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Telling Postmodernist Stories

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For a number of years—from, let's say, the early publications of Bremond, Todorov, Barthes, and Genette in the sixties, to Gerald Prince's *Narratology* (1982) and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction* (1983)—narrative was a favored, perhaps *the* favored, object of literary theorizing. Lately the tables have been turned and it is theory which has become the object of narrative: where once we had theories about narrative, we begin now to have stories about theory. This "narrative turn" (Norris 1985) is arguably a "postmodernist" reaction against the "modernism" of structuralist narratology. The present paper explores the transactions between theory and narrative, taking as its case certain recent accounts of postmodernism itself. Thus the "Postmodernist" in my title is ambiguous: on the one hand, these are stories *about* postmodernism; on the other hand, as stories that in some sense do the work of theories, they themselves also *belong* to postmodernism. This paper endorses a generally *constructivist* approach to the objects of theory and narrative alike (cf. the various constructivisms of Berger and Luckmann 1966; Goodman 1978; and Schmidt 1984).

The First Story

In quest of a theory of Postmodernism, we might turn to a short text by Max Apple with the likely sounding title of "Post-Modernism" (from *Free Agents*, 1984; see Appendix). We would be disappointed, for instead of a theory—or at least a manifesto or polemic from which

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an implicit theory might be inferred—we get a story. Not *much* of a story, granted, and one that starts out rather like an essay ("It's always safe to mention Aristotle in literate company") before settling down into the narrative mode: "having no theory to tell, I will show you a little post-modernism" (Apple 1984: 135). This is only the first of a series of disorienting reversals in the relative roles of theory (or "analysis," Apple's other term for it [137]) and story in the course of this text. Indeed, this opening reversal already contains another reversal: Apple will not "tell" a theory but will "show" a little postmodernism; but surely one "tells" a story, not a theory, and in any case the sample of postmodernism he "shows" us takes the form of a little story.

In this disorienting reversibility of story and analysis, as well as its manifest dissatisfaction with theorizing, Apple's text justifies its title after all. For Apple's "Post-Modernism" shares these features with the "postmodernism" of J.-F. Lyotard's influential account (1979; English trans. 1984). Lyotard, of course, has defined postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (1984: xxiv). Scientific (analytical, theoretical) knowledge, he argues, arose in opposition to "traditional" narrative knowledge. Yet because scientific knowledge is incapable of legitimating itself, of lifting itself up by its own epistemological bootstraps, it has always had to resort for legitimation to certain "grand narratives" *about* knowledge—the Enlightenment narrative of human liberation through knowledge, the Hegelian narrative of the dialectical self-realization of Spirit, the Marxist narrative of revolution and the founding of a classless society, and so on. In our time, according to Lyotard, faith in these and other grand or meta-narratives has ebbed, so that knowledge has had to seek its legitimation *locally* rather than universally, in terms of limited language-games and institutions, through what Lyotard calls "little narratives" (1984: 60). Unlike scientific knowledge, "little" or first-order narratives are self-legitimating. They construct their own pragmatics: the participants in the circulation of knowledge (addressor, addressee, narrative protagonist) and the social bond among these participants. They "define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do" (23).

Lyotard is not alone in discrediting metanarratives and endorsing self-legitimating "little narratives." For example, we also find Richard Rorty distinguishing in analogous terms between the two ways in which "reflective human beings" give sense to their lives. One is "to describe themselves in immediate relation to a nonhuman reality," i.e., to aspire to objectivity or scientific knowledge in Lyotard's sense; while the other involves "telling the story of their contribution to a community," i.e., solidarity, or Lyotard's narrative knowledge (Rorty 1985:

3).[1] Similarly, Hayden White has recently undertaken the "redemption of narrative" in historiography (White 1987). White vindicates narrative history on the grounds that it serves to test our culture's "systems of meaning production"—systems which, to the embarrassment of "scientific" historians, narrative history shares with myth and literature—against real-world events.[2] In other words, where Lyotard sees narrative as self-legitimating because of its deep complicity with our culture's social construction of reality, White sees it, for precisely the same reason, as critical and self-critical. Finally, Jerome Bruner has recently sought to confer legitimacy on narrative as a "mode of thought" on a par, epistemologically and ontologically, with the empirico-logical mode of science (Bruner 1986). It is with these and similar developments in mind that Christopher Norris (1985), surveying the intellectual landscape, has claimed to discern a general "narrative turn" of postmodern thought analogous to, but also in some ways undoing, the "linguistic turn" of modern thought earlier in this century.

"As the idea gains ground that *all* theory is a species of sublimated narrative, so doubts emerge about the very possibility of *knowledge* as distinct from the various forms of narrative gratification" (Norris 1985: 23). This is where Max Apple comes in. Sharing the postmodernist incredulity toward analysis and its legititmating metanarratives which also characterizes Lyotard, Rorty, White, Bruner and others, Apple conspicuously opts for the gratifications of "little narratives" *about* postmodernism in lieu of theories of it.

This is not yet the whole story of Apple's "Post-Modernism," however. There is, after all, "a bit of analysis" (1984: 137) in Apple's text, some theorizing amid the storytelling. Despite his suspicion of theorizing, Apple actually does undertake to define the "'post-modern' attitude" which his little story, he says, demonstrates:

> Maybe you would characterize this attitude as a mixture of world weariness and cleverness, an attempt to make you think that I'm half kidding, though you're not quite sure about what. (1984: 137)

In other words, Apple defines the "postmodern attitude" in terms of what Alan Wilde (1981) has called "suspensive irony." Where the characteristic "disjunctive irony" of modernism sought to master the world's messy contingency from a position above and outside it, postmodernist suspensive irony takes for granted "the ironists' immanence in the world he describes" (Wilde 1981: 166) and, far from aspiring to master disorder, simply accepts it. When the writer in Apple's little exemplary story, pondering the likelihood of error in an ad for a $6.97 pocket calculator (battery included), observes that the situation leaves "plenty of room for paranoia and ambiguity, always among the top ten in literary circles" (1984: 136), he is naming characteristically *modernist* forms of closure; paranoia and ambiguity are forms of disjunctive irony. But in *making* this remark about paranoia and ambiguity ranking among the literary top ten, the attitude which Apple's narrator displays is characteristically *postmodernist* and suspensive —the attitude of someone who is half kidding, though we are not quite sure about what.

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[1] It is Rorty, of course, who, in an analysis paralleling Lyotard's, has demonstrated that objectivity, the search for Truth, is itself only a character in the metanarrative of Western philosophy since Descartes and that this metanarrative has ceased to be relevant and compelling and ought to be abandoned in favor of local, provisional sense-conferring stories (Rorty 1979, 1982; see Norris 1985: 139–66).

[2] "The historical narrative does not, as narrative, dispel false beliefs about the past, human life, the nature of the community, and so on; what it does is test the capacity of a culture's fictions to endow real events with the kinds of meaning that literature displays to consciousness through its fashioning of patterns of 'imaginary' events" (White 1987: 45).

