

THE SELF-CONSCIOUS NARRATOR IN DONALD BARTHELME

AND VLADIMIR NABOKOV

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

We accept this thesis as conforming  
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

October, 1978

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(Donald Hutton Stanley)

ABSTRACT

The literary device of a self-conscious narrator is prevalent in the works of Donald Barthelme and Vladimir Nabokov. However, the themes and world view of the works are not predetermined by any qualities inherent in the self-conscious narrator. Despite a current critical tendency to suppose that self-consciousness necessarily implies a problematic or solipsistic stance towards both reality and traditional realism, the self-conscious narrator remains a malleable device which can be used in conjunction with traditional realism, and which can be shaped according to the unique purposes of a particular author.

A tendency among certain contemporary theorists -- Robert Alter, Susan Sontag, Maurice Beebe and others -- would make self-consciousness, rather than realism, central to the tradition of the novel. This tendency represents a phase in the historical pattern by which the self-conscious narrator goes in and out of fashion. In the eighteenth century English novel he appeared to be a sprightly variant of the formal realism of Defoe and Richardson, in that he interrupted the narrative to comment on narrative technique, and to emphasize the artificial or contrived aspect of what were otherwise presented as real events. Despite an early fruition in Sterne, the self-conscious narrator's popularity declined, and critics came to regard him as an aberration, and an impediment to the novel's "implicit methods." He revived in the modern era, and at present self-consciousness itself is assumed by some critics to be "at the heart of the modernist

consciousness in all the arts." This somewhat exaggerated status of literary self-consciousness leads to a corresponding condescension towards traditional realism, a condescension which is revealed in the critical response to Nabokov's self-conscious narrator.

Some of the criticism of Nabokov is vitiated by the simplistic assumption that Nabokov, the wizard of mirrors and word games, has banished from his novels all traces of the real world. In fact, however, Nabokov's narrators contribute to a unique world view in which there is an implied identity between the fictional world of art and the rules of the universe. The self-conscious narrator emphasizes the artifice of the narrative, but at the same time he personifies, as it were, certain narrative conventions, and adds what Charles Kinbote calls a "human reality." His ongoing dialogue with the reader helps the reader to recognize the false artifice of totalitarian states and totalitarian art, and teaches the reader to regard fictional characters with a sympathetic eye. In the words of Albert Guerard, "Within Nabokov's involutions, behind his many screens, lie real people."

Donald Barthelme's self-conscious narrators might at first appear to be rather typical spokesmen for certain clichés of avant garde theory: ontological chaos, the breakdown of language and meaning, existential dread. But the narrators are also satirists of avant garde theory, particularly the theory that the literary past has been discredited and language no longer communicates. Rather than intimidating the reader, the self-conscious narrator sometimes acts as his ally, inviting the reader to check the fiction against conditions in the reader's own world ("Look for yourself,"

says one narrator). Self-consciousness is shown to be part of a malaise in society itself, a malaise that is occasioned not so much by epistemological breakdown as by moral failure. Self-consciousness is a symptom of a society that is at heart evil and murderous.

Barthelme and Nabokov employ their self-conscious narrators to different ends: Nabokov's gifted self-conscious narrator contributes to Nabokov's serene sense of an identity between art and reality; Barthelme discovers a moral failure at the heart of a self-conscious society. The works and world views of each author are made possible by a unique transformation of a traditional narrative convention.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wish to acknowledge the assistance of my dissertation committee, Jerry Wasserman (supervisor), Roger Seamon and Graham Good.

## INTRODUCTION

My subject is the self-conscious narrator in the fiction of Vladimir Nabokov and Donald Barthelme. Neither of these writers has established a monopoly on the self-conscious narrator, whose presence in contemporary American literature has become pervasive. His ubiquity is a symptom of a change in the tradition of the novel, a change characterized by the diminishing critical status of realism.

The long tradition that realism is central to the novel has been revised; as is usual with revisionist theories, there is an element of distortion. Contemporary theorists tend to argue that the presence of deliberate artifice and narrative self-consciousness within a work implies a rejection of traditional realism, and, perhaps, a solipsistic stance towards both language and meaning. Joyce Carol Oates, writing in reaction to the new theories, asks, querulously, "Why is it that our cleverest writers, pushed forward by editors, critics and fellow-writers alike, have followed so eagerly the solipsistic examples of Nabokov, Beckett and, more recently and most powerfully, Borges?"<sup>1</sup>

Oates over-generalizes, but her fretful question is germane; with reference to our particular interest, the self-conscious narrator, it is clear that some critics consider him the bearer of overtly artificial and contrived fiction, fiction which, to

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(1) Joyce Carol Oates, "Whose Side Are You On?/The Guest Word," New York Times Book Review, 4 June 1972, p. 63.



evoke Page Stegner on Nabokov, escapes into aesthetics. Contemporary critics, particularly critics with allegiances to the avant garde, tend to smuggle their preconceptions across the border of a given work by means of the self-conscious narrator; but the narrator, like the critic, is just a tourist within the absolute dictatorship of the author. Hence the thesis of the present work: The philosophic and aesthetic effect of the self-conscious narrator in a given work by Barthelme or Nabokov is determined by the author, and not by any inherent and inescapable quality of the self-conscious device itself. Barthelme and Nabokov bend the self-conscious narrator in the direction of their own unique aims and obsessions. They exercise complete control over their self-conscious devices, including the effect of the self-conscious narrator on realism; they do not fondly suppose that if the narrator's imagination is strong, the hold on reality must be weak.

Since it might seem self-evident to argue that authors are masters of the available techniques, let me describe in somewhat more detail certain contemporary attitudes towards self-conscious fiction. It should be remembered that when the novel had the authenticity of history or biography, the self-conscious narrator was thought to be an excessively personal and even amateurish intrusion into the novel's careful verisimilitude; to quote Henry James, the self-conscious narrator seemed "inartistic."<sup>2</sup>

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(2) Henry James, "Anthony Trollope," in The Future of the Novel, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Random House, 1956), p. 248.

But in contemporary theory the self-conscious narrator is often taken to be the artistic salvation of what would otherwise be hopelessly pedestrian realism.

For example, Maurice Beebe remarks that many critics have been writing "about the reflexive and solipsistic quality of Modernist literature, the way in which it turns inward and considers itself."<sup>3</sup> From the Impressionists on, "most of our significant artists have implied that their vision of things is more important than the things themselves" (p. 14), and, adds Beebe, in a trendy truism, the "creation of art is almost always a self-conscious act" (p. 15). Beebe is careful not to take a side, and his argument is full of careful qualifications; nevertheless there is a discernible tendency to think of the novel as essentially self-conscious. The same could be said for Robert Alter's book, as one might gather from the subtitle: Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre.

Alter says he is balancing a critical bias for realism:

Especially within the sphere of English criticism of the novel, there has been a recurrent expectation that "serious" fiction be an intent, verisimilar representation of moral situations in their social contexts; and, with few exceptions, there has been a lamentable lack of critical appreciation for the kind of novel that expresses its seriousness through playfulness, that is acutely aware of itself as a mere structure of words even as it tries to discover ways of going beyond words to the experiences words seek to indicate.<sup>4</sup>

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(3) Maurice Beebe, "Reflective and Reflexive Trends in Modern Literature," in *Twentieth-Century Poetry, Fiction, Theory*, ed. Harry R. Garvin (Lewisburg, Penn.: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1977), p. 13.

(4) Robert Alter, *Partial Magic* (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1975), p. ix.

The tradition of the novel is informed by a "critical-philosophical awareness" in which ontology is "essentially problematic," and the novel is "less closely linked with the solid assurances and material views of bourgeois society than some observers have imagined" (pp. x, xv). Those same purblind observers have missed the importance to the novel of "restless self-questioning" (p. xv).

However, Alter stops short of proclaiming that the novel is essentially self-conscious, or that self-consciousness characterizes what he facetiously terms "The Other Great Tradition" (p. ix). Other critics have been less circumspect; consider, for example, John Ditsky's analysis of the William Gass novel, Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife. Ditsky says the novel's patron saint is Laurence Sterne,

a reminder that the traditional novel has had available for centuries the model it has now chosen to follow up, and a figure whose existence makes possible the disturbing suggestion that the novel form has been sidetracked since long before Austen.<sup>5</sup>

Ditsky here articulates a concept dear to some contemporary critics, that Sterne's self-consciousness is more central than Austen's realism, that the novel as a genre has until recently been "sidetracked." When critics begin to distinguish high roads as opposed to sidetracks, and play the parlor game of Great Traditions in which only approved works qualify, the unique values of a particular work tend to be slighted. It is the sign of a shift

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(5) John Ditsky, "The Man on the Quaker Oats Box: Characteristics of Recent Experimental Fiction," Georgia Review, 26 (1972), 305.

in fashion, a new fad, when critics continuously bring Sterne on stage. We recognize his mischievous influence in Ditsky's description of the "conscious presence of the creative intelligence as active participant in the reader's vicarious experience of the fictional work's substance," and in Ditsky's breathless announcement that "the artist-audience-work relationship becomes one of active and radical conspiracy -- one not to be confused with the patronizing homily-sessions of an earlier day" (p. 306). Ditsky's own patronizing disdain for the homily sessions of an earlier day is part of a critical strategy that calls for a "radical" break with the traditional novel. Today's brash self-conscious narrator must be disassociated from his sedate nineteenth century ancestors. Theories of a radical break with convention emphasize the narrator's creative (solipsistic) imagination to the detriment of traditional mimesis. The first casualties of self-conscious fiction are things as they are -- a mercy killing, according to some critics.

Charles Russell, for example, maintains that self-conscious literature denies reality, or evades reality, or gets by without reality, on the ground that language is incapable of expressing anything about the real world. Value and meaning are dead issues, says Russell, who assumes that the authors he analyzes share his negations. He says cheerfully that, "as Saussure has shown, all linguistic systems are fundamentally arbitrary."<sup>6</sup> "Language ... can never be more than a tenuous imposition on a meaningless world.

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(6) Charles Russell, "The Vault of Language: Self-Reflexive Artifice in Contemporary American Fiction," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 20 (1974), 351.

Ultimately, meaning can refer only to its own linguistic system. It has only a self-referential significance." Therefore, "Self-reflective art reveals this existence centered upon itself" (p. 351). Russell's closed circle surrounds the lines of William H. Gass:

On the other side of a novel lies the void. Think for instance, of a striding statue; imagine the purposeful inclination of the torso, the alert and penetrating gaze of the head and its eyes, the outstretched arm and pointing finger; everything would appear to direct us toward some goal in front of it. Yet our eye travels only to the finger's end, and not beyond. Though pointing, the finger bids us stay instead, and we journey slowly back along the tension of the arm. In our hearts we know what actually surrounds the statue. The same surrounds every other work of art: empty space and silence.<sup>7</sup>

But, as we will argue later, Donald Barthelme's self-conscious fiction is not self-contained; his exquisitely-carved statues point a finger directly at the reader's world. When Russell claims that Vladimir Nabokov's novels are "totally self-absorbed, self-referential linguistic games claiming no entrance into, no involvement with, the phenomenal world" (p. 358), he is taking no account of Nabokov's passion for scientific accuracy and fidelity to the natural world. Russell is forced to ignore such Nabokov stories as "An Affair of Honour," in which the narrator sadly deflates the daydreams of the leading character on the ground that, "Such things don't happen in real life."<sup>8</sup>

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(7) William H. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1972), as quoted in Russell, p. 351.

(8) Vladimir Nabokov, "An Affair of Honour," in *A Russian Beauty and Other Stories*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov, Vladimir Nabokov and Simon Karlinsky (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. 115.

But to continue with Russell's argument. He insists that John Barth "comprehends that all fictions are ultimately about themselves, about the creation of the world by the word" (p. 358). Barth's irony "negates any demand of the contemporary artist to create a radically new vision ..." (p. 359); in fact, Barth and other contemporary writers, in the attempt to reach toward "the latent existence of the world around us ... always return to the meaning of that reaching. If we see, or create, meaning, it is recognized as one more artifice" (p. 359). Anything that resembles meaning or truth is just another illusory layer of artifice, and this state of affairs holds true for most contemporary fiction, since Russell assures us that "both the two main directions to contemporary literature" reveal "the self-consciously explorative nature of our art" (p. 352).

The short term for such theorizing would seem to be solipsism, although Russell's sometimes opaque argument is never quite that blunt. One is thankful, therefore, for the straightforward candor of Arlen Hansen's title, "The Celebration of Solipsism: A New Trend in American Fiction." After discovering solipsism in Barth, Barthelme, Gass and others, Hansen concludes that contemporary writers:

began in reaction to the determinists' denial of the power or significance of man's creative imagination. In the end, some may try to deny the adjustmental aspect of experience, and thus their vision may become too highly subjective and delusory. But the moments of delusion and preciousness might prove in the final analysis a small price to pay for a renewed attention to, and respect for, man's imagination.<sup>9</sup>

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(9) Arlen J. Hansen, "The Celebration of Solipsism," Modern Fiction Studies, 19 (1973), 15.

Although Hansen is more temperate than Russell, his conclusion rests on the same assumption that self-conscious literature downplays the "adjustmental aspect of experience" (by which Hansen presumably means such hard facts as sticks and stones, firing squads and gravity). The corollary of his argument is that conventional realistic novels fail to give attention to, or lack respect for, "man's imagination." This does a disservice to the numerous contemporary writers who employ narrative styles innocent of self-conscious innovation. Is it fair to say that Alice Munro, Mordecai Richler, Larry McMurtry, Saul Bellow and Philip Roth lack respect for man's imagination? When Graham Greene says, "What I would like is to achieve an unnoticeable style," he represents a host of writers who create fiction that respects the imagination without making use of the exhibitionistic and overtly stylish self-conscious narrator.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, the implicit or explicit prejudice against conventional realistic fiction in the theories of Russell, Hansen and others results in a prejudice against the reading public that borders on elitism. Realism remains essential to the novel, not just a sidetrack. Although some critics might condemn the attractions of "local colour," the reader, like the movie-goer, continues to hunger for a sense of the texture of the real world. Facts are always welcome.

Furthermore, the reader's appetite for the commonplace, for factual information and accuracy, is shared by many of those writers who are thought to be celebrators of solipsism. For

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(10) As quoted in "A Novel Sort of Life," by Eric Young and Louise Dennys, *Weekend Magazine*, 25 March 1978, p. 11.

example, Russell assures us that Nabokov's novels are self-referential linguistic games claiming no involvement with the phenomenal world. Yet a precisely opposite aesthetic is advanced in "A Guide to Berlin," a story in which, as Nabokov says in a note about its translation, "two or three scattered phrases have been added for the sake of factual clarity."<sup>11</sup>

The horse-drawn tram has vanished, and so will the trolley, and some eccentric Berlin writer in the twenties of the twenty-first century, wishing to portray our time, will go to a museum of technological history and locate a hundred-year-old streetcar, yellow, uncouth, with old-fashioned curved seats, and in a museum of old costumes dig up a black, shiny-buttoned conductor's uniform. Then he will go home and compile a description of Berlin streets in bygone days. Everything, every trifle, will be valuable and meaningful: the conductor's purse, the advertisement over the window, that peculiar jolting motion which our great-grandchildren will perhaps imagine -- everything will be ennobled and justified by its age.

I think that here lies the sense of literary creation: to portray ordinary objects as they will be reflected in the kindly mirrors of future times; to find in the objects around us the fragrant tenderness that only posterity will discern and appreciate in the far-off times when every trifle of our plain everyday life will become exquisite and festive in its own right ... (pp. 93-94).

This story, or mild manifesto, was written in 1925, when Nabokov's audience was minimal, which partly explains the implication that his contemporary Berlin audience was incapable of appreciating reality's "fragrant tenderness." The point remains that his aesthetic depends on fidelity to the trifles of everyday life, from buttons to streetcars. One can justify a certain skepticism

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(11) Vladimir Nabokov, "A Guide to Berlin," in *Details of a Sunset*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov and Vladimir Nabokov (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), p. 90.



when a critic announces coyly that,

The "real" world, such as it is, such as it is rumored to be, has been increasingly subjected to abuse lately, both from the writers of various sorts of "fictions" and "new novels," and also from their defenders in the new critical anti-world that has grown up around such experimentation.<sup>12</sup>

Certain of these experimental new novelists are less abusive towards the real world than the critics might think. Ronald Sukenick, who humorously champions a new international style in which one of the main qualities is "opacity," nevertheless maintains that "the movement of fiction should always be in the direction of what we sense as real."<sup>13</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, a noted exponent of the new novel, has been known to speak favourably of fidelity to the real world:

All writers believe they are realists. None ever calls himself abstract, illusionistic, chimerical, fantastic, falsitical .... And no doubt we must believe them all, on this point. It is the real world which interests them; each one attempts as best as can to create "the real."<sup>14</sup>

Even John Barth, often taken as the leading exemplar of the contemporary self-conscious novelist, does not represent a complete break with the values of the conventional novel, and with the phenomenal world; at least, he does not represent as complete a break as some critics would suggest. For example, Robert Scholes leans heavily on Barth's works in his proposal for a new narrative genre, which Scholes calls "fabulation": "Delight in design,

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(12) Ditsky, p. 297.

(13) Ronald Sukenick, "The New Tradition," *Partisan Review*, 39 (1972), 587, 583.

(14) Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For A New Novel*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 157.

and its concurrent emphasis on the art of the designer, will serve in part to distinguish the art of the fabulator from the work of the novelist or the satirist. Of all narrative forms, fabulation puts the highest premium on art and joy."<sup>15</sup> Scholes says his term "fabulator" is "an honest attempt to find a word for something that needs one." (We should note his disarming aside that the term is "of course a gimmick, an attention-getter" [p.6].) But is it true that a narrator who delights in narrative design cannot be understood in terms of both the novel genre and the long tradition of the self-conscious narrator? "Fabulation" might be merely a novel that features a self-conscious narrator in a cheerful phase. Since literary criticism does not lack for confusing terminology, perhaps we should resist attention-getting gimmicks predicated on the notion that contemporary writers are so radical that the traditional critical terms no longer apply. John Barth himself offers support for our resistance in a conversation with Joe David Bellamy, in which Bellamy describes a type of fiction "which tends to start talking about the formal nature of the story and the process of its description" (that is, self-conscious fiction). Bellamy asks Barth if there is "a basic conflict between that kind of anti-illusionistic writing and the story-telling impulse":

Barth: No, I don't think there's a conflict, only a kind of tension, which can be used. When we talk about it this way it all sounds dreadfully self-conscious, involuted, vertiginous, dull. In the actual execution it

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(15) Robert Scholes, *The Fabulators* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 10.

doesn't have to be that at all; it can be charming, entertaining; it can even be illusionist.<sup>16</sup>

Sorting through the terms, it seems that Barth rejects the notion that self-conscious devices preclude realism (the traditional illusionistic "storytelling impulse"). It is a mistake to think that self-conscious novels have nothing in common with realistic novels, and it is a worse mistake to think that self-conscious novels are superior in kind to realistic novels. One must protest what Ditsky calls "the latest French thinking in the latest Sontag abridgment," particularly when it leads Susan Sontag (among others, as we shall see in the third chapter) to argue that our contemporary realistic novels "represent barely noteworthy products of a retarded or reactionary consciousness."<sup>17</sup> In fact, however, both the realistic and the self-conscious novel must be faithful to the storytelling impulse and the "adjustmental aspect of experience"; the sign of a "retarded consciousness" would be a novel that went too far in the direction of artifice and solipsism. In the words of Albert Cook:

All art, of course, envisages reality: any work of art is, among other things, an intuitive statement about our experience of the world. And any work of art, at the same time, interests itself ... in its own appearance, the artifice it constitutes of paint or sound or words ....<sup>18</sup>

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(16) Joe David Bellamy, "John Barth," in *The New Fiction*, ed. Bellamy (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1974), p. 10.

(17) Ditsky, p. 298; Susan Sontag, Pref., *Writing Degree Zero*, by Roland Barthes, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), p. ix.

(18) Albert Cook, *The Meaning of Fiction* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1960), p. 24.

Cook calls this artifice "reflexivity," which, like any literary device,

does not, or should not operate in a void: artifices would be vain if they could be purely artificial; they cannot because they must in some way designate the reality from which they spring. When a novel uses reflexivity it must discover a reality. Otherwise we feel it to be gratuitously artificial .... (p. 25).

It is refreshing to find in Cook a critic who can discover reflexivity "implicit in the formalism of most well-made novels since Flaubert" (p. 25), and yet refrain from proclaiming that the novel has been sidetracked into futile realism since Austen. Self-consciousness should be thought of as one more device by which the artist can fashion his vision of the world, since it by no means commits the artist to a solipsistic vision in which layers of artifice infinitely regress from the real world; in fact, self-conscious devices can strengthen the reader's sense of traditional realism. This apparent paradox can be illustrated by briefly referring to the works of two American authors who are not usually listed among the promoters of self-conscious fiction.

Consider this passage from a short story by Charles Bukowski:

So, reader, let's forget Mad Jimmy for a minute and get into Arthur -- which is no big problem -- what I mean is also the way I write: I can jump around and you can come right along and it won't matter a bit, you'll see.<sup>19</sup>

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(19) Charles Bukowski, "Nut Ward Just East of Hollywood," in Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and General Tales of Ordinary Madness (San Francisco: City Lights, 1972), p. 264.

Bukowski here uses what we will see in the next chapter are some of the essential devices of the self-conscious narrator: the narrator calls attention to himself, and emphasizes the artifice of his narrative. But, taken in the larger context of Bukowski's fiction, the self-conscious devices have the paradoxical effect of making the narrative seem natural and realistic, the opposite of contrived.

Bukowski's narrators generally pretend to present true stories from the slums and the mean streets; the form of Bukowski's fiction is little different from the ostensible non-fiction in his columns in a now defunct underground newspaper. The narrator is often named Bukowski, or some transparent pseudonym, adding to the illusion that the narrative is the record of an actual occurrence. The narrator is careful to distinguish himself from those American artists who, in Bukowski's opinion, are elitists preoccupied with artifice to the detriment of meaning and communication:

poetry is still the biggest snob-racket in the Arts ... in essence, the generally accepted poetry of today has a kind of glass outside to it, slick and sliding, and sunned down inside there is a joining of word to word in a rather metallic inhuman summation or semi-secret angle. this is a poetry for millionaires and fat men of leisure so it does get backing and it does survive because the secret is in that those who belong really belong and to hell with the rest. but the poetry is dull, very dull, so dull that the dullness is taken for hidden meaning -- the meaning is hidden, all right, so well hidden that there isn't any meaning. but if YOU can't find it, you lack soul, sensitivity and so forth, so you BETTER FIND IT OR YOU DON'T BELONG. and if you don't find it, KEEP QUIET.<sup>20</sup>

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(20) Charles Bukowski, "Eyes Like the Sky," in *Erections*, p. 417.

Thus the narrator establishes a rhetorical bond with the reader. He is the reader's friend (and fellow ignoramus), and their relationship will bypass the formidable formality of contemporary literature. For example, "Non-Horseshit Horse Advice" says, "for those of you unfamiliar with the basic principles of horse-wagering, allow me to divert you with a few basics."<sup>21</sup> "Allow me to divert you" -- the nineteenth century ingratiating tone, combined with lowlife subject matter and a deliberately unsophisticated style, result in self-consciousness which is anything but solipsistic. The narrator attempts to convince the reader that he is the only artist still connected with reality in America; he and the readers are allies against sophistry and artifice.

Joyce Carol Oates employs a similar technique in her Expensive People. In this curious novel a first-person narrator describes the unhappy childhood in which he may or may not have murdered his mother. The narrator is extremely self-conscious in the novel's opening pages, and in scattered later passages -- for example, he discusses his literary influences, which include an article in the Amateur Penman, "Just What Is Really Necessary in Your Writing?" He asks permission to use "certain rhetorical flourishes and tricks, and the pathetic Melvillian device of enormous build-ups for flabby walk-ons ...."<sup>22</sup> Yet long stretches

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(21) Charles Bukowski, "Non-Horseshit Horse Advice," in Erections, p. 99.

(22) Joyce Carol Oates, Expensive People (1968; rpt. New York: Fawcett, 1970), pp. 89-90.

of the novel are not self-conscious at all, as though the narrator had forgotten about himself in the effort of producing a tale of high emotion and melodrama. The remaining self-consciousness does not contribute to a theme of artifice and literary exhibition; on the contrary, the narrator argues that his story is not fiction, but truth. He says his "memoir" is not "well rounded or hemmed in by fate in the shape of novelistic architecture. It certainly isn't well planned. It has no conclusion but just dribbles off, in much the same way it begins. This is life" (p. 6). The narrator, like Bukowski's narrator, wants to "minimize the tension between writer and reader.... You think I am trying to put something over on you, but that isn't true. It isn't true. I am honest and dogged and eventually the truth will be told ..." (pp. 6-7). The fact is, says the narrator, "this is not fiction. This is life" (p. 7).

The context of an artist's work governs the effects of a particular literary device. The prevalence of self-conscious devices in contemporary writers has led to certain generalizations about the philosophic basis for self-consciousness, and of course these generalizations are partly true; but the percentage of truth is greatly attenuated when the generalizations are applied to a particular writer, particularly a writer of any originality. One suspects that a work which corresponded in every respect to the strictures of self-consciousness would be, in Barth's words, "involuted, vertiginous, dull." Instead of conforming to the alleged rules of self-consciousness, however, the artist causes a metamorphosis of his self-conscious devices

until they contribute to the unique context of a given work. Whatever inherent qualities these self-conscious devices may contain in theory, the artist transforms them in the execution.

The first chapter defines the self-conscious narrator, and illustrates the definition with examples taken from several contemporary writers; the examples will indicate that the self-conscious narrators vary as much as the authors they represent. The chapter argues that the tradition of the self-conscious narrator goes back at least as far as the eighteenth century; it is possible that a greater familiarity with the antecedents of the contemporary self-conscious narrator might have prevented critics from trying to cast him in the role of the revolutionary leader of a radical aesthetic. The brief historical survey will also show that critics in past eras have managed to find what seemed to them good and sufficient reasons for justifying their preconceptions about the narrator's role. The chapter concludes by sketching in some of the themes that recur in contemporary fiction; these include the image of the isolated artist, the use of experimental language, and the stress on innovative narrative techniques.

The second chapter, on Vladimir Nabokov, argues that Nabokov transforms his self-conscious narrators into agents for Nabokov's own fiercely individualistic aesthetic. The self-conscious narrator becomes the exponent of the glory of the human imagination, despite such constraints on the imagination as police states and literary conventions. However, Nabokov's



narrators are not exponents of hermetically sealed word-worlds. The natural world retains an honoured place in Nabokov's fiction (witness his scrupulous, scientific descriptions of nature), and the narrator is part of a philosophic system that incorporates both artifice and reality; in fact, the narrator's imaginative forays often correspond in a mysterious manner to the laws of the universe. The correspondence is difficult to define (all Nabokov's works might be thought of as partial adumbrations), but it is clearly not an artificial environment for crossword puzzle puppets: "Within Nabokov's involutions, behind his many screens, lie real people."<sup>23</sup>

The third chapter deals with Donald Barthelme. In Barthelme's works, a self-conscious society has a debilitating effect on the individual. In "What To Do Next," a character is said to be "hopelessly compromised" by "listening to the instructions of others, or to the whispers of your heart, which is in itself suspect, in that it has been taught to behave ... by the very culture that has produced the desperate situation."<sup>24</sup> The individual finds himself socially programmed for self-conscious futility.

However, the stories do not celebrate the solipsistic intellect. They reveal that self-consciousness is rooted in something deeper, which is the general moral failure: barbarity, greed, murderousness. Although Barthelme's narrators

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(23) Albert J. Guerard, "Notes on the Rhetoric of Anti-Realist Fiction," *TriQuarterly*, No. 30 (1974), p. 25.

(24) Donald Barthelme, "What to Do Next," in *Amateurs* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1976), p. 81.

appear to be playfully self-conscious satirists, they are gradually revealed to be participants in a grave moral drama; it seems "the centre of your difficulties ... is the fact that you are no good" (p. 84).

Ours is a conservative argument. Although both Nabokov and Barthelme are innovative artists, Barthelme hardly provides tidy textbook examples for avant garde theorists, and Nabokov's works rest on an understanding of, and even a reverence for, literary tradition. Thus the introduction has attempted to discourage certain preconceptions that would, perhaps, make it all too easy to explain the use of the self-conscious narrator. The chapters that follow attempt to be inductive rather than deductive; the fact that Barthelme and Nabokov create fictional worlds so different from one another, despite using similar self-conscious methods, suggests that the inductive method is preferable. At any rate, we should be able to avoid the mistake of confusing what the artist created with what he was expected to create.

## I

### THE PEDIGREE OF THE SELF-CONSCIOUS NARRATOR

#### Introduction

The argument is that the philosophic and aesthetic import of the works of Barthelme and Nabokov is not predetermined by certain inherent qualities of the self-conscious narrator. On the contrary, the self-conscious narrator is a malleable device which the authors bend in the direction of their own special literary aims. The function of this first chapter is to show that the self-conscious narrator is not a commanding figure on the literary scene, but rather a familiar figure who has gone in and out of literary fashion. At one time he wore the sedate vestments of the nineteenth century gentleman, and during the era of novelistic impersonality he was so drab as to appear almost invisible. His startling, avant garde, and indeed revolutionary appearance in contemporary literature is due mainly to the startling, avant garde, and revolutionary wardrobe afforded him by contemporary critics.

The self-conscious narrator is defined as a narrator who intrudes on the narrative to comment on his narrative techniques, and to emphasize the artificial and contrived quality of what are otherwise presented as real events. The device developed in step with the development of the English novel in the eighteenth century.

Most of the ramifications of the contemporary novel are represented in the cycle that began with Defoe's verisimilitude and ended with Sterne's very obtrusive narrator. Sterne is of course now considered central to the novel, but for centuries the novel was much closer to the formal realism of Defoe and Richardson. Although nineteenth century novels contain Shandean elements, the intrusive narrator operates within certain limitations, and the typical nineteenth century omniscient narrator was easily discarded when the novel settled into the mold of impersonality and social realism. There was little need for a self-conscious narrator when theorists called for a dehumanized art and an authorial voice refined out of existence. The self-conscious narrator went into eclipse, an eclipse which in a sense has never ended. Certainly in the American novel, our special interest, a case could be made that the realistic novel (often characterized by an objective and impersonal, rather than a self-conscious, narrator) has remained the dominant mode, in both critical and popular terms, since James.

However, in recent American literature, the self-conscious narrator has returned. The eventual breakdown of social realism offered him new opportunities. Authors used him to dramatize the lonely integrity of the artist, and to experiment with language and with narrative techniques. Consequently, it is now typical of a growing number of contemporary works that the narrator of Barthelme's Snow White should interrupt the narrative to ask the reader, "Have you understood, in reading to this point, that Paul is the prince-figure?"<sup>1</sup> Inevitably, the critics conclude that

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(1) Donald Barthelme, Snow White (New York: Atheneum, 1967), p. 82.

the times "demand" self-consciousness:

The modernist sensibility does indeed demand a degree of self-consciousness, an overt acknowledgment on the part of the artist of his awareness of the identity of his material, techniques and processes. That art is illusion, and the revelation of the nature of this illusion ... are at the heart of the modernist consciousness in all the arts.<sup>2</sup>

"The age demanded an image/ Of its accelerated grimace," says the sardonic speaker in Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,"<sup>3</sup> which should caution us against an enthusiastic and uncritical acceptance of the new status of the self-conscious narrator, who now stands "at the heart of the modernist consciousness in all the arts." The purpose of this chapter is to keep the self-conscious narrator in historical perspective, even if perspective diminishes his philosophic status.

#### Narrative Self-Consciousness Defined

In "The Self-Conscious Narrator in Comic Fiction Before Tristram Shandy," Wayne Booth analyzes what he calls the "intruding" narrator.<sup>4</sup> Booth says all narrators are intrusive in the sense that they choose what they talk about, and that this primary form of intrusion should not be treated as a single device. Booth defines a second class of narrative in which the narrator is the hero or main topic of his own account; this second class is almost

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(2) Barbara Rose, "Wolfeburg," The New York Review of Books, 26 June 1975, p. 26.

(3) Ezra Pound, "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," in Selected Poems (New York: New Directions, 1957), p. 61.

(4) Wayne Booth, "The Self-Conscious Narrator in Comic Fiction Before Tristram Shandy," PMLA, 67 (1952), 163.

as general and variable as the first: "Indeed, all first-person narrators ... 'intrude' quite explicitly ..." (p. 164). A third type of narrator "indulges in 'rhetorical' commentary on the characters or events of his story, in order to induce appropriate attitudes in the reader. These comments may range from the simplest kind of weighted language ... to fairly extended commentary on the intellectual issues involved ...." Refining this third class one step further, Booth arrives at the "self-conscious narrator," "who intrudes into his novel to comment on himself as a writer, and on his book, not simply as a series of events with moral implications, but as a created literary product" (pp. 164, 165).

The self-conscious narrator comments on himself as a writer, and comments on his narrative as a created literary product. Booth's definition was designed to fit the works surrounding the eighteenth century's Tristram Shandy, but it is very useful in terms of contemporary self-consciousness as well. However, there are two salient features of contemporary self-consciousness which are perhaps implicit in Booth's definition, but which for our purposes need to be emphasized.

First, the self-conscious narrator in contemporary literature has developed in reaction to the prevailing impersonality of the novel during the modern period (broadly defined as James to the Second World War). James, Flaubert, and others had reacted in their turn against sentimentality and overt moralizing, and had developed an impersonal and objective narrative voice. This new modernist spirit would, in the words of Stéphane Mallarmé, minimize the author's "oratorical presence" and discredit "the

old lyrical aspiration or the enthusiastic personal direction of the sentence."<sup>5</sup> Therefore the contemporary self-conscious narrator often adopts a quirky, idiosyncratic, all-too-human voice, which is at times guilty of a doctrinaire subjectivity.

A second feature of the contemporary self-conscious narrator is his association with metaphysical uncertainty. The notion of a probing, ironic narrator at odds with literary convention and bourgeois epistemology is perhaps implicit in both Booth's theory and Sterne's practice, but in contemporary fiction the problematic aspect has been exaggerated.

