two segments of my definition, but they illustrate only partially the consequences of the third, especially the fact that inhabiting such a world offers at least the possibilities of generating more positive (if never complete) meanings and values than are allowed for by *Ashenden* or than are directly articulated by "Small Island Republics."²⁸ In Donald Barthelme's "The Emerald," however, it is precisely the idea of possibility that determines the story's treatment and theme and that makes it so eminently midfictional. Having said which, I imagine a susurrant of resistance and disbelief. Barthelme a midfictionist? Barthelme, the well-beloved of reflexivist-minded critics, the chief disciple of "the Metafictional Muse" (to borrow from the title of Larry McCaffery's intelligent and persuasive essay on him)? No doubt, Barthelme is the most self-conscious, experimental, artful, and playful of the writers I'm dealing with here; and no doubt, elements of metafictional theory and practice are to be found throughout his work. But with relatively rare exceptions, Barthelme's fiction remains stubbornly referential, acknowledging the pressures of the world it questions and refusing simply to privilege imagination at the expense of Graff's "resisting reality"—any more than it does the reverse.

The best of Barthelme's stories and novels—"City Life," "Engineer-Private Paul Klee," "Rebecca," "The Death of Edward Lear," "The Great Hug," *The Dead Father*, and, not least, "The Emerald"—are in fact (to proceed still further into heresy) *moral* studies of how to deal with a world it is impossible either to dismiss or to understand; and the attempt in most of these to re-create value and meaning in the felt absence of either accounts for the oddly indeterminate status of these fictions, which are at once among the quirkiest and the most compelling in contemporary literature. Certainly, "The Emerald" gives full play to the odd and fantastic in the premise and development of its plot, which recounts the kidnapping of a precocious, talking, seven-thousand-and-thirty-five-carat emerald, the offspring of Mad Moll (a rather limited and ineffective witch) and the man in the moon, and its subsequent recovery when a reliquary containing "the true Foot of Mary Magdalene"²⁹ kills Vandermaster, its abductor. And yet, however much the story's incidents lay stress on life's vagaries and absurdities, its techniques—the generally humdrum speech, the predominantly dialogic presentation, the consequent exclusion of comment by the narrator, and a cast of characters who largely assume the authenticity of the situation—all these make for a treatment that is, for the most part, deliberately and scrupulously ordinary. But to put the matter this way may be to suggest, unintentionally, the priority of the ordinary over the marvelous, whereas their relationship, as the evidence of style reveals, is one of mutual qualification. Barthelme's language (to pursue this point) is always, even when most seemingly matter-of-fact, slightly but persistently stylized, deviant, offbeat. Indeed, in its bland recycling of clichés, in its barely perceptible stiffening of the rhythms and patterns of colloquial prose, in its ubiquitous deployment of linguistic *chevilles* (all as

if enclosing the discrete elements of discourse within invisible and ironic quotation marks), and, of course, in its not always recognized capacity for modulating on occasion, as in Moll's monologues, into a more ornate and rhetorical register, Barthelme's flexible style, the indelible signature of his midfictional status, serves as the concrete embodiment of a vision that acknowledges life's overwhelming dullness even as it concedes the human potential for establishing within that dullness small, unstable, and mysterious enclaves of significance and pleasure.

"The Emerald," to come back to it now, thematizes this double view as fully and suggestively as any of Barthelme's fictions; and in doing so it recapitulates and enlarges on the concerns of "Small Island Republics" and *The Making of Ashenden*. Thus Moll, with her "memories of God who held me up and sustained me until I fell from His hands" (p. 20), inhabits a fallen world, and her descriptions of it (along with the emerald's)—it is, variously, "this gray world of yours" (p. 9), "the ferocious Out" (p. 10), "the welter" (p. 21), and "the scrabble for existence" (p. 26)—indicate an attitude that is from first to last suspensive, accepting of its drab and fierce confusions. That attitude sets Moll and her child directly at odds with the other characters, for all of whom the emerald is the hypostatized object of a passionate quest for the extraordinary as something perfected, other, and apart: a variably interpretable means of correcting or overcoming life's insufficiencies. So "Lily the media person" (p. 15) and her "editor-king" (p. 17), Mr. Lather (their newspaper, not coincidentally, is called *World*), are after the perfect story, the mob of weirdly-named but otherwise indistinguishable emerald-hunters after still more exotic, if more tangible, gain; but it is only Vandermaster, whose quest is the most outrageous and extreme, that need concern us here. Seeking nothing less than immortality—"In addition to my present life" he tells Moll, "I wish another, future life" (p. 14)—Vandermaster represents desire run wild. But not, perhaps, as wild as all that. The absoluteness of desire may be construed as, among other things, the recurrent dream of art's resolving grace, its power to achieve through form a stability beyond the reach of life's disorders. If this is so, Barthelme's story presents itself, along with Apple's and Elkin's, as a comment on modernism. That is, as "Small Island Republics" contests the idea that man is the measure and *Ashenden* the belief that primitivism offers a genuine alternative to aestheticism, so "The Emerald" gives the lie to the heterocosmic imagination and to the imperialism of art.