Apple's postmodernist suspensiveness is also evident in the flood of inconsequential detail which all but overwhelms his little story: Target Stores and Woolco and K-Mart and Sears and Penney's and Ward's; a calculator originally priced $49.95, then $9.97, now $6.97; Colonel Qaddafi and weight-lifting accidents and Vietnamese wet-nurses and the *National Enquirer*; and so on and so on. Wilde writes, about another postmodernist writer,

> Like the pop artists, [he] puts aside the central modernist preoccupation with epistemology, and it may be the absence of questions about how we know that has operated most strongly to "defamiliarize" his (and their) work. [His] concerns are, rather, ontological in their acceptance of a world that is, willy-nilly, a given of experience. (1981: 173)

Or, as Max Apple succinctly puts it in the final sentence of "Post-Modernism": "Everything is the way it is" (1984: 139). Wilde is actually talking about Donald Barthelme in the passage I have quoted but he might as well be talking about Max Apple and in fact does talk about Apple in strikingly similar terms elsewhere in the same book (Wilde 1981: 132–33, 161–67).

But if, as appears to be the case, Wilde and Apple are theorizing and/or telling stories about the same postmodernism,[3] then after all there is a metanarrative lurking behind Apple's little story. For Wilde's theory of postmodernism is explicitly inscribed within a metanarrative of change and innovation, the story which Gerald Graff has called "the myth of the postmodern breakthrough" (1979). Once upon a time, so Wilde's story runs, there was modernism, a period style characterized by disjunctive irony and reflecting a crisis of consciousness, the modernists' painful sense of the irreducible gap between their need for order and the disorderliness of reality. Then came "a space of transition" (Wilde 1981: 120)—rather less abrupt in Wilde's account than in other versions of the breakthrough myth—which Wilde calls late-modernism and which he associates with the writing of Christopher Isherwood and Ivy Compton-Burnett. Beyond this threshold lies a strange new world of suspensive irony in which the pathos of the modernist hunger for order has been "turned down" to a less anxious acceptance of the world as "manageably chaotic" (1981: 44) and the new literary emotions are low-key, understated ones. What especially characterizes Donald Barthelme's postmodernist writing, Wilde tells us, is

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[3] Indeed, so close is Apple's definition of postmodernism in "Post-Modernism" to Wilde's in *Horizons of Assent* that we might well wonder whether Max Apple has been reading Alan Wilde on Max Apple!

> the articulation not of the larger, more dramatic emotions to which modernist fiction is keyed but of an extraordinary range of minor, banal dissatisfactions. . . . Barthelme's stories express not anomie or accidie or dread but a muted series of irritations, frustrations, and bafflements. (1981: 170)

This is precisely the emotional tone of Apple's "Post-Modernism":

> In her own life Joyce Carol is undeluded by romantic conventions. Her stories may be formulaic but she knows that the shortness of life, the quirks of fate, the vagaries of love are always the subjects of literature.
>
> Sometimes her word processor seems less useful than a 19-cent pen. Sometimes she feels like drowning herself in a mud puddle.
>
> Still she is neither depressed nor morose. (1984: 138–39)

Wilde's (and presumably Apple's) version of this story differs from other versions of the breakthrough myth in the strangely muted, minor-key character of its brave new world, neither heroically utopian nor tragically dystopian[4] and, as I have already noted, in the relative gradualness of the transition. Nevertheless, it has much in common with the other versions of this metanarrative, all of which in turn have something in common, as Dominick LaCapra has observed, with the "traditional apocalyptic paradigm." In LaCapra's retelling of it, that metanarrative runs something like this:

> an all but inscrutable (magical, hermetic, religious, archaic, pre-Socratic, savage, medieval, pre-Renaissance—in any event, totally "other") discourse of the past was disrupted at some time by the rise of a scientific, secular, analytic, reductive, referential, logicist . . . discourse that dominates moder-

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[4] Utopian versions of the breakthrough myth include, for example, Hassan 1975 and 1980; Docherty 1982; dystopian versions include Newman 1984; West 1985. Newman has sought to portray the postmodernist breakthrough as a whimpery minor apocalypse but his manifest intentions are betrayed by his own high-pitched, hysterical rhetoric, which has the effect of blowing postmodernism up to the proportions of a major disaster.

> nity; all we have at present are faint glimmerings of another global turning point in the history of discourse that will give content and meaning to what must be for us a blankly utopian future. (1985: 104)

Versions of this metanarrative have been told, for instance, by T. S. Eliot, where it takes the form of a story about the dissociation of sensibility and its imminent re-association; by Michel Foucault, where it occurs as the story of the emergence and disappearance of the category "Man"; and recently by Timothy Reiss (1982) and Francis Barker (1984), who in their different ways tell a similar story of the emergence in the seventeenth century of the entire complex of bourgeois subjectivity, textuality, representation, and the Cartesian "mind." Barker's version of the story differs from the others in its *literal* apocalypticism: threatened with annihilation, bourgeois discourse will, Barker fears, contrive to bring the whole world down with it in a real, nuclear apocalypse![5]

So pervasive is this apocalyptic metanarrative of the postmodernist breakthrough that few who address the issue of postmodernism have wholly escaped its influence, including those who are skeptical of it or indifferent to it.[6] Gerald Graff, who gave currency to the phrase "myth of the postmodern breakthrough," is of course one of the skeptics; by calling it a "myth," he implies that it is a delusion, so much mystification. But by attacking the breakthrough story he testifies to its existence *as a myth* in our culture—in other words, as a legitimating metanarrative.

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[5] Apocalyptic rhetoric also comes on strong in Cornel West's version of the breakthrough narrative:

> In the eyes of many, we live among the ruins of North Atlantic civilization. Major philosophical figures such as Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, Alasdair MacIntyre and Ludwig Wittgenstein echo this Spenglerian theme. Possible nuclear holocaust hovers over us. Rampant racism, persistent patriarchy, extensive class inequality, brutal state repression, subtle bureaucratic surveillance, and technological abuse of nature pervade capitalist, communist, and neocolonial countries. The once vital tradition of bourgeois humanism has become vapid and sterile. The emancipatory intent of revolutionary Marxism has been aborted and discredited. The shock effect of Catastrophic nihilism is now boring and uninteresting. As we approach the end of the twentieth century, the rich intellectual resources of the West are in disarray and a frightening future awaits us. (1985: 259)

[6] A striking exception is Frank Kermode (1968), who managed to challenge the idea of a breakthrough to postmodernism without inadvertently evoking the myth of the postmodernist breakthrough in the process. But then, Kermode was writing rather early in the history of the postmodernist controversy; a few years later he might have found the lure of the breakthrough metanarrative harder to resist. More recently, Helmut Lethen (1986) has succeeded in getting outside the postmodernist breakthrough narrative by relocating both the "before" and "after" of the breakthrough *within* modernism itself. The polar thinking that gives rise to such a narrative of discontinuity, he argues, is itself typically modernist; a genuinely "new" postmodernism would abandon the myth of breakthrough altogether!