But rather than continuing to speak in theoretical terms, let us consider several illustrative examples of the contemporary self-conscious narrator. The examples are designed to indicate the variety of self-conscious narrators (despite the prescriptive theories surrounding them), and also to show, within the limits of brief examples, that the narrators tend to conform to the specific purposes of a specific author in a specific work.

#### The Self-Conscious Narrator Illustrated

John Fowles' pseudo-Victorian narrative, The French Lieutenant's Woman, provides a usefully blatant example of the self-conscious narrator. One scene ends in a close-up of the heroine, Sarah, her face wet with silent tears. "Who is Sarah?" asks a disembodied voice. "Out of what shadows does she come?"

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(5) Mallarmé, as quoted in Erich Kahler, The Disintegration of Form in the Arts (New York: George Braziller, 1968), pp. 75,76.

Chapter 13 answers the question as follows:

I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters' minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in (just as I have assumed some of the vocabulary and "voice" of) a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God .... But I live in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes; if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the word.

So perhaps I am writing a transposed autobiography; perhaps I now live in one of those houses I have brought into the fiction; perhaps Charles is myself disguised. Perhaps it is only a game. ... Or perhaps I am trying to pass off a concealed book of essays on you.<sup>6</sup>

Fowles' self-conscious narrator conforms to our definition in that he intrudes on the narrative to comment on his problems as a writer, and to comment on his narrative as a literary creation. In the process of challenging the conventions of the Victorian novel he addresses the reader directly, over the heads of the characters, as it were. Note the narrator's symptomatic claim that the innocent Victorian technique of omniscience is no longer valid in the age of profound French theorizing. Now that the age of innocence is over, the novelist must fall in line with newly discovered ontological truths: "The novelist is still a god ...; what has changed is that we are no longer the gods of the Victorian image, omniscient and decreeing; but in the new theological image, with freedom our first principle, not authority" (p. 97). In order to free himself, the narrator must give his characters their freedom: "There is only one good

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(6) John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969), pp. 94-95.



definition of God; the freedom that allows other freedoms to exist. And I must conform to that definition" (p. 97).

The narrator's notions of God and reality are not very interesting in themselves; what is interesting is the way in which the ponderous theory affects the self-conscious device. This particular self-conscious narrator seems to be grey-haired with responsibility, and the strain shows as he develops something of a whining tone: "Perhaps you suppose that a novelist has only to pull the right strings and his puppets will behave in a lifelike manner ..." (p. 95). The tone suggests that Bellamy's fears about an impediment to traditional storytelling are justified. The narrator's troubled musings about the narrative rules (Is the novel a concealed book of essays, a disguised autobiography, a game?) are indeed what Barth called "vertiginous," not to mention involuted and dull, although one of the factors that made this novel a best seller, aside from the endless marketability of historical romance, was the interest of some readers in the behind-the-scenes, workshop chatter. Presumably these same readers enjoyed the figure of the artist in the rather tedious second part of The Collector. At any rate, Fowles' fascination with novelistic theory results in a serious and sober self-conscious narrator.

He can be contrasted with the narrator of John Updike's novel, A Month of Sundays. The narrator, a promiscuous cleric, sneaks from his wife's bed to snoop on his mistress:

[He] made his way down oaken staircases flayed with moonbeams to a front door whose fanlight held in Byzantine rigidity the ghosts of its Tiffany colors .... [He] pressed his thumb upon the concussive latch, eased the towering

giant of a parsonage portal towards his twittering chest, stepped outside, onto granite, and bathed his legs in the wintery air.

This is fun! First you whittle the puppets, then you move them around.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike Fowles' narrator, Updike's narrator seems to enjoy manipulating his puppets. Since Tristram Shandy, in fact, self-conscious narrators have been associated with comic narratives. John Barth says he prefers "a kind of fiction that, if it's going to be self-conscious, is at least comic about its own self-consciousness,"<sup>8</sup> and we noted Scholes' attempt to describe a comically self-conscious narrative as a characteristic of a new art form. But the self-conscious narrator in a cheerful phase, whether or not he puts "the highest premium on art and joy," is merely one of the variables of the self-conscious narrator open to the skilful novelist. John Updike is not necessarily a happy "fabulist." In the following passage he uses a self-conscious narrator, but in this case the narrator is not A Month of Sundays' cheerfully naive amateur (writing as part of a program of psychological therapy), but, it seems, a professional author:

A blue jay lights on a twig outside my window. Momentarily sturdy, he stands astraddle, his dingy rump towards me, his head alertly frozen in silhouette, the predatory curve of his beak stamped on a sky almost white above the misting tawny marsh. See him? I do, and, snapping the chain of my thought, I have reached through glass and seized him and stamped him on this page. Now he is gone. And yet, there, a few lines above, he still is,

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(7) John Updike, A Month of Sundays (New York: Knopf, 1975), p. 12.

(8) "John Barth," in Bellamy, p. 11.

"astraddle," rump "dingy," his head "alertly frozen." A curious trick, possibly useless, but mine.<sup>9</sup>

The narrator of "Leaves" is attempting to come to terms with nature, his literary gifts, and, not least in importance, his recent divorce. Although the passage is highly self-conscious, there is not a sense of "art and joy," but art and futility: "A curious trick, possibly useless ...."

One should also note the emphasis on mimesis in the Updike passage, and contrast it with the following from Jorge Luis Borges:

For years now, I have been telling people I grew up in that part of Buenos Aires known as Palermo. This, I've come to realize, is mere literary bravado; the truth is that I really grew up on the inside of a long iron picket fence in a house with a garden and with my father's and his father's library. The Palermo of knife fights and of guitar playing lurked (so they say) on street corners and down back alleys. In 1930, I wrote a study of Evaristo Carriego, a neighbor of ours, a poet and glorifier of the city's outlying slums. A little after that, chance brought me face to face with Emilio Trápani. I was on the train to Morón. Trápani, who was sitting next to the window, called me by name. For some time I could not place him, so many years had passed since we'd been classmates in a school on Thames Street. Roberto Godel, another classmate, may remember him.

... Riding along, we struck up one of those trivial conversations that force you to unearth pointless facts and that lead up to the discovery of the death of a fellow-schoolmate who is no longer anything more than a name. Then, abruptly, Trápani said to me, "Someone lent me your Carriego book, where you're talking about hoodlums all the time. Tell me, Borges, what in the world can you know about hoodlums?" He stared at me with a kind of wonder.

"I've done research," I answered.

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<sup>(9)</sup> John Updike, "Leaves," in *The Music School* (1966; rpt. New York: Fawcett, 1967), p. 44.

Not letting me go on, he said, "Research is the word, all right. Personally, I have no use for research -- I know these people inside out." After a moment's silence, he added, as though he were letting me in on a secret, "I'm Juan Muraña's nephew."

Of all the men around Palermo famous for handling a knife way back in the nineties, the one with the widest reputation was Muraña. Trápani went on, "Florentina -- my aunt -- was his wife. Maybe you'll be interested in this story."

Certain devices of a literary nature and one or two longish sentences led me to suspect that this was not the first time he had told the story.<sup>10</sup>

In one sense, of course, Borges is following a convention at least as old as self-consciousness, that of distancing the narrator from his narrative by means of convenient intermediaries. The purpose of this distancing is to make the narrative more realistic. One thinks of the Gothic novelists who insisted that their manuscripts had been found in trunks with squeaky lids, written in anonymous blood; of Cervantes, who bought the manuscript of Don Quixote from a reliable Arabic historian in the Tolédo marketplace; of The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, which, said Pym, was not fiction but fact.<sup>11</sup>

Borges similarly distances his narrative from the narrator by means of the convenient Emilio Trápani, but the self-conscious note is signified by the narrator's consciousness of himself as an

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(10) J.L. Borges, "Juan Muraña," in Doctor Brodie's Report, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni and J.L. Borges (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1972), pp. 81-82.

(11) Pym was afraid to publish his memoirs, for fear they would be misinterpreted as "merely an impudent and ingenious fiction." He applied to "Edgar Allen Poe," then the editor of the Southern Literary Messenger, who advised him to publish the narrative just as it was, and trust the "shrewdness and common sense of the public." Pym decided, however, to dupe the public by publishing his adventures as fiction, and "that they might certainly be regarded as fiction, the name of Mr. Poe was affixed to the articles in the table of contents of the magazine." The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (1838; rpt. New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), pp. 1,2.

artist. We learn, for example, that the biographical information in the first line is "literary bravado." Borges appears in person in the railroad car but is this the real Borges? Borges talks elsewhere of "working in imaginary and real people in the same story. For example, if I quote an apocryphal book, then the next book to be quoted is a real one, or perhaps an imaginary one, by a real writer, no? When a man writes he feels rather lonely, and then he has to keep his spirits up, no?"<sup>12</sup>

Unlike Updike's more or less straightforward narrator in "Leaves," Borges' narrator emphasizes narrative ambiguity and deceptiveness; the "Borges" of the story is somewhat removed from a literal self-portrait, and Trápani, the ostensible eyewitness, who pretends to believe in the virtue of factual, first-hand reporting, is also a narrator who introduces artifice into the ostensible record of true events: "Certain devices of a literary nature ... led me to suspect that this was not the first time he had told the story."

The Borges example demonstrates narrative self-consciousness at a far remove from realism. Certainly those critics who argue that narrative self-consciousness leads to solipsism and regressive layers of artifice would have a good argument if they restricted themselves to Borges. And yet, it might be more accurate to say that Borgesian self-consciousness leads not to solipsism, or indeed any standard philosophic position, but to paradox, and

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(12) Richard Burgin, *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 50.

to uniquely Borgesian paradox at that. Consider the conclusion to "Borges and I":

Years ago I tried to free myself from him and went from the mythologies of the suburbs to the games with time and infinity, but those games belong to Borges now and I shall have to imagine other things. Thus my life is a flight and I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to him.

I do not know which of us has written this page.<sup>13</sup>

It seems that Borges uses the self-conscious narrator as a means towards self-discovery, and although it might be difficult for the reader to interpret the findings, surely the stories reveal something more subtle than solipsism. Nabokov and Borges go in different directions of course, with Nabokov much more closely allied with the real world, but both transform the self-conscious narrator into something literally unique!<sup>14</sup> The following description of Sebastian Knight might remind us of the narratives of both Nabokov and Borges:

[He] was aware of his inability to fit into the picture -- into any kind of picture. When at last he thoroughly understood this and grimly started to cultivate self-consciousness as if it had been some rare talent or passion, only then did Sebastian derive satisfaction from its rich and monstrous growth . . . .<sup>15</sup>

The foregoing examples should be sufficient to make the

(13) J.L. Borges, "Borges and I," trans. James E. Irby, in Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, trans. J.E. Irby et al. (New York: New Directions, 1964), pp. 246-47.

(14) See Patricia Merivale, "The Flaunting of Artifice in Vladimir Nabokov and Jorge Luis Borges," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, 8 (1967), 294-309; rpt. in Nabokov: The Man and His Work, ed. L.S. Dembo (Milwaukee: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1967), pp. 209-24. Subsequent references to the several articles on Nabokov in the Wisconsin Studies issue will be attributed to Dembo.

(15) Vladimir Nabokov, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (1941; rpt. Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1959), p. 44.

definition of the self-conscious narrator clear; however, it might still be objected that all narrators are to a certain extent self-conscious. The answer to this objection, as Booth points out, is that what appears to be self-consciousness is the root intrusiveness of the first-person narrator. Furthermore, one could admit a degree of self-consciousness in every narrator, but still insist that the label "self-conscious narrator" is useful when applied to works in which the self-consciousness inherent in narration is emphasized, or brought to the reader's perhaps unwilling attention. Consider, for example, the contrast in the opening paragraphs of Larry McMurtry's The Last Picture Show and Sasha Sokolov's A School for Fools, respectively:

Sometimes Sonny felt like he was the only human creature in town. It was a bad feeling, and it usually came on him in the mornings early, when the streets were completely empty, the way they were one Saturday morning in late November. The night before Sonny had played his last game of football ....<sup>16</sup>

All right, but how do you begin, what words do you use? It makes no difference, use the words: there, at the station pond. At the station pond? But that's incorrect, a stylistic mistake.<sup>17</sup>

The Sokolov passage has certain affinities with the previous examples, whereas the McMurtry passage seems impersonal, plain, straightforward -- unself-conscious. Sokolov's narrator is aware of himself as a writer, and aware that he is creating a literary effect with words. By contrast with McMurtry, who is obviously beginning a traditional narrative about a young man in a rural

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(16) Larry McMurtry, The Last Picture Show (New York: Dial, 1966), p. 1.

(17) Sasha Sokolov, A School for Fools, trans. Carl R. Proffer (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis, 1977), p. 11.

town, Sokolov seems to be rather artificial, although one hesitates to use that term when all works of art are by definition artificial; yet the clumsy term still expresses the idea that the reader must not expect literary trompe l'oeil, or traditional realism. Instead, despite the long tradition of the self-conscious narrator, the ordinary reader will be somewhat thrown off by the self-conscious style. As the blurb on the jacket phrases it, "Sokolov purposely stuns the reader in the whimsical opening pages. The re-reader will see that the novel contains as much plan as passion. But Sokolov outdoes Sterne with digressions ...."

The question is; why should Sokolov's self-conscious methods "stun" the reader, when the reader has had the two centuries since Sterne to assimilate self-conscious techniques? The answer lies in the history of the novel. Despite the concurrence of both self-conscious fiction and what is now thought of as traditional realistic fiction in the eighteenth century, realism prevailed. Although both Fielding and Sterne combined self-consciousness with realism, the tradition passed on to the nineteenth century was the realistic tradition; poor self-consciousness did about as well as the Gothic.

There were of course critics prepared to argue that what did in fact happen was what should have happened; the self-conscious narrator was eventually banned from what was thought to be the realistic mainstream of the novel. Consequently, the contemporary resurgence of the self-conscious narrator has led to exaggerated and enthusiastic notions that he is a revolutionary figure to be associated with the breakdown of language, philosophic chaos,



literature as solipsistic escapism -- all those notions based on the idea that self-consciousness and realism are somehow mutually exclusive. This notion is of course false, and leads to exaggerations on the order of Ditsky's that "the novel form has been sidetracked since Austen."

### The Self-Conscious Narrator in the Eighteenth Century

The conventional novel is based on what Ian Watt calls formal realism.<sup>18</sup> The use of a self-conscious narrator for years implied an anti-conventional departure from the norm, the norm having been established in the eyes of theoreticians of the novel by Defoe and Richardson. A sense of norms and traditions was quickly established despite the fact that the word "novel," as is endlessly pointed out, implies something innovative and new. What was new about the novel in the eighteenth century was that it answered the middle class need for facts. The lowest common denominator of the novel, Watt's formal realism, insists on the things of this world. We are told that the novel was stimulated by the new individualism of the competitive marketplace and free-form Protestantism, or by trends in philosophy towards nominalist language and the evidence of the senses, or by a new scientific interest in the quotidian; but in any case the middle-class reading public desired information about their very real world.

These very real wants were answered by Defoe, who in 1722 published A Journal of the Plague Year, a work of fiction that

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(18) See Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel (London, 1957; rpt. Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1965), pp. 32-34.

disguised itself as an eye-witness, first-person account of the Great Plague of London in 1665. About two decades later Richardson wrote Pamela, fiction disguised as a conduct book for young girls who might find themselves resisting the somewhat unwelcome advances of lecherous gentlemen. Both Richardson and Defoe used narrators who were unconcerned about stylistic virtuosity. Moll, Robinson Crusoe and Pamela are not literary craftsmen.

Fielding challenged the conventions of the novel, which had barely begun, with his parodies Shamela and Joseph Andrews. Tom Jones is the most radical departure, as Fielding himself announced:

I shall not look on myself as accountable to any court of critical jurisdiction whatever; for as I am, in reality, the founder of a new province of writing, so I am at liberty to make what laws I please therein.<sup>19</sup>

Even at this early stage of the novel's development, the self-conscious narrator has an important place. We recognize his presence in a chapter heading of Tom Jones -- "A short hint of what we can do in the sublime . . . ." -- and in the deliberately exaggerated mock-epic style of the passage that provides a hint of the sublime: "Hushed be every ruder breath. May the heathen ruler of the winds confine in iron chains the boisterous limbs of noisy Boreas . . ." (p. 129).

But the self-conscious narrator in all his involuted glory arrives with Sterne's Tristram Shandy:

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(19) Henry Fielding, Tom Jones (London, 1749; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1963), p. 65.

We are now going to enter upon a new scene of events. --

Leave we then the breeches in the taylor's hands, with my father standing over him ....

Leave we poor Le Fever to recover, and get home from Marseilles as he can. -- And last of all, -- because the hardest of all --

Let us leave, if possible, myself: -- But 'tis impossible, -- I must go along with you to the end of the work.<sup>20</sup>

From Defoe's realism to one of the most self-conscious, artificial, meddling narrators in literature. A literary critic who was born in 1700, and who attempted throughout his life to stay up to date with the avant garde, would have thrown his hands up in despair when Tristram Shandy began to be published in 1759.

By 1759 the novel had combined self-consciousness with formal realism; it should be remembered that neither Fielding nor Sterne abandoned realism. Sterne's narrator might be self-conscious and whimsical, but his account of the siege of Namur is accurate. Fielding's novel, like many a realistic novel after it, took a chance on insulting its audience by describing life among the lower classes; and the complex, "artificial" plot is said to correlate with the almanac of 1745. Nevertheless, it was the more straightforward realism of Defoe and Richardson which came to be thought of as the central tradition of the novel, and the self-conscious style of Sterne, in particular, was considered a blind alley off the novel's healthy highroad. Thus the loaded terms of Ernest Baker:

The freakish deviations from the norm typified by Tristram Shandy and A Sentimental Journey were

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(20) Laurence Sterne, Tristram Shandy, ed. Ian Watt (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 336.

not, however, a thing entirely new, but on the contrary a revival of nondescript kinds of fiction that had been common enough before Richardson and Fielding took hold of the novel and put it in order.<sup>21</sup>

Such polarization of "freakish derivation" vs. the novel in good order is an impediment to understanding self-consciousness in Nabokov and Barthelme. Self-consciousness had its turn as the freakish derivation, but now in much contemporary criticism realism has to play the villainous role of freakish derivation, or, as Sontag would have it, the product of a retarded consciousness. Behind the mad pendulum swing of critical opinion the work itself tends to be obscured; the process of revising literary history has a marked effect on our understanding of contemporary writers who the critics insist operate under Sterne's shadow. Joyce Carol Oates, for example, says it is a "commonplace of critical thought to point all the way back to Tristram Shandy as a convention-breaking work";<sup>22</sup> a commonplace, that is, of recent critical thought, which is dominated by the notion that works which break with tradition are the most valuable.

It is a further sign of Sterne's new centrality that Wayne Booth has provided Tristram with his own tradition, beginning with Don Quixote, "the first important novel using the self-conscious narrator" (p. 165). Sterne's self-conscious narrator suddenly develops a pedigree: Booth mentions in his article Furetière's Le Roman Bourgeois (1666), Scarron's Roman Comique (in two parts,

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(21) Ernest Baker, The History of the English Novel, IV (London: H.F. and G. Witherby, 1930), p. 240.

(22) Joe David Bellamy, "Joyce Carol Oates," in Bellamy, p. 27.

1651 and 1657), Congreve's Incognita (1700), the important Pharsamon (1737) by Marivaux, and a mass of "facetiae", a term that is probably subsumed under Ernest Baker's cruel phrase, "non-descript kinds of fiction."<sup>23</sup> We are now assured that Sterne's times were positively characterized by self-consciousness:

[R]egardless of the historian's decision as to the date of the origin of the novel as a literary form, the form itself ... became important in the eighteenth century concurrent with the new self-consciousness of western man about his need to hammer out for himself the answers to his increasingly problematic and frenetic existence. ... And the major issues themselves are transformed into fundamental questions about the form itself and how to use it.<sup>24</sup>

Kaplan's version of literary history makes self-consciousness and Sterne central to the eighteenth century. In fact, however, the realism of Defoe and Richardson prevailed, which explains why the self-conscious narrator languished in the following century. He survived only in a weakened condition as part of what is known as editorial omniscience, which refers to a narrator who knows as much about his characters as God, and who enjoys commenting on the action as it unfolds. The omniscient narrator differs from the eighteenth century self-conscious narrator in that he generally restricts himself to moralizing commentary, rather than aesthetic debates that would significantly disturb his novel's realistic surface.

The self-conscious narrator expired, and the critics gathered at his sickbed to say that his death might be necessary to clear

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(23) See also Booth's "Tristram Shandy and Its Precursors: The Self-Conscious Narrator," Diss. Univ. of Chicago 1950; and his The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), particularly pp. 211-40.

(24) Fred Kaplan, "Victorian Modernists: Fowles and Nabokov," The Journal of Narrative Technique, 3 (1973), 109.

the way for the purely realistic novel. This unfortunate critical bias has had an effect on our understanding of contemporary novelists, whose use of the self-conscious narrator is taken to be a repudiation of realism, with all the accompanying philosophical connotations, rather than the rejuvenation of a literary device which can be used as a full partner of realism rather than its polar opposite. But let us look at the self-conscious narrator's declining fortunes in more detail.

#### The Decline of the Self-Conscious Narrator

It is true that several nineteenth century narrators intrude to comment on the action, and to a certain extent make the reader aware of a controlling artistic presence. For example, here in the early part of the century is Jane Austen, generally deemed "impersonal," nevertheless commenting in a facetious vein towards the end of Mansfield Park: "Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore every body, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest."<sup>25</sup>

In Adam Bede, while the story "Pauses a Little," George Eliot chats with a reader about her treatment of the clergyman, Mr. Irwine.<sup>26</sup> In Vanity Fair, Thackeray promises that once the curtain is raised he will bow to the audience and retire; in fact, however, he can't resist a further personal appearance, and

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(25) Jane Austen, Mansfield Park, ed. Reuben A. Brower (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 350.

(26) George Eliot, Adam Bede (London, 1859; rpt. New York: Crowell-Collier, 1962), p. 173.

travels to the Ducal town of Pumpnickel, attends the theatre, and personally witnesses the social embarrassment of Dobbin and Emmy: "It was on this very tour that I, the present writer of a history of which every word is true, had the pleasure to ... make their acquaintance."<sup>27</sup> The reticent and withdrawn Nathaniel Hawthorne surprised himself in the opening to The Scarlet Letter:

It is a little remarkable, that -- though disinclined to talk overmuch of myself and my affairs at the fireside, and to my personal friends -- an autobiographical impulse should twice in my life have taken possession of me, in addressing the public. The first time was three or four years since, when I favored the reader -- inexcusably, and for no earthly reason, that either the indulgent reader or the intrusive author could imagine -- with a description of my way of life in the deep quietude of an Old Manse. And now -- because, beyond my deserts, I was happy enough to find a listener or two on the former occasion -- I again seize the public by the button, and talk of my three years' experience in a Custom-House.<sup>28</sup>

But there is a fundamental difference between this nineteenth century self-conscious narrator and the self-conscious narrators of Barthelme or Nabokov or Sterne. Paradoxically enough, Austen and Hawthorne seem anything but self-conscious; their intrusions seem natural, innocent and unsophisticated. Their narrators are not struggling with different methods of narration, and nothing is problematic about their choices; instead, they rest within the convention of editorial omniscience. The narrator is omniscient in that he has full knowledge of everything that passes in the

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(27) Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, ed. Geoffrey and Kathleen Tillotson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), p. 602.

(28) Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, ed. Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, and E. Hudson Long (New York: Norton, 1961), p. 6.

minds of his characters; but in return for this power he must treat the reader with respect. This is the era of Dear Reader. The unwritten contract demands genteel deference to the audience and to traditional methods of telling a story; although the narrator has absolute power, he must never break the rules of verisimilitude. The narrator rarely explores his own personality, or reveals his stylistic and technical problems; his attention is focused instead on entertaining and enlightening his guest, the reader:

It is the first necessity of [the novelist's] position that he make himself pleasant.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps the reader -- whom I cannot help considering as my guest in the Old Manse, and entitled to all courtesy in the way of sight-showing . . . .<sup>30</sup>

Omniscience within gentlemanly limits becomes a kind of depersonalized omniscience, which means the death of a self-conscious narrator who would insist on the vagaries of aesthetic methods and on his own personality. Norman Friedman uses the useful term Neutral Omniscience to describe the depersonalization of the self-conscious voice. Whereas Editorial Omniscience admits "authorial intrusions and generalizations about life, manners and morals," Neutral Omniscience "differs from Editorial Omniscience only in the absence of direct authorial intrusions (the author speaks impersonally in the third person) . . . ."<sup>31</sup> As the "author-

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(29) Anthony Trollope, *Autobiography*, in Miriam Allott, *Novelists on the Novel* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959) p. 315.

(30) Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846; rpt. Chicago: Rand, McNally, n.d.), p.8.

(31) Norman Friedman, "Point of View in Fiction: The Development of a Critical Concept," *PMLA*, 70 (1955), 1171-72.



ial intrusions" (more accurately, the narrator's intrusions) dwindle and eventually disappear, the narrator drops from the reader's sight, to be replaced by an impersonal omniscient voice which rarely refers to the fact that the story at hand, "in which every word is true," is a created work of art.

This depersonalization received the influential approval of Henry James, who considered it sacrilegious for a narrator to intrude on the story. Consider his remarks from an essay on Anthony Trollope:

He took a suicidal satisfaction in reminding the reader that the story he was telling was only, after all, a make-believe. He habitually referred to the work in hand (in the course of that work) as a novel, and to himself as a novelist, and was fond of letting the reader know that this novelist could direct the course of events according to his pleasure. Already, in Barchester Towers, he falls into this pernicious trick.... These little slaps at credulity (we might give many more specimens) are very discouraging, but they are even more inexplicable; for they are deliberately inartistic .... It is impossible to imagine what a novelist takes himself to be unless he regards himself as an historian and his narrative as a history.... As a narrator of fictitious events he is nowhere.... Therefore, when Trollope suddenly winks at us and reminds us that he is telling us an arbitrary thing, we are startled and shocked....<sup>32</sup>

James preferred a single, focused perspective rather than the multiple perspective of the omniscient narrator.<sup>33</sup> He preferred

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(32) James, pp. 247-48.

(33) "To employ more perspectives than are necessary for the 'treatment of the subject' is seen by them [James and Percy Lubbock] as an artistic failure. (This judgment is probably itself based on an analogy with the logical principle known as Occam's razor, which assigns a superior validity to the simpler of two arguments.)" Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, The Nature of Narrative (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 273.

to incorporate the single perspective as a character within the plot; hence, such characters as Lambert Strether, and "point of view" rather than a self-conscious narrator.

"As a narrator of fictitious events he is nowhere," suggests the scope of James' prejudice against the overt artifice of the self-conscious narrator; nevertheless his theories were full of qualifications and good sense. Unfortunately, his theories were simplified by Percy Lubbock in the influential Craft of Fiction:

Lubbock's account is clearer and more systematic than James's; he gives us a neat and helpful scheme of relationships among the terms panorama, picture, drama and scene. It is a scheme that James can be made to support, but in James's account it is surrounded with important qualifications which in Lubbock are already beginning to be slighted.<sup>34</sup>

James and his disciple Lubbock contributed to the demise of the self-conscious narrator, an easy target in that he usually appeared in the form of a surrogate for the moralizing author. Instead of focusing the reader's attention on the aesthetics of the narrative, he offered a running moral commentary; and instead of flaunting his quirky, subjective personality, he either modulated towards a neutral and even invisible impersonality, or else presented himself as a decorous gentleman, the willing servant of his reader's expectations. Such at least were the tendencies of the nineteenth century self-conscious narrator, and those who wanted a more impersonal and objective novel were not about to advocate a return to the more exhibitionistic

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(34) Booth, Rhetoric, pp. 24-25.

tendencies of a Sterne. Consequently, by 1928, and Point Counter Point, Aldous Huxley uses the notebook of a character named Philip Quarles to complain about the disappearance of the self-conscious narrator in his role as meddling author. Quarles muses on the former "god-like creative privilege" of the novelist,

to consider the events of the story in their various aspects -- emotional, scientific, economic, religious, metaphysical, etc. He will modulate from one to the other .... But perhaps this is a too tyrannical imposition of the author's will. Some people would think so. But need the author be so retiring? I think we're a bit too squeamish about these personal appearances nowadays.<sup>35</sup>

Ford Madox Ford wrote unequivocally that the novelist "must not, by taking sides, exhibit his preferences." "No author would, like Thackeray, today intrude his broken nose and myopic spectacles into the middle of the most thrilling scene he ever wrote, in order to tell you that though his heroine was rather a wrong 'un his own heart was in the right place."<sup>36</sup> Joseph Warren Beach could justifiably claim that, "In a bird's-eye view of the English novel from Fielding to Ford, the one thing that will impress you more than any other is the disappearance of the author."<sup>37</sup> Although Beach states a fact rather than making a judgment, other critics stood ready to elevate what is to what should be. In a chapter of The World

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(35) Aldous Huxley, Point Counter Point (1928; rpt. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1955), p. 298.

(36) Ford Madox Ford, The English Novel (Philadelphia and London: J.B. Lippincott, 1929), pp. 128, 144.

(37) Joseph Warren Beach, The Twentieth Century Novel: Studies in Technique (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1932), p. 14.

of Fiction with the apt title, "The Invisible Novelist," Bernard DeVoto declares that the "interposition of the novelist in person is discordant":

Certainly the sentiment is not universal; there are many readers who do not share it and some novelists who do not observe it. [Nevertheless] it is one of the determining principles of modern fiction and one of the refinements, or purifications, that fiction has achieved on the way to its implicit methods.<sup>38</sup>

DeVoto's "implicit methods" hint at the sterile dogmatism of New Critical theories about the novel. A narrator commenting casually on his narrative in a relaxed, moralistic, old-fashioned tone is an embarrassment to the critic engaged in close reading to establish structure, tension, "pseudo-statement" and holistic form. The author's biography was declared out of bounds (the intentional fallacy), and his rhetorical effect on the audience was deemed irrelevant (the affective fallacy). Thus Allen Tate:

The limited and thus credible authority for the action, which is gained by putting the knower of the action inside its frame, is perhaps the distinctive feature of the modern novel; and it is, in all the infinite shifts of focus of which it is capable, the specific feature which more than any other has made it possible for the novelist to achieve an objective structure.<sup>39</sup>

There is no provision in the "objective structure" for self-conscious narrators who might leave around the unsharpened pencils of their craft, and offer unsolicited opinions regarding the morality of the characters, and perhaps call into question

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(38) Bernard DeVoto, The World of Fiction (Boston: The Writer, Inc., 1956), p. 207.

(39) Allen Tate, "The Post of Observation in Fiction," Maryland Quarterly, I (1944), p. 63.

the terms of existence of the object, the objet d'art.

The rigid critical orthodoxy that proclaimed the self-conscious narrator "discordant" was part of a larger critical tendency towards the impersonal and even the dehumanized. By comparison with the sympathetic clucking noises Thackeray makes over his favourite characters, Flaubert's attitude towards Madame Bovary seems inhuman and therefore cruel (in so far as the narrative voice in Madame Bovary has any human dimension at all). There is no longer any need for the self-conscious narrator's tendency to meddle in the plot, for his overt aesthetic preoccupations, his moralizing, or, of course, his rhetoric. If the novel is a perfect object, there is no need to cajole the audience.

Therefore the next section examines the depersonalization of the narrative, which has ramifications for the self-conscious narrator in the contemporary novel. When the self-conscious narrator finally returned to the novel, after being banished from his partnership in the representation of reality for so long, he naturally enough appeared to be a solipsistic agent of chaos, designed to eliminate any possibility of agreement between the artist and the audience about their common reality.

Let us look first at what José Ortega y Gasset would call the dehumanization of art.

### The Inhuman Narrator

There is a famous passage relating to the depersonalization of the novel in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man:

The personality of the artist, at first a cry or a cadence or a mood and then a fluent and lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalizes itself, so to speak.... The artist, like the God of the creation, remains behind or within or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.<sup>40</sup>

Portrait was published in 1916. Four years later T.S. Eliot published The Sacred Wood, which includes the influential essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Eliot also wants to minimize the artist's personality, or at least the cult of personality: "It is not in his personal emotions, the emotions provoked by particular events in his life, that the poet is in any way remarkable or interesting." "Poetry is ... not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things."<sup>41</sup>

Given the intellectual climate, it is not surprising that a prejudice developed in favor of impersonal "showing" over rhetorical "telling." Wayne Booth has attempted to dispense with the distinction between showing and telling once and for all. "Everything [the author] shows will serve to tell; the line between showing and telling is always to some degree an arbitrary one." In short, "the author's judgment is always present, always evident to one who knows how to look for it."<sup>42</sup> Booth is reacting

(40) James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, ed. Chester G. Anderson (New York: Viking, 1968), p. 215.

(41) T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism (1920; rpt. London: Methuen, 1960), pp. 57, 58.

(42) Booth, Rhetoric, p. 20.

against a bias which is displayed in the following discussion of the difference between Defoe (who we are to believe is a clumsy teller) and Joyce (a sophisticated shower). John Peter compares a passage from Robinson Crusoe with a passage from the Portrait:

In the one case [Defoe] the texture is comparatively opaque: we hear the voice of the author speaking, narrating. In the other case the texture is comparatively transparent, so that it is rather a matter of the story enacting itself through an unobstructive medium of words.

... We associate the undeveloped style with the use of the first person, and with verboriousities like "I take up my pen" and "Gentle reader," and it is probably true that an early novelist like Richardson was precluded, by his use of the epistolary method, from achieving the force of a developed style.... [In many early novels] the narrator, though not the author himself, permits him the latitude of expatiation and surmise, a sort of dairian ease, and here too the prose seldom transcends the level of its words....<sup>43</sup>

Peter confuses the author with the narrative voice. We do not have the author "speaking, narrating" in Defoe's novel, because it is a first person narration by a character named Robinson Crusoe. A novel is never narrated by the author, but by a narrative voice which is as much a creation as the characters, and which can be first-person or third-person, objective or self-conscious, or whatever. Obviously Peter sees any intermediary between the events and the reader as a flaw revealing the amateurish presence of the author, and an impediment to the progress of the "developed" style. But whether the perpetrator is the narrator, or the author, or the "use of the first person,"

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(43) John Peter, "Joyce and the Novel," Kenyon Review, 18 (1956), 622.

the sin is "latitude of expatiation and surmise, a sort of dairian ease"; since this description could easily fit Tristram Shandy, we can surmise that there is no place for the "verbose" self-conscious narrator in Peter's developed style.