Here again the comment—roughly, the valorization of post-modernism's preference for looser and less determined orders and for smaller, less perfect pleasures—is both structural and thematic; and what the antic choice and arrangement of events intimate, Mad Moll herself expresses. "Diamonds," she says, "are a little ordinary. Decent, yes. Quiet, yes. But gray." And she proceeds then, in paradoxical use of various gems, all of which are by any usual reckoning more ordinary than the diamond, to assert, precisely, the extraordinariness of the ordinary: "Give me step-cut zircons, square-cut spodumenes,

jasper, sardonyx. . . . But best of all, an emerald" (p. 26). The justification of the claim is the substance of Moll's central speech, in which she spells out for Lily's benefit the "meaning" of the emerald and in which, through her, Barthelme adds to his acceptance of the world his assent to its possibilities: "It means, one, that the gods are not yet done with us. . . . The gods are still trafficking with us and making interventions of this kind and that kind. . . . Two, the world may congratulate itself that desire can still be raised in the dulled hearts of the citizens by the rumor of an emerald. . . . Three, I do not know what this Stone portends . . . but you are in any case rescued from the sickliness of the same" (p. 26).

The "in any case" neatly qualifies the affirmation, as does the aposiopetic maneuver that leads Moll to suggest abruptly "a small offering in the hat on the hall table" (p. 26). Indeed, the swerve from the vatic to the mundane provides the note of ironic deflation, at any rate of reservation, one expects to find in Barthelme's work. On the other hand, one needn't take literally, as Moll does, the existence of those "tucked-away gods whom nobody speaks to anymore" (p. 12) to recognize on Barthelme's part the wish to restore, along with desire and diversity, some sense of mystery to a radically despiritualized world: the world to which, in other stories, his characters so often react with a kind of wry or aggrieved hopelessness. The phrase that best sums up this intention is perhaps Alejo Carpentier's "*lo real maravilloso*," "the intrinsic quality of Latin-American experience," as Alastair Reid says, paraphrasing Carpentier and referring specifically to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, "in which the wondrous and inexplicable are an essential part of ordinary perception."²⁴ The perception (mediated more perhaps by American pop than by French surrealism) is one that Barthelme shares, whether or not it surfaces in all of his fictions; and "The Emerald" ends with one of his most felicitous expressions of it. "And what now? said the emerald. What now, beautiful mother?" To which comes the reply: "We resume the scrabble for existence, said Moll. We resume the scrabble for existence, in the sweet of the here and now" (p. 26).

Unlike the paradoxes that translate modernist irresolution into aesthetic stasis, Barthelme's finds energy in contradiction and in so doing realizes the potential of midfiction. Clarifying Elkin's explorations of the extraordinary, adding to Apple's suspensiveness (as Apple himself repeatedly does in *The Oranging of America* or in the exuberant "Free Agents") a hint of possibility, "The Emerald" invites us into a world where action is neither heroic nor final but in which the scrabble for existence, uncertain at best, offers something more than the self-referentiality entailed by the semiotics of enclosure. Something other, however, than McFague's "parabolic mode—the hidden way of locating the graciousness of the universe within the ordinary and the mundane" (*SP*, p. 95), for midfiction's concern is less with the discovery than with the generation of meaning. Barthelme's *Deus Lunus* exacts from humans not faith but risk in a difficult balancing act whose existential motto is, in the words of the emerald:

"Now is sooner than then" (p. 21). So affirmation, yes, and assent; but local, limited, and temporary. Deus Lunus is a suitable god for a world that remains obstinately stochastic. Commenting on the "rhetorical sacrament" he finds at the end of "The Emerald"—Moll's reiterated reference to "the scrabble for existence"—Elkin writes: "There is a solace in finality and a grace in resignation no matter *what* one is resigned to—death, helplessness, the end of chance, resignation itself. But life's tallest order is to keep the feelings up, to make two dollars' worth of euphoria go the distance. And life can't do that. So fiction does. And there, right there, is the real—I want to say 'only'—morality of fiction."²⁸ I'm not sure that Barthelme (or Elkin himself in *The Living End*) would agree that "life can't do that"; but what matters, in any case, is that Moll and her creator direct us not only to the scrabble but to "the sweet of the here and now"—or to both at once. The morality, in short, whether it is art's or life's, bypasses the extremes of experience, deriving its complexity from a vision that immerses itself in less ultimate truths, as Elkin himself acknowledges in a remark immediately subsequent to the passage I've just quoted. Reminiscent of the climactic revelation in *The Dead Father*—"All there is, Julie said. Unfortunately. But this much. This where life lives."²⁹—Elkin's final words are no less tempered: "not much, is it? It's all there is." Midfiction's response, an answer equally to the different faiths of realism and parable and to the invincible doubt of reflexivity, can be stated simply: It is enough.

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NOTES

- 1 J. P. Stern, *On Realism* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 158. The book will be referred to hereafter as *OR*.
- 2 My allusions are to Gerald Graff's *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979); David Lodge's *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977); and Linda Nochlin's "The Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law," *Art in America*, 61 (September-October 1973), 54-61 and (November-December), 97-103. Graff's study will be referred to hereafter as *LAI*.
- 3 *New York Times Book Review*, 14 December 1980, p. 3.
- 4 See, respectively, Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* (Urbana, Chicago, London: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1979); Raymond Federman, ed., *Surfiction: Fiction Now . . . and Tomorrow* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975); Jerome Klinkowitz, *The Life of Fiction* (Urbana, Chicago, London: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1977); and Jerome Klinkowitz, *Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction* (Urbana, Chicago, London: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1975).
- 5 See, in particular, Roland Barthes's *S/Z* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970).
- 6 Raymond Federman, "Surfiction—Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction," in *Surfiction: Fiction Now . . . and Tomorrow*, pp. 8 and 12. The quotation in the next sentence is taken from this essay as well.

- 7 Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (1975; rpt. Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1978), p. 182. For a more comprehensive discussion of reflexive fiction than the one in this essay, see my book *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1981), chapter 5.
- 8 Pierre Thévenaz, *What is Phenomenology? and Other Essays*, ed. James M. Edie (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1962), p. 50.
- 9 Compare Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing*, p. 40 and Terrance Doody, "Don Quixote, Ulysses, and the Idea of Realism," *Novel*, 12 (Spring 1979), 201-02. For an ambitious and invaluable survey of the theories and assumptions of realism, see Marshall Brown, "The Logic of Realism: A Hegelian Approach," *PMLA*, 96 (March 1981), 224-41. It seems to me, however, that Brown's own provocative definition—"We consider a piece of writing to be realistic. . . whenever and insofar as we perceive ordered silhouetting or embedding effects" (p. 233)—tends to stir up still further rather than to calm the troubled waters of the debate.
- 10 For discussions of metafiction, see Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction*, pp. 105-36, and Larry McCaffery, "Donald Barthelme and the Metafictional Muse," *Substance* 27, 9, No. 2 (1980), 75-88. Scholes's term "fabulation" is ultimately too general and inclusive for my purposes and, in addition, too aesthetically resolved in its quasi-modernist emphasis on complexity compelled into unity. On the other hand, fabulation comes closer to what I'm after in its emphasis on "a return to story for renewed vigor" (p. 25).
- 11 Thomas C. Oden, ed., *Parables of Kierkegaard* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), p. xvi.
- 12 Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 44. I am indebted throughout the following discussion to McFague's book, which will be referred to hereafter as *SP*. See also Erick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), and John Dominic Crossan, *Raid on the Empire: Comic Eschatology in Jesus and Borges* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).
- 13 Less radical than some, McFague goes on to say that "neither tradition can do without the other" (p. 81n).
- 14 Louis Marin, "On the Interpretation of Ordinary Language: A Parable of Pascal," in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed., Josué V. Harari (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1979), p. 241.
- 15 Compare the following, perhaps too inclusive statement by Robert O. Hodgell in *The Innovator and Other Modern Parables* (Nashville, N. Y.: Abingdon Press, 1969): "Actually, any representation of life and its concerns, if done in a dramatic, implicit, concrete, and vivid manner, can be received as parable" (pp. 19-20).
- 16 It should be pointed out that Samuel Hynes, untroubled by the religious associations of the word, uses it suggestively to apply to works by such writers as Auden, Spender, Greene, Rex Warner, Isherwood, Orwell, and MacNeice. See *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London: The Bodley Head, 1976), pp. 13-15. The book will be referred to hereafter as *AG*.
- 17 William A. Beardslee, *Literary Criticism of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), p. 17. Quoted in *Speaking of Parables*, p. 140.
- 18 See *Horizons of Assent*, pp. 10-11 and part 3, *passim*.
- 19 The statement appeared in Bantam's 1979-1980 catalogue of "Literature for Colleges and Universities." Compare Apple's brief essay "On Realism," *The Nation*, 3 February 1979, p. 117, in which the zaniness (his word) of his fiction is ironically traced to the bizarre events of "the whole world singing in tune to reality."