Both David Lodge (1977, 1981) and Christine Brooke-Rose (1981) have proposed accounts of postmodernist writing radically at odds with the breakthrough narrative, construing postmodernism as essentially *parasitic* on earlier modes; nevertheless, the breakthrough scenario seems to insinuate itself into their discourses against their wills. For Lodge, postmodernism is essentially rule-breaking art and thus ultimately dependent on the persistence of the rules it sets out to break, as a figure depends upon the ground against which it defines itself. But postmodernist writing breaks the rules of metaphoric and metonymic writing alike and thus stands outside and apart from the pendulum-like alternation of metaphoric and metonymic modes which, according to Lodge, constitutes the history of twentieth-century writing. Lodge's discourse thus conforms to the postmodernist breakthrough narrative without apparently meaning to. Similarly, Brooke-Rose abruptly abandons her "rhetoric of the unreal," based on a model of fantastic hesitation, when she comes to postmodernism. Ironically, by shifting to a Bakhtinian discourse of parody and stylization to describe postmodernism's parasitism on earlier modes, she testifies, if only inadvertently, to postmodernism's radical discontinuity with earlier modes—the breakthrough narrative once again. (See McHale 1982.)

Do not suppose, however, that by associating Wilde's and (by implication) Apple's postmodernist stories with this pervasive breakthrough metanarrative I am seeking in some sense to unmask or denounce or deconstruct their discourses. Far from it. I would insist that there is nothing wrong with the so-called myth of the postmodernist breakthrough, including Wilde's and Apple's versions—it makes quite a satisfying story, in fact—but just so long as we *divest it of its authority as metanarrative*. To escape the general postmodernist incredulity toward metanarratives it is only necessary that we regard our *own* metanarrative incredulously, in a certain sense, profferring it tentatively or provisionally, as no more (but no less) than a strategically useful and satisfying fiction, in the key of "as if" (see Vaihinger, 1965 [1935]). I am recommending, in other words, that we need not abandon metanarratives—which may, after all, do useful work for us—so long as we "turn them down" from metanarratives to "little narratives," lowering the stakes, much as the postmodernists themselves (in Wilde's and Apple's account of them) turn down modernism and lower its stakes. Instead of taking metanarratives at their own valuation, I am advocating "trivializing" them, in a certain sense, so that instead of a Hegelian metanarrative we have "little-Hegelianism," instead of a Marxist metanarrative we have "little-Marxism"—and instead of postmodernist apocalypticism we have "little-apocalypticism."[7]

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[7] Some of the storytellers who have narrated one or another version of the postmodernist breakthrough narrative have managed to keep it in the key of "as if";

We are justified in telling or entertaining the metanarrative of the postmodernist breakthrough just so long as we do so not in the mode of objectivity (to revert to Rorty's opposition) but in the mode of solidarity; in other words, so long as we do not claim that our story is "true," a faithful representation of things as we find them "out there" in the world (but what "things" correspond to a literary-historical construct such as "postmodernism" anyway? and where, in such a case, is "out there"?) but only that our story is *interesting to our audience* and *strategically useful.* "Period terms," writes Matei Calinescu,

> function best when they are used heuristically, as strategic constructs or means by which we inventively articulate the continuum of history for purposes of focused analysis and understanding. Strategic is the key word here. . . . It suggests goal-directed action, permanent readiness to weigh possible scenarios against each other, and ingenuity in the selection of those scenarios that are at the same time most promising and unpredictable. (The right degree of unexpectedness is a major strategic value.) (1987: 7)

But if all our stories about postmodernism, big or little, are strategic fictions, if all our categories are constructions, this does not mean that they are all equally *good* stories, equally *sound* constructions. It makes a difference which story or variant we choose to tell and there are criteria for preferring certain stories or variants over others. Our criteria of choice can hardly be criteria of objective *truth,* given that the "object" about which the discourse may be said to be true (or false) has been *constructed by* that discourse itself.[8] Rather, we must choose

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others conspicuously have not. Thus, for example, Malcolm Bradbury (1983) and Ron Sukenick (1985 [1972]) both insist on the ultimate fictionality of their stories about the discontinuity between modernism and postmodernism. Even Ihab Hassan, for all his over-heated apocalypticism, treats the categories "modernist" and "postmodernist" circumspectly. If he draws up parallel columns of modernist and postmodernist characteristics, he also recognizes that other schemas are always possible: "Make Your Own List," he invites us (1975: 48). On the other hand, we find the architectural critic Charles Jencks in his latest book (Jencks 1986) grimly berating other critics and theorists for having "illicitly" conflated late-modernist architecture with postmodernism—as though such categories could actually be found lying around "out there" in the world, so that verifiably true or false statements could be made about them, instead of their having been constructed by the discourses of writers like Jencks himself.

[8] Cf. Claudio Guillén:

> Historians and philosophers of history normally recognize today that there is no such thing as a ready-made subject matter of history. It exists only insofar as the historians have selected it and shaped it for us. "Objectivity" in history is as much of a misnomer or *petitio principii* as "realism" in the novel. . . . The same certainly applies to the order of *literary* history. . . . The isolation of a period must rely on the previous choice of pertinent criteria. . . . In each case a certain objectivity resides in the coherence between the criteria initially chosen and the facts to which they are supposed to apply. (1969: 433)

among competing constructions of postmodernism on the basis of various kinds of *rightness* or *fit* such as, for instance, validity of inference; internal consistency or coherence; fairness of sample; appropriateness of scope; richness of interconnections; fineness of detail; and productivity, a story's capacity to generate *other* stories, to stimulate lively conversation, to keep the discursive ball rolling (see Goodman, 1978: 129; Calinescu, 1983: 279–84). In the case of categorizing systems, which of course would include systems of period categories such as modernism vs. postmodernism, we need to be able to show that the categories can do useful *work:*

> For a categorial system, what needs to be shown is not that it is true but what it can do. Put crassly, what is called for in such cases is less like arguing than selling. (Goodman 1978: 129)

Above all, we choose one story or variant over another for its superior *interest.* Minimally, we strive to tell stories that are at least *relevant* to our audience; optimally, we hope to make our stories compelling, gripping.

Another Story

Once upon a time, John Barth might have written (but didn't), modernist literature reached the point of exhaustion; then came the postmodernist breakthrough and literature replenished itself. Perhaps the most celebrated version of the breakthrough myth, this story has recently received the imprimatur of Charles Jencks, self-appointed custodian of the term "postmodernism" (Jencks 1986: 7). But just how good a story is it? How well does it fit?

Originally published in 1967, when Barth was teaching at SUNY Buffalo, his essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" retains some of the apocalyptic tone of that "somewhat apocalyptic place and time" (Barth 1984: 205).[9] Nevertheless, looking back on the 1967 essay from the perspective of 1979, Barth insists that it did not emphasize the "used-upness" of literature to the degree that many readers (to his dismay) have supposed it did. The emphasis fell, rather, on the possibility of artistic conventions being "deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work." "In homelier terms," wrote Barth in 1967, "it's a matter of every moment throwing out the bath water without for a moment losing the baby" (1984: 70).

A neat trick, but how is it actually done? Barth exemplifies the literature of exhaustion through the strategy of a familiar fable by Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (from *The Garden of Forking Paths,* 1941). This is one of those texts in which Borges, presumably aware of the impossibility of writing with "originality" in a tradition as long and crowded as our own, conspicuously *refuses* to write an "original" text, instead producing a meta-text, a pseudo-learned commentary on *other* texts—texts, however, which exist only in his own imagination. The paradox, of course, is that by writing a metatextual commentary on an unwritten "original" text, instead of the original itself, Borges has actually created the fiction he is ostensibly refusing to create.