The self-conscious narrator would fare no better in what José Ortega y Gasset called the "presentative" novel. Ortega says that while the "primitive reader" may have enjoyed the narrative novel, the modern sophisticated reader demands a novel "direct and descriptive. The best word would be 'presentative'."<sup>44</sup> "During the nineteenth century," Ortega says, "artists proceeded in all too impure a fashion. They reduced the strictly aesthetic elements to a minimum and let the work consist almost entirely in a fiction of human realities" (p. 11). The presentative novel would maximize aesthetics and minimize human realities. Such a novel would fit the laws of the new "pure" art, which would meet the expectations of what Ortega calls "the most alert young people of two successive generations" (p. 13). The new "pure" art tends "(1) to dehumanize art, (2) to avoid living forms, (3) to see to it that the work of art is nothing but a work of art ..." (p. 14).

These formidable "alert young people" placed their faith in the presented object. There is, of course, an immense critical problem in the dichotomy between the object as a symbol for vast forces in the external world, in the sense of a grain of sand containing the universe, and the object as supremely unreal,

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(44) José Ortega y Gasset, The Dehumanization of Art and Notes on the Novel, trans. Helene Weyl (1948; rpt. New York: Peter Smith, 1951), pp. 62,63.



with other works of art as its only context. But in either case the emphasis is on the object, the "thing" in all its reverberations, and the narrator is superfluous:

The work of art in its complete purity implies the disappearance of the poet's oratorical presence. The poet leaves the initiative to the words, to the clash of their mobilized diversities. The words ignite through mutual reflexes like a flash of fire over jewels. Such reflexes replace that respiration ... perceptible in the old lyrical aspiration or the enthusiastic personal direction of the sentence.<sup>45</sup>

The novelist was urged to present objects: Ortega's "ultra-objects" (p. 22) or Eliot's more famous objective correlative. Thus the impersonal style of Hemingway, who waged war against rhetoric:

They whack-whacked the white horse on the legs and he kned himself up. The picador twisted the stirrups straight and pulled and hauled up into the saddle. The horse's entrails hung down in a blue bunch and swung backward and forward as he began to canter, the monos whacking him on the back of his legs with the rods. He cantered jerkily along the barrera. He stopped stiff and one of the monos held his bridle and walked him forward. The picador kicked in his spurs, leaned forward and shook his lance at the bull. Blood pumped regularly from between the horse's front legs. He was nervously unsteady. The bull could not make up his mind to charge.<sup>46</sup>

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(45) Mallarmé, as quoted in Kahler, *Disintegration of Form*, pp. 75-76. Perhaps Borges mocks this tendency in one of the fiercely avant-garde monographs of Pierre Menard, "on the possibility of constructing a poetic vocabulary of concepts which would not be synonyms or periphrases of those which make up our everyday language, 'but rather ideal objects created according to convention and essentially designed to satisfy poetic needs ...'" (*Labyrinths*, p. 37).

(46) Ernest Hemingway, *In Our Time* (1925; rpt. New York: Scribner's, 1958), p. 115.

Hemingway banishes the self-conscious narrator; in fact, one barely senses the presence of a narrative voice at all. But there is an implied voice, a moral voice that refuses to accept the world's horrors. Robbe-Grillet would do away with even the implied presence of a human consciousness:

In this future universe of the novel, gestures and objects will be there before being something; and they will still be there afterwards, hard, unalterable, eternally present ....

... No longer will objects be merely the vague reflection of the hero's vague soul, the image of his torrents, the shadow of his desires. Or rather, if objects still afford a momentary prop to human passions, they will do so only provisionally, and will accept the tyranny of significations only in appearance -- derisively, one might say -- the better to show how alien they remain to man.

... Whereas the traditional hero is ... destroyed by these interpretations of the author's, ceaselessly projected into an immaterial and unstable elsewhere ... the future hero will remain, on the contrary, there. It is the commentaries that will be left elsewhere; in the face of his irrefutable presence, they will seem useless, superfluous, even improper.<sup>47</sup>

Ortega's program of dehumanization is finally achieved in Robbe-Grillet's novels; instead of a self-conscious narrator there is a detached monotone which drones out the list of objects:

In the second row [of banana trees], starting from the far left, there would be twenty-two trees (because of the alternate arrangement) in the case of a rectangular patch. There would also be twenty-two for a patch that was barely trapezoidal, the reduction being scarcely noticeable at such a short distance from its base. And, in fact, there are twenty-two trees there.

But the third row too has only twenty-two trees ....<sup>48</sup>

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(47) Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For A New Novel*, pp. 21-22.

(48) Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Jealousy*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 20.

A bias against emotional commentary in favor of impersonal aesthetic objects denies the self-conscious narrator freedom to function. A related factor militating against the self-conscious narrator is the novel of social realism, by which we mean novels that focus on the society rather than the individual, and novels which emphasize social forces, ideological and natural, rather than style and aesthetics. Social realism is particularly important in American fiction, our main interest in that Barthelme is an American writer, and Nabokov, admittedly a delicate problem in nationalistic classification, liked to describe himself as an American writer and taxpayer.

When one thinks of social realism in the novel -- of, say, the social epics of Thackeray and Tolstoy, -- one also thinks of the early challenge to social realism made by what are now called the English modernists -- Joyce, Woolf and Lawrence, for example. Yet despite the fact that these writers, particularly Joyce, challenge traditional forms of the novel and traditional world views, it is generally true to say that their works are grounded in realistic studies of their societies -- Joyce's Dublin, Lawrence's study of class distinctions in Lady Chatterley's Lover, the social mores of middle class London which lie behind the epistemological fireworks of Mrs. Dalloway. Furthermore, their departures from traditional realism do not generally depend on a self-conscious narrator.

At any rate, despite any influence by the English modernists, American literature has been dominated by social realism until contemporary times. A case could be made that realism is still the dominant mode, not only among the bestselling chronicles of

an Arthur Hailey or an Irwin Shaw (who, after all, represent the contemporary novel to most readers), but among the more sophisticated novelists such as Bellow, Roth, and McMurtry. It is difficult to say why the literature of social forces has been so strong in America, although one could speculate that it has something to do with a young, frontier society, in which the forces that act on society are more crude and apparent than they are in the more traditional and perhaps more subtle European society. Speculation aside, there is indisputably a realistic tradition bounded at one extreme by the refinements of Howells and James, and at the other extreme by the brutalized realism, or naturalism, of London and Norris. A host of writers fit somewhere in between: Wharton, Farrell, Lewis, Dos Passos, Dreiser, Thomas Wolfe. There has been an accompanying tradition of distrust for aesthetics, particularly ivory-tower aesthetics in which the novelist would set himself apart from the commonality. Writers who might self-consciously distinguish themselves from the bourgeoisie nevertheless tend (with some exceptions, to be sure) to adopt an anti-intellectual, anti-aesthetic dandy, two-fisted stance. Charles Bukowski comes to mind, the bard of the unlettered.

Because of the strength of the realistic tradition, the break with it has been all the more violent. The self-conscious narrator, with his individualism, his egotism and his aesthetic preoccupations, has been embraced all too eagerly as a counter-thrust to the realistic tradition, rather than as a device by which the excesses of realism could be corrected. Arlen Hansen,

for example, advocates the solipsism of the "creative imagination" as a necessary evil in the battle against realism, which he sees as partly characterized by "overt and disguised polemics on behalf of empiricism and behavioralism."<sup>49</sup>

So prevalent is the deterministic coloration of the respective visions of Crane, Dreiser, Dos Passos, Cummings, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Wolfe, Warren, Bellow, Updike, Heller, Malamud, Roth and Mailer that there seems little need to cite specific examples (p. 5, n. 2).

Perhaps the most articulate critic of the over-reaction to the tradition of social realism is Tom Wolfe, who argues that contemporary novelists have embraced self-consciousness and other aesthetic sins (in Wolfe's theology) to the point of surrendering the literature of society to the journalists. Journalists have seized the opportunity, and have been repaid by being read (unlike most self-conscious novelists). The over-reaction to social realism causes critical myopia with respect to Nabokov, whose repeated fictional attacks on totalitarian societies are either ignored, or else trivialized as yet another layer or artifice in what are thought to be involuted crossword puzzles. Let us examine the development of the destructive dichotomy between self-conscious literature and realistic literature by first returning to the late nineteenth century novel, and its journey from Europe to America.

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(49) Hansen, p. 5.

## Social Realism

As the novel gained in prestige as an art form, it gained in ambition; instead of restricting itself to an individual it took on society in general: "the way we live now," in Trollope's phrase. Instead of Jane Austen's character study of a young woman in Emma, there was George Eliot's comprehensive chronicle of an entire provincial town in Middlemarch. The tendency was more pronounced in France, where Balzac attempted to record a half century of French life in his series, the Human Comedy, and where Zola produced a sociological series of twenty novels with the imposing title, Les Rougon-Macquart. Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire. French novelists often proceeded from twin impulses, neither of them conducive to narrators who self-consciously comment on aesthetic techniques. One impulse was historic; the novelist was the chronicler of contemporary history. Balzac called himself the "secretary of French society."<sup>50</sup> His Human Comedy was said to be "a precious contribution to French history. The great historian of the French Revolution, Albert Sorel, thought its pages as luminous as those in any archives."<sup>51</sup> (Similarly, Gordon S. Haight remarks of George Eliot that, "A famous historian once told me that Middlemarch contained the finest picture he knew of England at the time of the Reform Bill."<sup>52</sup>)

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(50) As quoted in Tom Wolfe, "Why They Aren't Writing the Great American Novel Anymore," Esquire, Dec. 1972, p. 157.

(51) E.K. Brown, Introd., Père Goriot and Eugénie Grandet, by Honoré de Balzac, trans. E.K. Brown, Dorothea Walter, and John Watkins (New York: Random House, 1946), p. ix.

(52) Gordon S. Haight, Introd., Middlemarch, by George Eliot, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956), p. vi.

The second impulse was scientific; the novelist attempted to apply to fiction the objectivity and impersonality of science. Scientific social realism has common ground with theories of the impersonality of art. Eliot says that "it is in this depersonalization that art can be said to approach the conditions of science."<sup>53</sup> Balzac's vision, in the words of E.K. Brown, is "the vision of a human biologist."<sup>54</sup> Balzac tells us that the leading idea of his Human Comedy

came from the study of human life in comparison with the life of animals .... Society makes the man; he develops according to the social centres in which he is placed; there are as many different men as there are species in zoology.<sup>55</sup>

Zola similarly proclaims that the novelist is like a scientist observing human phenomena:

The scientist in his laboratory puts his substances into contact in a suitable container (environment) and then plays no further personal part, but steps back and merely notes down the inevitable reactions. In exactly the same way the modern scientific novelist should bring together certain human types, whose hereditary composition is known, put them together in a suitable environment and then report impersonally what must happen because scientific laws dictate each reaction.<sup>56</sup>

It is true that "Zola's shocking and highly imaginative novels ... are only loosely 'scientific,' and as Philip Rahv has said, the invocation of science by the French naturalists came primarily

(53) Eliot, "The Perfect Critic," in The Sacred Wood, p. 7.

(54) Brown, p. ix.

(55) Balzac, as quoted in Brown, pp. ix-x.

(56) A paraphrase of Zola's theories in L.W. Tancock, Introd., Germinal, by Emile Zola, trans. L.W. Tancock (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1954), pp. 6-7.

out of a desire to attach to the novel the prestige rather than the method of science."<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, when enthusiasm for the French scientific novel passed over to America, the French scientific bias was often misunderstood or ignored. Frank Norris transformed Zola's naturalism into romanticism:

Naturalism, as understood by Zola, is but a form of romanticism after all .... Terrible things must happen to the characters of the naturalistic tale. They must be twisted from the ordinary, wrenched from the quiet, uneventful round of everyday life and flung into the throes of a vast and terrible drama that works itself out in unleashed passions, in blood and in sudden death.<sup>58</sup>

American realists retained the French interest in society, interpreted in pseudo-scientific terms. The individual was thought to be in the control of gigantic social forces -- social Darwinism, or pessimistic determinism, or voracious capitalism. Since the individual was, to use a word fashionable at the time, determined, the self-conscious narrator was superfluous on several counts: the realist preferred the depiction of hostile social forces, red in tooth and claw, to the aesthetic deliberations of the self-conscious narrator; the realist preferred comprehensive ideologies -- generally gloomy ideologies -- to the idiosyncracies of a unique sensibility. The developing dichotomy between an interpretative consciousness with an interest in aesthetics, and the crude, direct, impersonal transcriber of the red meat of reality, is, in the words of

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(57) Richard Chase, The American Novel and Its Tradition (Garden City, New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1957), p. 186.

(58) Frank Norris, as quoted in Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds (1942; rpt. Garden City, New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1956), p. 76.



Lionel Trilling, "exemplified by the doctrinaire indulgence which liberal intellectuals have always displayed towards Theodore Dreiser."<sup>59</sup>

It was Parrington who established the formula for the liberal criticism of Dreiser by calling him a "peasant": when Dreiser thinks stupidly, it is because he has the slow stubbornness of a peasant; when he writes badly, it is because he is impatient of the sterile literary gentility of the bourgeoisie. It is as if wit, and flexibility of mind, and perception, and knowledge were to be equated with aristocracy and political reaction, while dullness and stupidity suggest a virtuous democracy ....

This implied amalgamation of mind with gentility is the rationale of the long indulgence of Dreiser, which is extended even to the style of his prose. Everyone is aware that Dreiser's prose style is full of roughness and ungainliness, and the critics who admire Dreiser tell us it does not matter (pp. 9-10, 12-13).

Certainly Frank Norris would say that a rough and ungainly prose style doesn't matter: "Who cares for fine style! Tell your yarn and let your style go to the devil. We don't want literature, we want life."<sup>60</sup> The fine distinctions of a fine style are unnecessary when novelists emphasize the elemental passions:

It was a crisis .... Blindly, and without knowing why, McTeague fought against it .... Within him, a certain second self, another better McTeague rose with the brute. ... The two were at grapples.... It was the

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(59) Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (1950; rpt. Garden City, New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1953), p. 8. Trilling disapprovingly quotes F.O. Matthiessen: "'The liability in what Santayana called the genteel tradition was due to its being the product of mind apart from experience. Dreiser gave us the stuff of our common experience, not as it was hoped to be by any idealizing theorist, but as it actually was in its crudity'" (p. 12).

(60) Norris, as quoted in Kazin, p. 75. Cf. Oates' narrator in *Expensive People*.

old battle, old as the world, wide as the world -- the sudden panther leap of the animal, lips drawn, fangs aflash, hideous, monstrous, not to be resisted, and the simultaneous arousing of the other man, the better self that cries, "Down, down," without knowing why; that grips the monster; that fights to strangle it, to thrust it down and back.<sup>61</sup>

The comic book style of Darwinian monsters rampant on a field of determinism is not conducive to self-conscious narration. The emphasis is on externals. Zola researched railroading for La Bête humaine and coal mining for Germinal; Norris "studied the Harvard Library's copy of A Text-book of Operative Dentistry so he could load McTeague with the dental minutiae of bud-burrs and gutta-percha. Throughout, the Naturalists' most characteristic tool has been the notebook."<sup>62</sup> A novelist eager to discharge his notebook's information is not likely to emphasize the aesthetic basis of his narrative. As for the introspective aspect of the self-conscious narrator, the more doctrinaire naturalists were not convinced that individuals had any inward lives worth considering:

Naturalist doctrine ... assumes that fate is something imposed on the individual from the outside. The protagonist of a naturalistic novel is therefore at the mercy of circumstances rather than of himself, indeed he often seems to have no self.<sup>63</sup>

"A man becomes most human, says Scheler in Man's Place in Nature, when he separates himself from the imperatives of his

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(61) Frank Norris, McTeague, ed. Carvel Collins (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1950), p. 22.

(62) Carvel Collins, Introd., McTeague, p. ix.

(63) Chase, p. 199.

environment and becomes 'self-conscious.'"<sup>64</sup> But is it not equally true that men define themselves, become most human, when they respond to the imperatives of their environment? Furthermore, is not the "naturalist doctrine" that fate is imposed on the individual from outside often precisely the case in life as well as literature? -- In other words, Scheler's premise reveals the critical polarization between self-consciousness and social forces.

One can see the same polarization in Updike's Bech: A Book, in which the hero visits one of the ~~Eastern~~ European communist countries, where of course contemporary social realism flourishes:

In the course of their tour through the museum, Bech tried to cheer [his tour guide] with praise of Socialist realism. "Look at that turbine. Nobody in America can paint a turbine like that. Not since the thirties. Every part so distinct you could rebuild one from it, yet the whole thing romantic as a sunset. Mimesis-- you can't beat it."<sup>65</sup>

Bech associates mimesis with Socialist realism, which might be described as imposed naturalism; "decadent" aesthetics must be minimized, and the artist must faithfully adhere to subject matter set by the state. Instead of the representation of reality, the artist adumbrates ideology. Consider intrepid Tu Lo, in the contemporary Chinese story, "The Undaunted":

Under the window sat dauntless Tu Lo, his head cradled on his hands over his desk. He was listening with great concentration to a broadcast of the inspiring call issued by the Party Central Committee headed by Chairman Mao: Hit

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(64) Jerry Bryant, The Open Decision (New York: The Free Press, 1970), p. 5.

(65) John Updike, Bech: A Book (New York: Knopf, 1970), p. 14.

back at the Right deviationist wind to reverse correct verdicts!

He stood up, ... then pushed open the window. ... Instead of the endless, undulating plateau, he seemed to see the indomitable, roaring billows of the mighty Yellow River surging forward and surging in his breast ....<sup>66</sup>

Tu Lo's programmatic adventures obviously represent a perversion of social realism; but the fact that Bech casually associates mimesis with this perverted form of literature exemplifies the split in critical thinking between self-conscious aesthetics and the realistic representation of society.

#### The Breakdown of Social Realism

In 1948 Lionel Trilling presented the theory that the novel of social realism (which had flourished in America throughout the 1930's) was finished because the freight train of history had passed it by. The argument was that such novels were a product of the rise of the bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century at the height of capitalism. But now bourgeois society was breaking up .... The only hope was a new kind of novel.... [Novelists] rushed off to write every kind of novel you could imagine, so long as it wasn't the so-called "big novel" of manners and society. The next thing one knew, they were into novels of ideas, Freudian novels, surrealist novels ("black comedy"), Kafkaesque novels and, more recently, the catatonic novel or novels of immobility, the sort that begins: "In order to get started, he went to live alone on an island and shot himself." (Opening line of a Robert Coover short story.)<sup>67</sup>

By the Sixties, Wolfe continues, the novelist had abandoned "the richest terrain of the novel: namely, society, the social

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(66) *The Undaunted: A Revolutionary Short Story* (Toronto: Norman Bethune Institute, 1976), p. 32.

(67) Wolfe, pp. 156-57.

tableau, manners and morals, the whole business of 'the way we live now.'" Publishers wanted novels that would record the Sixties, but "all they got was the Prince of Alienation ... sailing off to Lonesome Island on his Tarot boat with his back turned and his Timeless cape on, reeking of camphor balls" (p. 157).

Novelists may or may not have abandoned the "richest terrain of the novel," but many of them definitely abandoned social realism. Wolfe among others has traced the abandonment of social realism to a lack of faith in realism itself. Bernard Bergonzi argues that traditional realism "depended on a degree of relative stability in three separate areas: the idea of reality; the nature of the fictional form; and the kind of relationship that might predictably exist between them."<sup>68</sup> When both the "idea of reality" and fictional form became as problematic as their relationship, artists began to re-evaluate, and in fact devalue, the traditional mimetic function of the novel. Just as devalued currency has a significant and possibly destructive effect on the economy, devalued realism has a potentially destructive effect on fiction; as various theorists have warned, one shouldn't lightly abandon a mode which has served fiction well for at least three centuries.

Wolfe, for example, argues that realism is the very soul of fiction. He says that "the introduction of realism into literature by people like Richardson, Fielding and Smollett was like the introduction of electricity into marine technology.

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(68) Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 188.

It was not just another device. It raised the state of the art to a new magnitude."<sup>69</sup> Bergonzi agrees that the "astonishing technical development" in the early eighteenth century involved more than "mere technique, since new areas of experience and new ways of understanding were inextricably tied up with formal change." It is a "real problem to avoid talking as if the novel went on steadily improving between, say, 1730 and 1880."<sup>70</sup> George Steiner, commenting on what he sees as the decline of the novel, says that by "its very nature and vision, the art of the novel is realistic. Where it abandons its responsibility to the real, the novel betrays itself."<sup>71</sup> And one should remember Erich Auerbach's distant early warning in Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, which was written during a war that appeared to be destroying the last vestiges of western civilization, and written with the object of "bringing together again those whose love for our western history has serenely persevered."<sup>72</sup> Joyce said that history was a nightmare from which he was trying to awake; how ironic that Auerbach's final chapter analyzes Joyce and other modernists whose works seemed to Auerbach to embrace and welcome the disintegration of the old civilized stabilities:

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(69) Wolfe, p. 272.

(70) Bergonzi, p. 188.

(71) George Steiner, "Literature and Post-History," in Language and Silence (New York: Atheneum Press, 1967), p. 388.

(72) Erich Auerbach, Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, trans. William R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1953), p. 557.

At the time of the first World War and after [says Auerbach] -- in a Europe unsure of itself, overflowing with unsettled ideologies and ways of life, and pregnant with disaster -- certain writers ... find a method which dissolves reality into multiple and multivalent reflections of consciousness ....

...There is in all those works a certain atmosphere of universal doom: especially in Ulysses, with its mocking odi-et-amo hodgepodge of the European tradition, with its blatant and painful cynicism, and its uninterpretable symbolism -- for even the most painstaking analysis can hardly emerge with anything more than an appreciation of the multiple enmeshment of the motifs but with nothing of the purpose and the meaning of the work itself.... There is often something confusing [about Ulysses and other novels], something hazy about them, something hostile to the reality they represent.... There is hatred of culture and civilization, brought out by means of the subtlest stylistic devices which culture and civilization have developed, and often a radical and fanatical urge to destroy (p. 551).

Auerbach says destructive impulses on the part of the modernists contributed to the breakdown of mimetic representation; Steiner says realism was defeated by the cruel terms of contemporary history ("Fiction falls silent before the enormity of the fact ....");<sup>73</sup> Wolfe says novelists ignore realism through self-centred egotism--but, whatever the cause, realism is no longer thought to be central to the novel. It is instructive to compare Ernest Baker's description of self-conscious fiction in the eighteenth century as a "freakish derivation" from the norm of realism, with those contemporary theorists who now describe realism as the freakish derivation. Thus Ortega's proclamation that the "imperative of unmitigated realism that dominated the artistic sensibility of the last

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(73) Steiner, "Literature and Post-History," p. 388.

century must be put down as a freak in aesthetic evolution."<sup>74</sup> Thus John Barth, who says that unlike "those critics who regard realism as what literature has been aiming at all along, I tend to regard it as a kind of aberration in the history of literature."<sup>75</sup> Speaking in a calmer, and therefore more damning tone, William Phillips adds, "In fact, realism is just another formal device, not a permanent method for dealing with experience."<sup>76</sup>

### The Return of the Self-Conscious Narrator

H.G. Wells writes with the tone of a socialist who is cheerfully biding his time:

Throughout the broad smooth flow of nineteenth-century life in Great Britain, the art of fiction floated on this same assumption of social fixity. The Novel in English was produced in an atmosphere of security for the entertainment of secure people who liked to feel established and safe for good. Its standards were established within that apparently permanent frame and the criticism of it began to be irritated and perplexed when, through a new instability, the splintering frame began to get into the picture.<sup>77</sup>

Through that splintering frame stepped the self-conscious narrator. In The Research Magnificent, for example, Wells attempted "the device of making the ostensible writer speculate about the chief character in the story he is telling. The ostensible writer becomes a sort of enveloping character, himself

(74) Ortega, p. 25.

(75) "John Barth," in Bellamy, p. 4.

(76) William Phillips, as quoted in Wolfe, p. 272.

(77) H.G. Wells, Experiment in Autobiography, as quoted in Bergonzi, p. 196.



in discussion with the reader."<sup>78</sup> Many critics since Wells have noted the association of the self-conscious narrator with the splintering frame of realism, but unfortunately this association has been elevated to a critical axiom, in which it is assumed that the self-conscious narrator is by nature hostile towards reality.

For example, Nabokov insists that the word reality should always be quarantined with quotation marks; his insistence is based on the subtle and complicated relationship between artifice and reality in his own works. One often sees Nabokov's fastidiousness taken with doctrinaire literality, out of Nabokov's special context, and applied to self-conscious aesthetics as though everyone were agreed that reality is an entirely subjective matter, and that we all have nothing in common here on our mutual earth. Consider Jerome Klinkowitz's tentative questioning of Donald Barthelme: "Do you have any consciously formed notions about time and space that influence your work? Perception and imagination? Or, forgive me, 'reality'?"<sup>79</sup> (The word reality seems to have become vulgar or obscene.) Similarly, Larry McCaffery describes Barthelme's use of myth: "like a significant number of recent writers, Barthelme has turned to a familiar myth (rather than to 'reality') ...."<sup>80</sup> "Snow White," McCaffery explains, "has as its 'subject matter' art itself. It is not the 'real world' which it seeks to

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(78) *Ibid*, p. 196.

(79) Jerome Klinkowitz, "Donald Barthelme," in Bellamy, pp. 50-51.

(80) Larry McCaffery, "Barthelme's Snow White: The Aesthetics of Trash," *Critique*, 16, No. 3 (1975), 20.

represent, but the status of art .... Snow White can, therefore, best be termed a 'self-reflexive' work in that even as it is being created, it seeks to examine its own condition" (p. 19).

McCaffery's haze of defensive quotation marks suggests that the self-reflexiveness of Barthelme's fiction is partly due to qualities in Barthelme's work, and partly due to the terms of McCaffery's critical vocabulary. If "subject matter" has nothing to do with the "real world," it will not be surprising to find critics who pronounce Barthelme's work "self-reflexive" and solipsistic -- forgive me, "solipsistic." Many of the themes of the self-conscious narrator in contemporary American fiction centre on the expectation that self-conscious aesthetics are utterly distinct from realist aesthetics, as we can see by describing three of the more prevalent themes.

The first theme is the artist as his own self-sufficient hero. We quoted earlier Joyce's memorable definition of the impersonal artist, behind the work and beyond analysis. Yet even the critic who wants to take Joyce at his word distrusts "the insistent self-dramatizations in the Portrait," and the "instances of autobiographical esotericism." The critic might feel patronized by "the invitation at the end of Finnegan's Wake -- 'The keys to. Given!' -- with its touching magisterial assumption that these keys will seem worth disentangling from the verbiage in which they have been coyly buried."<sup>81</sup>

Within the most impersonal aesthetic there lurks egocentric introspection. Within the contemporary self-conscious aesthetic

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(81) *Peter*, pp. 627-28.

there lurks a kind of heroic solipsism. Tom Wolfe, who sees the world in terms of status, thinks the contemporary novelist is carried away with his own prestige. According to Wolfe, essayists, biographers, authoritative critics, and so on, formed literature's middle class, while the proles were the journalists, "who dug up slags of raw information for writers of higher 'sensitivity' to make better use of." At the top were the novelists. "They were regarded as the only 'creative' writers, the only literary artists. They had exclusive entry to the soul of man, the profound emotions, the eternal mysteries, and so forth and so on ...."<sup>82</sup> Thus universities display their Novelists-in-Residence like rose buds in the corporate button-hole; there is a market for a novelist's conversations (Borges), strong opinions (Nabokov), and self-interviews (James Dickey).

On the other hand, the novelist might sense that his power and influence are illusory, a matter of lip service on society's part. He might take to heart Ortega's opinion that the importance of the artist peaked in the nineteenth century: "Poetry and music then were activities of an enormous caliber. In view of the downfall of religion and the inevitable relativism of science, art was expected to take upon itself nothing less than the salvation of mankind."<sup>83</sup> But the ironic temper of the new art, as demonstrated with excessive vivacity by the Dadaists, meant that art would be regarded "as a thing of no transcending consequence" (p. 14).

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(82) Wolfe, p. 153.

(83) Ortega, pp. 49-50.

The artist might find himself rejecting society and writing for himself, an "ideal reader," or an elite. One begins to hear such strange pronouncements as the following from William H. Gass. An unwary interviewer asked him about his next novel, and Gass replied, "I began The Tunnel in 1966. I imagine it is several years away yet. Who knows, perhaps it will be such a good book that no one will want to publish it. I live on that hope."<sup>84</sup> If it is a virtue to be unread, presumably the contemporary novelist will have little concern about whether his narrator makes contact with an audience:

Occupied as he is with this basic task of grasping artistically an excessively complicated reality, the narrator necessarily loses sight of his reader and the reader's receptivity. He can no longer afford to consider all that. The specific reader and the reader's imagination lag far behind him; generations intervene between the author and the comprehending recipient of the narrative. The artist becomes the complete autocrat.<sup>85</sup>

To become an autocrat of the imagination, as Wallace Stevens might phrase it, might tempt novelists such as Gass, as well as those critics who, naturally enough, take pleasure in being among the few who can decipher an artist's willful obscurities and "autobiographical esotericism." A self-conscious narrator could be a surrogate for a self-absorbed novelist. But, as we shall see in Nabokov and Barthelme, the self-conscious

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(84) Carol Spearin McCauley, "William H. Gass," in Bellamy, p. 44.

(85) Erich Kahler, The Inward Turn of Narrative, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), p. 177. Kahler reports that when Hermann Broch was working on The Death of Virgil, Broch remarked, "You know, it's really no longer readable" (p. 177).

narrator can also be used as a device by which the reader is kept in touch with the author's complex purposes. The self-conscious narrator's rhetorical tendencies are essential in maintaining connections between the puzzled reader and the narrative innovations of the contemporary novel. Nabokov was asked, "Do you make a point of puzzling people and playing games with readers?"; he replied, "What a bore that would be!"<sup>86</sup> The point of his textual games is to maintain the dialogue, not to demonstrate the author's intellectual superiority.

A second theme of self-consciousness is the distrust of language as a means of communication. American literature, perhaps because of its two-fisted frontier tradition, has long been suspicious about language, particularly literary language (as Trilling complained). One thinks of the editor in the last pages of Poe's novel, engaged in dubious etymology regarding the strange words discovered by Pym in his journey to a land suspiciously reminiscent of the American South; of The Scarlet Letter, which turns on the ambiguity of a vowel; of Hemingway's attack on abstractions in A Farewell to Arms;<sup>87</sup> of Addie in Faulkner's As I Lay Dying:

And so when Cora Tull would tell me I was not a true mother, I would think how words go straight up in a thin line, quick and harmless, and how terribly doing goes along the earth, clinging to it, so that after a while the two

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(86) Vladimir Nabokov, Strong Opinions (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. 184.

(87) "Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates" (Ernest Hemingway, A Farewell To Arms [1929; rpt. New York: Scribner's, 1957], p. 185).

lines are too far apart for the same person to straddle from one to the other; and that sin and love and fear are just sounds that people who never sinned nor loved nor feared have for what they never had and cannot have until they forget the words.<sup>88</sup>

The contemporary American author, according to Tony Tanner, fears that "language ... may at every turn be limiting, directing and perhaps controlling his responses and formulations."

Such an author -- and I think he is an unusually common phenomenon in contemporary America -- will go out of his way to show that he is using language as it has never been used before, leaving the visible marks of his idiosyncrasies on every formulation.<sup>89</sup>

Clearly this linguistic paranoia would find expression in the self-conscious narrator, whose tendencies towards the idiosyncratic might result in endless neologisms or a private code. Or perhaps the self-conscious narrator would be too sensitive to the limitations of words to speak at all, thus fulfilling the prophecy of George Steiner, who argues there has been a retreat from the word, in mathematics and science and philosophy alike, until the artist finds himself tempted by the "suicidal rhetoric of silence." "When the words in the city are full of savagery and lies, nothing speaks louder than the unwritten poem."<sup>90</sup> Kahler, whose imagination is equally apocalyptic, links together the avant-gardists, the solipsists and the technocrats, and envisions what almost amounts to a conspiracy, a conspiracy "to produce incoherence," and sever language "from

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(88) William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (1930; rpt. New York: Vintage-Random House, 1964), pp. 165-66.

(89) Tony Tanner, *City of Words* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), p. 16.

(90) George Steiner, "Silence and the Poet," in *Language and Silence* (New York: Atheneum Press, 1967), pp. 50, 54.

human expression."<sup>91</sup> Certain self-conscious narrators in contemporary fiction are as incoherent and unconnected to human expression as Kahler says, although one suspects the artists responsible for these narrators are far too self-absorbed to join together in an organized conspiracy.<sup>92</sup>

But the self-conscious narrator in Barthelme is often the reader's agent against the dead language and jargon of an ad man society. While Barthelme's self-conscious narrators undeniably leave the marks of their idiosyncracies on every formulation, they also offer fresh language and fresh perceptions which entice the reader into sympathy with the realistic events of the story. "I am free associating, brilliantly, brilliantly," says the narrator of one Barthelme story, "to put you into the problem."<sup>93</sup>

The final theme is the self-conscious narrator as an aesthetic innovator. We noted that the self-conscious narrator has always been characterized by his running commentary on aesthetics. When social realism was in power, and the ground rules of the novel were well understood, there was little need for an interpretative self-conscious narrator; but with the breakdown of traditional forms, and with the rise of a rather institutionalized avant garde, the narrator found himself under pressure to create completely unique works of art along with

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(91) Kahler, *Disintegration of Form*, pp. 96, 94.

(92) E.g., *Breakthrough Fictioneers*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (Barton, Vermont; Something Else Press, 1973), particularly "Tablet XI" by Armand Schwerner and "Dashing from Don to Tioli" by Raymond Federman, pp. 308-10 and 260-63, respectively.