- 20 Max Apple, "Small Island Republics," *The Kenyon Review*, New Series II (Spring 1980), p. 113. Subsequent references to this story and to the other fictions I discuss will be given parenthetically in the text.
- 21 See "My Love Affair with English," *New York Times Book Review*, 22 March 1981, where Apple speaks of style as a "truth more profound to me than meaning, which is always elusive and perhaps belongs more to the reader" (p. 24).
- 22 See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," in *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1964), p. 54.
- 23 Stanley Elkin, *The Making of Ashenden*, in *Searches & Seizures* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1973), pp. 129, 150, 130.
- 24 For a different reading of the ending, see Thomas LeClair, "The Obsessional Fiction of Stanley Elkin," *Contemporary Literature*, 16 (Spring 1975). "The real 'making of Ashenden,'" he writes, "is his freedom" (p. 161).
- 25 Thomas LeClair, "Stanley Elkin: The Art of Fiction LXI," *The Paris Review*, 66 (Summer 1976), 78.
- 26 Jeffrey L. Duncan, "A Conversation with Stanley Elkin and William H. Gass," *The Iowa Review*, 7 (Winter 1976), 61.
- 27 Scott Sanders, "An Interview with Stanley Elkin," *Contemporary Literature*, 16 (Spring 1975), 131-32 and 141-42. The last quotation ends, apparently in acknowledgment of differing interpretations of his characters: "Alas, they put others off." For Elkin's comment on *The Making of Ashenden*, see LeClair's interview, p. 74.
- 28 See Larry McCaffery's essay on the *Franchiser*, "Stanley Elkin's Recovery of the Ordinary," *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction*, 21, No. 2 (1979), 39-51. I have dealt with the subject apropos of *The Living End* in *Horizons of Assent*, pp. 158-61.
- 29 McCaffery, "Stanley Elkin's Recovery of the Ordinary," p. 40.
- 30 See *The Dick Gibson Show* (1971; rpt. New York: Warner Books, 1980), p. 274. I should say that there is no clear agreement about the novel or about the scene from which my title comes—or indeed about the phrase itself. In LeClair's *Partisan Review* interview, Elkin says about the book: "The theme of the novel is that the exceptional life—the only great life—is the trite life. It is something that I believe. . . . To have affairs, to go to Europe, to live the dramatic clichés, all the stuff of which movies are made, would be the great life" (p. 73)—a statement that suggests a more straightforward conception of the ordinary and the extraordinary than the novel seems to me to convey. Asked by LeClair, "Do the characters in your novels, then, have rather conventional notions of what exceptional is?" (pp. 73-74), Elkin's answer is yes. See too LeClair's essay, p. 154; Raymond Olderman, "The Six Crises of Dick Gibson," *The Iowa Review*, 7 (Winter 1976), 130 and 136-37; and McCaffery's "Stanley Elkin's Recovery of the Ordinary," p. 41.
- 31 Sanders, "An Interview with Stanley Elkin," p. 133.
- 32 This is not to deny a more obviously affirmative quality in other of Elkin's and particularly of Apple's work. See *Horizons of Assent*, chapter 5.
- 33 Donald Barthelme, "The Emerald," in *The Best American Short Stories 1980*, ed. Stanley Elkin with Shannon Ravenel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), p. 6. The story originally appeared, with pictures and captions (Barthelme's?) in the November 1979 issue of *Esquire*, pp. 92-105.
- 34 Alastair Reid, "The Latin-American Lottery," *The New Yorker*, 26 January 1981, p. 109.
- 35 The quotation is from Elkin's "Introduction" to *The Best American Short Stories 1980*, p. xviii.
- 36 Donald Barthelme, *The Dead Father* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975), p. 175.