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[9] "Rereading it now, I sniff traces of tear gas in its margins, I hear an echo of disruption between its lines" (Barth 1984: 64).

The "new and lively work" which Barth promises arises from the play of ontological levels, the way the story's fictional world is reflected by its actual mode of existence in the real world. "Tlön" is *about* a text which calls into being an imaginary world; but of course it also is a text which in some sense calls into being an imaginary world. Moreover, the imaginary world of Tlön (*within* the imaginary world of "Tlön") contains objects—*hronir,* Borges calls them—which have been generated by pure acts of imagination, as the world of Tlön itself has; as the story "Tlön" has. "In short," says Barth, "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 the message'" (1984: 71). By using the strategy of the fictional meta-text to produce a kind of short-circuit in the hierarchy of ontological levels, the story turns its disadvantageous situation at the tail-end of a long literary tradition, when "original" stories apparently can no longer be written, into a positive advantage, thereby contributing something genuinely "new and lively" after all.

If Borges's "late-modernism" (a term Barth adopts in 1979) is the literature of exhaustion, then, Barth tells us, postmodernism is, or ought to be, the literature of replenishment. Exhausted literature can be replenished by reviving the traditional ("premodernist," says Barth) values of fiction. But to be valid, such resurrection cannot be mere retrogression to the poetics of Balzac, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy. No more than anything else can fiction go home again; the old values must be revived in a way which takes the twentieth century into account. Postmodernist fiction must transcend the antitheses of modernist and premodernist writing, keeping "one foot always in the narrative past . . . and one foot in, one might say, the Parisian structuralist present" (Barth 1984: 204). This straddling of modes Barth finds in the work of Italo Calvino and Gabriel García Márquez, who epitomize for him the replenishment he has in mind.

We need to look more skeptically at Barth's choices of representative writers of exhaustion and replenishment. Apart from Borges, the exemplary writers of exhaustion in the 1967 essay are Beckett and Nabokov. It is easy enough to see why Beckett might qualify, though Barth himself says little about it. Think only of those passages, for instance in *Molloy* or *Watt* or "The Lost Ones," where Beckett has his protagonist(s) literally exhaust, in a systematic way, all the possibilities of action calculable given a certain restricted set of objects and states:

> Here he moved, to and fro, from the door to the window, from the window to the door; from the window to the door, from the door to the window; from the fire to the bed, from the bed to the fire; from the bed to the fire, from the fire to the bed; . . . from the door to the window, from the window to the fire; from the fire to the window, from the window to the door; from the window to the door, from the door to the bed; from the bed to the door, from the door to the window. . . .

and so on and on for another twenty-odd lines (Beckett 1970 [1953]: 203–4). "Art in a closed field," Hugh Kenner has called this typical Beckett strategy (Kenner 1964). A strategy of exhaustion in more ways than one, it exhausts (in Barth's sense) certain basic conventions of fiction at the same time that it literally exhausts the possibilities of a closed field. No doubt it also tends to exhaust the reader's patience; no doubt it was designed to do so.

But if Beckett qualifies for membership in the late-modernist category, on the grounds of his practice of art in a closed field, then so too must Italo Calvino, on the same grounds. Calvino's fascination with the systematic exhaustion of narrative possibilities is reflected in his membership, from 1973, in the Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle or Oulipo. This group, whose members included Raymond Queneau, Georges Perec, and Harry Mathews, speculated about and practiced combinatorial methods for generating texts from the systematic combinations of a limited number of elements.[10] Calvino not only speculated about combinatorial narrative but also practiced it in texts such as "The Count of Monte Cristo" (from *t zero,* 1967) and, above all, in *The Castle of Cross Destinies* (1973).

This text involves a set of characters, strangers to one another, who, deprived mysteriously of the power of speech, must "tell" their life-stories visually, by selecting and arranging images from a deck of tarot fortune-telling cards. According to an appended "Note," this fictional situation actually reproduces the method by which the text itself was generated. The author, manipulating a tarot deck, "discovered" in the layout of the cards the tales of his fictional characters and even various "archetypal" narratives from world literature: tales from *Orlando Furioso,* the stories of Oedipus, Parsifal, Faust, Hamlet, Macbeth, Lear. . . . "I was tempted," this Note continues, "by the diabolical idea of conjuring up all the stories that could be contained in a tarot deck"—in short, an exercise in exhausting all the narrative possibilities within a closed field. Admittedly, Calvino, unlike Beckett, fails to carry out his program to the bitter end, limiting himself to the recognition of how it *might* be done:

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[10] See Calvino's speculative essay on such a combinatorial system, "Prose and Anticombinatorics" (in Motte 1986: 143–52).

> It was absurd to waste any more time on an operation whose implicit possibilities I had by now explored completely, an operation that made sense only as a theoretical hypothesis. (Calvino 1978: 120)

Yet this is precisely what Barth had commended Borges for: his ability to *recognize* the possibilities of exhaustion without feeling compelled tediously to *execute* them (1984: 75–76). And as we know, Borges is for Barth the exhaustive late-modernist *par excellence.* The conclusion seems unavoidable: Calvino's *Castle of Crossed Destinies* is in important respects more like the literature of exhaustion, as Barth defines it, than like the literature of replenishment Barth envisages.

If Calvino's role in John Barth's postmodernist breakthrough story is problematic because he too closely resembles the literature of exhaustion, Nabokov's role is problematic because he does not always resemble it closely enough. Barth calls Nabokov a late-modernist and he is right, as long as what he has in mind are texts such as *Pale Fire* (1962), which uses the same strategy of the fictional meta-text as Borges's "Tlön," Barth's exemplary text of exhaustion. What is exhausted in *Pale Fire,* of course, is not, as in Beckett's *Watt* or *Molloy,* the possibilities of narrative action in a closed field of objects but instead the possibilities of narratorial reliability—or rather, of narratorial *un*reliability (see Rabinowitz 1977; McHale 1987: 18–19). We suspect that the first-person narrator of *Pale Fire,* one Kinbote or Botkin (we are not even sure of his name), author of a pseudo-scholarly line-by-line commentary on John Shade's long poem "Pale Fire," has distorted various (fictional) facts but we cannot determine which facts these might be or how they might have been distorted. Having exhausted all the interpretive possibilities, we are left in the end with nothing certain.[11]

Nabokov's next novel, *Ada* (1969), is quite a different matter, however. On the face of it, *Ada* and *Pale Fire* are much alike, sharing, for example, the linguistic playfulness for which Nabokov is notorious.

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[11] Interestingly, Borges had actually raised the possibility of this form of narrative exhaustion at the beginning of "Tlön":

> Bioy Casares had dined with me that night and talked to us at length about a great scheme for writing a novel in the first person, using a narrator who omitted or corrupted what happened, and who ran into various contradictions, so that only a handful of readers, a very small handful, would be able to decipher the horrible or banal reality behind the novel. (Borges, 1962: 17)

The difference is that, in *Pale Fire,* the "very small handful" of successful decipherers dwindles to none.