(93) Donald Barthelme, "Florence Green is 81," in *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964), p. 4.

his fellow "breakthrough fictioneers." He was expected to blow the roof off the house of fiction. As one of Barthelme's narrator's complains,

It is difficult to keep the public interested.

The Public demands new wonders piled on new wonders.

Often we don't know where our next marvel is coming from.

The supply of strange ideas is not endless.<sup>94</sup>

The novel has a paradoxical tradition of change. Fielding thought he had invented a new genre, Henry James wrote about the New Novel, and French novelists announced the newest New Novel, which, as Gore Vidal waspishly remarks, "is close to forty years old," and thus "old indeed for a literary movement, particularly a French literary movement."<sup>95</sup> Bradbury argues that of all the literary arts, "the novel seems least given to a priorism," as "each novel creates its own world afresh, and engages us for the occasion with its own laws":

Ian Watt ... and Bernard Bergonzi ... both argue that the species arose in the eighteenth century as a fully fledged form with--as its English name suggests -- a propensity against generic definition.... And, says Bergonzi, "stylistic dynamism, or steady formal change" has always been the essential principle of the novel's development, of its interest in any one case.<sup>96</sup>

However, the contemporary novel is hardly characterized by "steady formal change," but by endless innovation; in fact, one theorist, speaking of the arts in general, argues that the times

(94) Donald Barthelme, "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace," in *Sadness* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), p. 139.

(95) Gore Vidal, "American Plastic: The Matter of Fiction," *New York Review of Books*, 15 July 1976, p. 31.

(96) Malcolm Bradbury, *Possibilities* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 12, 13.



are characterized by stasis:

For stasis, as I intend the term, is not an absence of novelty and change -- a total quiescence -- but rather the absence of ordered sequential change.... Indeed, insofar as an active, conscious search for new techniques, new forms and materials, and new modes of sensibility (such as have marked our time) precludes the gradual accumulation of changes capable of producing a trend or a series of connected mutations, it tends to create a steady-state, though perhaps one that is both vigorous and variegated.<sup>97</sup>

Clearly one option open to the self-conscious narrator is to contribute to the contemporary static chaos by accompanying his fellow Breakthrough Fictioneers to ground where the reader cannot follow. But Nabokov's self-conscious narrators often act to preserve what is best in the literary tradition; in fact, good taste and reverence for the best literature of the past are considered virtues in Nabokov. Similarly, Barthelme's narrators often ridicule excessively programmatic avant garde aesthetics. Thus the self-conscious narrator can indeed challenge the reader's expectations of traditional realism, but at the same time preserve and reinforce those aspects of realism that keep the reader in touch with the work of art, that help to "put you in the problem."

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(97) Leonard B. Meyer, *Music, the Art and Ideas: Patterns and Predictions in Twentieth-Century Culture* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 102.

## II

THE "GIFT" OF THE SELF-CONSCIOUS NARRATOR:  
THE FICTION OF VLADIMIR NABOKOV

Introduction

Page Stegner says that Vladimir Nabokov "continually stands between sun and scene so that his shadow will be cast over the action." "He performs this special intrusion ... primarily to remind the reader that he is there with his brush and canvas, that fictional verisimilitude is an illusion, a reflection in the artist's mind ...."<sup>1</sup> An important device in the performance of this special illusion is of course the self-conscious narrator, who has traditionally made the reader aware that the narrative is part of a created literary product. However, the tradition has been specially adapted by Nabokov as a means of protecting the autonomy of the narrative voice from all those forces, both literary and social, that would restrict an artist's freedom.

Nabokov has never been reticent about the issue of artistic freedom:

No creed or school has had any influence on me whatever.  
[M]y political creed has remained as bleak and changeless as an old gray rock .... Freedom

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(1) Page Stegner, Escape Into Aesthetics (New York: Dial Press, 1966), p. 49.

of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of art.<sup>2</sup>

The self-conscious narrator carries on Nabokov's program of individualism. The narrator is not a simple transcriber of the events, but a dominating personality -- a story in himself. He is eager to justify and even celebrate his anti-social impulses (Humbert Humbert, for example). Although he is capable of exact verisimilitude, he appears to abandon the encompassing tradition of realism when it suits his imaginative purposes. In terms of technique, he is a literary exhibitionist who directs the reader's aesthetic attention towards his clever handling of the narrative. He avoids standard turns of phrase, and mocks the traditional elements by which the plot is thickened. By means of his artistic imagination, he imposes elegant order on what at times appears to him to be chaos, a variegated void.

However, despite the aesthetic idiosyncracies of the narrator, we should not conclude that the works themselves are

(2) Nabokov, Strong Opinions, pp. 3, 34-35.

Subsequent references to works by Nabokov in this chapter will consist of page numbers and titles or abbreviated titles in parentheses. The publishing data for works not documented previously are as follows: Ada (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969); Bend Sinister (1947; rpt. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973); Despair (New York: Putnam, 1966); The Eye, trans. Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Phaedra, 1965); The Gift, trans. Michael Scammell in collaboration with Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Putnam, 1963); Glory, trans. Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with Vladimir Nabokov (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971); Invitation to a Beheading, trans. Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Putnam, 1959); King, Queen, Knave, trans. Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with Vladimir Nabokov (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968); Lolita (Paris, 1955; rpt. New York: Putnam, [1958], and its appended essay, "On a Book Entitled Lolita"); Look at the Harlequins! (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974); Mary, trans. Michael Glenny in collaboration with Vladimir Nabokov (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970); Nabokov's Dozen (1958; rpt. New York: Avon, 1973); Nikolai Gogol (New York: New Directions, 1944); Pale Fire (1962; rpt. New York: Berkeley, 1972); Pnin (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1957); Speak, Memory, rev. ed. (New York: Putnam, 1966).

solipsistic (in Charles Russell's terms, "all fictions are ultimately about themselves, about the creation of the world by the word"). One must dispute the notion that Nabokov's works are a hall of mirrors reflecting nothing but the Wizard of Montreux, a notion that is only slightly more sophisticated than the popular notion that Nabokov is a Russian prince who was deposed by the communists and turned to pornography.

Stegner's opinion is typical: The spectral intrusion reminds the reader "that fictional verisimilitude is an illusion, a reflection in the artist's mind." Self-consciousness is implied to be the enemy of verisimilitude; instead of a story referring to the real world, it refers only to the no doubt ideal world imprisoned in the artist's mind. In fact, however, Nabokov's work is often as verisimilar as any traditional realistic work. One should remember that his descriptions of nature are scientifically accurate (in his fiction as in his papers on lepidoptery), and consider that research rivalling that of an industrious nineteenth century French realistic novelist is reproduced in the Chernyshevski biography within The Gift. In terms of the theory of the novel, Nabokov taught his Cornell students Joyce with the aid of a street map of Dublin, and Anna Karenina with the aid of a street map of Moscow. In his review of Sartre's La Nausée he is critical when Sartre allows the early travels of his central character to seem "implausible" (Strong Opinions, p. 229). Sartre's hero Roquentin also makes the mistake of imagining that the composer and the singer of a certain popular song are a Brooklyn Jew and a Negress, respectively; Nabokov says

coldly, "I have ascertained that in reality the song is a Sophie Tucker one written by the Canadian Shelton Brooks" (p. 229).

That Humbert Humbert is a highly imaginative self-conscious narrator does not prevent his "fancy prose style" from being true to the nuances of American teen-age speech (Lolita, p. 11). The argument should be evident: The self-conscious narrator contributes not only to a sense of the artist's pervasive presence, but to that aspect of Nabokov's fiction which is realistic and verisimilar. Every form of narration requires aesthetic devices and tricks; Nabokov chooses to display his devices in order to help the reader distinguish between stock clichés and fresh, vivid, accurate mimesis.

One motive for the fierce individualism of the self-conscious narrator is his distrust for all the lies and distortions of totalitarian society and repressive ideologies. Because Nabokov's people often move both imaginatively and physically from the world in which they find themselves, it might appear that they are "escaping" into the Palace of Art; but in some cases they escape not from reality or the "adjustmental aspect of experience," but from notions of unreality fostered by the totalitarian state. In Invitation to a Beheading, for example, the hero escapes from a state prison to a world where there are "beings akin to him" (p. 223). The hero is not simply moving from unpleasant reality to an aesthetic heaven; he is in fact escaping the inferior, meretricious art of the totalitarian state, where even the trees are not real:

The fallen trees lay flat and reliefless, while those that were still standing, also two-dimensional, with a lateral shading of the trunk to suggest roundness, barely held on with their branches to the ripping mesh of the sky. (p. 223).

The narrator mocks the unreality of the state's version of reality -- reality by decree, reality painted by police artists. By exposing the shabby heavens and the amateurish trees, he is directing both Cincinnatus and the reader away from propagandistic illusion. Jerzy Kosinski has described his personal exposure to the type of false world that tortures Cincinnatus:

I once remarked, ... that in my view Stalin was "an ideal novelist," a kind of writer every writer secretly would like to be -- to have your books published in millions of copies by the state (all the volumes beautifully bound) and to have all your potential critics arrested and exiled on the day of publication ....

I saw myself imprisoned in a large "house of political fiction," persecuted by a mad best-selling novelist, Stalin, and a band of his vicious editors from the Kremlin, and quite logically I saw myself as a protagonist of his fiction.... I really saw myself living inside of a "novel" called "the Soviet Union" created by the crude imagination of bad artists ....<sup>3</sup>

Thus when critics describe Nabokov as a wizard of the pigments, or an aesthetic magician totally removed from the social concerns that dominate realistic fiction, they tend to forget that his self-conscious narrators' preoccupation with aesthetics is in fact a political statement. Both Bend Sinister and Invitation are as much about the freedom of the individual in a totalitarian state as 1984 or The Gulag Archipelago. In Nabokov's works, false

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(3) Jerome Klinkowitz, "Jerzy Kosinski," in Bellamy, p. 165.

aesthetics are as much a form of repression as the secret police, and much of what appears to be deceitful aesthetic games on the part of the narrator is actually an attempt to circumvent the distortions of incompetent art.

The self-conscious narrator is not a device opposed to realism, because reality and artifice are somewhat mysteriously united in Nabokov's fiction. When John Shade says that the universe is an iambic line, he is of course a character speaking in the context of a particular work; but at the same time he voices a theme essential to Nabokov, that reality can only be understood in terms of the highest form of art. When he says that Sartre in La Nausée lacked the talent to "make the world exist as a work of art," Nabokov in one sense restates the aesthetic of traditional realism, and in another sense hints at what Nabokov views as the interpenetration of artifice and reality (Strong Opinions, p. 230). In the section that follows, therefore, our emphasis will be on the self-conscious narrator as the agent of a consistent world view which includes both realism and artifice, and not as the agent of a world of mirrors "unrelated to the phenomenal world."

### Nabokov's Private Life

Although the New Critics are no longer sufficiently dominant to proclaim biographical criticism a heresy, their distrust lingers on; and no doubt it is true that nothing in a fictional work can be entirely explained by reference to the author's life. Nevertheless, Nabokov's life is directly related to his development

of a special type of self-conscious narrator. Nabokov's privileged and exceptional childhood and youth, and later his enforced exile, obviously contributed to the development of a proud, isolated, and often aristocratic narrator who self-consciously opposes his own rarefied sensibility to the crude generalizations of the state and the society.

Nabokov's origins are aristocratic. His grandfather was Minister of Justice under Tsars Alexander II and III, and his father was an influential liberal statesman. He was the adored oldest son in a highly sophisticated family: "Imagine being the sort of strange child who sees certain letters of the alphabet as tinted with blue -- 'steely x, thundercloud z, huckleberry k'. He confides in his adored mother and finds she shares and enlarges on these perceptions!"<sup>4</sup> Imagine being the sort of child whose early poems are published by a private press out of his allowance money, a small fraction of the two million dollars he was to have inherited from his uncle.<sup>5</sup>

The exiled Nabokov was not a prime candidate for assimilation. He was much too proud, too loyal to Russia and his own background and talents. One thinks of his anger as an adolescent at the teacher at St. Petersburg's Tenishev School, a doctrinaire democrat who suggested that Nabokov's family limousine should wait a discreet distance from the school gates. One thinks also of his reply to Lucie Léon Noel when she speculated that Nabokov

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(4) Richard Boeth, "The Gamesman," *Newsweek*, 18 July 1977, p. 42.

(5) Many of the biographical details in this section are taken from Andrew Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Part* (New York: Viking, 1977).



must have been overawed meeting Joyce: "She pictures me as a timid young artist; actually I was forty, with a sufficiently lucid awareness of what I had already done for Russian letters preventing me from feeling awed in the presence of any living writer" (Strong Opinions, p. 292). Given this supreme self-confidence about his literary talents and his social standing, it is not surprising that Nabokov adopted an attitude of proud alienation towards the countries in which exile deposited him. He said of the years at Cambridge: "There was a certain make-believe about it all."<sup>6</sup> In Berlin he was isolated within the émigré colony, whose members "kept to themselves.... Life in those settlements was so full and intense that these Russian intelligenti ... had neither time nor reason to seek ties beyond their own circle" (Speak Memory, p. 277).

In fact, the émigrés were more than just neutrally oblivious to Berlin society. Fyodor Godunov-Cherdynstev, the hero of The Gift, hates the Berlin bus lines, the ugly streets he sees through the wet windows, and, most of all, "the native passengers":

[For] some reason he got the impression that all these cold, slippery eyes, looking at him as if he were carrying an illegal treasure (which his gift was, essentially), belonged only to malicious hags and crooked hucksters. The Russian conviction that the German is in small numbers vulgar and in large numbers -- unbearably vulgar was, he knew, a conviction unworthy of an artist; but nonetheless ... only the gloomy conductor ... seemed outwardly, if not a human being, then at least a poor relation to a human being (The Gift, pp. 92-93).

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(6) *Field, His Life in Part, p. 140.*

"Fyodor's attitude toward Germany reflects too typically perhaps the crude and irrational contempt that Russian émigrés had for the 'natives' (in Berlin, Paris or Prague)" (Foreword, Gift, p. 10). But many of the Berlin works are too typical. Sometimes the natives are explicitly abused, but generally the narrators' contempt takes the form of transforming the "unbearably vulgar" surroundings. With reference to the novel, King, Queen, Knave, Andrew Field notes that

the novel is clearly not "about" Berliners, nor does it contain, as many reviewers thought, "Berlin as seen through Russian eyes ...." The novel is, in a way, a realistic portrayal of the Russian émigré's way of not seeing the natives of the countries into which he had happened to fall ... except as celluloid or cardboard figures ....<sup>7</sup>

The physical setting can seem as insubstantial as the natives. For example, the narrator of "Terra Incognita" claims to be engaged in the exploration of a fabulous tropical region, the details of which occasionally fade to reveal "a few pieces of realistic furniture and four walls." The narrator tries to convince himself that his magical tropics are real, and denies those "unwelcome glimpses of my supposedly real existence in a distant European city (the wallpaper, the armchair, the glass of lemonade) ... ("Terra Incognita," Russian Beauty, pp. 128, 127).

It is tempting to apply Field's remark to several of the émigré novels, and argue that the novels are realistic portrayals of a society, specifically the small and insular society of Russian émigrés. The narrator's solipsistic tendencies would then

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(7) Andrew Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art (Boston: Little, Brown 1967), p. 158.

be controlled by the realistic context. In the case of Fyodor, who is one of the narrators of The Gift, the control would come from the omniscient third person narrator, the superego with, as it were, special responsibility for the reality principle, who would emphasize that all these fantasies about the German race are merely inside Fyodor's head: "for some reason he got the impression," "a conviction unworthy of an artist." In The Eye, to pursue the tempting argument, several judicious clues make it clear that the narrator Smurov has completely misunderstood the relationship between Vanya and Mukhin, that he is not the romantic hero of his daydreams, and that he is mad:

I swear, I swear I am happy. I have realized that the only happiness in this world is to observe, to spy, to watch, to scrutinize oneself and others, to be nothing but a big, slightly vitreous, somewhat bloodshot, unblinking eye. I swear that this is happiness. What does it matter that I am a bit cheap, a bit foul, and that no one appreciates all the remarkable things about me -- my fantasy, my erudition, my literary gift ... I am happy that I can gaze at myself, for any man is absorbing -- yes, really absorbing! The world, try as it may, cannot insult me. I am invulnerable.... Oh, to shout it so that all of you believe me at last, you cruel, smug people.... (The Eye, pp. 113-114).

Smurov's eyeball trope immediately recalls Ralph Waldo Emerson in the throes of transcendentalism. But it must be remembered that in the penultimate pages of the novel, Smurov seems greatly attracted to the same bourgeois values as the other characters, and thus the final speech of the novel is voiced not by Smurov, but by one of the many aspects of Smurov, the aspect that possesses a "literary gift." The gift is the same gift as that possessed by Fyodor, which suggests that it is inadequate to

think of the narrators as solipsists whose excesses are controlled by the context; in fact, the self-conscious narrators are, as a function of their alienation from society, the only ones who understand society's real nature.

In the passage from The Gift quoted above, Fyodor's "gift" refers variously to his sophistication, erudition, literary talent -- in short, to all those qualities in his background which make it possible for him to comprehend and express the truth about what is going on around him. Given the conditions in Berlin during the two decades before the war, Fyodor's paranoia is justified, and it is obviously based on Nabokov's experience in exile. Nabokov, after all, had removed his unique talents from the frying pan of Lenin to the fire of Nazi Germany. Marrying a Jew did not improve his standing with the German state. Thus the fact of Germany's unimaginable cruelty merges with Germany's unimaginable banality; these twin evils can only be perceived for what they are by the self-conscious narrator.

In Bend Sinister, the ideologies accepted as reality would seem to be a blend of Nazism and Communism. The state is run according to a theory called Ekwilism, which would eliminate the gifted individual in favour of standard brands. Fradrik Skotoma, the philosopher of Ekwilism, says that the root of all the world's woes is the unequal distribution of human consciousness:

It was, however, quite possible, he maintained, to regulate the capacity of the human vessels. If, for instance, a given amount of water were contained in a given number of heterogeneous bottles ... the distribution of the liquid would be uneven and unjust, but could be made even and just either by grading the contents or

by eliminating the fancy vessels and adopting a standard size (Bend Sinister, p. 75).

The "fancy vessels" are those with the sensibility and intelligence to see through the state's new order, in which "a great and beautiful simplification will replace the evil refinements of a degenerate past" (p. 151). Again, "degenerate" and "refinements" refer to those with the gift, inimical to the state, of seeing things for themselves. The hero of the novel, Krug, refuses to sign a document supporting the policies of the state precisely on the grounds that the state and all its attributes are unreal. As he says, "I do not believe in pistols ... (p. 124).

The self-conscious narrator of the novel sees both the unreality of the state, and its real power. Here are his comments after the scene in which Krug refuses to accept the policies of the dictator Paduk:

Which, of course, terminated the interview. Thus? Or perhaps in some other way? Did Krug really glance at the prepared speech? And if he did, was it really as silly as all that? He did; it was. The seedy tyrant or the president of the State, or the dictator, or whoever he was -- the man Paduk in a word, the Toad in another -- did hand my favorite character a mysterious batch of neatly typed pages (p. 151).

The narrator questions the validity of his imagination; could the documents of a totalitarian state be that farcical? He concludes that his narrative is accurate: "He did; it was." But while acknowledging the power of the state, he refuses to accept its lies. He denies Paduk his titles -- "The seedy tyrant or the president of the State, or the dictator, or whoever he was ...," just as Nabokov in his Gogol biography shows his scorn for the

incompetence of Gogol's presiding physician by refusing to spell his name consistently: "Dr. Auvers (or Hovert)," "Auvert's (or Hauvers's)" (Gogol, p. 2). When the self-conscious narrator emphasizes artifice or illusion, it is often the case that the subject of his narrative is in fact an illusion, a sham, a farcical imposter. Because of his special literary gifts, the narrator has the power to expose those illusions accepted as reality by the rest of society.

After the better part of two decades in Berlin, and a few years in Paris, Nabokov managed to bribe the proper bureaucrat and moved to America, where he claimed to feel at home. Bend Sinister was written in America, and it is interesting to hear Krug's reminiscences of his lecture tour in the land where fancy vessels are preserved, a land of "Elation, delight, a quickening of the imagination .... Landscapes as yet unpolluted with conventional poetry, and life, the self-conscious stranger, being slapped on the back and told to relax'" (p. 30). Perhaps in America there would be no need for a skeptical narrator, since Nabokov seemed to accept the cold war dialectic of absolutely evil Communism opposed by perfectly free America -- "I deplore the attitude of foolish or dishonest people who ridiculously equate ... the ruthless imperialism of the USSR with the earnest and unselfish assistance extended by the USA to nations in distress" (Strong Opinions, p. 50). Instead of holding himself aloof from democratic America, we are told that Nabokov "immersed himself in the mainstream of American bourgeois culture, and thus learned a whole

subject matter."<sup>8</sup>

But in Morris Bishop's list of Nabokov's production during the Cornell years, there is a suggestion that Nabokov's assimilation was incomplete: "In addition to stories and poems for the New Yorker he wrote Pnin, Lolita, Conclusive Evidence, The Song of Igor's Campaign, Eugene Onegin, and a number of articles on lepidoptera" (p. 237) -- Two books on Russian literature; a memoir, most of its chapters dealing with the Russian years; and two novels whose heroes are estranged from the American scene. And despite his residence in congenial America, Nabokov did not eliminate the alienated self-conscious narrator. He denied, for example, that Lolita was a social satire of American mores (in the manner of, say, Sinclair Lewis):

Another charge which some readers have made is that Lolita is anti-American.... Considerations of depth and perspective (a suburban lawn, a mountain meadow) led me to build a number of North American sets. I needed a certain exhilarating milieu. Nothing is more exhilarating than philistine vulgarity. But in regard to philistine vulgarity there is no intrinsic difference between Palearctic manners and Nearctic manners.... I chose American motels instead of Swiss hotels or English inns only because I am trying to be an American writer.... On the other hand, my creature Humbert is a foreigner and an anarchist, and there are many things, besides nymphets, in which I disagree with him. And all my Russian readers know that my old worlds -- Russian, British, German, French -- are just as fantastic and personal as my new one is ("On A Book Entitled Lolita," p. 317).

By "philistine vulgarity," a quality common to both totalitarian Europe and free America, Nabokov means a great deal more than laughable bad taste. His fiction equates dull and stupid bourgeois

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(8) Morris Bishop, "Nabokov at Cornell," in Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. and Charles Newman (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1970), p. 239.

culture, totalitarianism, and, not least, incompetent art and conventional aesthetics. Nabokov has been quite explicit in his equation of literary conventions with political coercion. He said in 1968 that in Russia, a hundred years ago, "the most eloquent and influential reviewers ... demanded that Russian novelists and poets portray and sift the modern scene...." The typical critic would insist

that a literary artist be a "reporter on the topics of the day," a social commentator, a class-war correspondent. That was half a century before the Bolshevik police not only revived the dismal so-called progressive (really, regressive) trend characteristic of the eighteen sixties and seventies, but, as we all know, enforced it.... The dreary principles once voiced in the reign of Alexander the Second and their subsequent sinister transmutation into the decrees of gloomy police states ... come to my mind whenever I hear today retro-progressive book reviewers in America and England plead for a little more social comment, a little less artistic whimsy. The accepted notion of a "modern world" continuously flowing around us belongs to the same type of abstraction as say, the "quaternary period" of paleontology. What I feel to be the real modern world is the world the artist creates, his own mirage, which becomes a new mir ("world" in Russian) by the very act of his shedding, as it were, the age he lives in (Strong Opinions, pp. 111-112).

Nabokov is being unfair, since presumably those book reviewers who argued for a little less artistic whimsy hardly had in mind the brutal political repression of an artist's imagination. The point remains that Nabokov has not forgotten his European experiences, which included a brother murdered in the concentration camps. There is "a central core of spirit in me that flashes and jeers at the brutal force of totalitarian states" (p. 113). It is apparently



instinctive for him to associate pressures to include social content mirroring the modern world with the efforts of a police state to control reality by controlling art. When he talks about the artist "shedding, as it were, the age he lives in," he is not announcing his intention to avoid any connection with the phenomenal world. What he does want to avoid is "abstraction," that is, the unreal generalizations of the political state, or of Freudianism (which he sees as a police state of the mind), or the unholy alliance of ideology and realism which resulted in doctrinaire American naturalism. Nabokov's narrators avoid abstractions for specifics, and for the fine perceptions of a subtle intellect. When Trilling called for an end to the liberal worship of Dreiser, he was not calling for fiction unconnected with reality; similarly, it is not the intention of Nabokov's fiction to carry the reader to a realm outside space and time, where the artist is supreme (because unchallenged). He wants realism unencumbered with the illusions of politics and reactionary literary critics. Nabokov's "shedding" no doubt hints at one of those images never far from his naturalist's mind (not Jack London's comic book naturalism, but the naturalism of a lepidopterist) in which from the old and unnecessary cocoon there emerges a new-born, unique and fresh realism.

### The Intrusive Narrator

Contributing to the newborn realism is the self-conscious narrator, who appears in many ingenious variations; the most striking variation is Nabokov's imitation of the nineteenth century

omniscient narrator. We cited Ford's axiom, composed at a time when the self-conscious narrator was out of fashion: "No author would, like Thackeray, to-day intrude his broken nose and myopic spectacles into the middle of the most thrilling scene he ever wrote ...." We also cited Ditsky's opinion, composed at a time when the self-conscious narrator was in fashion: the "conscious presence of the creative intelligence" means that "the artist-audience-work relationship becomes one of active and radical conspiracy -- one not to be confused with the patronizing homily sessions of an earlier day." Nabokov of course goes his own way in this as in so many other matters. His self-conscious narrator intrudes on the action in order to display a special sensibility (rather like Nabokov's) which denies the dehumanization of the narrative voice, and which comments on the action to lead the reader in the right direction. The method is far different from that of, say, Flaubert, whose impersonal and objective narration might lead the reader to wonder what poor Emma had done to deserve such treatment from the author. Nabokov, on the other hand, uses his intrusive narrator to dispense poetic justice (in Bend Sinister) and to guide the reader's understanding of a rather shallow character (in King, Queen, Knave). The intrusive narrator, often a surrogate for the author, is not designed simply to remind the reader that "verisimilitude is an illusion, a reflection in the artist's mind," but to give the work a human dimension, and, paradoxically, to increase the reader's sympathy for, and comprehension of, the characters.

Here is Nabokov on composing chess problems:

Deceit, to the point of diabolism, and originality, verging upon the grotesque, were my notions of strategy; and although in matters of construction I tried to conform, whenever possible, to classical rules ... I was always ready to sacrifice purity of form to the exigencies of fantastic content, causing form to bulge and burst like a sponge-bag containing a small furious devil (Speak, Memory, pp. 289-90). 9

The small furious devil corresponds to the intrusive narrator, who has something of a disruptive effect on the traditional novel form. In Look at the Harlequins!, for example, the hero is a famous novelist; in the following passage he reviews his career:

Neither Slaughter in the Sun (as the English translation of Camera Lucinda got retitled while I lay helplessly hospitalized in New York) nor The Red Topper sold well. My ambitious, beautiful, strange See under Real shone for a breathless instant on the lowest rung of the bestseller list in a West Coast paper, and vanished for good. In those circumstances I could not refuse the lectureship offered me in 1940 by Quirn University on the strength of my European reputation. I was to develop a plump tenure there and expand into a Full Professor by 1950 or 1955: I can't find the exact date in my old notes.

Although I was adequately remunerated for my two weekly lectures on European Masterpieces and one Thursday seminar on Joyce's Ulysses ... and had furthermore several splendidly paid stories accepted by The Beau and the Butterfly, the kindest magazine in the world, I was not really comfortable until my Kingdom by the Sea (1962) atoned for a fraction of the loss of my Russian fortune ... (p. 129).

Nabokov has repeatedly issued warnings against a biographical reading of the novels. In the Introduction to Mary, for example,

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(9) "When in his autobiography he [Nabokov] writes about the delight he took in composing chess problems he is also writing about himself as a writer," says Gleb Struve in "Notes on Nabokov as a Russian Writer," in Dembo, p. 53.

he claims to have left autobiography behind as the bad habit of an amateur:

The beginner's well-known propensity for obtruding upon his own privacy, by introducing himself, or a vicar, into his first novel, owes less to the attraction of a ready theme than to the relief of getting rid of oneself, before going on to better things. It is one of the very few common rules I have accepted (p. xi).

Nevertheless, the primary narrator in Look at the Harlequins! is a surrogate for Nabokov, and the ostensible narrative line, an elderly novelist musing over his past, is a series of in-jokes about Nabokov's publishing career. Thus the narrator Vadim Vadimovich's novel Slaughter in the Sun represents Nabokov's 1938 novel, Laughter in the Dark; Camera Lucida is a variant of the title of the original work, Camera Obscura; and so on. Presumably only a few readers will recognize the in-joke about expanding into a plump tenure and a Full Professorship. Owing to the candies that replaced a smoking habit when Nabokov moved to America, he gained about sixty pounds, or about half of his former weight. He liked to say he was "one-third American" (Strong Opinions, p. 27).

Such in-jokes become a touch cruel when the narrator, poor Vadim Vadimovich, wakes up from a spell of madness, and can't remember his own surname:

I ... felt my family name began with an N and bore an odious resemblance to the surname or pseudonym of a presumably notorious (Notorov? No) Bulgarian, or Babylonian, or, maybe, Betelgeusian writer with whom scatterbrained émigrés from some other galaxy constantly confused me; but whether it was something on the lines of Nebesnyy or Nabledrin or Nablidze ... I simply could not tell....

Without a name I remained unreal in regained consciousness. Poor Vivian, poor Vadim Vadimovich, was but a figment of somebody's -- not even my own -- imagination (Harlequins, pp. 248-49).

Vadim is of course half-remembering Nabokov's name. The static in his brain is caused by another figment of the author's imagination, who, as it were, winks at the reader from behind Vadim's back.

The intrusiveness of the omniscient narrator on Vadim's own narration is not physical or in person; the intrusion might be termed psychological, or implicit. But in King, Queen, Knave the intrusive narrator is as much on the scene as George Eliot interviewing Adam Bede in his old age, or Thackeray at Pumpernickel. The hero of King, Queen, Knave is a good-hearted German businessman named Dreyer, one of Nabokov's few sympathetic German characters. His selfish wife, Martha, and his knavish nephew, Franz, cuckold Dreyer and plan his murder. Near the end of the novel Franz notices a girl in a gleaming blue dress:

The foreign girl in the blue dress danced with a remarkably handsome man in an old-fashioned dinner jacket. Franz had long since noticed this couple; they had appeared to him in fleeting glimpses, like a recurrent dream image or a subtle leitmotiv .... Sometimes the man carried a butterfly net. The girl had a delicately painted mouth and tender gray-blue eyes, and her fiancé or husband, slender, elegantly balding, contemptuous of everything on earth but her, was looking at her with pride; Franz felt envious of that unusual pair ... (King, Queen, Knave, p. 254).

The girl resembles Vera Nabokov, and the gentleman Nabokov himself, in the role of the superior artist. According to Nabokov's Foreword, "the appearances of my wife and me in the last two chapters are merely visits of inspection" (p. viii). The distin-

guished gentleman's desirable companion, "tanned, pale-haired, lovely" is an ornament for the omniscient narrator, who is balding, but elegantly balding -- a very flattering self-portrait; no wonder Franz senses his own inferiority:

After passing him they began talking again; he had the impression they were discussing him, and even pronouncing his name. It embarrassed, it incensed him, that this damned happy foreigner ... knew absolutely everything about his predicament and perhaps pitied, not without some derision, an honest young man who had been seduced and appropriated by an older woman ... (p. 259).

Franz is in the presence of his Creator. An itinerant photographer, who had been walking on the sandy beach of the novel's final scenes, had announced gratuitously that, "The artist is coming! The divinely favored, der gottbegnadete artist is coming!" (p. 234).

This intrusive narrator differs from some nineteenth century intrusive narrators in that he does not attempt to ingratiate himself with the reader. Rather than integrating himself into the scene, he is opposed to everything in it, save his companion. Again, the special sensibility of the narrator sees through the distortions of society, represented in this case by a parody of a love affair between evil, mercenary Martha and Franz, a young provincial on the make in the big city. The intrusive narrator and his companion, by contrast, represent real love; thus while Franz and Martha are concerned with appearances, the elegant gentleman is oblivious to everything but his companion, who is dignified with the term, "fiancé." Once again, philistine vulgarity is corrected, or at least put in perspective,

through a special sensibility dressed in a no doubt elegant "old-fashioned dinner jacket."

There is another important method by which the intrusive narrator increases, rather than decreases, the verisimilitude of the scene. King, Queen, Knave is often thought of as one of Nabokov's more artificial narratives, no doubt partly through the influence of Andrew Field's description:

Consciousness of the fact that literature is an artificial convention is stretched to its furthest limits and used to create a radically different style of writing.... The novel's artificiality is so deft and its mechanisms so cunning that King, Queen, Knave is, far more than Pale Fire or any other of Nabokov's novels, a work in which one sees and feels the artist in the very act of manipulating his subject and characters.<sup>10</sup>

But one function of the intrusive narrator is to increase the reader's sympathy for what Field calls the novel's "pasteboard figures" (p. 159). Thus Franz realizes that the damned happy foreigner

knew absolutely everything about his predicament and perhaps pitied, not without some derision, an honest young man who had been seduced and appropriated by an older woman who, despite her fine dresses and face lotions, resembled a large white toad (King, Queen, Knave, p. 259).

Here the narrator, rather in the so-called "moralizing" manner of the previous century, establishes the moral dimension of the novel for the reader who may have been lagging behind. The use of the word toad, as with Paduk, dismisses Martha to the regions of the hopelessly corrupt; but although the phrase "honest young man" is derisive indeed, the reader should recognize that Franz

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(10) Field, His Life in Art, p. 153.

is not just a crude and vulgar young opportunist, nor a cardboard character, nor a minor chess piece, but a rounded character deserving some of the sympathy readers offer to characters in traditional novels. The intrusive narrator is not all artifice and magic tricks, but to some extent a traditional humanist; certainly Nabokov's works do not lack an ethical sense.

In Bend Sinister, for example, the intrusive narrator could be said to dispense poetic justice. The narrator works in opposition to Paduk's dictatorship, sneaking into his hero's consciousness while Krug's sleeping brain is under the control of the mind's dream producers:

But among the producers or stagehands responsible for the setting there has been ... a nameless, mysterious genius who took advantage of the dream to convey his own peculiar code message which has nothing to do ... with any aspect of Krug's physical existence, but which links him up somehow with the unfathomable mode of being, ... a kind of transcendental madness which lurks behind the corner of consciousness and which cannot be defined more accurately than this, no matter how Krug strains his brain (p. 64).

Krug of course senses the presence of the intrusive narrator. Nabokov says in the Introduction that in "the second paragraph of Chapter Five [the passage quoted above] comes the first intimation that 'someone is in the know' -- a mysterious intruder.... The intruder is ... an anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me" (p. xii).

The novel certainly disturbs the verisimilar surface, and one is indeed aware of the artificer behind the artifice. But the narrator also acts as the reader's index to reality. For example:



I felt a pang of pity for Adam [Krug] and slid towards him along an inclined beam of pale light -- causing instantaneous madness, but at least saving him from the senseless agony of his logical fate (p. 233).

"Logical fate" refers to the verisimilar plot; that is, the inevitable death of an independent intellectual in a police state.

But the reason the narrator rescues Krug from "senseless agony" is that Krug belongs outside the pernicious illusions of totalitarianism. Krug, partly the representative of the narrator's special sensibility, is on a different level (literally) from the unreal and insignificant villains of the story.

Nabokov asks himself in the Introduction whether there is "any judgment on my part carried out, any sentence pronounced, any satisfaction given to the moral sense?" He answers that "crime is punished at the end of the book when the uniformed waxworks are really hurt, and the dummies are at last in quite dreadful pain, and pretty Mariette gently bleeds, staked and torn by the lust of forty soldiers" (p. viii). Nabokov's remark is not without irony, since it would require a rather bloodthirsty "moral sense" to take satisfaction in Mariette's gang rape. Revenge is not an approved motive in Nabokov's novels, nor reform for that matter; instead, the narrator directs the reader's sympathy towards those characters who, like the narrator, are capable of perceiving the truth of things.

### The Self-Conscious Narrator as Artist

Nabokov's self-conscious narrator often intrudes, or makes personal appearances, in the role of an artist. In Bend Sinister,

for example, Krug's death scene is interrupted by a visit to the artist's workshop. The wall vanishes, "like a rapidly withdrawn slide, and I stretched myself and got up from among the chaos of written and rewritten pages, to investigate the sudden twang that something had made in striking the wire netting of my window" (p. 240).

When Nabokov does not use an omniscient surrogate as a prime narrator in his stories, he often chooses a character who is an artist, or who has the temperament of an artist. His preference for artists nicely fits the tradition of the self-conscious narrator, which calls for an emphasis on the artificiality of the narrative. In fact it is difficult to imagine a Nabokov novel in which the controlling sensibility would be inarticulate and unself-conscious. The techniques and themes would be hopelessly constrained by such central figures as the old fisherman in The Old Man and the Sea, or Benjy in The Sound and the Fury, or any of the dumb brute heroes of deterministic fiction. Since Nabokov believes that truth and accuracy depend on specialized gifts, he is to a certain extent in his fiction trapped within his own specialized interests. Thus he prefers to dwell on sensibilities with some of his own cultural coefficients, artistic hero-narrators with an appreciation for Pushkin, prosody and butterflies.

For example, the narrator of Look at the Harlequins!, Vadim, is a kind of analogue of Nabokov, and his novels are ex libris Nabokov. John Shade is a poet, and his Boswell, Kinbote, is a frustrated writer of aristocratic romances starring himself.

Such characters are obviously prone to narratives that are self-conscious, "literary" and artificial -- Shade narrates in rhymed couplets. But even characters who are not artists by profession have a tendency to shape their experiences into artistic creations. Hermann of Despair, a businessman, seems suspiciously sophisticated in literary matters. "The general characteristics of his style," says Stephen Suagee, are

tortuous sentences interspersed with fragments, a sensitivity to colors and details, vigorous metaphors, parodies of novelistic devices, and so forth. "I have grown much too used to an outside view of myself, to being both painter and model, so no wonder my style is denied the blessed grace of spontaneity" .... Style is the man, and Hermann is definitely self-conscious.<sup>11</sup>

In short, says Doug Fowler, Nabokov creates "equivalents" -- that is, artistic equivalents, for Nabokov himself. The equivalent, "perhaps the most important constant within Nabokov's longer fiction," is "a male genius,

usually of European birth, and whose capabilities, humor and taste are such that, as A.C. Bradley pointed out of Prince Hamlet, he could have conceived and written not only the work in which he appears but the rest of the canon as well. In other words, Nabokov creates in his fiction a character who could have created Nabokov's fiction ....<sup>12</sup>

A narrative under the control of a self-conscious artist will tend to emphasize its own artificiality, and the fictional

(11) Stephen Suagee, "An Artist's Memory Beats All Other Kinds: An Essay on Despair," in A Book of Things About Vladimir Nabokov, ed. Carl R. Proffer (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1974), p. 54.

(12) Doug Fowler, Reading Nabokov (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974), p. 14.

universe might appear to be self-indulgent fantasizing. Certainly Nabokov does nothing to discourage those readers who search for cracks in the surface of verisimilitude. In King, Queen, Knave, for example, the mysterious landlord says he knows perfectly well "that the whole world was but a trick of his, and that all these people -- eight former lodgers, doctors, policemen ... Franz, Franz's lady friend, the noisy gentleman with the noisy dog ... owed their existence to the power of his imagination ..." (pp. 227-28). Simon Karlinsky argues that Nabokov's central theme is the "nature of the creative imagination and the solitary, freak-like rôle in which a man gifted with such imagination is inevitably cast in any society."

Such a person may be shown pursuing his basic endeavor directly (e.g., Sebastian Knight or the hero of The Gift), but more often, as Khodasevich pointed out, Nabokov's artist-hero is disguised.... Thus, the work of art that the hero strives to create ... may be presented in the guise of chess playing (The Defense), butterfly collecting ("The Aurelian"), a murder (Despair), seduction of a young girl (Lolita) ... of simply trying to reconstruct one's own identity (The Eye). In all these cases, however, the hero uses his imagination to devise a reality of his own, which he seeks to impose on the surrounding reality.<sup>13</sup>

The hero, often the self-conscious narrator as well, seeks to "impose" his vision on the surrounding society. The imposition of a private reality might seem to call into question the verisimilitude of the novel as a whole. It might seem that traditional mimesis has been bypassed. Doug Fowler complains

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(13) Simon Karlinsky, "Illusion, Reality and Parody in Nabokov's Plays," in Dembo, p. 183.

that Nabokov at times creates a kind of fiction in which the narrative is "atrophied, and the reader's interest in it is replaced by an interest in watching the equivalent-as-artist, an engagement in watching the equivalent create art."<sup>14</sup>

However, it is our argument that the artifice of the self-conscious narrator (Karlinsky's hero of the creative imagination, Field's "equivalent") has to some extent the paradoxical effect of strengthening the verisimilitude of the narrative as a whole. The effect is similar to that of the detective story, a stylized, even ritualized narrative form, but a form in which details are as profound, convincing and crucial as in the most realistic fiction (no object could be more substantial than the Maltese Falcon). Since Karlinsky mentions Lolita and Despair, let us examine the self-conscious narrators of those two novels.

Hermann himself worries about incipient solipsism: "Maybe it is all mock existence, an evil dream ..." (Despair, p. 221). The style in which he chooses to narrate his Despair shows all the signs of Barth's famous literature of exhaustion; that is, the exhaustion of realism.<sup>15</sup> But in the following passage, note the affinities to Oates' narrator in Expensive People:

How shall we begin this chapter? I offer several variations to choose from. Number one (readily adopted in novels where the narrative is conducted in the first person by the real or substitute author):

It is fine today, but cold, with the wind's violence unabated; under my window the evergreen

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(14) Fowler, p. 15.

(15) John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," Atlantic, Aug. 1967, pp. 29-34.

foliage rocks and rolls.... My restlessness grows....

A nice refreshing variation, this number one; it allows a breather and helps to bring in the personal note; thus lending life to the story - especially when the first person is as fictitious as all the rest. Well, that is just the point: a trick of the trade, a poor thing worn to shreds by literary fiction-mongers, does not suit me, for I have become strictly truthful (p. 53).

Obviously Hermann is a more slippery customer than Oates' narrator, and yet there is an analogous impulse to avoid what the narrator sees as the unreal conventions of mere novels in favor of the human truth of his experience.

For example, Hermann worries that his story has degenerated into a diary; "the lowest form of literature." Under the heading "March 31st. Night," he comments as follows:

Connoisseurs will appreciate that lovely, self-conscious, falsely significant "Night" (meaning readers to imagine the sleepless variety of literary persons, so pale, so attractive). But as a matter of fact it is night at present (p. 218).

It is night, and, to use an expression that fastidious Hermann would no doubt reject, a dark night of the soul for the novel's narrator, who is successfully creating a novel about a suffering human being and not a "literary person." The self-conscious style perfectly expresses the real anguish of a certain neurotic type, who struggles with his tendency towards solipsism. When Hermann realizes that his murderous masterpiece is flawed, "an accursed voice shrieked into my ear that the rabble which refused me recognition was perchance right," and he finds himself doubting everything, "doubting essentials, and I understood that what little life lay before me would be solely devoted to a futile struggle

against that doubt ..." (p. 213).

Hermann gives us both his illusions and the truth, creating a character study sufficiently realistic to awake the reader's sympathy, despite Hermann's denials: "Stop short, you people -- I raise a huge white palm like a German policeman, stop! No sighs of compassion, people, none whatever. Stop, pity! I do not accept your sympathy ..." (p. 187). The reader comes to understand Hermann's torments, even when they are expressed in self-conscious and self-pitying terms (Hermann says he has "passed the supreme limit of possible pain, injury, anxiety of mind" [p. 217]). The reader sympathizes because Hermann is not what he would like to be, an impersonal artist, but a suffering neurotic. One is impressed by the human dimensions of his twisted character, and not, as the self-conscious style might lead one to suspect, the aesthetic preoccupations of a "literary person."

Although both Hermann and Humbert Humbert produce self-conscious narratives that might seem designed to confuse the reader, both have the ability to bring aesthetics to the aid of a greater sense of reality; in Humbert's case, the reality of love. Since Humbert is less despicable than Hermann, it is more apparent that his artistic sensibility reveals truths about human relationships that are lost in a society bounded by vulgar generalizations (such as the myth of the matinee idol, in which guise Humbert mesmerizes poor Charlotte Haze).

Humbert is as self-conscious a narrator as Hermann:

My poor photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three, and, save

for a pocket of warmth in the darkest part,  
 nothing of her subsists within the hollows and  
 dells of memory, over which, if you can still  
 stand my style (I am writing under observation),  
 the sun of my infancy had set... (Lolita, p. 12 ).

Since Humbert is writing under observation, in prison, and much of what he writes is directed towards an unforgiving society -- hence the numerous wry asides to the "ladies and gentlemen of the jury" (p. 11) -- the reader might well suspect Humbert's writing style, and question the veracity of his version of the events. For example, it seems a little suspicious that the narrator's physique seems to vary from page to page. At first Humbert is broadchested and big boned, lanky, a hunk of virile he-man. Later he is "elegant, slender" (p. 274), and finally he becomes "fragile, frileux, diminutive ... sickly" (p. 275):

The more virile characteristics have been transferred to Lolita's husband... Richard Schiller is the final inheritor of several normal men ... who have been contrasted with Humbert to his disadvantage through the second half of the book. Clearly, Humbert's original entity has again been split up, and the parts distributed among different actors .... The reader has to ask himself whether it is Humbert or Nabokov who does this -- whether we can distinguish between what is invented by this narrator and what is reported -- and the answer is complicated. The reader has to deal with a highly sophisticated reading experience, which challenges his assumption that he "knows what is going on"....16

Humbert is more than "unreliable," since his very existence is suspect. At times he seems to be an aspect of Quilty's personality; or perhaps Quilty is an aspect of Humbert's personality; or perhaps

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(16) Martin Green, "The Morality of Lolita," Kenyon Review, 28 (1966), pp. 357-58.



their relationship is still more complex. Consider Humbert's account of the wrestling match during the murder: "I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us" (Lolita, p. 301). The exasperated Green concludes that Lolita is "fundamentally counterfeit" and that the tricky narrative voice "rouses all of a reader's distrust -- of a gamesmanship kind " (pp. 356, 357).

However, it must be remembered that Humbert is responsible not only for the incongruities of the narrative, but also for its realistic checks and balances. Humbert himself continually draws the attention of the reader to those elements of the story that seem bizarre; thus Lolita sleeps with her mouth open, "in a kind of dull amazement at the curiously inane life we had all rigged up for her" (Lolita, p. 217). Humbert reminds us that he is a "murderer with a sensational but incomplete and," significantly, "unorthodox memory" (p. 219). Just as Hermann is aware of his "artist's memory" (Despair, p. 213), Humbert is himself aware, and deliberately makes the reader aware, of his solipsistic tendencies.

Humbert's self-conscious style is an aid to the reader in interpreting the events of a story that might otherwise be as bare, gross and unreal as a newspaper headline. Thus when Humbert acquires his deadly .32, he remarks, sardonically, "We must remember that a pistol is the Freudian symbol of the Ur-father's central forelimb" (Lolita, p. 218). (In Nabokov's fiction Freudianism is a kind of mind control rivalled in vulgarity and harmfulness only by a dictatorship.) In Humbert

the reader has an ally against sham: "Mid-twentieth century ideas concerning child-parent relationship have been considerably tainted by the scholastic rigmarole and standardized symbols of the psychoanalytic racket, but I hope I am addressing myself to unbiased readers" (p. 287). Humbert's fresh perceptions are made more apparent by the framing Foreword of John Ray, Jr., Ph.D., who, in his role as the representative of a sane and realistic society, nevertheless distorts the events into a lurid melodrama involving "the wayward child, the egotistic mother, the panting maniac" (p. 7). Ray can only raise the reader's estimation of Humbert's veracity by announcing in a fatuous tone of finality that Humbert is "abnormal. He is not a gentleman" (p. 7).

Even Ray can descry in Humbert's confession "a desperate honesty" (p. 7). Humbert's special sensibility, which can be only expressed through an artistically self-conscious style, produces a narrative luminous with the truth of his relationship with Lolita. For example, there is a tendency among critics to emphasize that part of the novel which satirizes American mores; Lolita is seen as a typical teen-aged, gum-chewing, embryonic tramp, a fit product of America's roadside culture. Humbert of course knows better, and provides anecdotes that make Lolita a more three-dimensional character than most fictional juveniles. He reports a conversation between Lolita and her schoolmate, in which Lolita "so very serenely and seriously" remarks,

"You know, what's so dreadful about dying is that you are completely on your own"; and it struck me ... that I simply did not know a thing about my darling's mind and that quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate -- dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me.... She would mail her vulnerability in trite brashness and boredom, whereas I, using for my desperately detached comments an artificial tone of voice that set my own last teeth on edge ... (p. 286).

Note that Humbert's self-conscious methods do not preclude a brilliantly accurate description of his own inadequacies; note also that even in the overheated romanticism of gardens and twilights and palace gates there are dimensions of *Lolita* which cannot be understood or expressed by a less sophisticated, involuted sensibility (John Ray's for instance: "the wayward child").

Humbert's self-conscious narrative methods combine with traditional realism to form a more substantial narrative than one might expect from the fanciful romanticism of Humbert's opening pages. A discussion of the rhetorical emphasis of the self-conscious narrator is reserved for a later section, but it should be noted that Humbert takes great pains to keep the reader in touch with his perceptions. "Reader!" he says, at the beginning of the famous passage in which Humbert discovers the true nature of his crime (p. 310). Humbert boasts quite rightly that his methods are the right ones, the only ones that would create "durable pigments" to insure *Lolita's* "immortality" (p. 311).

### The Multiple Self-Conscious Narrator

A single self-conscious narrator emphasizes the artificiality of a narrative. In Pale Fire and Pnin there are multiple self-conscious narrators; the confusion they occasion regarding "point of view" might seem sufficient to signify the final abandonment of realism and verisimilitude. However, we can take heart from Kinbote's admittedly ambiguous remark in Pale Fire that it is his notes which give Shade's poem a "human reality" otherwise lacking (p. 18).

In Pale Fire the interaction of the multiple narrators increases the reader's sense of artifice, but at the same time it increases the verisimilitude, "human reality," of both the main characters and their productions. The quaint couplets of Shade's poem take on a new resonance, and the mad pedant brings a new vitality to the rather sterile business of a scholarly commentary. Because Kinbote is even more untrustworthy than Humbert, the critics have become snappish after their frustrated attempts at finding a unified narrative voice. They have murmured that perhaps Nabokov prizes fantastic form too highly over realistic content. But Kinbote's self-consciousness leads him to provide biographical details about Shade that make both Shade and his poem come alive, and Kinbote's inspired pedantry makes the art of annotation seem as exciting and crucial as the chase scene in a thriller. He restores the passion and commitment to the old New Critical activity of close reading. By misreading Shade's narrative, he makes it worth reading.

Charles Kinbote, another stylist with a mind full of

literature, is a follower of the Humbert Humbert school of fast and loose verisimilitude. In the following passage, Kinbote describes the encounter between Gradus and young Gordon in a Swiss villa:

Rather reluctantly there came out a slender but strong-looking lad of fourteen or fifteen dyed a nectarine hue by the sun. He had nothing on save a leopard-spotted loincloth....

Through light and shade walked the strange pair: the graceful boy wreathed about the loins with ivy and the seedy killer in his cheap brown suit....

The boy applied avid lips to a pipe of spring water and wiped his wet hands on his black bathing trunks.

"Who knows," said the boy striking his flanks clothed in white tennis shorts....

The young woodwose had now closed his eyes and was stretched out supine on the pool's marble margin; his Tarzan brief had been cast aside on the turf. (pp. 143, 144).

Gordon's spectacular costume changes are a function of Kinbote's lascivious imagination. A second hint that the passage is not entirely realistic is that Kinbote has been attempting to synchronize the adventures of Gradus with Shade's progress in completing his poem. The passage ends as follows:

From far below mounted the clink and tinkle of distant masonry work, and a sudden train passed between gardens, and a heraldic butterfly volant en arrière, sable, a bend gules, traversed the stone parapet, and John Shade took a fresh card (p. 144).

The implication is that the scene between Gordon and Gradus is not the work of Kinbote, but of Shade, who composes his narratives on index cards. This might come as a shock to the

reader who had accepted Kinbote's description of the reasons for the book's existence: to wit, that the last manuscript of the deceased New England poet, John Shade, had passed into Kinbote's hands, and that Kinbote had published the poem with his own annotations. The reader would have gathered from clues previous to the villa scene that Kinbote is an eccentric, that he is not a deposed Zemblan monarch but an exiled Russian intellectual teaching at Shade's university. The unwary reader would have relaxed in the delusion that he is dealing with a simple unreliable narrator. The line, "Shade took a fresh card," would shatter his complacency.

Similarly, Kinbote says that "the final text of the poem is entirely his [Shade's]" (p. 59). But in the note to line 550 Kinbote admits that an earlier cancelled fragment was fictitious:

Conscience and scholarship have debated the question, and I now think that the two lines given in that note are distorted and tainted by wishful thinking. It is the only time in the course of the writing of these difficult comments, that I have tarried, in my distress and disappointment, on the brink of falsification (p. 162).

The shocking news that Kinbote may have tampered with the text reminds the reader that the poem itself, as well as all the biographical details about Shade, might be entirely Kinbote's creation. Certainly much of the commentary is obviously fictitious, being Kinbote's romantic dream punctuated with realistic (but perhaps not real) humiliations. When Kinbote praises the poem's next line about the orbicle of jasp, the reader might legitimately wonder if Kinbote wrote the line himself.

The exasperated reader might be tempted to discount Kinbote entirely, and consider him a character in a novel by John Shade. Such a reading would be strengthened by the following display of Shade's prescience:

Man's life as commentary to abstruse  
Unfinished poem. Note for further use.  
(ll. 939-940)

Kinbote's explanation of the line is unsatisfactory. He says Shade implies "that human life is but a series of footnotes to a vast obscure unfinished masterpiece." Kinbote typically takes the academic high road, whereas the reader might surmise that Shade has somehow anticipated that Kinbote would add his own life's commentary to Shade's unfinished poem (the word "unfinished" again undercuts Kinbote's claim that the poem had been completed). Did Kinbote write the lines himself in another attack of honesty, or can Shade read the future, and did he create the entire package -- poem, commentary, and cast of mad characters?

These questions have caused confusion and debate among the critics. For example, Who wrote the poem, Pale Fire? According to Andrew Field, there is a possibility that "John Shade's long poem Pale Fire really belongs to the pen of the mad scholar Kinbote .... On the other hand, Charles Kinbote and his Zembla might just as well belong to the pen of John Shade who has 'taken' Kinbote from life and put him to his own artistic use ...."<sup>17</sup> After twenty pages and a diagram with arrows and a sun labelled "Nabokov," Field concludes: "There are many compellingly logical reasons to place John Shade before Charles Kinbote" (p. 317).

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(17) Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art, p. 297.

Julia Bader agrees: "The poet and the mad commentator are ostensibly distinct personalities.... But the separation into autonomous characters -- Shade, Kinbote, Gradus -- is only apparent.... Shade, I maintain, has perpetrated his own 'stylistic' death within the novel, and he has then given us a new aspect of himself in the guise of another soul and another artwork (Kinbote and the commentary)."<sup>18</sup> Both Bader and Field are contradicted by Page Stegner, who argues that it is "possible, perhaps probable, that Gradus and Shade are as much figments of Kinbote's imagination as Charles the Beloved."<sup>19</sup> Although Stegner offers his opinions in a tentative manner, Andrew Field adds a special commentary to his Nabokov: His Life in Art in order to reproach Stegner for viewing Pale Fire's puzzles "in an inverted and meaningless way."<sup>20</sup>

Alden Sprowles condemns the forces of both Field-Bader and Stegner:

The difficulty with either theory is that the necessity for having a "master thumbprint" beyond Nabokov's own is unproved. Since there is never a direct statement from an internal controlling author, the proof depends on buried hints and artificial separation of genuine and artificial voices, all of which is rather spurious and pointless, as Mary McCarthy points out.<sup>21</sup>

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(18) Julia Bader, Crystal Land (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1972), p. 31.

(19) Stegner, p. 129.

(20) Field, His Life in Art, p. 317.

(21) Alden Sprowles, "Preliminary Annotation to Charles Kinbote's Commentary on 'Pale Fire,'" in Proffer, p. 226. For McCarthy's opinion, see her letter to the New York Times Book Review, 10 July 1966, p.50.



No wonder William Carroll, in an essay on another topic, almost inadvertantly mentions Pale Fire and quickly adds a footnote: "Discretion forbids entering the controversy over whether Shade, Kinbote, or Prof. Botkin is the 'primary' narrator of Pale Fire."<sup>22</sup>

When critics begin to describe each other's opinions as meaningless, it seems inevitable that the accusation will eventually be turned on the work itself, particularly when the critical difficulties turn on the work's overt artifice. Page Stegner, for example, complains that he wishes those critics who claim to have found moral truth in Pale Fire, "would somehow demonstrate where they found it, and how, and what it is."

It seems to me that in their lengthy explications of the riddles in the novel they fall into the same trap that Nabokov has perhaps fallen into -- that is, thinking that form and style alone will bear the burden of greatness and that a novel is outstanding because its structure is fantastically complex.<sup>23</sup>

D.J. Enright comments that Pale Fire, like the other most celebrated of Nabokov's novels, is characterized by "tricksiness."<sup>24</sup>

"All too generally," says Enright,

this author, rich in what is given to few writers and poor in what is given to most men, reminds me of Gulley Jimson's comment in The Horse's Mouth: "... like farting Annie Laurie through a keyhole. It may be clever but is it worth the trouble?" (p. 4)

No doubt Enright has the complexities of Pale Fire in mind when he delivers the inevitable and absurd opinion that Nabokov "feels

(22) William Carroll, "Nabokov's Signs and Symbols," in Proffer, p. 217, n. 14.

(23) Stegner, p. 131.

(24) D.J. Enright, "Nabokov's Way," The New York Review of Books, 3 November 1966, p. 4.

a large and fairly comprehensive distaste for the real" (p. 3).

Pale Fire does not evidence a comprehensive distaste for the real. One of the devices by which the novel avoids "trickiness" is the device of the self-conscious narrator; Kinbote has a point when he says,

Shade's text simply has no human reality at all since the human reality of a poem such as his ... has to depend entirely on the reality of its author and his surroundings, attachments and so forth, a reality that only my notes can provide. To this statement my dear poet would probably not have subscribed, but, for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word (pp. 18-19).

Kinbote is incorrect in saying that Shade was too skittish for autobiographical details, or that the poem suffers from the omission of certain pithy variants, but he is correct in saying that he supplies a human dimension to the minor poem of a minor poet.

Criticisms often levelled at Nabokov himself are present in exaggerated form in Shade's poem. It is indulgently self-centred, as if the poet were imagining himself addressing a representative of the press with an infinite interest in the subject poet; a self-interview, complete with writing habits, the poet's curmudgeonly opinions on the modern world (ll. 923-930), and his gratuitous jibes at critical bores and Englishmen who speak French poorly. Here the special sensibility of Nabokov's self-conscious narrator is at its weakest, since there is no interaction with other sensibilities and society. The poem is quiescent and sterile: "And so I pare my nails, and muse, and hear/ Your steps upstairs, and all is right, my dear" (ll. 245-46).

What Kinbote brings to this (and whether it is literally over Shade's dead body, or whether Shade invented Kinbote for the purpose is not the issue) are biographical details which place Shade in the context of the world, and which make the reader take an interest in his personality and poem. For example, Kinbote can bring the dead poet to life:

Through the back of John's thin cotton shirt one could distinguish patches of pink where it stuck to the skin above and around the outlines of the funny little garment he wore under the shirt as all good Americans do. I see with such awful clarity one fat shoulder rolling, the other rising; his gray mop of hair, his creased nape; the red bandanna handkerchief limply hanging out of one hip pocket, the wallet bulge of the other ... (p. 206).

Similarly, the weak ending of the poem takes on a new resonance when Kinbote supplies the death scene implied by its dying fall; the poem's opening lines -- "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain/ By the false azure of the windowpane" (ll. 1-2) -- are more coherent and significant when Kinbote describes the dead poet, who "had now been turned over and lay with open dead eyes directed up at the sunny evening azure" (p. 208; my emphasis).

Kinbote is a self-conscious narrator despite himself -- "I have no desire to twist and batter an unambiguous apparatus criticus into the monstrous semblance of a novel" (p. 62). Inadvertantly, as it were, he revitalizes the impersonal business of editing a poem. Although it is difficult to look afresh at a novel that has exercised so many exegetes, let us try and imagine a reader encountering the final pages of the novel for the first time. He finds at first a dry, correct, dull, factual

account of the text that will follow, an account filled with technical terms and impersonality. Although the preternaturally alert reader might suspect something unusual is afoot with the terms "amusing" and "shocking," it is not until the bottom of the third paragraph, as Kinbote corrects something he has said earlier, that the reader first encounters what Kinbote would call "human reality":

I mean, he preserved the date of actual creation rather than that of second or third thoughts. There is a very loud amusement park right in front of my present lodgings (p. 7).

This is the beginning of the reader's appreciation of Kinbote's humanity, the first sign of the migraines and other distracting personal problems that culminate in one of the last lines of the Commentary: "Gentlemen, I have suffered very much, and more than any of you can imagine" (p. 212). Then, instead of hinting at the almost subliminal passions and rages that seethe under the decorous prose of most scholarly editions, Kinbote overtly begins his attack on his fellow professors, "Prof. Hurley and his clique" (p. 8).

A conventional literary form, the scholarly commentary, has been given a human dimension through the characteristic rhetorical, passionate, egocentric voice of the self-conscious narrator. Carol Williams describes the problems Pale Fire poses for the ordinary reader, who must "roam back and forth -- with the keenest intelligence, alertness, and physical dexterity -- between a Foreword by editor Charles Kinbote, a poem, 'Pale Fire', by John Shade, and a Commentary and Index by Kinbote."<sup>25</sup> But it is Kinbote's

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(25) Carol T. Williams, "'Web of Sense': Pale Fire in the Nabokov Canon," Critique, 6, No. 3 (1963), 29.

mad insistence that every word of John Shade's poem has profound personal significance that prompts the reader to exercise his intelligence and alertness in close reading; it requires a mad would-be King to breathe new life into New Criticism. One does not usually turn to an index to find human drama, but how much scorn, envy and disappointment are in Kinbote's perfunctory listing of his arch-rival: "Shade, Sybil, S's wife, passim" (p. 223).

In Pale Fire the commentator and the narrative poet interact to give each other life. The interaction provides a secondary meaning to Kinbote's metaphor about Shade's dying fingers fumbling at Kinbote's hands, "seeking my fingertips, finding them, only to abandon them at once as if passing to me, in a sublime relay race, the baton of life" (p. 208). One wonders how the story of an exiled European intellectual and a mild New England poet could have been presented more vividly and affectingly in a more traditional novel. Kinbote's "notes and self" (p. 212) do indeed peter out at the end of the novel into the figure of the Russian artist who oversees the novel, but before that point there is enough of what Nabokov calls the tingle and tang of reality to satisfy even D.J. Enright.

Turning now to Pnin, we should note a shrewd comment by Enright on the question of Nabokov's compassion. Enright notes that Page Stegner, "in a slightly uneasy way ... offers to justify Nabokov, to show that he possesses not only a brilliant style but also (though he 'tries to obfuscate that emotion by means of a brilliant style') a deeply compassionate nature."<sup>26</sup>

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(26) Enright, p. 3.

It would be incorrect to set up an opposition between, on the one hand, sterility and unreality (qualities erroneously associated with the self-conscious narrator), and on the other hand the warm and soothing blanket of humanistic compassion. Although Nabokov uses the self-conscious narrator to personalize certain impersonal elements of the novel, this does not imply that he tempers cold artificiality with warm sentimentality; instead, he uses the self-conscious voice to explore the spectrum of human emotion. Unfortunately for Pnin, the narrative voice from which Pnin suffers is unkind, even cruel.

On a first reading, Pnin appears to be the simple character study of a stereotyped absent-minded professor in a realistic academic setting. Many readers find it Nabokov's most accessible novel. The narrator appears to be the omniscient, neutral reporter of the conventional novel. Stegner, for example, applauds the reduction of self-conscious artifice:

Perhaps because the composition is more straightforward and the author's controlling hand less apparent, Pnin is the most moving and real of Nabokov's characters. It seems as if both composer and solver, being less involved with intellectual gymnastics, are able to concentrate on the depiction and understanding of a truly human being and his redemptive response to the painfulness of exile.<sup>27</sup>

Stegner is quite correct in saying that Pnin is warm and human, but this is not a function of reduced self-conscious artifice; Stegner is incorrect when he says that "the presence of the author as controlling deity is not felt, and the narrator of the story,

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(27) Stegner, pp. 97-98.

a Russian exile and compatriot of Pnin's, is finally an unimportant figure in the novel" (p. 96). The narrator is in fact of primary importance in the novel, as Pnin himself becomes all too aware.

The narrator's identity seems to be multiple. He might be Prof. Cockerell, the top campus mimic. He might also be the professor who takes away Pnin's job, and whose initials are V.V. More than the initials are revealed when Pnin and his old friend Professor Chateau examine a cloud of blue butterflies:

"Pity Vladimir Vladimirovich is not here," remarked Chateau. "He would have told us all about these enchanting insects."

"I have always had the impression that his entomology was merely a pose."

"Oh, no," said Chateau.

(Pnin, p. 128)

This is of course a reference to the historical personage, Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov, which leads to intellectual gymnastics indeed among the critics. Fowler says the narrator is "roughly Nabokov."<sup>28</sup> Paul Grams is forced into torturous sentences in which Nabokov's name is surrounded by defensive quotation marks: "In other words, the liberties 'Nabokov' takes in order to 'fictionalize' Pnin's biography ...."<sup>29</sup> Ambrose Gordon, Jr. says the narrator gradually "takes on the familiar lineaments of Vladimir Nabokov."<sup>30</sup> Nabokov of course delights in autobiographical references which make it impossible

(28) Fowler, p. 123.

(29) Paul Grams, "Pnin: The Biographer as Meddler," *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, No. 3 (1972), pp. 360-69; rpt. in Proffer, p. 198.

(30) Ambrose Gordon, Jr., "The Double Pnin," in Dembo, p. 150.

for critics to tie up the loose ends of his fictions; nevertheless, the character who took away Pnin's job is not the man who was married to Véra Nabokov. The novel provides us with enough internal information about the narrator for the reader to construct a character study that does not depend on tidbits from the life of the real Nabokov.

The essence of this narrator, despite his multiple identities, one of which bears a resemblance to Nabokov himself, is his maliciousness. Consider his account of a gathering of Pnin and his acquaintances, a gathering in which the narrator participated. The narrator recounts an anecdote about Pnin's female cousin, whom, the narrator says poisonously, he had previously "known in Yalta, Athens, and London." Pnin interrupts the story:

"Now, don't believe a word he says.... He makes up everything. He once invented that we were schoolmates in Russia and cribbed at examinations. He is a dreadful inventor..." (p. 185).

Pnin has good reason to dread the narrator's tone of cool condescension. When the narrator visits Pnin's childhood home, he is quick to contrast Pnin's modest surroundings with his own inherited wealth. In his role as a character he takes away Pnin's job, and in his role as author, which gives him the privilege of omniscience, he invades the privacy of Pnin's mind. Perhaps worst of all, he tampers with Pnin's beloved ex-wife. The narrator has had a casual and condescending affair (on his part) with Liza; she married Pnin on the rebound. Through Liza the narrator obtains some of Pnin's pathetic and revealing love letters, and doesn't hesitate to display the letters to the



reader, who begins to feel like a voyeur. Once one becomes aware of the narrator's dreadful powers, it is difficult to concur with Fowler that Pnin is "easily the most gentle and humane of all Nabokov's novels."<sup>31</sup>

In short, Nabokov has transformed the conventions of the omniscient and intrusive self-conscious narrator. The omniscient narrator becomes a major character in the story, and because his actions are both personal and arbitrary, the reader is all the more sympathetic to helpless Pnin. It is interesting that critics often complain that an artist's treatment of his characters is arbitrary and contrived; Nabokov himself attacks La Nausée on the grounds that Sartre unsuccessfully "inflicts his idle and arbitrary philosophic fancy on a helpless person whom he has invented for that purpose ..." (Strong Opinions, p. 230). What a brilliant technique, therefore, to personalize or anthropomorphize the omniscient narrator, so that things that happen to Pnin are not the artificial calculations of an impersonal voice, but the vindictive tactics of a character within the scene, a narrator who parades his nastiness before the horrified reader.