Pale Fire has its "word golf," its "mirror words," its invented Zemblan language and comically corrupt translations. *Ada* is similarly full of anagrams, secret codes, multilingual puns, and slyly altered names and book titles. The difference is that, in *Ada*, this play of language has ontological consequences it cannot have in the elusive world of *Pale Fire*. The word-games generate a *world:*

> An American governor, my friend Bessborodko, is to be installed in Bessarabia, and a British one, Armborough, will rule Armenia. (Nabokov 1970: 252)

Here the witty scrambling and recombination of the syllables *arm, bess, boro,* drags a world in its wake: American and British governors are being posted to Bessarabia and Armenia because these Near-Eastern lands have just been captured, in the present time of *Ada*, from the Tartars of the Golden Horde in the Crimean War. As for the American governor's distinctly un-American name, this is explained by the fact that, in this world, North America is inhabited by people of Russian-speaking, not English-speaking, descent. In short, much of the linguistic playfulness of *Ada* is elaborately motivated by the fiction of a parallel world, an Antiterra whose history and geography are uncannily both like and unlike that of our own Earth.[12]

We will never know for certain whether Zembla, the kingdom of *Pale Fire*, "really" exists or not. According to some hypotheses which may be entertained about *Pale Fire*, it does exist and Kinbote/Botkin, the narrator-commentator, is its exiled king; according to other hypotheses, it exists but Kinbote was never its king; according to still others, it does not exist at all. By contrast, we can be quite sure that Antiterra exists—fictionally exists, that is, as the projected world of *Ada*. Whereas in *Pale Fire* we are left in a state of anxious uncertainty about how much of the story "really happened," how much was hallucination or self-aggrandizing lie, in *Ada* we are simply called upon to suspend disbelief and accept the anti-world of Antiterra as a matter of (fictional) fact. This suggests that *Ada* is different from *Pale Fire* in ways that Barth fails to take into account when he groups Nabokov with the late-modernists.[13] To the degree that Nabokov is not like himself (i.e., to the degree that *Ada* is not like *Pale Fire*), he is not like the literature of exhaustion.

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[12] The parallel world is of course a venerable *topos* of science fiction; classic examples are Edwin A. Abbott's *Flatland* (1884), Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee* (1955) and Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962).

[13] I am being unfair to Barth, of course: in 1967, with the publication of *Ada* still two years in the future, there was no possibility of his taking it into account. Nevertheless, in the "Replenishment" essay of 1979, having had a decade to consider the anomalous case of *Ada*, Barth continues to locate Nabokov in the exhausted camp.

Moreover, he not only is *not* like the literature of exhaustion, he *is* like the literature of replenishment. In the parallel Earth of *Ada*, alternative technologies replace those with which we are familiar, among them the alternative technology (or pseudo-technology) implied by the following passage:

> Rolled up in its case was an old "jikker" or skimmer, a blue magic rug with Arabian designs, faded but still enchanting, which Uncle Daniel's father had used in his boyhood and later flown when drunk. Because of the many collisions, collapses and other accidents, especially numerous in sunset skies over idyllic fields, jikkers were banned by the air patrol; but four years later Van who loved that sport bribed a local mechanic to clean the thing, reload its hawking-tubes, and generally bring it back into magic order and many a summer day would they spend, his Ada and he, hanging over grove and river or gliding at a safe ten-foot altitude above surfaces of roads or roofs. (1970: 43–44)

A characteristically exhausted gesture, one might be tempted to say of this: the ironic "re-invention" of a stage property out of the *Arabian Nights*, in the context of a science-fiction parallel world. But it also brings irresistibly to mind another contemporary re-inventor of the fantastic:

> . . . the gypsies returned. They were the same acrobats and jugglers that had brought the ice. . . . This time, along with many other artifices, they brought a flying carpet. But they did not offer it as a fundamental contribution to the development of transport, rather as an object of recreation. The people at once dug up their last gold pieces to take advantage of a quick flight over the houses of the village. . . . the boys grew enthusiastic over the flying carpet that went swiftly by the laboratory at window level carrying the gypsy who was driving it and several children from the village who were merrily waving their hands. . . .

This comes, of course, from *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez (1977[1967]: 34–35), and the resemblance is more than coincidental. For García Márquez, like the Nabokov of *Ada*, reclaims the fantastic for "sophisticated" writing by reintegrating it in a context of conventional novelistic realism. His world, like Nabokov's, is a composite of fantastic elements and the familiar elements of verisimilar fiction: the gypsies bring flying carpets but they also introduce telescopes, magnifying glasses, and ice to tropical Macondo; some of Macondo's citizens ascend bodily into heaven, while others are massacred, with all too credible historical realism, by troops in the service of the banana company. No doubt this is what Barth means by postmodernism keeping one foot in the narrative past and one foot in the present—one foot, let's say, in the *Arabian Nights* and one foot in the grim recent history of Latin America. But if this is what makes García Márquez a postmodernist writer, then by the same token it must make a postmodernist of Nabokov, at least the Nabokov of *Ada*. García Márquez's Macondo is an alternative or parallel world in much the same way that Nabokov's Antiterra is, merely lacking the pseudo-scientific "explanation"—an anti-Colombia to match Nabokov's Antiterra. Conversely, Nabokov, at least in *Ada*, is as much a practitioner of so-called "magic realism" as García Márquez.

"It goes without saying," John Barth writes, "that critical categories are more or less fishy as they are less or more useful" (1984: 200). By Barth's own criterion, then, we can only conclude that his categories of exhaustion and replenishment or late-modernism and postmodernism are pretty fishy. Far from helping us to group like with like and to distinguish like from unalike, his categories create groupings of texts which are in important ways less like others in the same group than they are like texts in the other group. Family resemblances have been obscured rather than enhanced. There would seem to be something askew in Barth's version of the story. Surely there must be better ways to tell it.

A Third Story

"Long ago," writes Dick Higgins, poet, composer, performance artist, and sometime small-press publisher,[14]

> Long ago, back when the world was young—that is, sometime around the year 1958—a lot of artists and composers and other people who wanted to do beautiful things began to look at the world around them in a new way (for them). (1984: 87)

This is Higgins's version of the myth of the postmodernist breakthrough (although in fact he avoids the term "postmodernist" or "postmodernism"). According to this version of the story, for the half-century or so preceding this watershed of 1958, innovative artists and thinkers had typically been preoccupied with the process of cognition: with, on the one hand, the *object* of cognition, in the tradition of Imagism, objectivism, Bauhaus aesthetics, and so on; and, on the other hand, with the *subject* of cognition, thus focussing on issues of individuation and identity in the tradition of expressionism, cubism, Freudian psychology, abstract expressionism and Beat poetry and, at the extreme limit, existentialism. Long in emerging—Higgins suggests that it actually characterizes most pre-twentieth-century Western art, though it only becomes central beginning with the Romantics—cognitivism reaches its climax and crisis in the late 1950s, when a "rupture" occurs. With the emergence during those years of such phenomena as Pop art, happenings, concrete poetry, various forms of aleatory and "modular" music, and so on, cognitivism is shifted to the sidelines of innovatory art, displaced by what Higgins is forced to call "postcognitive" art. If he is unwilling to define too narrowly the characteristics of postcognitivism—it is, after all, an art still in the making, still emergent—Higgins at least specifies that in it, by contrast with cognitive art, issues of identity and the subject of cognition dwindle in importance. The *persona* of the artist is submerged in the gestalt of the artwork, and the mythic image of the artist, so strong in modernism, is weakened nearly to the point of obliteration.[15]

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[14] John Barth, in "The Literature of Exhaustion" of 1967, offers as evidence of literature's exhaustion the "experimental" works published by the Something Else Press, which he sneeringly dismisses as "a swinging outfit" (1984: 65). That "outfit" was Dick Higgins, founder and publisher of Something Else.