William Carroll says it is no fun being a character in Nabokov's fiction:

Arbitrarily created, the character leads a life inherently fragile; he is continually jostled, transported in space and time, forced into exile at the stroke of a pen, capriciously tortured, driven into madness at the last moment (Bend Sinister), or abruptly "cancelled." ... As flies to wanton boys are we to our authors, they kill us for their plots.<sup>32</sup>

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(31) Fowler, p. 122.

(32) Carroll, p. 203.

This is somewhat unfair to Nabokov. In Pnin the hero eventually escapes the tortures of his narrator. In Bend Sinister, the narrator, although much less a distinct personality, is essentially benign. However, the narrator is never an agent for the sentimentality of the reader. For example, Krug is not permitted to use the beam of light as a deus ex machina by which he might climb to the narrator's workshop, there to be restored to his son and depart for free America on the artist's visa. Sentimentality implies evasion of the truth, and nothing could be further from Nabokov's use of all-too-real narrators.

#### The Persuasive Self-Conscious Narrator

The rhetorical element in the makeup of Nabokov's self-conscious narrators leads them to attempt to persuade the reader to accept the devices and prejudices of the narrator. Nabokov's narrators are not as contemptuous of the reader's expectations and capabilities as has been generally assumed; in fact, some of the narrator's repeated addresses to the reader are designed to keep the reader in touch with the events of the plot, to make the devices inherent in any form of narration apparent to the reader, and to make the reader a better literary critic in order to avoid the gross distortions of inferior art. The narrator's rhetorical emphasis on artifice is part of a programmatic attack on the distorting generalizations of literary and political theory. Artifice is often opposed to mind-dulling ideology, and not necessarily reality. However, the self-conscious emphasis on artifice has made converts of some of the

critics, and there is a critical tendency to treat the realistic aspects of his works with quotation marks, as a sign of solidarity with the Master of Illusions. Perhaps the self-conscious narrator has done his persuasive work too well.

In Speak, Memory, Nabokov describes the style of Sirin (Nabokov's early pseudonym): "Russian readers who had been raised on the sturdy straightforwardness of Russian realism and had called the bluff of decadent cheats, were impressed by the mirror-like angles of his clear but weirdly misleading sentences..." (Speak, Memory, p. 288). If the reader failed to be impressed, he could be sure that the self-conscious narrator would draw the mirror-like angles to his attention. The narrators become, as it were, internal lobbyists for Nabokov's idiosyncratic techniques. Speaking through his puppets, or with a highly stylized narrative voice with analogies to his own, Nabokov teaches his readers the rudiments of literary criticism as Nabokov would like to see it taught, emphasizing commentaries on specific texts. For example, here is pedantic Kinbote on John Shade:

The whole thing [ll. 403-74] strikes me as too labored and long, especially since the synchronization device has been already worked to death by Flaubert and Joyce. Otherwise the pattern is exquisite (Pale Fire, p. 140).

In The Gift, literary criticism and the plot are inseparable. Fyodor waits for Zina in a romantic Berlin night -- "thus it transpired that even Berlin could be mysterious," says Fyodor, voicing the obligatory Nabokov prejudice:

Within the linden's bloom the streetlight winks.  
A dark and honeyed hush envelopes us. Across

the curb one's passing shadow sinks: across  
a stump a sable ripples thus (pp. 188-89).

Anna Salehar has pointed out that this bit of prose description is in fact the beginning of a poem; quatrains of iambic pentameters with the rhyme scheme abab. In her article, "Nabokov's Gift: An Apprenticeship in Creativity," she argues that the apprenticeship is not Fyodor's, but the reader's. We must become artists ourselves, or at least co-creators with Nabokov, and thus share in Fyodor's "remarkable ability to see the objective world in a way different from most people...."<sup>33</sup>

If the reader conscientiously pays attention to the idiosyncratic devices presented by the self-conscious narrators, his expectations of "sturdy realism" are bound to be disappointed. He might begin to suspect that he is the least important element in the relationship of artist/work/audience; the work itself might seem a self-sufficient artifice with no connection to the reader's world. Why, asks the bemused reader, is the narrator so insulting?

Tum-tee-tum. And once more -TUM! No, I have not gone mad. I am merely producing gleeful little sounds. The kind of glee one experiences upon making an April fool of someone. And a damned good fool I have made of someone. Who is he? Gentle reader, look at yourself in the mirror, as you seem to like mirrors so much (Despair, p. 34).

However, the reader is here encountering Hermann, surely the Nabokov narrator who displays the greatest hostility towards the reader (since he suspects approval for his masterpiece will not

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(33) Anna Salehar, "Nabokov's Gift: An Apprenticeship in Creativity," in Proffer, p. 81.

be forthcoming). It is true that Nabokov himself sounds rather like Hermann in the Foreword to Despair when he says, sarcastically, "Plain readers ... will welcome its plain structure and pleasing plot ..." (p. 9); but it is nevertheless true that Nabokov often uses the self-conscious narrator to give the reader a clearer sense of what is going on. In Ada, for example, Van Veen notes that the dialogue "was speckled with Russian, an effect not too consistently reproduced in this chapter -- the readers are restless tonight ..." (Ada, p. 403). There is contempt in Van's ungracious concession, as though the readers were restless natives in a jungle of ignorance. But Van's concession, gracious or otherwise, is repeated in Nabokov's own career. Simon Karlinsky says that Nabokov's English translation of The Waltz Invention has the ease of the reader in mind. The translator "at times resorts to explicating the text rather than merely translating it ...."

[Nabokov's] attitude toward the reader of the English versions of his earlier work is mellow and more forbearing than the one he had toward the reader of the Russian originals. The literary allusions, puns, and false leads in the original version of The Gift have largely been elucidated and deciphered in the translation. Similarly, the reader of The Waltz Invention in English has a somewhat simplified text.... At the end of his English preface, the author obligingly tells the reader just where the action of the play is taking place; he further tips his hand by referring to Salvator Waltz as "a fellow author" in the newly provided list of dramatis personae....<sup>34</sup>

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(34) Simon Karlinsky, "Illusion, Reality and Parody in Nabokov's Plays," in Dembo, pp. 193-94.

Nabokov is more revealing and intellectually generous than those critics who welcome cabalistic crossword puzzles might admit. Vladislav Khodasevich says that the "key" to Nabokov's work is that he does not hide or mask his devices, but on the contrary,

places them in full view like a magician who, having amazed his audience, reveals on the very spot the laboratory of his miracles.... Sirin does not hide them because one of his major tasks is just that -- to show how the devices live and work.<sup>35</sup>

The self-conscious narrators advocate their own singular methods in order to defeat what Nabokov sees as the generalized lies fostered by cruel politicians and dull critics. He emphasizes the rare, the particular and the idiosyncratic, as opposed to levelling and therefore false generalizations. Thus Nabokov on Sirin:

Just as Marxist publicists of the eighties in old Russia would have denounced his lack of concern with the economic structure of society, so the mystagogues of émigré letters deplored his lack of religious insight and of moral preoccupation (Speak, Memory, p. 287).

In the Foreword to Despair he disposes of the generalizations of the sociologists, the Freudians, and the critics:

Despair, in kinship with the rest of my books, has no social comment to make, no message to bring in its teeth .... The attractively shaped object or Wiener-schnitzel dream that the eager Freudian may think he distinguishes in the remoteness of my wastes will turn out to be ... a derisive mirage organized by my agents. Let me add, just in case, that experts on literary "schools" should wisely refrain this time from casually dragging in "the influence of German Impressionists": I do not know German and have never read the Impressionists -- whoever they are (Despair, pp. 8-9).

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(35) Khodasevich, "On Sirin," in Nabokov: Criticism, p. 97.

The narrators' aesthetic preoccupations are part of a struggle against intellectual tyranny (hence the association of simple or inferior art with totalitarianism in Bend Sinister and Invitation to a Beheading), and also part of the struggle to preserve the intellectual traditions and freedom of Russia's exiled intellectuals. It is no accident that Nabokov's opinions in the Foreword to The Gift are echoed by Pnin's narrator:

The tremendous outflow of intellectuals that formed such a prominent part of the general exodus from Soviet Russia in the first years of the Bolshevik Revolution ... remained unknown to American intellectuals (who, bewitched by Communist propaganda, saw us merely as villainous generals, oil magnates, and gaunt ladies with lorgnettes).... The old intellectuals are now dying out and have not found successors in the so-called Displaced Persons ... who have carried abroad the provincialism and Philistinism of their Soviet homeland. (The Gift, p. 10).

I saw Pnin ... at an evening tea in the apartment of a famous émigré ... one of those informal gatherings where old-fashioned terrorists, heroic nuns, gifted hedonists, liberals, adventurous young poets ... would represent a kind of special knighthood, the active and significant nucleus of an exiled society which during the third of a century it flourished remained practically unknown to American intellectuals for whom the notion of Russian emigration was made to mean by astute Communist propaganda a vague and perfectly fictitious mass of so-called Trotskiites ... ruined reactionaries ... restaurant keepers, and White Russian military groups, all of them of no cultural importance whatever (Pnin, p. 184).

Jack Ludwig has argued that Nabokov ignores the American reality.<sup>36</sup> It is significant that Nabokov's response to Ludwig's piece almost by reflex centres on what Nabokov sees as political

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(36) See Jack Ludwig, "The Ordinary Is, Too," in Nabokov: Criticism, pp. 346-49.

pressure:

I remember, not without satisfaction, how fiercely and frequently, during my last year of high school in Russia (which was also the first year of the revolution), most of my teachers and some of my schoolmates accused me of being a "foreigner" because I refused to join in political declarations and demonstrations. Mr. Ludwig ... indicates with great sympathy and acumen the possibility of similar accusations being made by my new fellow-citizens (Strong Opinions, p. 299).

Nabokov never forgets that the activities of his self-conscious narrators have a political context. There is a tendency on the part of the critics, however, to isolate the artificiality of the self-conscious narrators, to the point where the narrators' activities seem to take place in an aesthetic vacuum. It seems critics tend to be overwhelmed by the aesthetics that Nabokov propounds both inside and outside his works:

[Nabokov] took the unexpected occasion of his celebrity [after Lolita] to proclaim what he had already been hissing through three decades of brimming obscurity: that he ... was not only the greatest but perhaps the only writer of serious fiction on the face of the earth.

[Before] his death in Switzerland at 78 ... no small amount of readers, critics and academics had surrendered the last laugh and accepted the autocratic old wizard at approximately his own evaluation.<sup>37</sup>

Nabokov never said that he was the "only writer of serious fiction on the face of the earth"; but it is true that his innovative methods, his genius, and his repeated attacks on other theories of the novel, not to mention other novelists, have caused some critics to decide that the standard critical terms are inadequate. William Carroll notes that "Nabokov's fiction

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(37) Boeth, p. 42.



spawns special critical vocabularies and diseases in those who attempt to account for its persistently odd effect."<sup>38</sup>

One symptom of the disease, which can be slight or nearly fatal, depending on the patient, is a tendency to slant one's criticism in the direction of the artifice of Nabokov's fiction, at the expense of its realism. Alden Sprowles, for example, complains that one critical difficulty resulting from Nabokov's "distinctive style is the inevitable urge to emulate or parody it while criticizing him."<sup>39</sup> The difficulty is nicely illustrated by Sprowles' own article, which he describes as "a logical extension of Kinbote's insane annotating (itself a byproduct of Nabokov's footnoting proclivities)" (p. 288). Actually, the logical extension of Kinbote's insane annotating is found later in the volume from which Sprowles' article is taken. Kerry Ahearn provides "A Lolita Crossword Puzzle" (pp. 302-305), with up and down clues from the novel. One of my students once informed me, after her prolonged exposure to a course featuring Nabokov, that all of literature is crossword puzzles; nothing more, nothing less.

Critics under Nabokov's spell are troubled by the issue of realism. For example, here is Gleb Struve nervously approaching Nabokov's first novel:

With all its immaturity, Mashenka reveals some of the essentials of Nabokov's literary technique. He is a "realist" (I know he himself detests the use of such labels in literature) in the sense that ....<sup>40</sup>

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(38) Carroll, p. 203.

(39) Sprowles, p. 228.

(40) Struve, p. 47.

And here is Julia Bader, on her way towards the inevitable conclusion that "Nabokov's work eludes traditional rubrics of interpretation":

Shuddering at Nabokov's wise caution ("Remember that mediocrity thrives on 'ideas.' Beware of the modish message. Ask yourself if the symbol you have detected is not your own footprint. Ignore allegories ..."), I have several admissions to make. The "idea" of this book is that the various levels of "reality" in Nabokov's novels are best seen in the perspective of the game of artifice.... My "modish message" is that in various forms and strange ways all of Nabokov's novels are about art.... This sounds allegorical, but in the footsteps of Van Veen I would like to propose a theory....<sup>41</sup>

An example of a good critic who has nevertheless been overly indoctrinated by the self-conscious narrators and by Nabokov's public and private pronouncements is Alfred Appel, Jr. Here he deals with those critics who considered Lolita a satire:

[Lolita's] greatness does not depend on the profundity or extent of its "satire," which is over-emphasized by readers who fail to recognize the extent of the parody, its full implications, or the operative distinction made by Nabokov: "Satire is a lesson, parody is a game."<sup>42</sup>

Note that what Appel intends to be the crunching argument is one of Nabokov's personal rubrics; before we can criticize Nabokov, we must commit to memory his operative distinctions. But perhaps Appel's carefully qualified argument seems inoffensive; perhaps Nabokov is right and Appel is helpfully passing on a truth. In the following example, however, which is an extension of the technique used above (that is, borrowing Nabokov's weapons), Appel

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(41) Bader, pp. 1-2.

(42) Alfred Appel, Jr., "Background of Lolita," in Nabokov: Criticism, p. 36.

attempts to bypass independent criticism altogether in justification of his early (and valuable) review of Ada:

Because of the novel's amplitude and complexity, its allusiveness, elusiveness, and gradual accretion of significant detail, my purpose here is to label, rather than "interpret," its contents and contours, an intention fully in the spirit of Van Veen and his maker. When Van is pressed for a psychiatric explanation of two delusions, he doubtless speaks too for Nabokov the lepidopterist, teacher, and translator and annotator of Eugene Onegin: "in my works, I try not to 'explain' anything, I merely describe . . . ." <sup>43</sup>

While the critic might sympathize with the notions of Nabokov's self-conscious narrators, and learn from them, it is dangerous to identify them with Nabokov, or to go forth and criticize in their spirit. When critics begin to form circular theories in which all of Nabokov's art is about art, it is not surprising that Alfred Appel, Jr. should find it necessary to assure his readers that he is a real person, "and has not been invented by Vladimir Nabokov." <sup>44</sup>

#### The Metaphysics of Self-Consciousness

It is a mistake for the critic to abstract the notions of Nabokov and his narrators into an aesthetic in which artifice predominates; it is a mistake because Nabokov's own aesthetics are part of the fiction's very singular, and very consistent, world view, a world view that does not rely on pure artifice, or common-sense realism, but on their complex interpenetration.

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(43) Alfred Appel, Jr., "Ada Described," in Nabokov: Criticism, p. 162.

(44) Alfred Appel, Jr., The Annotated Lolita (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), p. xii.

Nabokov's world view undeniably has a great deal to do with perceiving the world in artistic terms. Clarence Brown, who believes that Nabokov's works reveal an "absolute unity,"<sup>45</sup> cites one of the imaginary novels in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight: "All things belong to the same order of things, for such is the oneness of human perception, the oneness of individuality, the oneness of matter, whatever matter may be. The only real number is one, the rest are mere repetition" (p. 105). A sense of the oneness of perception requires a special sensibility, which is why Nabokov chooses narrators as sensitive as Sebastian Knight, whose "slightest thought or sensation had always at least one more dimension than those of his neighbors ..." (p. 66). Although the unique perceptions of the special sensibility, which often include a partial transformation of the world, do not receive blanket approval, they are unquestionably encouraged. When a character says justifiably enough that Kinbote is insane, John Shade replies that insanity is the wrong word: "One should not apply it to a person who deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it with a brilliant invention" (Pale Fire, p. 169). Hermann reports that "a Russian author who lives in the neighborhood highly praises my style and vivid imagination" (Despair, p. 189).

Nabokov's narrators continually posit a world of harmony, order, value and all the other characteristics of aesthetic and social utopias. In "Cloud, Castle, Lake," for example, one of

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(45) Clarence Brown, "Nabokov's Pushkin and Nabokov's Nabokov," in *Dembo*, p. 200.

the narrator's "representatives" escapes the group pursuits of a guided tour, and finds his own private scenery:

It was a pure, blue lake, with an unusual expression of its water.... Of course, there are plenty of such views in Central Europe, but just this one -- in the inexpressible and unique harmoniousness of its three principal parts, in its smile, in some mysterious innocence it had ... -- was something so unique, and so familiar, and so long-promised, and it so understood the beholder, that Vasili Ivanovich even pressed his hand to his heart, as if to see whether his heart was there in order to give it away (Nabokov's Dozen, p. 90).

A region so sympathetic that it understands the observer might seem a simple illustration of the pathetic fallacy by which the observer animates an indifferent universe by investing it with his own sensibility; Nabokov's works are more complicated than that, partly because they contain the possibility that the narrator's imaginings in some way correspond with the exigencies of reality. John Shade, for example, says explicitly that the universe can only be understood through art:

I feel I understand  
Existence, or at least a minute part  
Of my existence, only through my art,  
In terms of combinational delight;  
And if my private universe scans right,  
So does the verse of galaxies divine  
Which I suspect is an iambic line.  
(Pale Fire, ll. 570-76)

Pnin appears to escape reality into a better world, which Kinbote might call the refuge of art:

Then the little sedan [containing Pnin] boldly swung past the front truck and, free at last, spurted up the shining road, which one could make out narrowing to a thread of gold in the soft mist where hill after hill made beauty of distance, and where there was simply no saying what miracle might happen (Pnin, p. 191).

But in a sense Pnin is escaping from the artifice of the cruel narrator who is telling his story. The phrases sound romantic (soft mist, thread of gold), but one should keep in mind another romantic, Martin of Glory. Nabokov has explained that his working title for the book, Romanticheskiy vek, which Nabokov says translated as "romantic times," was chosen not to indicate escape from the real world, but escape from the illusions of journalists. He says, "I had had enough of hearing Western journalists call our age 'materialistic,' 'practical,' 'utilitarian,'" and he wanted to stress in Glory the thrill of "the most ordinary pleasures" (Glory, p. x). So perhaps Pnin's state where anything can happen is the real world, as opposed to the narrator's world, just as the escape of Cincinnatus to a world where there are beings akin to him is an escape from the false and trashy world of a dictatorship, and "all of this theatrical, pathetic stuff --

the promises of a volatile maiden, a mother's moist gaze, the knocking on the wall, a neighbor's friendliness, and, finally, those hills which broke out in a deadly rash (Invitation, p. 53).

Behind details which seem to be mere metaphors, whimsical exercises of fancy, there is a metaphysic which incorporates metaphor into reality. In The Gift we learn that "a very successful ant flight was staged: ... in places where nobody bothered them they kept crawling along the gravel and shedding their feeble prop-room wings" (p. 72). These metaphors alluding to the illusions of stagecraft disguise the fact that the narrator has in mind the process of metamorphosis in the natural world,

a process he invokes later in the paragraph: "The lindens went through all their involved, aromatic, messy metamorphoses." When Nabokov was asked whether his aesthetic tricks and sleight-of-hand served any purpose other than amusement, he replied by relating deception to "that other V.N., Visible Nature." An individual style, he says, is "organic." "The sleight-of-hand you mention is hardly more than an insect's sleight-of-wing" (Strong Opinions, p. 153).

Rather than arguing that Nabokov and his narrators are hostile to reality, one should note that reality is hostile to them. Pnin is tortured not only by the narrator, but by grim history:

In order to exist rationally, Pnin had taught himself, during the last ten years, never to remember Mira Belochkin ... because, if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira's death were possible (Pnin, pp. 134-35).

The narrator of "The Leonardo" attempts to romanticize an unworthy hero, one Romantovski, who the narrator believes is triumphing over the world through poetry. The truth of things convinces him otherwise, and his faith in the hero dissipates, as does his ability to assemble a suitable stage set:

My poor Romantovski! ... I believed, let me confess, that you were a remarkable poet whom poverty obliged to dwell in that sinister district. I believed, on the strength of certain indices, that every night, by working on a line of verse or nursing a growing idea, you celebrated an invulnerable victory over the brothers. My poor Romantovski! It is all over now. Alas, the objects I had assembled wander away. The young poplar dims and takes off -- to return where it had been fetched from. The brick wall dissolves.

The house draws in its little balconies one by one, then turns, and floats away. Everything floats away. Harmony and meaning vanish. The world irks me again with its variegated void (Russian Beauty, pp. 23-24).

Patricia Merivale argues that the tidal pull of the real world distinguishes Nabokov from Borges:

These Prosperos, the poet-conjurors of our own day, flaunt the complex artifices of their revels with equal skill; but while Nabokov usually dismisses his actors "into thin air" and returns us to the real world, Borges takes the argument to its conclusion, and perpetually reminds us that both author and reader "are such stuff/ As dreams are made on."<sup>46</sup>

An example of the ways in which Nabokov returns us to the real world occurs in "An Affair of Honor." The hero of the story, Anton Petrovich, is a fearful man unfortunately involved in a duel. Although the story is told to a large extent in the thoughts of the hero, the narrator interrupts at one stage of Anton Petrovich's sleepless night to comment on his hero's mental state: "And then Anton Petrovich did the very worst thing a man in his situation could have done: he decided to reason out what death really meant" (Russian Beauty, pp. 100-101). That line, so matter of fact and experienced, demonstrates that the intrusion of a self-conscious narrator does not necessarily imply fanciful artifice.

Later the hero runs frightened from the duel, and to compensate for his failure in courage begins to imagine a happy ending for himself. He imagines his friends telling him everything is fine:

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(46) Patricia Merivale, "The Flaunting of Artifice in Vladimir Nabokov and Jorge Luis Borges," in *Dembo*, p. 224.



"And you came out of it honorably, while he [Berg, the duellist] is disgraced forever. And, most important, your wife, when she heard about it, immediately left Berg and returned to you. And you must forgive her."

Anton Petrovich smiled broadly, got up, and started fiddling with the ribbon of his monocle. His smile slowly faded away. Such things don't happen in real life (p. 115).

In short, Nabokov's self-conscious narrators are not merely imps leading the reader through layers of artifice towards an infinitely regressive solipsism. Nabokovian self-consciousness involves a marriage of artifice and realism, and at times implies their identity. Nabokov's metaphysic is difficult to define, but it seems clear that the self-conscious narrator, a major contributor to Nabokov's fiction, is neither a solipsist nor a realist, but the spokesman or agent of a much more comprehensive and subtle world view. It is the special gift of Nabokov's self-conscious narrators to involve the reader in the complicated interplay of realism and artifice; the reader's aesthetic pleasures are increased, and, paradoxically enough, he is made aware of what Kinbote calls the "human reality" of plots and metaphors, poems and commentators. He learns to sympathize with fictional characters living in imaginary dictatorships.

## III

## THE MURDEROUS SELF-CONSCIOUS NARRATOR:

## THE FICTION OF DONALD BARTHELME

Introduction

Modernist writing is ebulliently parricidal and cannibalistic.<sup>1</sup>

[T]he original, authentic self ... is a dirty great villain ....<sup>2</sup>

Critics rarely attempt to place Nabokov in the tradition of American literature, despite his insistence that he is as American as apple pie and Arizona. There have been more numerous attempts to place him in the Russian tradition; for example, Simon Karlinsky tentatively fits Nabokov, Chekhov and perhaps Pushkin into what Karlinsky calls "biological humanitarianism," as opposed to the ideological humanitarianism of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and others.<sup>3</sup> Although the émigré critics were for the most part disappointed by Nabokov's divergence from Russian literary tradition, some consoled themselves by discerning

(1) Morris Dickstein, "Fiction Hot and Kool: Dilemmas of the Experimental Writer," *TriQuarterly*, No. 33 (1975), 261.

(2) Donald Barthelme, "Daumier," in *Sadness* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), p. 163. Subsequent references to works by Barthelme in this chapter will consist of page numbers and titles in parentheses. The publishing data for works not documented previously are as follows: *City Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970); *The Dead Father* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975); *Guilty Pleasures* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974); *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973).

(3) Simon Karlinsky, "Nabokov and Chekhov: The Lesser Russian Tradition," in *Nabokov: Criticism*, p. 16.

affinities with Gogol and concluding that Nabokov had inherited the "irrational, comic and linguistically inventive tradition which passed through Dostoevsky to Andrey Bely ...."<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, Nabokov's fiction often appears to be outside literature's national boundaries, programmatically sui generis. Ivan Bunin remarked to a friend in 1930 that Nabokov had introduced "a new kind of literary art," "a whole new universe,"<sup>5</sup> and Nabokov himself, never loathe to present himself as someone outside the rules that govern the rest of us, once said, "I'm the shuttlecock over the Atlantic, and how bright and blue it is there, in my private sky, far from the pigeonholes and the clay pigeons" (Strong Opinions, p. 117). The impression of self-sufficiency is partly due to Nabokov's self-conscious narrative methods, in which the plot is always under the overt control of an aesthetic sensibility, and partly due to the implied correspondence between the rules of the universe and the visions of the imagination. A sense of serenity and at least potential order is strengthened by Nabokov's faith in the good offices of the imagination; as he says in the Foreword to The Eye, the "forces of the imagination" are, in the long run, "the forces of good" (p.10).

Nabokov's aesthetic serenity is unknown in the fiction of Donald Barthelme. Barthelme's narrators are equally self-conscious, but in their egocentric worlds the creative imagination has gone sour. When Barthelme's narrators attempt to emulate

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(4) Jane Grayson, Nabokov Translated (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), p. 218.

(5) Galina Kuznetsova, Grasskii dnevnik, as quoted in Karlinsky, "Nabokov and Chekhov," p. 16.

Nabokov's zest for anti-bourgeois thought and action, they join an intimidating crowd of equally sophisticated elitists . Idiosyncratic behavior has become the social norm, and the convenient targets once presented by lumbering philistines have disappeared. Worse still, the utopian options within Nabokov's fiction have been discredited, since the imagination no longer works its way towards universal order, but towards chaos and confusion. Consider, for example, the narrator's attitude towards literature itself. Nabokov mocks and parodies literature, particularly bad literature, but there is an underlying reverence for art -- choosing Pushkin over Thomas Mann is a moral act. In Barthelme art itself is suspect, and his many narrator-artists complain bitterly about their role.

Some of the themes outlined in the previous paragraph are platitudes of the avant garde -- the breakdown of art, philosophic chaos, the Decline and Fall of Civilization As We Know It. There is a spirit of satire in Barthelme that mocks fashionable angst and pace-setting existential gloom. However, Barthelme's satire differs from the great models of the eighteenth century, in which satires often presented positive alternatives: Pope's reason, Swift's Houyhnhnms, the exemplary later life of Mr. Wilson in Joseph Andrews -- each suggesting the lost Golden World of reasonable and virtuous conduct. In Barthelme's fiction, the narrator's impulse towards satire on the current state of affairs is matched by his complicity in those affairs. Barthelme himself may be above the struggle, but his narrators often mirror the general loss of nerve, the debilitating self-

consciousness of the selfish modern world, and there is no way out for them, either in personal conduct or in art. The narrators, like their society, are brain damaged:

Oh there's brain damage in the east, and brain damage in the west.... Brain damage caused by art. I could describe it better if I weren't afflicted with it... ("Brain Damage," City Life, p. 146).

However, Barthelme's self-conscious techniques do not "celebrate" layers of artifice in which everything is futile and nothing is real. Self-consciousness is also a means of self-discovery; unfortunately, what is discovered is unpleasant. In terms of the perverse Catholicism that permeates Barthelme's fiction like a black mass, man is discovered to be inherently sinful and wicked. His attempts to confess his sins are failures since there is no authoritative figure to determine value -- no priests, no Pope, no order. A sense of inherent sinfulness, particularly sinfulness without recourse to confession, connects Barthelme with both America's realist tradition and the early Puritan tradition. Certainly Norris would have no difficulty recognizing Barthelme's dirty great villainous self. Hawthorne's nightmares included Young Goodman Brown's discovery of faithless Faith, and the diseased imagination of the Reverend Dimmesdale. One thinks also of Melville's Claggart, and Poe's imp of the perverse, and of course the doomed sinners of Wigglesworth and the other New England keepers of the flock. Underlying Barthelme's self-conscious artifice is a sense of the American reality which is as strong as that of his more conventionally realistic contemporaries. In Jack Ludwig's terms, Barthelme is another devotee of America's "longest standing,

most profound fix"; that is, deliberations about "the nature and meaning of reality," based on what Ludwig calls "the terrifying pervasiveness of the actually ordinary."<sup>16</sup>

Partly by means of the self-conscious narrator, who, as we shall see, has a realistic voice as well as an artificial voice, Barthelme both mirrors a self-conscious society and penetrates through to the motive for self-consciousness. At the heart of self-consciousness he discovers the real American personality; despite certain qualifications and fitful attempts at optimism, the essential personality is murderous, the old barbarian, Cain the killer.

#### The Urban Neurotic

Let us delineate Barthelme's self-conscious society, as represented by the self-conscious narrator. Unlike Nabokov's narrators, Barthelme's do not cultivate their self-consciousness as part of the healthy expression of their life-giving differences. They are helplessly, automatically self-conscious, since their society now indulges in an activity that has replaced, say, farming in an agricultural society, or religion in a theocracy. Self-consciousness is inevitable when the salient feature of the social context is its lack of context. The narrators are city dwellers with little sense of their city's history, or its relationship to the surrounding nation; they have no family ties, and their sense of the natural world is limited to a dim impression of tall buildings. Their very names are bland and unrevealing; in the case of Snow White's

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(6) Ludwig, pp. 347, 348.

seven communal dwarfs -- Clem, Hubert, Dan, Kevin, Bill, etc. -- the names, like the characters, are deliberately interchangeable. The narrators' jobs are generally absurd or irrelevant. They are simply of the city, anonymous citizens. The novel's traditional grid co-ordinates of community and the natural world have disappeared.

Rather than build up a composite picture of Barthelme's rootless narrator from the many examples in his fiction, let us use as a role model Barthelme himself. Although he is less relentlessly autobiographical than Nabokov, the autobiographical glimpses in his fiction, non-fiction and rare interviews seem very close to the enervated, introspective intellectual featured in the stories. Barthelme's range of personality types is in fact very limited; the narrators, characters and the authorial voice itself all speak in similar patterns, and perhaps they all could have had the background of "the most imitated fictionist in the United States today."<sup>7</sup>

Barthelme was brought up and educated in Houston, Texas, where his father was an architect. "He was something of an anomaly in Texas in the thirties," says Barthelme about his father. "The atmosphere of the house was peculiar in that there were very large architectural books around and the considerations were: What was Mies doing, what was Aalto doing, what was Neutra up to, what about Wright?"

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(7) According to Philip Stevick, as quoted in Jerome Klinkowitz, "Donald Barthelme," in *Bellamy*, p. 45.

In the late thirties my father built a house for us, something not too dissimilar to Mies's Tugendhat house. It was wonderful to live in but strange to see on the Texas prairie. On Sundays people used to park their cars out on the street and stare. We had a routine, the family, on Sundays. We used to get up from Sunday dinner, if enough cars had parked, and run out in front of the house in a sort of chorus line, doing high kicks.<sup>8</sup>

One can immediately discern the sophisticated international influences that led Barthelme to develop a style that minimizes the context of locale. Doing high kicks in the faces of the local yokels might lead to fiction far removed from that of his fellow Texan author, Larry McMurtry. In his excellent novels, McMurtry allows his colorful Texas characters and the spirit of the place to unfold in a leisurely, old-fashioned manner. His narrators, generally omniscient and objective, or else autobiographical first-person, never self-consciously disrupt the smooth flow of the narrative; the fictional process is subordinated to Texas and Texans. By contrast, Barthelme mocks local color with arch references to tumbleweeds and dogies. The following vignette from Snow White, in which Paul the Prince poses by a Western fence, suggests Barthelme's ironic distance from myths of the Marlboro man:

If I had been born well prior to 1900, I could have ridden with Pershing against Pancho Villa. Alternatively, I could have ridden with Villa against the landowners and corrupt government officials of the time. In either case, I would have had a horse. How little opportunity there is for young men to have personally owned horses in the bottom half of the twentieth century! A wonder that we U.S. youth can still

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(8) "Donald Barthelme," in Bellamy, pp. 46-47.



fork a saddle at all.... Of course there are those 'horses' under the hoods of Buicks and Pontiacs.... But those 'horses' are not for me. They take the tan out of my cheeks and the lank out of my arms and legs. Tom Lea or Pete Hurd will never paint me standing by the fence if I am sitting inside an Eldorado, Starfire, Riviera or Mustang....(pp. 78-79).

Note Paul's symptomatic ambivalence towards questions of principle - whether he fights for Pershing or Villa, he gets what he wants, a horse to pose on. Note the mockery of the western ethos in such phrases as forking a saddle and the desirable lankness of leg. Note most of all that the narrator is self-consciously aware of himself as an inappropriate urban cowboy in a painted Western scene.