Higgins summarizes his story about cognitivism and postcognitivism this way:[16]

> *The Cognitive Questions*
> (asked by most artist of the 20th century, Platonic or Aristotelian, till around 1958):
>
> > "How can I interpret this world of which I am part? And what am I in it?"
>
> *The Postcognitive Questions*
> (asked by most artists since then):
>
> > "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" (1978: 101)

I find Dick Higgins's story about the breakthrough to postcognitivism a good deal more attractive than John Barth's story about literature's exhaustion and replenishment. This is partly because of its more overt fictionality. To begin a historical narrative (entitled, incidentally, "A Child's History of Fluxus") "Long ago, back when the world was young," is obviously to evoke the generic conventions of the fairy tale; to continue by specifying the date 1958—instead of a more conventional "round number" such as 1960—is to confirm that this is fictionalized history. This is the same sort of gesture as Virginia

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15. Barth is exactly right when he observes of the Something Else Press publications that, in them, the "traditional notion of the artist" as "the Aristotelian conscious agent who achieves with technique and cunning the artistic effect" (1984: 65) is conspicuous by its absence; this is precisely what Higgins means by "postcognitive." See Higgins 1978: 3–9, 93–101, 156–66, and 1984: 5–6, 71–81.

16. Higgins is not alone in telling the postmodernist breakthrough story this way; others have told it in roughly comparable terms. Cf. Ron Sukenick's account, in an interview with Larry McCaffery dating from February 1981, of the displacement of "epistemology" (Higgins's "cognition") from the center of literary interest (LeClair and McCaffery 1983: 286); or Matei Calinescu's story of the transition from modernist "monism" (roughly, Higgins's "cognitivism") to postmodernist "pluralism" (roughly, "postcognitivism"; Calinescu 1983: 267); or my own story of the shift of dominant from epistemology to ontology in postmodernist writing (McHale 1987).

Woolf's specification of December 1910 as the moment on or about which human nature changed. In both cases what is explicitly offered us is a useful fiction, an "as if" proposition, not the "truth."

Apart from its more transparently strategic and fictional character, we might want to see whether Higgins's story has any other advantages over Barth's story, whether it "fits" better. Comparison is tricky, however, because the two stories bear on quite different corpuses: where Barth is exclusively concerned with literary fiction, Higgins seems interested in everything *but* literary fiction and even seems disposed to dismiss fiction as by definition cognitivist and "passéist" (1978: 158). I shall take the liberty of extrapolating Higgins's story of the postcognitive breakthrough to the kinds of texts Barth discusses, to see what kind of work his version of the story might be capable of, by comparison with Barth's.

Begin, for example, with Barth's exemplary fiction of exhaustion, the Borges fable of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." Where Barth sees a late-modernist jiu-jitsu strategy, by which the story's awareness of its own belatedness is turned to creative advantage, Higgins might see a text which stages or enacts the first of his "Postcognitive Questions": "Which world is this?" Granted, the artist-persona so typical of cognitive art is conspicuous here, but his importance dwindles before our eyes as the ontological issues raised by the projection of the world of Tlön and its "disintegration" of our world (Borges 1962: 34) come to dominate the text. Gradually, through parallelisms and mirrorings among its various ontological levels (objects imagined into being *within* the world of Tlön, the world of Tlön itself, the fictional world of the story "Tlön," the real world in which Borges once wrote and we now read the story), a whole series of postcognitive ontological questions come into focus: how many worlds? how many kinds of world? what relationships hold among them? according to what criteria are they to be assessed?—and so on (see Calinescu 1983: 267). Thus, according to the account Higgins might give, the divide separating late-modernism from postmodernism ought to fall, not where Barth located it, *between* Borges's "Tlön" and writers of replenishment such as Calvino and García Márquez, but in such a way as to include Borges along with Calvino and García Márquez on the postcognitive, postmodernist side of the line.

If we do redraw the map this way, we find that the cognitive/postcognitive divide very often runs through the middle of careers and oeuvres that Barth tends to treat monolithically as *either* modernist *or* postmodernist, exhausted or replenishing. Thus, Barth's account of Samuel Beckett's career is a story of progressive exhaustion, of writing that approaches ever nearer to the silence which is its logical ultimate conclusion (Barth 1984: 67–68). This effaces the differences between earlier and later Beckett[17]: between the Beckett who is still preoccupied with modernist issues of reliability and unreliability of narrators, radical subjectivity, and multiplicity of perspectives, as in *Watt* and *Molloy*, and the Beckett who focuses instead on the status of fictional worlds, the power (and impotence) of language to make and unmake worlds, and the relationship between fictional being and elusive "real" being, as in *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*, and many of the later short texts (see McHale 1987: 12–13). Barth effaces, in short, the distinction between the cognitivist and the postcognitivist Beckett.[18] Similarly with Nabokov: by treating him as a representative master of exhaustion, Barth, as we have already seen, flattens out the salient differences between the radically skeptical epistemologist of *Pale Fire* and the playful ontological improviser of *Ada*. Again, just such a distinction between the cognitivist earlier Nabokov, author of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, and the postcognitivist later Nabokov, author of *Ada* and *Look at the Harlequins*, could be extrapolated from Higgins's version of the story.

On the other hand, when Barth *does* recognize a shift of orientation in a writer's career, Higgins's narrative might serve to corroborate rather than contradict Barth's. Thus, for example, Barth, in the "Replenishment" essay of 1979, briefly traces the stages of Calvino's development from the neo-realism of *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* (1947) to the full-fledged postmodernism of *Cosmicomics* (1965) and *Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1969) (1984: 196). In this case, Higgins's narrative would be likely to parallel Barth's, mapping out parallel stages from cognitivism to postcognitivism in Calvino's oeuvre. But even where, as here, Barth's and Higgins's stories appear to unfold in parallel, the two stories prove to be differently motivated. For Barth, Calvino qualifies as a postmodernist writer of replenishment because he synthesizes the premodernist gratifications of storytelling with modernist self-consciousness and high artistry. For Higgins, on the other hand, Calvino might be thought of as a postcognitivist in *Castle of Crossed Destinies* because he relinquishes control of "his" narrative to chance configurations of the tarot cards, thereby submerging his artistic persona in the gestalt of the aleatory (or quasi-aleatory) work (see Higgins 1984: 75).

Higgins's story, then, is in my view preferable to Barth's for strategic reasons. It makes only the claims on our belief that fiction does

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[17] Again, this is somewhat unfair to Barth: writing in 1967 he could not have anticipated Beckett's continuing productivity, manifested in such late masterpieces as "The Lost Ones" (1971/1972) and "Company" (1980).

[18] It only seems fair to observe that Higgins himself tends to treat Beckett's writing as still predominantly cognitivist; see Higgins 1984: 71.

—no more but no less. It has "the right degree of unexpectedness" (Matei Calinescu's phrase, Calinescu 1987: 7). It "fits" better than Barth's: internally better-organized, more coherent, more "compact," it brings together better than Barth's does texts, writers and phenomena which seem properly to "go together," while keeping separate, again better than Barth's, things which seem properly kept apart. It seems likely to be a highly productive story, enabling us to tell many sub-narratives about the manifold adventures of cognitivism through the centuries, its crisis in the middle decades of the twentieth century and the strange birth of new, postcognitive forms. For instance, Higgins suggests in several places how we might begin to disinter early, precursor postcognitivists such as Satie, Duchamp, Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and the dadaists from the mass of dominant cognitive art which surrounded them and tends to obscure their true outlines from us (Higgins 1978: 101 and 1984: 5–6; cf. Lethen 1986). Finally, Higgins's story seems to me—and to others too, I would hope—intrinsically a more interesting story than the one Barth tells.

As a test of the usefulness of Higgins's account, perhaps we might return to the text with which we started, Max Apple's "Post-Modernism," and try rereading it in the light of Higgins's "little narrative" of the postcognitive breakthrough.

The First Story Again

"As an exercise," Apple begins, "let's imagine a character" (1984: 136). With this metafictional gesture, he invites us into the fiction-writer's workshop to demonstrate for us how a fictional person, and with him a world, is made. Stroke by stroke, detail by detail, Apple builds up his character: a contemporary writer, student of the modernists, who uses a word processor; who lives in a world which also contains morning newspapers, Colonel Qaddafi, Target Stores and Woolco and K-Mart and other retail chains, Texas Instruments pocket calculators, and so on; but nameless as yet. We are shown, in effect, what Borges also shows us in his equally brief but ontologically more spacious story of Tlön: the construction or projection of a world by a fictional text, with the reader's collaboration. All fictions do this, of course, but this one does it in full view and in slow motion, as it were. Then, abruptly, the world-making operation is suspended. The author withdraws his authority from the collaborative project, leaving us holding the bag: "You were wrong" (p. 137). At a stroke, the character-in-the-making vanishes into a kind of limbo; still legible, he has nevertheless been canceled, placed *sous rature.*

Having erased his character, however, Apple next proceeds to construct, again in full view and in slow motion, a new one, female this time where the first was male; this time bearing a name, Joyce Carol, where the first one was nameless; also a writer but of women's gothic romances, not avant-garde postmodernist fiction; a widow with quintuplets to support; living in a world which also contains the *National Enquirer*, fertility drugs, weight-lifting, and so on. Thus Apple leads us through an entire cycle of fictional creation, de-creation, and recreation, laying bare in the process the fiction-writer's ways of worldmaking and asserting his freedom to project a world ("Shall I project a world?" agonized Pynchon's heroine in *The Crying of Lot 49*).

In the process he also lays bare some of the essential characteristics of the ontological structure of fictional works and their worlds. He draws our attention, for instance, to the partial indeterminacy, the "gappiness," of fictional objects, including fictional characters. No description of a fictional character could ever be complete in the way we suppose real people (at least *ourselves*) are complete:

> No doubt I've made some mistakes. In my descriptions I forgot to tell you how she looked, the color of her hair or skin or eyes. I neglected to mention her bearing and/or carriage and said nothing at all about her interpersonal relations. (1984: 138)

In the case of fictional worlds, writes Roman Ingarden,

> It is always as if a beam of light were illuminating a part of a region, the remainder of which disappears in an indeterminate cloud but is still there in its indeterminacy. (1973[1931]: 218)

Some of the indeterminacy of fictional worlds and the objects in them is permanent: we will never be able to close the gap. Other gaps, however, are temporary, designed to be filled by the reader in the process of realizing or concretizing the text. Thus, it is entirely appropriate for Apple to solicit our collaboration in fleshing out his skeletal character:

> Wallace Stevens once said, "Description is revelation," and you know, I fell for it. If you want to know any of the nonrevelations you'll have to help me out; after all, readers and listeners are always friends. (1984: 138)

But just because this text foregrounds and lays bare the process of world-making (and -unmaking) and the ontological structure of the fictional world, does this necessarily mean it qualifies as "postcognitive" in Dick Higgins's sense? After all, for all its emphasis on the ontological instead of the epistemological, this text does still submit in a conspicuous way to the authority of the artist-persona; the subject of cognition is firmly in place, as by rights he should not be in what Higgins would call postcognitive art.

Or is he so firmly in place? Throughout the first half of "Post-Modernism," Apple seems to be inscribing himself into his text in the persona of its writer-hero, building up a portrait of the artist as a postmodernist; but then abruptly, even aggressively, he denies his autobiographical presence here, in effect erasing his self-inscription:

> . . . you assumed, no doubt, that it was me.
>
> You were wrong. I don't even know how to type and am allergic to word processors. Furthermore, I have never read a thesaurus and I do my work standing at a Formica-topped counter. (1984: 137)

But if *that* inscribed author, the postmodernist writer-hero, turns out not to have been the "real" Max Apple, then perhaps *this* one is, the one who intervenes in his own text to set things straight. He isn't, of course, any more than the other one was. This inscribed author is every bit as fictional as the earlier inscribed author had been; the ontological barrier between inscribed characters and real-world persons is unbreachable. We have, in short, a situation analogous to the one in Borges's astonishing two-page tour-de-force, "Borges y yo" (1957), in which the real author and the inscribed fictional author displace one another turn and turn-about, until the "real" author is lost in the shuffle of selves: "I don't know which one of the two of us is writing this page" (1968: 201). In short, "Post-Modernism" constructs a subject of cognition only to deconstruct it, dispersing it among the various authorial inscriptions. Thus Apple's story passes beyond modernist cognitivism to what Higgins would call postcognitivism.[19]

Apple's opening gambit in "Post-Modernism" is to assert his own and other storytellers' "right to stop being philosophers when it suits us, which is most of the time" (p. 135). This assertion proves to be as paradoxical as everything else in Apple's story/theory. For by exploring and exposing the postcognitive, ontological aspects of fictional world-making, the structure of fictional worlds and their contents, and the problematic presence of the author in his text, Apple turns out to be doing what Annie Dillard calls "unlicensed metaphysics in a teacup" (1982: 11).

But of course it's only a story.

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19. I should perhaps observe in passing that by naming his second author-character "Joyce Carol," and making her a writer of gothic romances, Apple opens up another dimension of ontological tension in his text. For these details are clearly designed to tease the reader into expecting a *roman à clef*, in which the fictional heroine is modelled on the real-world novelist Joyce Carol Oates, sometime author of gothic romance pastiches. *Roman à clef*, of course, incorporates sharp ontological tension between real-world persons and events and their fictional surrogates as one of its defining characteristics and Apple has exploited this characteristic of *roman à clef* in such texts as "The Oranging of America" (1976) and its expanded version, *The Propheteers* (1987).