Meanwhile the real Donald Barthelme was not a cowboy in Texas, but in 1957 the founding editor of the University of Houston Forum, "which --with its early publication of Walker Percy, William H. Gass, Joseph Lyons ... --was for a time as much a local anomaly as the Barthelme Tugendhat home."<sup>9</sup> Barthelme moved to New York, where he was first the managing editor of an arts and opinion periodical called Location, and then a New Yorker writer. "The Teaching of Don B.: A Yankee Way of Knowledge" provides a self-portrait in a New York context:

While doing anthropological field work in Manhattan some years ago I met, on West Eleventh Street, a male Yankee of indeterminate age whose name, I was told, was Don B. I found him leaning against a building in a profound torpor - perhaps the profoundest

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(9) Jerome Klinkowitz, Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction (Urbana, Illinois: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1975), p. 63.

torpor I have ever seen. He was a tallish man with an unconvincing beard and was dressed, in the fashion of the Village, in jeans and a blue work shirt (Guilty Pleasures, p. 53).

Even allowing for the Carlos Castaneda parody, here are the attributes of a Barthelme narrator: indeterminate age, uncertain beard, clothes that meekly conform to the blue urban uniform. He is not a unique and a special individual, but a statistic in someone's anthropological research. The source of his profoundly passive torpor is the non-context of the city. The anonymity and loneliness of the city encourage the narrator to look into himself for value, but at the same time the city denies him any connection with traditional sources of value. In "The Indian Uprising," for example, a city vaguely reminiscent of New York is conquered by Comanches. The inhabitants are unable to defend themselves, despite defensive quotations from such cultural touchstones as T.S. Eliot and Hamlet: "On the map we considered the situation with its strung-out inhabitants and merely personal emotions" (Unspeakable, pp. 6-7). Cohesive strategy is impossible:

"What is the situation?" I asked.

"The situation is liquid," he said. "We hold the south quarter and they hold the north quarter. The rest is silence." (p. 7)

Instead of street signs that refer to the natural world (Elm, Maple) or intellectual structure (Main) or tradition (Washington Ave.), Barthelme's streets are named after ephemeral culture heroes: "She ran off down George C. Marshall Allée ..." (p. 7). The barricades themselves are composed of ceramic ashtrays, bottles of Black and White, corkscrews and Yugoslavian carved

flutes. The city is composed of pop trash, and it is not worth defending:

I spoke to Sylvia. "Do you think this is a good life?" The table held apples, books, long-playing records. She looked up. "No." (p. 3).

The narrator half welcomes the Commanches. He looks into their savage black eyes and imagines the end of what semblance of order the city possesses, the "clear, neat rows of houses in the subdivisions" (p. 12).

### The Philosophy of Chaos

The urban environment forces Barthelme's narrators to lead arid, sterile lives, which naturally enough occasions arid and sterile self-consciousness. Thinking never leads to intellectual discovery; analysis never leads to action; clever and facile articulation and pseudo-eloquence never quite lead to the satisfactions of art. Whenever the narrators attempt to surmount the dreary urban particulars of their lives, and try to see over the tall, forbidding buildings, they must contend with the disorderly fictional cosmos. They dwell in philosophic chaos, frustrated by intellectual dead ends and random phenomena. When Barthelme was asked if any general conceptions of space and time were reflected in his fiction, he answered "No";<sup>10</sup> the stories present plenty of reasons for taking him at his word:

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(10) "Donald Barthelme," in Bellamy, p. 51.

that's chaos can you produce chaos? Alice asked certainly I can produce chaos I said I produced chaos she regarded the chaos chaos is handsome and attractive she said and more durable than regret I said and more nourishing than regret she said

twirling around on my piano stool my head begins to swim my head begins to swim twirling around on my piano stool twirling around on my piano stool a dizzy spell eventuates twirling around on my piano stool I begin to feel dizzy twirling around on my piano stool

chaos is tasty AND USEFUL TOO

("Alice," Unspeakable, pp. 120,119,122)

Similarly, in "Up, Aloft in the Air," the narrator explores America from an untrustworthy airplane:

"In case of orange and blue flames," he wrote on the wing, "disengage yourself from the aircraft by chopping a hole in its bottom if necessary.... I suggest that you be alarmed. ... You are up in the air perhaps 35,000 feet, with orange and blue flames on the outside and a ragged hole in the floorboards. What will you do?" (Caligari, p. 127).

The confused, dizzy, terrified narrator often proposes an exit to some better universe next door. After the dull round of events in "The Party," the narrator turns to his friend and says:

Dear Francesca, tell me, is this a successful party, in your view? ... I know that you have always wanted to meet [King] Kong; now that you have met him and he has said whatever he has said to you ... can we go home? I mean you to your home, me to my home, all those others to their own homes, cells, cages? I am feeling a little ragged. What made us think we could escape things like bankruptcy, alcoholism, being disappointed, having children? Say "No," refuse me once and for all, let me try something else (Sadness, p. 62).

The concept of something else, some other country, recurs in Barthelme's fiction, as it does in Nabokov's fiction; however, Barthelme is even more vague than Nabokov about the terms of any prospective utopia, probably because the context of his fiction makes it clear that there is no philosophical escape hatch. Self-consciousness leads the self nowhere. The demoralizing search for value sometimes leads the narrators to wonder whether their continued existence serves any purpose. In a review of a Graham Greene novel, Barthelme questions the notion that any action, a good or an evil action, is preferable to passive indifference:

The chief modern literary expression of this position is T.S. Eliot's, in his 1930 essay on Baudelaire: "So far as we are human, what we do must be either evil or good; so far as we do evil or good, we are human; and it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing: at least, we exist." Mr. Eliot's remarks, unfortunately, are themselves at the mercy of an unexamined assumption, that it is better to exist than not to exist. This, to say the least, has not been proved, and it is the genius of a novelist like Beckett that his characters act precisely in the area of the unexamined assumption: they yearn toward nonexistence.<sup>11</sup>

The narrators' confusion and despair is disguised by the comic tone. The narrators tend to treat existence lightly, and rarely seem tempted to demonstrate universal nihilism by such apt actions as suicide. They avoid any such action because even nihilism implies a system of thought, an orthodoxy, and the

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(11) Donald Barthelme, "The Tired Terror of Graham Greene," *Holiday*, April 1966, pp. 148-49.

narrators rarely hold to any intellectual position for long. It is difficult for the critic to demonstrate that the narrators are confused and thrown back on themselves because they lack the mental landmarks of logic and order; it is difficult because such lumbering terms as "nihilism" and "solipsism" are continually undercut by Barthelme's use of terse, ironic, disruptive statements that never coalesce into a philosophy of meaning or non-meaning. The narrators speak and think in fragments. According to one narrator, "Fragments are the only form I trust" ("See the Moon?" Unspeakable, p. 157).

That line has become a catch-phrase among Barthelme's admirers and enemies. It is taken almost metonymically as the substance of Barthelme's aesthetic. For example, Joyce Carol Oates too freely associates the narrator with the author:

"Fragments are the only form I trust." This from a writer of arguable genius, whose work reflects the anxiety he himself must feel, in book after book, that his brain is all fragments ... just like everything else.... [E]ven the construction of his sentence is symptomatic of his role: It begins with "fragments," the stern healthy noun, and concludes with the weak "I". But. There is a point in history at which Wilde's remark comes horribly true, that life will imitate art. And then who is in charge, who believed himself so cleverly impotent, who supposed he had abdicated all conscious design ...?<sup>12</sup>

Speaking for the affirmative, as it were, Richard Schickel says,

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(12) Oates, "Guest Word," p. 63.

You will perhaps recall Barthelme's most quoted dictum: "The only forms I trust are fragments." [sic] We perceive in fragments, live in fragments, are no doubt dying by fragments; should we not, then, write in fragments, emphasizing thereby the strange disjunctions, the even stranger juxtapositions, that are part of the everyday experience of modern life?<sup>13</sup>

Although one applauds Schickel's attempt to oppose a realistic aesthetic ("everyday experience of modern life") to Oates' predictable accusation that Barthelme has substituted the impotent values of art for healthy life, it remains dangerous to ascribe to Barthelme any fixed aesthetic philosophy, particularly one taken verbatim from a narrator. Barthelme has published a humorous retraction of the fragments line, which he says is a "statement by the character about what he is feeling at that particular moment."

I hope that whatever I think about aesthetics would be a shade more complicated than that. Because that particular line has been richly misunderstood so often ... I have thought of making a public recantation. I can see the story in, say, Women's Wear Daily: WRITER CONFESSES THAT HE NO LONGER TRUSTS FRAGMENTS Trust 'Misplaced,' Author Declares DISCUSSED DECISION WITH DAUGHTER, SIX Will Seek 'Wholes' In Future, He Says ... New York, June 24 (A&P) - Donald Barthelme, 41-year-old writer and well-known pragmatist, said today that he no longer trusted fragments.... The author, looking tense and drawn after what was described as "considerable thought"....<sup>14</sup>

Although she may have erred in generalizing too freely about Barthelme's aesthetic, Oates was perceptive in noting a certain lack of editorial responsibility. "We all doubt our

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(13) Richard Schickel, "Freaked out on Barthelme," New York Times Magazine, 16 August 1970, p. 14.

(14) "Donald Barthelme," in Bellamy, pp. 53-54; the typography of the original has been simplified.

authority," Barthelme once said. "We're not sure we understand it. We doubt our competence to understand it."<sup>15</sup> His narrators have difficulty sustaining an argument, or, as we shall see in "Daumier," a persona. Although the narrators might appear at times to be confident satirists, the satire has no fixed and immutable moral base. If this is satire, it is satire in all directions, with no sense of progress towards a moral norm. Furthermore, the plethora of philosophic notions makes it difficult to align Barthelme's narrators with the articulate spokesmen of those writers usually classified as absurdists, or black humorists, or existentialists, or any other Labelist. Barthelme is always ready with his retractions, and the narrators are anything but consistent (there are even sunny patches of optimism).

Readers who search for a message, a "world view," are therefore placed under stress. Tom Wolfe is of the opinion that Barthelme has no choice but to write short stories:

"As long as he's writing in a short space, I think people can enjoy the intracranial exercise he's putting you through."<sup>16</sup>

Whether or not a novel requires some air-tight cosmology as literary ballast, the point is that Barthelme's narrators must contend with a fictional world in which ideas are banished that can't be expressed in a short, snappy phrase; a world in which ideas cancel out, like fashions in clothes; mental pop, intracranial angst, a chaos of values in which only advertising men

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(15) Schickel, p. 42.

(16) "Tom Wolfe," in Bellamy, p. 88.



could survive. Although Guerard, like Oates, confuses the author with his spokesmen, Guerard has a point in calling Barthelme "a cheerful historian of collapse."<sup>17</sup>

Language Problems: The List

Philosophic instability is revealed in the narrators' use of language. That the narrators would be arch and artificial in their self-conscious narratives one would expect; that they disrupt traditional models of realistic narratives one accepts as a matter of course; but what is less predictable is that the narrators are disturbed by their inability to use language as a medium of communication. Whereas Nabokov's narrators are exhilarated by the creative use of docile nouns and vital verbs, Barthelme's narrators are demoralized by the endless din of meaningless language that drives them "around the bend" (Snow White, p. 30).

Barthelme himself does not generally suffer from an inability to organize a coherent narrative that will give his readers aesthetic pleasure. But his narrators do suffer; they seem to be disappointed inheritors of the failed dreams of such modernist writers as Ezra Pound, who said, confidently enough, that we are all "governed by words, the laws are graven in words, and literature is the sole means of keeping these words living and accurate."<sup>18</sup> It was hoped that language might act as part of a momentary stay against confusion, a dike against

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(17) *Guerard*, p. 28.

(18) As quoted in *McCaffery*, p. 19.

the rising tide of history. But Pound also expressed the counter-impulse, to Make It New, an idea extended by Wallace Stevens into the formula of "The Man with the Blue Guitar": "Throw away the lights, the definitions,/ And say of what you see in the dark/ That it is this or it is that./ But do not use the rotted names."<sup>19</sup> Such lexical freedom is taken to excess in a manifesto from transition in 1929, a manifesto signed by Hart Crane among others:

6. The literary creator has the right to disintegrate the primal matter of words imposed on him by text-books and dictionaries....

7. He has the right to use words of his own fashioning and to disregard existing grammatical and syntactical laws....<sup>20</sup>

Aside from a quaint antiquarian impulse, Barthelme's narrators rarely act to preserve the language; they follow the revolutionary side of Pound's dialectic, in the footsteps of Stevens and the transition radicals. But instead of freedom they find anarchy, and instead of unconstrained self-expression they are unable to articulate their thoughts and emotions.

It might seem, therefore, that Barthelme's fiction is allied with critics such as Russell, who argues that language can no longer be trusted to communicate meaning. It might seem that Barthelme's fiction conforms to Hansen's premise that self-consciousness is resolved in solipsism, or to the argument of Sontag and others that realism, which implies language that refers to the common reality of artist and reader, has been

(19) Wallace Stevens, "The Man with the Blue Guitar," in The Palm at the End of the Mind (New York: Vintage-Random House, 1972), p. 149.

(20) "Proclamation," transition, No. 16-17 (1929), p. [13].

finally discredited. Such assumptions, however, would not be correct. The self-conscious narrator remains enough of a rhetorician to involve the reader in the story, and at times this involvement includes references to the reader's real world (as we shall see in "The Glass Mountain"). At times, in fact, the self-conscious narrator adopts the old-fashioned role of the omniscient intrusive narrator to offer comments on the moral significance of the story (as in "Rebecca"). Although the language of contemporary America is deservedly satirized (particularly technical and sociological jargon), often the narrator's self-consciousness about language indicates a failure on the part of the narrator rather than a failure on the part of language. Self-consciousness is a symptom, not a cause, of the narrator's debilitated state, and a device to avoid facing unpleasant truths. But let us look in detail at some of the narrator's problems with language, beginning with the list.

In "Hiding Man," the narrator visits a movie theatre and encounters the sinister Bane-Hipkiss, who challenges the narrator's unfashionable faith in Catholicism. "You still believe in saints?" says Bane-Hipkiss:

"I believe in saints, [says the narrator]  
 "Holy water,  
 "Poor boxes,  
 "Ashes on Ash Sunday,  
 "Lilies on Easter Sunday,  
 "Crèches, censers, choirs,  
 "Albs, Bibles, mitres, martyrs,  
 "Little red lights,  
 "Ladies of the Altar Society,  
 "Knights of Columbus,  
 "Cassocks and cruets,  
 "Dispensations and indulgences,  
 "The efficacy of prayer,

"Right Reverends and Very Reverends,  
 "Tabernacles, monstrances,  
 "Bells ringing, people singing...."  
 (Caligari, p. 34)

The list makes a shambles of any coherent attempt to come to grips with religious faith. Free association leads to the jarring juxtaposition of mitres and martyrs; the rhythm of bells ringing, people singing is deliberately banal; Right Reverends followed by Very Reverends mocks the rigid pecking order of the church; the list in both its illogical organization and its contradictory elements is a good argument against faith. In another story the narrator says, "I have a deep bias against religion which precludes my discussing the question intelligently" ("Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel," City Life, p. 89). The narrator of "Hiding Man" similarly attempts to avoid an intelligent, or, at least, rational, discussion of the issue; instead he offers a list which is self-conscious and private to the point of being hermetic. The reader learns little about religion, but much about the emotional tension of the narrator.

In "Perpetua," on the other hand, the reader is left unedified when an architect named Henry brags of his many beautiful churches:

Architecture is memory, Henry said, and the nation that had no cathedrals to speak of had no memory to speak of either. He did it all, Henry said, with a 30-man crew composed of I superintendent I masonry foreman I ironworker foreman I carpenter foreman I pipefitter foreman I electrician foreman 2 journeyman masons 2 journeyman ironworkers.... (Sadness, p. 43).

Henry's unpunctuated string of titles provides both an over-

abundance of information and no information -- just as a telephone book, that model of alphabetical coherence, is in one sense an incomprehensible assemblage of strangers.

Since the lists can obviously be expanded to infinity, they tend to mock the ability of words to tell a story and impart a message:

Q: I have a number of error messages I'd like to introduce here and I'd like you to study them carefully.... they are numbered. I'll go over them with you: undefinable variable ... improper sequence of operators ... improper use of hierarchy... missing operator ... mixed mode, that one's particularly grave ... argument of a function is fixed-point ...

A: I like them very much.

("The Explanation," City Life, p. 73)

When the lists are of objects, the effect is something like the apocalypse of realism, as though realism had gone mad, and swamped both the narrator and the reader with more information than the mind can comprehend or language can control. Let us return to those barricades against the Comanches in "The Indian Uprising":

I analysed the composition of the barricade nearest me and found two ashtrays, ceramic, one dark brown and one dark brown with an orange blur at the tip; a tin frying pan; two-litre bottles of red wine ... aquavit, cognac, vodka, gin, Fad # 6 sherry; a hollow-core door in birch veneer on black wrought-iron legs; a blanket, red-orange with faint blue stripes ... a yellow-and-purple poster; a Yugoslavian carved flute, wood, dark brown; and other items. I decided I knew nothing (p. 5).

The last line is a reference to a John Updike story, which, like "The Indian Uprising," first appeared in The New Yorker. Updike's story also describes the breakdown of sophisticated urban life, and ends, dramatically, "Sunday's events repeated

themselves in his mind, bending like nacreous flakes around a central infrangible irritant, becoming the perfect and luminous thought: You don't know anything." <sup>21</sup> Thus the narrator of Barthelme's story adds an unattributed quotation to his pile of random urban objects. In Updike's story the line is meant to bear the italicized weight of a moral, or message; in Barthelme's story it is just a meaningless cultural referent, a line from a magazine story lying beside the carved Yugoslavian flute. Barthelme's narrator is perhaps the more convincing representative of a communication breakdown, since his lists do not contribute to a comprehensive sense of nihilism or solipsism or any other "perfect and luminous thought"; the lists are in the spirit of what Michel Foucault calls Heterotopias:

Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, ... because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things ... to 'hold together.' [Heterotopias] dessicate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences.<sup>22</sup>

Myths are deliberately dissolved in Barthelme's fiction -- the myth of Snow White, for example, -- and Barthelme's narrators often undercut the lyricism of their own sentences.

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(21) John Updike, "Sunday Teasing," in The Same Door (1959; rpt. Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Crest, 1963), p. 86.

(22) Michel Foucault, The Order of Things (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), p. xviii.

But perhaps it could be argued that the narrators' lists are an attempt to pin down and specify the real world; perhaps the narrators do not engage in the decadent creation of heterotopias, but rather analyze and neatly present the raw data of urban experience. Such an argument would be defeated by an example from one of Barthelme's non-fiction works, an assignment from Esquire magazine to review the Ed Sullivan show. Barthelme's attitude in the review is a kind of mocking embrace of the show's unrelenting banality; but he ends the piece with a long list of the credits:

Associate Producer Jack McGeehan. Settings  
Designed by Bill Bohnert. Production Manager  
Tony Jordan. Associate Director Bob Schwarz...  
Program Coordinator... ("And Now Let's Hear it  
for the Ed Sullivan Show," Guilty Pleasures,  
p. 108).

The reader is not being offered useful data; instead, by slowing down the credits to the stately pace of print (rather than the embarrassed speed of television), Barthelme emphasizes the irrelevance of the information. Just as Ed's guests perform songs that are "submemorable" (p. 107), the reviewer indicates his inability to respond by offering non-information. "The Ed Sullivan Show is over. It has stopped" (p. 108).

However, Barthelme the reviewer is not totally incapable of response. Faced with what is undeniably the boring and sterile experience of attending the taping of a mediocre television show (apparently mediocre even by Sullivan's standards), the reviewer professionally maintains enough of an open mind to be moved by a song called "Those Were the Days": "Song is

ersatz Kurt Weill but nevertheless a very nice song, very nostalgic, days gone by, tears rush into eyes (mine)" (p. 105). Many of Barthelme's narrators are too debilitated for any such display of emotion, suggesting that Barthelme the reviewer uses language to mirror the sterility of the scene before him, while the narrators' use of language mirrors their own sterility. The list of objects in "The Indian Uprising" captures the triviality of the city, but it also expresses the dissatisfaction of the narrator, who suspects there should be something more to his life than sanding yet another hollow-core door for a coffee table: "I had made after all other tables, one while living with Nancy, one while living with Alice, one while living with Eunice, one while living with Marianne" (p. 4).

#### Language Problems: Malfunction

Lists at least provide the empty form of order, and offer an empty promise that the narrator's thoughts can be organized. But in several stories the narrator seems to lose control of language altogether. The language tends to "lose direction and slide into pure irrelevancies. The digressive method is not the one found, say, in Tristram Shandy, for it is not based on an associational logic and does not 'lead anywhere.'"<sup>23</sup> McCaffery quotes a passage from Snow White in which one of the dwarfs describes another dwarf's new pyjamas, and then wanders into a curious digression about the grade of pork ears used

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(23) McCaffery, p. 30.



in the baby food vats, and the fact that sales nationwide "are brisk, brisk, brisk.... The pound is weakening. The cow is calving. The cactus wants watering. The new building is a building with leases covering 45 per cent of the rentable space already in hand. The weather tomorrow, fair and warmer" (pp. 119-20). The rhetoric of business had invaded the dwarf's perception of the natural world ("The pound is weakening. The cow is calving."); even his weather report seems to issue from the offices of Merrill Lynch.

"Bone Bubbles" goes even further; too far, in fact:

offer last gesture smooth man of position purely  
cinematic vice slap and tickle zippered wallpaper  
two beautiful heavy books, boxed hears noise goes  
to window 220 treasures from 11 centuries fixer  
great and stupefying Ring minimum of three if it  
hadn't been for Y. I never would have gotten  
my lump local white Democrats... (City Life, p. 122).

Numerous painful rereadings suggest that a narrative of sorts lurks in the verbiage of "Bone Bubbles," but it seems safe to say that the narrator has retired into a willful obscurity. One source of his disdain for communication is suggested in a passage from The Dead Father, in which the leading characters encounter two unpleasant children and ask them what they have learned at school:

We are invigorated with the sweet sensuality  
of language. We learn to make sentences.  
Come to me. May I come to your house?  
Christmas comes but once a year. I'll come  
to your question. The light comes and goes.  
Success comes to those who strive. Tuesday  
comes after Monday. Her aria comes in the  
third act. Toothpaste comes in a tube....  
She comes from Warsaw. He comes from a  
good family. It will come easy with a little  
practice. I'll come to thee by moonlight ...  
(pp. 15-16).

There is no little charm in the child's demonstration that the verb "to come" is absurdly overloaded with syntactical functions, and that the ostensible rationality of language is covertly sensual; nevertheless, her speech is typical of the attempts of Barthelme's narrators and characters to subvert language as a natural means of communication. Philip Stevick has attempted to define the axioms of what he calls new fiction:

New fiction consolidates an attempt rare in fiction before the modern period to present elements of its texture as devoid of value; yet new fiction, in contrast to certain areas of modern fiction, seeks this value-less quality not as an act of subtraction, or dehumanization, or metaphysical mystification, not as a gesture of despair or nihilism, but as a positive act in which the joy of the observer is allowed to prevail as the primary quality of the experience.<sup>24</sup>

Barthelme the author may or may not be filled with joy at the thought of composing his brilliant stories, and perhaps the reader feels aesthetic bliss, tempered by his awareness of the pain and despair at the heart of the stories; but the primary observer -- the narrator -- is surely not filled with joy. Joy does not "prevail." Despite an optimistic impulse in Barthelme's fiction, the overriding fact of life for Barthelme's protagonists is moral paralysis, and much of this paralysis is expressed in their use of language. The language is self-conscious in the sense of being processed through a willfully deceptive intellect which eliminates emotion and value, and leaves

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(24) Philip Stevick, "Scheherazade runs out of plots, goes on talking; the king, puzzled, listens: an Essay on New Fiction," *TriQuarterly*, No. 26 (1973), pp. 332-62; rpt. in *The Novel Today*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (n.p.: Fontana, 1977), p. 210.

just the dry bones of language; one has an image of desperate clever dogs picking at a dessicated skeleton. It is true that part of the problem lies with language itself, particularly the sterile lingua franca of contemporary America, but it should not be forgotten that the narrators sometimes deliberately distort the language as a sign of their confusion, despair and guilt. Let us consider Snow White, which several critics insist is a book that centres on language. McCaffery's opinion is representative:

If we now turn to the central question of the role of language in [Snow White], we find that, more than anything else, the book seems to be "about" the condition of language.....<sup>25</sup>

Any critical consensus engenders suspicion. Perhaps Snow White is not mainly about language, but about one of Barthelme's favorite themes, the failure of romance in mundane modern times. Nevertheless, most readers notice the overwhelming buzz of language. All the narrators are self-conscious conversationalists; they struggle to soothe Snow White's complaint which she voices in her first speech of the novel: "Oh I wish there were some words in the world that were not the words I always hear!" (p. 6).

Although there is an impersonal omniscient narrator, the narrative is mainly carried on by the dwarfs, who sometimes speak in a kind of collective (or, considering the sleeping arrangements, communal) "we." One critic amusingly describes

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(25) McCaffery, p. 27. See also Dickstein, p. 268, and Guerard, p. 28.

the narrative voice as "third person dwarf."<sup>26</sup> In the struggle of the narrators to find words to satisfy Snow White, they neglect information customary in the traditional realistic narrative; the professions, activities and even the identities of the seven dwarfs are often far from clear. The narrators tend to neglect the plot in favor of philological debates. For example, Henry the dwarf, with a nod to our theme of self-consciousness, notes his weaknesses on a pad:

Process comparable to searching a dog's underbelly for fleas. The weaknesses pinched out of the soul's ecstasy one by one. Of course "ecstasy" is being used here in a very special sense, as misery, something that would be in German one of three aspects of something called Lumpwelt in some such sentence as, "The Inmitten-ness of the Lumpwelt is a turning toward misery." So that what is meant here by ecstasy is something on the order of "fit," but a kind of slow one, perhaps a semi-arrested one, and one that is divisible by three (p. 29).

Self-consciousness leads to misery, and one cause of the misery is Henry's failure to use words as analytical tools. His thoughts can't be confined to the neat precision of German philosophic semantics (which is why the sudden introduction of "fit" leads to a nonsensical refinement -- "divisible by three"). Immediately following Henry's linguistic fit, another dwarf defines the interrupted screw as "'a screw with a discontinuous helix, as in a cannon breech,'" formed by "'cutting away part or parts of the thread, and sometimes part of the shaft. Used with a lock nut having corresponding male sections.'"

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(26) Betty Flowers, "Barthelme's Snow White: The Reader-Patient Relationship," Critique, 6, No. 3 (1975), 37.

"This filthy," Henry said, "this language thinking and stinking everlasting of sex, screw, breech, 'part', shaft, nut, male, it is no wonder we are all going round the bend with this language dinning forever into our eyes and ears...." "I am not going round the bed," Dan said, "not me." "Round the bend," Henry said, "the bend not the bed, how is it that I said 'bend' and you heard 'bed,' you see what I mean, it's inescapable." "You live in a world of your own Henry." "I can certainly improve on what was given," Henry said (pp. 29-30).

Nabokov's narrators also felt an impulse towards a private world, but they thought of language as a serviceable medium in which to articulate that private world; Barthelme's narrators are not supported by language, but "driven round the bend." Humbert Humbert celebrated the magical power of language, its "durable pigments"; Barthelme's Dan the dwarf thinks of language as just another junk product. "'You know,'" he says, in a parody of colloquial, unself-conscious ease,

"Klipschorn was right I think when he spoke of the 'blanketing' effect of ordinary language, referring, as I recall, to the part that sort of, you know, 'fills in' between the other parts. That part, the 'filling' you might say, of which the expression 'you might say' is a good example... might also be called the 'stuffing'...."

Dan argues (or speechifies into a void) that stuffing has two qualities, an 'endless' quality and a 'sludge' quality:

"The 'endless' aspect of 'stuffing' is that it goes on and on, in many different forms, and in fact our exchanges are in large measure composed of it, in larger measure even, perhaps, than they are composed of that which is not 'stuffing.'"

Dan combines this despairing theory of language with a rationale for the dwarfs' profession, which might be running a plant that

produces totally useless buffalo humps. Since the per capita production of trash is going up steadily, the percentage of trash to everything else will soon be 100 per cent, at which point the question of disposing of the trash becomes a question "of appreciating its qualities, because, after all, it's 100 per cent, right?" "It's that we want to be on the leading edge of the trash phenomenon," says Dan, "and that's why we pay particular attention, too, to those aspects of language that may be seen as a model of the trash phenomenon" (pp. 96-98).

#### Language Problems: The Loss of Emotion

Dan's speech might be understood in terms of deliberately superficial pop art; or perhaps he describes the self-conscious aesthetic of "camp," in which the observer's ironic distance from the ostensible value of the artifact is the sole source of pleasure. In any event, Barthelme's narrators suffer the emotional effects of being on the leading edge of the trash phenomenon. Their position is a long way from Nabokov's cheerful assertion that nothing is more exhilarating than philistine vulgarity. The intellectual high spirits of some of Barthelme's narrators should not fool us into ignoring that they are trapped in a mean situation. Because they distrust language, and attempt to treat everything with self-conscious irony, they transform their narratives into futile word games. They try to remain untouched by circumstances, at tremendous emotional cost. The result of self-consciousness towards language is an inability to express emotion, followed by the loss of emotion.

The emotional loss is revealed in the details of punctuation:

Charles! Irene exclaimed. You're hungry! And you've been crying! Your gray vest is stained with tears! Let me make you a ham and cheese sandwich.

"All right Jane get into the car."

In the fall the war was always there, but we did not go to it any more.<sup>27</sup>

The first example uses exclamation marks as false signals; the ham and cheese sandwich deflates any possible tension or excitement. In the second example, spoken by the villain of Snow White, the absence of commas helps reduce the phrase to a machine-like monotone, the tone of some favorite Snow White terms, blague and dreck - the tone of plastic fiction.<sup>28</sup> The third example, from Hemingway's "In Another Country," demonstrates how his celebrated understatement retains a kind of romantic resonance; Barthelme's tonelessness is somewhat more sinister.

What is sinister is the sense of ironic distance. The narrator won't take responsibility for what he says, an evasion that irks Gore Vidal:

Mr. Barthelme tells us that his father was "a 'modern' architect." Incidentally, it is now the fashion to put quotes around any statement or word that might be challenged. This means that the questionable word or statement was not meant literally but ironically or "ironically." Another way of saying, "Don't hit me. I didn't really 'mean' it" (pp. 31-32).

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(27) Donald Barthelme, "Will You Tell Me?" in Caligari, p. 48; Snow White, p. 113; Ernest Hemingway, "In Another Country," in The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway (New York: Scribner's, 1938), p. 267.

(28) See Gore Vidal, "American Plastic: The Matter of Fiction," The New York Times Review of Books, 15 July 1976, pp. 31-39.

The link between self-conscious language and the loss of emotion is made apparent in two stories involving a character named Bloomsbury. In the first, "The Big Broadcast of 1938," Bloomsbury acquires a radio station in which he broadcasts favorite words: "The word matriculate had engaged his attention, he pronounced it into the microphone for what seemed to him a period longer than normal, that is to say, in excess of a quarter-hour. He wondered whether or not to regard this as significant" (Caligari, pp. 76-77). Bloomsbury also broadcasts a "commercial announcement" to his estranged wife (p. 69). He remembers their visit to the movies:

The first thing I knew I was inside your shirt with my hand and I found there something very lovely and, as they say, desirable. ... I simply ... held it in my hand, it was, as the saying goes, soft and warm (p. 71).

The story is filled with such expressions as "as they say," "as the expression runs," "as the saying has it" - and all these qualifications are applied to concepts and things generally taken for granted. Thus, when his wife arrives at the radio station, "With a single stride, such as he had often seen practised in the films, Bloomsbury was 'at her side'" (p. 79). The story ends in despair:

[The] electric company, which had not been paid from the first to the last, refused at length to supply further current for the radio, in consequence of which the broadcasts, both words and music, ceased. That was the end of this period of Bloomsbury's, as they say, life (p. 81).

Bloomsbury's detached style merges with the narrator's, and both treat life, "life," as though it were observed from a



great distance. Both Bloomsbury and the narrator are afraid to reveal too much: "After this announcement was broadcast Bloomsbury himself felt called upon to weep a little, and did, but not 'on the air'" (p. 71). That is, not publicly, not in full view of the reader.

In "For I'm the Boy Whose Only Joy is Loving You," Bloomsbury's wife has left him again. While his unpleasant friends attempt half-hearted consolations, Bloomsbury imagines a love dialogue with a girl who adopts a servant-to-liege-lord tone: "Have ye heard the news Pelly, that Martha me wife has left me in a yareplane? ... O yer wonderfulness, wot a cheeky lot to be pullin' the plog on a lovely man like yerself" (Caligari, p. 60). Dialect is generally used mockingly in Barthelme, to indicate the distance between the olden days of direct and passionate expression and modern sterility. When one of Bloomsbury's false friends says, "So now ... give us the feeling," Bloomsbury answers, "We can discuss ... the meaning but not the feeling" (p. 62). Bloomsbury's friend attacks him at the story's conclusion:

and beating Bloomsbury in the face first with the brandy bottle, then with the tire iron, until at length the hidden feeling emerged, in the form of salt from his eyes and black blood from his ears, and from his mouth, all sorts of words (p. 63).

The Bloomsbury stories suggest that one alternative to self-conscious language is an orgiastic release of unconsidered words, which breaks down the emotional barrier of language. A more sinister alternative is that the narrator has no emotions left to express, since self-consciousness has left him sterile

and empty. It has been argued that Barthelme, Brautigan and Coover have in common a post-Joycean imagination which is marked by "an extraordinary innocence, either genuine or feigned, even a kind of common prose rhythm deriving from the unwillingness to subordinate and complicate that is an attribute of the innocence," and "a readiness to confront certain extremities of life ... but an investing of these extremities with an odd and terribly distant artifice..."<sup>29</sup> Writing about Snow White, Betty Flowers notes that the "basic style takes a deceptively simple and studiedly innocent subject-verb-object form. Yet a style which is studiedly innocent is ultimately mock-innocent and, therefore, basically devious."<sup>30</sup>

The language is devious and mock-innocent and characterized by a self-conscious cool irony. The irony is different in kind from the pervasive irony of modern literature. The narrator is perhaps not ironic but catatonic. He is a development of the hero in Robert Musil's The Man Without Qualities, who thinks of himself as a victim of ambivalent reality: "All moral events," says the hero, Ulrich, "took place in a field of energy, the constellation of which charged them with meaning.... [An] endless system of relationships arose in which there was no longer any such thing as independent meanings, such as in ordinary life, at a first crude approach, are ascribed to actions and qualities."<sup>31</sup>

Ulrich is in despair, perhaps a rather intellectualized despair, but Barthelme's narrators are beyond despair:

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(29) Stevick, p. 188.