Appendix

*Post-Modernism** / Max Apple

It's always safe to mention Aristotle in literate company. I have known this since my freshman year in college. Furthermore, that esteemed philosopher by praising Homer for showing rather than telling gave all storytellers forever after the right to stop being philosophers whenever it suits us, which is most of the time.

So, invoking sacred Aristotle and having no theory to tell, I will show you a little post-modernism. Alas, I have to do this with words, a medium so slow that it took two hundred years to clean up Chaucer enough to make Shakespeare, and has taken three hundred years since then to produce the clarity of Gertrude Stein. Anyway, I confess that we writers are as bored as any other artists. We get sick of imitating the old masters, the recent masters, and the best sellers. We are openly jealous of composers who can use atonal sounds, painters who experiment with xerography and sculptors with Silly Putty and polyester. Other makers of artistic objects have all this new technology, not to speak of color, and here we are stuck with the rules of grammar, bogged down with beginnings, middles, and ends, and constantly praying that the muse will send us a well-rounded lifelike character.

As an exercise, let's imagine a character who is a contemporary writer. He has read Eliot and Proust and Yeats and even had a stab at *Finnegans Wake*. He is well acquainted with the Oxford English Dictionary and Roget's Thesaurus. There he is sitting before his word processor thinking, What will it be today, some of the same old modernist stuff, a little stream-of-consciousness perhaps with a smattering of French and German? Or maybe he looks out the window, notices the menacing weather, and thinks, This will be a day of stark realism. Lots of he saids and she saids punctuated by brutal silences.

As he considers epiphanies, those commonplace events that Joyce put at the heart of his aesthetic, our writer scans the morning paper. This is a research activity. In the trivial he will find the significant, isn't that what art is all about?

So the writer looks, and it is astonishingly easy. There it is, the first gift of the muse. One column quotes Colonel Muammar Qaddafi of Libya stating that his nation is ready to go to war against the United States. Directly across the page an ad for Target Stores pictures a Texas Instruments pocket calculator, regularly $9.97: "today only" $6.97, battery *included*.

The writer is stunned. He has followed this particular calculator since its days as a $49.95 luxury. He has seen it bandied about by Woolco and K-Mart and, under various aliases, by Sears, Penney's, and Ward's. Never has it been offered with the battery included. This is something altogether new. He remembers Ezra Pound's dictum, "Make it new." Still there is the possibility of an error, a misprint, a lazy proofreader, a goof by the advertising agency—plenty of room for paranoia and ambiguity, always among the top ten in literary circles. And the sad thing is, this particular ad will never appear again. Qaddafi will be quoted endlessly, but the sale was "today only." This is one of the ambiguities the writer has to live with.

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Of course our writer doesn't equate Target and the battery to war and peace, not even to the United States and Libya. He hardly considers the nuance of the language that uses the same terms for commerce and war: "Target," "battery," "calculate"—he can't help it if the language is a kind of garbage collector of meanings. All he wants to do is know for sure if that nine-volt battery is really included. He can, if he has to, imagine a host of happy Libyans clutching their $6.97 calculators and engaged in a gigantic calculating bee against the U.S., a contest that we might consider the moral equivalent of war and save everyone a lot of trouble.

His imagination roams the Mediterranean, but the writer will suppress all his political and moral feelings. He will focus absolutely on that calculator and its quizzical battery. He will scarcely notice the webbed beach chair peeking out of the next box or the sheer pantyhose or any of the other targeted bargains.

Let's leave our writer for a moment with apologies to Aristotle and begin to do a bit of analysis. Of course you have known all along that I have been trying to demonstrate a "post-modern" attitude. Maybe you would characterize this attitude as a mixture of world weariness and cleverness, an attempt to make you think that I'm half kidding, though you're not quite sure about what.

But even in this insignificant example nothing quite fits. It should be easy. We have only one character, the writer. He was sitting before his word processor and reading the paper. He was not described, so you assumed, no doubt, that it was me.

You were wrong. I don't even know how to type and am allergic to word processors. Furthermore, I have never read a thesaurus and I do my work standing at a Formica-topped counter.

The writer I was talking about was Joyce Carol, a young widow supporting quintuplets by reviewing books for regional little magazines. Her husband died in a weight-lifting accident. Her quints were, you have already guessed, the chemical outcome of what for years had seemed a God-given infertility. Joyce Carol struggles to understand all the books she reviews though she could earn a better wage as a receptionist for Exxon or even selling industrial cleaners and have a company car to boot; but then who would stay home with the quints?

Poor Joyce Carol is stuck with being a book reviewer as women have been stuck at home with books and children for at least two hundred years.

She is also about to begin composing her thirty-ninth gothic romance. Ladies in fifteenth-century costume will waste away for love while men in iron garments carry fragrant mementoes of their ladies and worry about the blade of their enemy penetrating the few uncovered spots of flesh.

Joyce Carol's quints lie in a huge brass carriage. They are attended by five Vietnamese wet nurses and a group therapist.

There is a photographer from the *National Enquirer* doing an in-depth story on the drug that gave Joyce Carol her quints. He is blacking out fingers and toes on the babes and asking the wet nurses to look forlorn.

Joyce Carol used to write exquisite stories of girls who couldn't decide whether they truly loved their lovers enough to love them. Her stories ended in wistfulness with the characters almost holding hands. Two were sold to the movies but never produced.

It occurs to me that you're probably not very interested in Miss Carol. No doubt I've made some mistakes. In my descriptions I forgot to tell you how she looked, the color of her hair or skin or eyes. I neglected to mention her bearing and/or carriage and said nothing at all about her interpersonal relations.

Wallace Stevens once said, "Description is revelation," and you know, I fell for it. If you want to know any of the nonrevelations you'll have to help me out; after all, readers and listeners are always friends.

I can only tell you that Joyce Carol is modest and desperate. She has a peasant's cunning, and you would not want to be her sister or roommate. She spends a lot of time missing her weight-lifter husband. The five offspring and the thirty-nine novels do not make her miss him any less. She sits at the word processor and imagines his strained biceps. When he pushed the bar over his head he grunted like an earthquake and won her heart.

In her own life Joyce Carol is undeluded by romantic conventions. Her stories may be formulaic but she knows that the shortness of life, the quirks of fate, the vagaries of love are always the subjects of literature.

Sometimes her word processor seems less useful than a 19-cent pen. Sometimes she feels like drowning herself in a mud puddle.

Still she is neither depressed nor morose. She is sitting there before you virtually undescribed, a schematic past, a vague future, possibly a bad credit risk as well.

Lots of times the strings of words she composes make all the difference to her. In the paragraph she has just written, a knight has survived the plague though everyone with him has perished. He carries a bag of infidel teeth as a souvenir for his lady. His horse slouches away from Bethlehem.

Joyce Carol looks up from her labor. The wet nurses are cuddling the babes. She is glad that she did not choose to bottle-feed. The *Enquirer* photographer snaps his pictures. In the photographs the fingers of the infants almost touch. Everything is the way it is.

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