(30) Flowers, p. 39.

(31) Robert Musil, The Man Without Qualities, as quoted in Wylie Sypher, Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art (New York: Vintage-Random House, 1962), p. 11.

It was pretty boring shooting up mesquite bushes, so we hunkered down behind some rocks, Father and I, he hunkered down behind his rocks and I hunkered down behind my rocks, and we commenced to shooting at each other. That was interesting ("Views of My Father Weeping," City Life, p. 13).

"Interesting" isn't an adequate term. "Interesting" seems a touch weak to cover duels with one's father. Similarly, the hero of "Up, Aloft in the Air"

walked the resilient streets of Akron. His head was aflame with conflicting ideas. Suddenly he was arrested by a shrill cry. From the top of the Zimmer Building ... a group of Akron lovers consummated a four-handed suicide leap. The air! Buck thought as he watched the tiny figures falling, this is certainly an air-minded country, America! But I must make myself useful. He entered a bunshop and purchased a sweet green bun, and dallied with the sweet green girl there, calling her "poppet" and "funicular." Then out into the street again to lean against the warm green façade of the Zimmer Building and watch the workmen scrubbing the crimson sidewalk (p. 130).

This is indeed an "odd and terribly distant artifice." The useless narrator dallies with words, green on green and tasty red.

### Self-Conscious Literature

Given the narrator's debilitating self-consciousness towards language, it is not surprising that he is equally self-conscious about his role as a narrator. Of course, the self-conscious narrator traditionally opposes his idiosyncratic, innovative voice to the literary orthodoxies; however, Barthelme's narrator at times appears to be true to the spirit of an age characterized by distrust for literary conventions, distrust which sometimes

ripens into subversion. The contemporary avant garde goes further than merely grafting innovation to the healthy organism of literary tradition; there is a new spirit of destruction and attack. John Hawkes, for example, announces, "I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting and theme...."<sup>32</sup> Contemporary writers add insult to injury by ignoring literary tradition:

New fiction, though aggressively non-traditional, shows less involvement with the tradition of prose fiction than any fiction since the beginning of the novel.  
... New Fiction, more than any fiction since Cervantes, chooses self-consciously to depart from tradition without investing that departure with any particular urgency or without making that act of departure the starting point of the fiction at all....<sup>33</sup>

Wylie Sypher explains with wonderful confidence that as "everyone recognizes, the scuttling of literature started a century ago." He lists Verlaine, Lewis Carroll's "anti-poetry," Eliot, Strindberg, Jarry's Ubu Roi, Tristram Shandy of course, Cervantes, Flaubert, Edouard Dujardin - "One can trace a whole tradition of anti-literature."<sup>34</sup> The scuttling of literature is not directed just at particular techniques, but at literature's liberal promise of value and order. Gerald Graff says the "conventions of post-modernist art systematically invert the respect for artistic truth and significance which had characterized modernism." Snow White is "one of the post-modernist works that is most skilful in its deployment of the literary past in a subversive way."<sup>35</sup>

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(32) John Hawkes, as quoted in Bradbury, p. 7.

(33) Stevick, p. 208.

(34) Sypher, pp. 68-69.

(35) Gerald Graff, "The Myth of the Postmodernist Breakthrough," TriQuarterly, No. 26 (1973), pp. 383-417; rpt. in Bradbury, pp. 220, 233.

Barthelme's antiliterary tendencies might seem sufficiently labelled ("postmodernist") and not worth examining; however, there are several qualifying and even contradictory factors. First, to say that Snow White is rooted deeply "in a fundamental distrust of most of the conventional principles of fiction" is a tiresome critical platitude, but like most platitudes it contains some truth; however, while Barthelme may indeed be fulfilling a modern expectation (meeting the outrage quotient), he does so in a manner consistent with the larger themes of his fiction.<sup>36</sup> It is one thing to compose self-assertive manifestos with which to dazzle poetry conferences, and it is another to show characters trapped in their own self-consciousness. Rather than merely conforming to the rule of misrule, Barthelme examines narrators and characters whose debilitating self-consciousness leads them to subvert the very activity which might offer them a sense of value.

Furthermore, the doctrinaire program of the avant garde (Down with plot!) is a fit target for Barthelme's satiric impulse. Anti-realism is as much a literary convention as realism, and in a sense Barthelme's narrators are anti-anti-realists, since at times they appeal to the common reality of the narrator and the reader. Barthelme's works are not five-finger exercises for the aesthete, but moral explorations; at the heart of the self-consciousness of Barthelme's narrators and characters is a moral failure; self-consciousness reflects, mirrors, reports (to use a good realistic term) real problems in American society, and more is at stake

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(36) McCaffery, p. 19.

than just another victory over out-of-fashion literary conventions. (In the struggle against literary traditions, the most minor artist might emerge triumphant; in fact, a lack of talent might be an important weapon in the struggle to avoid following in the tradition of the great literary works of the past.) Later we shall detail Barthelme's counter-attack on the avant garde, but at present we must consider the narrator's self-consciousness as it applies to his struggle to fill the narrator's role.

Literature as a liberal education is the narrator's first problem. There is a tradition deriving from the study of the Bible and from the study of the classics (sortes Vergiliae) that literature offers a guide to noble and upright conduct. This notion is not at the moment in fashion. Hence, in "Alice," the narrator pauses to consider what he should do next:

possible attitudes found in books 1) I don't know what's happening to me 2) what does it mean? 3) seized with the deepest sadness, I know not why 4) I am lost, my head whirls, I know not where I am 5) I lose myself 6) I ask you, what have I come to? 7) I no longer know where I am, what is this country? ...

but I know where I am, I am on West Eleventh Street shot with lust I speak to Alice on the street... (Unspeakable, p. 127).

The possibilities from books are romantic, suggesting both the narrator's nostalgia for times when someone could at least feel despair (Barthelme's narrators have difficulty feeling anything), as well as the narrator's post-romantic self-consciousness. Words from books don't relate to the narrator's real situation -- "but I know where I am," shot with lust, not tender love, on the streets of the cynical city.

When the narrator attempts to borrow the fine phrases of older literature, he finds that something has been lost in the temporal transplanting. He self-consciously attempts to play a role from the past, but the rhetoric of the role now sounds hollow. In "The Glass Mountain," for example, the narrator attempts to rescue a symbolic princess who resides "in a castle of pure gold" (City Life, p. 61). Despite his adherence to all the "conventional means" (for example, being taken to the tower of the glittering palace by an eagle), the narrator finds that he must adopt modern expedients. Instead of storming the castle like a knight in armour, he must ascend the wall of a skyscraper with the aid of plumber's helpers; and he has forgotten his Band-aids. In short, the expedition fails and the enchanted symbol proves false: "Nor are eagles plausible, not at all, not for a moment" (pp. 63, 65).

The best way to attack the fine old values of literature is through literature's heroes. First Achilles' heel, then Achilles, then the Aeneid, then the classical heritage. Barthelme's narrators like to reduce what might be called "heroes of potential" to the hopeless quotidian. They are removed from the context of the heroic book (or comic book, or movie) and relocated in the mundane present. For example, Snow White's witch figure, Jane, attempts an uneasy mixture of modern psychoanalysis and ancient folklore; she cultivates her malice: "Now I must witch someone, for that is my role, and to flee one's role, as Gimbal tells us, is in the final analysis bootless" (p. 158). Snow White's leading villain, Hogo de Bergerac, is such a serious

student of his adopted role that he studies atrocity books for tips. He complains that no one maintains the fine standards of evil of the past, and expresses his indignation in pseudo-Shakespearean jargon, which he apparently associates with the finest flowering of villainy (presumably Edmund and Iago are his role models). Of course the old rhetoric fails, and the fine phrases dissipate:

Hogo was reading a book of atrocity stories. "God, what filthy beasts we were," he thought, "then. What a thing it must have been to be a Hun! A filthy Boche! ... And today? We co-exist, we co-exist. Filthy deutschmarks! That so eclipse the very mark and texture ... That so eclipse the very mark and bosom of a man, that vileness herself is vilely o'erthrown. That so enfold ... That so enscarp ... Bloody deutschmarks! that so enwrap, the very warp and texture of a man, that what we cherished in him, vile-ness, is ... Dies, his ginger o'erthrown. Bald pel! that so ingurgitates the very wrack and mixture of a man, that in him the sweet stings of vileness are, all ginger fled, he..." (p. 64).

The heroes are revealed to be ordinary citizens, plagued with second thoughts, self-conscious about their heroic personae, and fatigued with the effort of sustaining them. In "The Party," for example, King Kong is an adjunct professor of art history at Rutgers; still terrifying, of course, but now he is "simply trying to make himself interesting" (p. 58). The narrator of "The Phantom of the Opera's Friend" gradually tires of the Phantom's self-doubts:

Occasionally he [the Phantom] is overtaken by what can only be called fits of grandiosity:  
"One hundred million cells in the brain!  
All intent on being the Phantom of the Opera!"  
"Between three and four thousand human  
languages! And I am the Phantom of the Opera  
in every one of them!"

This is quickly followed by the deepest



despair. He sinks into a chair, passes a hand over his mask.

"Forty years of it!" (City Life, p. 100)

The Phantom receives rather a low blow to the persona when the narrator describes the reluctance of Gaston Leroux to continue with the story:

Gaston Leroux was tired of writing The Phantom of the Opera. He replaced his pen in its penholder.

"I can always work on The Phantom of the Opera later--in the fall, perhaps. Right now I feel like writing The Secret of the Yellow Room" (p. 100).

In a spectacular scene, Batman and Robin speed off in the Batmobile to intercept The Joker! But first they have to ask directions:

"Well if I were you [says the Commissioner], I'd go out 34th Street until you hit the War Memorial, then take a right on Memorial Drive until it connects with Gotham Parkway! After you're on the Parkway it's clear sailing!" he indicated.

"Wait a minute!" Batman said. "Wouldn't it be quicker to get on the Dugan Expressway where it comes in there at 11th Street and then take the North Loop out to the Richardson Freeway? Don't you think that would save time?"

"Well I come to work that way!" the Commissioner said. "But they're putting in another two lanes on the North Loop..." ("The Joker's Greatest Triumph," Caligari, p. 152).

In other words, comic book heroes are imprisoned in the same dreary daily round of self-serve gas stations as the rest of us, and "the hot meat of romance is cooled by the dull gravy of common sense once more" ("Phantom," p. 103). The tiresome consciousness of playing a role defeats the hero: Robin tells Batman that the Joker may have learned their secret identity. "Great Scott!" Batman says. "If he reveals it to the whole world it will mean the end of my career as a crime-fighter! Well, it's a

problem" ("Joker," p. 156).

Since literature does not provide a liberal guide to moral conduct, and since its heroes are spiritually bankrupt, Barthelme's narrators view the ancillary activity of literary criticism with skepticism. Contemporary fiction attempts "to mock, subvert and pre-empt any traditional attempts at critical interpretation of itself";<sup>37</sup> but this should not imply that innovative attempts at critical interpretation would be any more successful. Nabokov's narrators want to proselytize the reader and the critic alike into accepting the life-giving values of narrative self-consciousness; Barthelme's narrators, conscious not of their literary strengths but their weaknesses, attempt to convince the reader that literary criticism is a waste of time.

In "The Glass Mountain," for example, the narrator scales the mountain by adhering as best he can to both the mountain and the best procedures of romance literature. He achieves the summit and the symbol:

97. I approached the symbol, with its layers of meaning, but when I touched it, it changed into only a beautiful princess.

98. I threw the beautiful princess headfirst down the mountain to my acquaintances.

99. Who could be relied upon to deal with her (pp.64-65).

The narrator presents an anti-romance, a counter-fairy tale, which subverts the honoured practice of delving beneath the surface of the story for the buried treasures of universally significant symbols. After all, the Glass Mountain narrator is ostensibly on a critical quest, an explicator searching for

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(37) Stevick, p. 192.

meaning in the text, hoping for luminous symbols to illuminate murky prose. Thus he muses at the 206-foot mark:

71. "The conventional symbol (such as the nightingale, often associated with melancholy), even though it is recognized only through agreement, is not a sign (like the traffic light) because, again, it presumably arouses deep feelings and is regarded as possessing properties beyond what the eye alone sees."

(A Dictionary of Literary Terms)

72. A number of nightingales with traffic lights tied to their legs flew past me (p. 63).

The object of statement 72 is to make Sylvan Barnet's handbook definition seem ludicrously doctrinaire, and, by extension, make any and all reader's guides, twentieth century views, and Coles' notes and queries seem futile.

I remember reading those lines in "The Glass Mountain" some years ago, just after they were published in City Life (1970), and incorporating them in an essay which was filled with exhilaration at the thought of all the stuffy cathedrals of outmoded literary criticism being razed to the ground (without giving any thought to what might replace them). On one of the more enthusiastically anarchistic pages, my professor wrote in the margin, "That way madness lies!" Quite true, and later in the chapter it will be demonstrated that many of the narrators are literally mad. At this point however, it should be emphasized that the narrator's attitude towards literary criticism is not only destructive of phoney rhetoric and cheap platitudes, but also any form of intellectual criticism, particularly criticism which has as its object the discovery of value. Satiric elements in the stories are rarely balanced with any sense of positive moral absolutes,

and attacks on patently absurd methods of literary criticism are not balanced by proposals of sane alternatives.

Snow White, for example, attempts to undermine criticism by means of the sudden introduction of a reader's quiz:

1. Do you like the story so far? Yes ( ) No ( )
2. Does Snow White resemble the Snow White you remember? Yes ( ) No ( )
3. Have you understood, in reading to this point, that Paul is the prince-figure? Yes ( ) No ( )
- ...
5. In the further development of the story, would you like more emotion ( ) or less emotion ( ) ?
- ...
7. Do you feel that the creation of new modes of hysteria is a viable undertaking for the artist of today? Yes ( ) No ( )
- ...
9. Has the work, for you, a metaphysical dimension? Yes ( ) No ( )
10. What is it (twenty-five words or less)?

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11. Are the seven men, in your view, adequately characterized as individuals? Yes ( ) No ( )
12. Do you feel that the Authors Guild has been sufficiently vigorous in representing writers before the Congress in matters pertaining to copyright legislation? Yes ( ) No ( )
13. Holding in mind all works of fiction since the war, in all languages, how would you rate the present work, on a scale of one to ten, so far? (Please circle your answer)  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
14. Do you stand up when you read? ( ) Lie down?  
( ) Sit? ( )

(pp. 82-83)

In this parody of the gentlemanly rhetorical exchange between reader and narrator, the reader is reduced to the role of an undergraduate answering a mid-term quiz. Besides, the questions

are loaded; to understand that Paul is the prince-figure is to demonstrate a reliance on the outmoded expectation that a character represents some larger abstraction (we know how Barthelme feels about symbols). Of course Paul is not a prince-figure at all: Snow White complains, "Paul is frog.... I thought he would, at some point, cast off his mottled wettish green-and-brown integument to reappear washed in the hundred glistering hues of princeliness. But he is pure frog" (p. 169).

The quiz demonstrates a distrust for the enterprise of art. When art is big business ("matters pertaining to copyright legislation"), it seems unlikely that art will have a metaphysical dimension. It is hard to say which the cynical questions 9 and 10 damn more: the tradition that art has more than a surface, or the tradition that art can be explained, explicated and interpreted.

Snow White and "The Glass Mountain" are symptomatic of a malaise that permeates all of Barthelme's stories. The poor diseased narrator, instead of running things with calm and control, finds himself filled with self-doubt. How should he know what should be included in his story? As one of the Snow White dwarfs says, "We like books that have a lot of dreck in them, matter which presents itself as not wholly relevant (or indeed, at all relevant) but which, carefully attended to, can supply a kind of 'sense' of what is going on" (p. 106). Surrounded by dreck, the narrator is hardly in the position of, say, Henry James, tracing the figure in the carpet. "Where is the figure in the carpet?" asks Kevin the dwarf. "Or is

it just ... carpet?" (p. 129).

Skeptical or confused about the possibilities of language and literature, defensive about criticism, the narrator doubts his own artistic powers. In "The Party," for example, his speculations about his social role can also be taken as a comment on aesthetics. He muses that society's crucial tasks "are often entrusted to people who have fatal flaws" (p. 58). His confidence has been shattered by his wife (Barthelme wives are generally Philistine materialists), who attacks his cultural heroes, Kafka and Kleist. He worries that he has run out of ideas: "When one has spoken a lot one has already used up all of the ideas one has. You must change the people you are speaking to so that you appear, to yourself, to be still alive" (p. 61). And in a rather autobiographical phrase that characterizes Barthelme's writing style, the narrator condemns himself: "Wonderful elegance! No good at all!" (p. 62).

The narrator of "At the Tolstoy Museum" notes evidence of fatal self-consciousness even in the monumental figure of Tolstoy: "To make himself interesting, he occasionally bowed backward" (City Life, p. 43). The literary past is not an inspiration but a weight: "The entire building, viewed from the street, suggests that it is about to fall on you" (p. 45). "This the architects relate to Tolstoy's moral authority," adds Barthelme's narrator, alluding to the idea that artists in the past were integrated and secure--omniscient, with a hint of omnipotence--in their roles as moral arbiters for society. The modern artist, says Barthelme's narrators, is anything but

a figure of certitude and authority. Edgar of "The Dolt," for example, repeatedly fails the five-hour, fifty-minute National Writer's Examination. He also fails to deal with the "son manqué":

Edgar tried to think of a way to badmouth this immense son leaning over him like a large blaring building. But he couldn't think of anything. Thinking of anything was beyond him. I sympathize. I myself have these problems. Endings are elusive, middles are nowhere to be found, but worst of all is to begin, to begin, to begin (Unspeakable, p. 69).

The idea of an integrated artist, in command of his craft, is now seen as a delusion. The artist in "A Shower of Gold" objects to the art dealer's scheme of cutting his sculpture in two (small pieces move faster; shorter shelf-life); "You have a very romantic impulse," says the art dealer, "I admire, dimly, the posture. You read too much in the history of art. It estranges you from those possibilities for authentic selfhood that inhere in the present century" (Caligari, p. 175).

Presumably authentic selfhood involves a surrender to the ethics of the marketplace. There is a fine line between the writer's unions and institutionalized imagination of the Soviet Union, and the Book of the Month competition of the West. A merger of the two systems is proposed in Barthelme's anti-utopian story, "Paraguay":

The problem of art. New artists have been obtained.... Production is up. Quality-control devices have been installed at those points where the interests of artists and audience intersect.... The rationalized art is dispatched from central art dumps to regional art dumps, and from there into the lifestreams of cities.... Marketing

considerations have not been allowed to dictate product mix; rather, each artist is encouraged to maintain, in his software, highly personal, even idiosyncratic, standards (the so-called "hand of the artist" concept)... (City Life, pp. 22-23).

"Highly personal, even idiosyncratic, standards" suggests the theme outlined in the first chapter, that the self-conscious narrator provides an alternative to impersonal and objective theories of narration. But although Barthelme's narrators are subjective, and intrusive enough to be noticeable, they often appear confused and estranged within their own narratives. We seem to be tracing a downward spiral.

#### The Other Side of the Avant Garde

The narrators treat language and literature as dangerous activities. The narrators' doubts and second thoughts are reflected in both the form and content of the stories, resulting in a self-conscious stance which is anti-conventional, subversive, disruptive.

But nothing in the paragraph above is surprising. Barthelme as an avant garde aesthetician--what could be more de rigueur in the seventies? One must therefore consider the notion that Barthelme is aware of avant garde expectations, and that to some extent his work is a reaction against them. Perhaps a self-conscious, mocking stance towards literary conventions has itself become a tedious convention ("Oh God comma I abhor self-consciousness").<sup>38</sup> Let us examine Barthelme's

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(38) John Barth, "Title," in Lost in the Funhouse (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1968), p. 113.



work for what some avant garde critics would term retrograde tendencies towards emotion and communication, and outline some of the more stringent avant garde theories under which Barthelme might superficially seem to be subsumed.

To anticipate the chapter's subsequent argument for a moment, Barthelme's reaction to avant garde expectations results in an interesting twist to self-consciousness. It seems that self-consciousness contains within itself an escape route from sterility, archness, solipsism and the other attendant demons. The escape route might be termed plain statement, messages straight to the reader. This is accomplished through a revival of the rhetorical narrator-reader relationship that went out of fashion in the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, escape from a structure of self-doubt and double-edged irony leads to a new kind of misery. Although the narrator's voice is now heard with a new directness, his voice is not necessarily more agreeable. Those self-conscious narrative masks are designed, it seems, to conceal the true identity of the narrator, revealed to be an unpleasant person. But this new twist is examined later in the chapter; we are presently concerned with Barthelme's conformity, or lack of conformity, to the institutionalized avant garde.

The essence of the avant garde position is that the novel is in a state of crisis. Richard Gilman, for example, says the novel must once and for all abandon "dead forms" and recognize the "crisis in literature."<sup>39</sup> He finds that

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(39) Richard Gilman, *The Confusion of Realms* (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 52.

aside from a few lapses Barthelme successfully redeems fiction from its "anachronistic storytelling role." By contrast, William Gass, whom one might have thought sufficiently innovative, stops short of healthy modernism; Gass' work is guilty of "burrowing for comfort and safety into the familiar, not daring fully to cast off its cargo of literary inheritance, employing certain ritualistic narrative procedures which its entire pioneering thrust denies and seeks to abolish" (p. 70).

One might quibble that there would be nothing left of Nabokov if he were forced to abandon his massive cargo of literary inheritance; one might cite Hawthorne's wise gloss on the notion of abandoning the Good Ship Literature in "Earth's Holocaust"; but it seems the first rule in an avant garde crisis is to abandon the past. Raymond Federman invents a new term, "surfiction," in order to express his dissatisfaction with "the failings of traditional fiction." "It is this ... insufficiency, this crisis of fiction which brings many contemporary writers to ... rewrite fiction in terms and in forms that have not yet been defined."<sup>40</sup> Richard Kostelanetz offers dark warnings about a conspiracy against new literature on the part of the "esthetically conservative reviewing media -- The New York Times Book Review, Saturday Review/World, or The New York Review of Books," all of which act as obstacles to that literary innovation which would "resuscitate modern arts that are incipiently senile."<sup>41</sup> Philippe Sollers, protesting outdated notions

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(40) Raymond Federman, "A Prefatory Note," *Surfiction*, ed. Federman (Chicago: The Swallow Press, Inc., 1975), p. 1.

(41) Richard Kostelanetz, "New Fiction in America," in *Surfiction*, pp. 87, 86.

of genre, gives the conspiracy a military character: "A book which seems to recognize none of the genre's rules yet dares to call itself a novel provokes the anger and irritation of the guardians of this law, the literary traffic cops."<sup>42</sup>

The corollary of the thesis that the novel is in a crisis is that the benighted Anglo-Saxon mind is incapable of recognizing a crisis. Many critics use French theorists to berate, condemn and otherwise snub the old-fashioned American and British novelists. The most noteworthy of these critics is Susan Sontag, who grimly announces that in France, "the line of post-novel prose narrative from the Surrealist fictions to those of Borges, Beckett and Robbe-Grillet, are taken to occupy the central position in contemporary letters," while most novels "in traditional 'realistic' forms (such as continue to this day to be critical successes in England and America) are regarded as essentially uninteresting, barely noteworthy products of a retarded or reactionary consciousness."<sup>43</sup> Note the implied radical chic equation of reactionary (conservative) views and retardation; only brain-damaged fascists would read Saul Bellow.

Sontag argues in Against Interpretation that the novel requires "renovation," (pop art posters on the walls, perhaps), trapped as it is in the nineteenth century's "wholly mundane concept of reality."<sup>44</sup> Thus, "the novel as a form of art has

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(42) Philippe Sollers, "The Novel and the Experience of Limits," in Surfiction, p. 61.

(43) Sontag, Pref., Writing Degree Zero, p. ix.

(44) Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), p. 101.

nothing to lose, and everything to gain, by joining the revolution that has already swept over most of the other arts" (p. 111). After the revolution, when the barricades have been joyfully removed from the free streets, Sontag promises that the novel will then and only then recover from its present degraded depths; the novel at the moment "has sunk to the level of an art form deeply, if not irrevocably, compromised by philistinism," but in that new dawn, the renovated novel will become something "which people with serious and sophisticated taste in the other arts can take seriously" (pp. 102, 111).

One is tempted to embrace what Sontag would call philistinism, if philistinism is the alternative to her chilling sophistication. Perhaps her position in the van, facing front of course, makes it difficult for her to perceive the literary landmarks behind. Her disdain for the mundane reality we all have in common and take for granted (and, one likes to think, share) certainly places her in the avant garde tradition as defined by Gerald Graff: "The avant-garde esthetic, whether it manifests itself as a mandarin formalism consecrated to a religion of high art and tradition or as a surrealist assault on esthetic form, art, and culture, asserts the creative autonomy of consciousness against the bourgeois reality principle." The avant garde aesthetic leads to "a permanent alienation of consciousness from any fixed position and from all previous modes of consciousness...."<sup>45</sup>

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(45) Gerald Graff, "Babbitt at the abyss: the social context of postmodern American fiction," *TriQuarterly*, No. 33 (1975), p. 321.

To a certain extent Barthelme fits the tenets of the avant garde, particularly the avant garde as translated from the French. Guerard notes shrewdly that "Snow White herself has a distinctly French mentality." "Behind the fun are serious matters: epistemological nightmare and the collapse of language, the widening separation of words and experience, the phenomenological distrust of value: all very French." But what is even more shrewd is Guerard's conclusion: "Barthelme may have taken the best from the French intellectual while satirizing his glibness."<sup>46</sup> One could argue that Barthelme's characters are not so much alienistes (to coin a French term) as parodic or mock or pseudo-alienistes:

For viewed from a certain angle, the spectacle of a bourgeoisie equipped with ideologies devised by the spiritual rebels and aristocrats of modernist art and literature, a bourgeoisie self-absorbed and nurturing an acute consciousness of psychological grievance and victimization, is a rich topic for satire.<sup>47</sup>

Instead of being one of the allies in the avant garde forces, Barthelme is to some extent a satirist of the avant garde. Its theories have filtered down through all strata of society, from the lofty intellectual plateau of Susan Sontag to the lowliest slum of an American novelist; Zenith boosters such as George F. Babbitt have been replaced as satiric targets by self-conscious, neurotic, Jean Luc Godard fans. Barthelme and others "are able to achieve a type of fiction which incorporates postmodern self-consciousness while trans-

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(46) Guerard, p. 31.

(47) Graff, "Babbitt at the abyss," p. 323.

ending postmodern subjectivism" (p. 323).

However, Barthelme does not in fact "transcend" postmodern subjectivity if the word implies that the issues that occasioned subjectivism have been somehow surmounted. While the stories mock the false rhetoric of the avant garde, they do not refute the issues confronted by the avant garde -- "epistemological nightmare and the collapse of language ... the phenomenological distrust of value...." The stories depict a society filled with debilitating self-consciousness, angst and despair, but they rarely offer healthy alternatives. The glibness of the avant garde is mocked, however, particularly the glibness as applied to aesthetics, and mocked in a manner that affects the self-conscious narrator, at times transforming him into an old-fashioned communicator, the reader's friend.

#### The Narrator as Plain-Speaker

Peterson, the hero of "A Shower of Gold," encounters a number of characters who spout avant garde platitudes, and yet belong to the bourgeoisie; his barber, for example, is the author of "four books titled The Decision to Be" (Caligari, p. 177). Peterson is invited to a television program which specializes in prime time existentialism. A program director details the rationale of Who Am I? :

People today, we feel, are hidden away inside themselves, alienated, desperate, living in anguish, despair and bad faith. Why have we been thrown here, and abandoned? That's the question we try to answer, Mr. Peterson. Man stands alone in a featureless, anonymous landscape, in fear and trembling and sickness unto death. God is dead. Nothingness every-

where. Dread. Estrangement. Finitude.  
Who Am I? approaches these problems in a root  
 radical way (p. 174).

Do these ideas in the program director's mind come from a lifetime of Kierkegaard scholarship? From an intuitive understanding of the degraded depths of the human heart? Or from drugstore philosophers and night school courses, History of Thought 101. (In Snow White the heroine muses that, "the main theme that runs through my brain is that what is, is insufficient. Where did that sulky notion come from? From the rental library, doubtless" [p. 135].) Peterson refuses to accept the premise of the TV program, and delivers an impassioned (i.e., old-fashioned) speech:

The emcee waved at the floor manager to turn Peterson off, but Peterson kept talking. "In this kind of a world ... absurd if you will, possibilities nevertheless proliferate. ... Don't be reconciled.... [I]ndulge in a mindless optimism. Visit girls at dusk.... My mother was a royal virgin ... and my father a shower of gold. My childhood was pastoral and energetic and rich in experiences which developed my character. As a young man I was noble in reason, infinite in faculty, in form express and admirable, and in apprehension ..." Peterson went on and on and although he was, in a sense, lying, in a sense he was not (p. 183).

The director's phrase about approaching contemporary problems in a "root, radical way" could be found in various permutations in any number of the critical articles surrounding the self-conscious New Fiction, and in any number of artistic manifestos and Canada Council applications. It is dangerous indeed to ascribe to Barthelme the intellectual notions that are thought to be the inevitable concomitants of self-conscious

fiction (solipsism, philosophic chaos, anti-realism, "Dread. Estrangement. Finitude."). However, note how the narrator hedges his epistemological bets in that final line ("in a sense"). Even in this very early (1963) and atypically optimistic story, the target is not necessarily the horrors of modern life, but the too-easy articulation of these horrors.

Thus Jerome Charyn sounds rather like the program director when he argues that the best postwar American writers address themselves to a "sense of dread." He concludes that language has left culture behind and turned in on itself. Literature is "the language of hysteria."<sup>48</sup> Snow White picks up on the idea: "Do you feel that the creation of new modes of hysteria is a viable undertaking for the artist of today?" The question exposes the element of jargon in Charyn's thesis, and one is reminded of the venomous attack on intellectual canned goods in Saul Bellow's Herzog: "The canned sauerkraut of Spengler's 'Prussian Socialism,' the commonplaces of the Wasteland outlook, the cheap mental stimulants of Alienation, the cant and rant of pipsqueaks about Inauthenticity and Forlornness."<sup>49</sup>

Consider also Ronald Sukenick. In his The Death of the Novel and Other Stories, Sukenick says, "The contemporary writer-- the writer who is acutely in touch with the life of which he is part -- is forced to start from scratch: Reality doesn't exist, time doesn't exist, personality doesn't exist."<sup>50</sup>

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(48) Jerome Charyn, *Intro.*, The Single Voice, ed. Jerome Charyn (New York: Macmillan, 1969), p. ix.

(49) Saul Bellow, Herzog (New York: Viking Press, 1964), as quoted in Graff, "Babbitt at the Abyss," p. 305.

(50) Ronald Sukenick, "The Death of the Novel," in The Death of the Novel and Other Stories (New York: Dial Press, 1969), p. 41: my emphasis.



But in "Departures," the narrator is in love with the wife of a famous poet. He imagines her walking with her husband "in SoHo, seeing what the new artists are refusing to do there, in their quest for a scratch to start from" (Sadness, p. 108). In that telling line, Barthelme's narrator disassociates himself from doctrinaire notions about the necessity of abandoning realism, meaningful language and other literary traditions. By mocking the avant garde artist's quest for the absolute freedom of an egoist in a vacuum, Barthelme's narrator establishes a rhetorical link with the reader. The reader is suddenly offered a guide to the bewildering maze of a self-conscious art. For example, Roland Barthes claims that writing is "in no way an instrument for communication," rather, it is "an anti-communication, it is intimidating."<sup>51</sup> What would Barthes make of the following passage from "The Glass Mountain"?

25. I was new in the neighbourhood.
  26. In the streets were many people with disturbed eyes.
  27. Look for yourself.
- (p. 60).

Isn't that an act of communication? "Look for yourself." Doesn't that line flatly contradict Robbe-Grillet when he says, "Art is based on no truth that exists before it; and one may say that it expresses nothing but itself."<sup>52</sup> Obviously we are invited by the narrator to look in our streets, and confirm by sense

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(51) Barthes, pp. 19, 20.

(52) Robbe-Grillet, as quoted in Gore Vidal, Homage to Daniel Shays (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 284.

impression, rationality, a common reality and common sense, what the narrator has perceived and expressed for our edification.

The consequent flow of sympathy between the reader and the narrator is based on the two sharing a common reality. It is an act of old-fashioned communication which supports that naive notion of Holden Caulfield that a good book prompts the reader to phone up the author for a tête-à-tête and a heart to heart. In short, Barthelme's narrators do not ignore the missing link in much of modern aesthetics, the audience. The stories tend to bear out Borges' observation that a book "is more than a verbal structure or series of verbal structures; it is the dialogue it establishes with its reader and the intonation it imposes upon his voice and the changing and durable images it leaves in his memory."<sup>53</sup>

Consider "Sentence," which consists of one long uncompleted sentence that proceeds by means of free association. There are sketches of a deteriorating marriage and a lustful doctor, but, as the writer worries, the "thin wires of dramatic tension ... have been omitted" (City Life, p. 113). The narrator first introduces and then banishes factors that would endanger the sentence's aesthetic autonomy, such as a messenger who avoids the sentence's trap door long enough to demand some sort of doctrinaire protest literature: "' Stop making this sentence, and begin instead to make Moholy-Nagy cocktails, for those are what we really need, on the frontiers of bad behavior....'" And with a bow to Pirandello, the narrator imagines "a possible

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(53) Borges, "A Note on (toward) Bernard Shaw," in Labyrinths, p. 213.

coup d'état within the sentence, whereby its chief verb would be ..." (p. 113).

In one sense this is a demonstration of the aesthetics of the self-conscious verbal structure; the explicit moral of the story is that we should honor such a "man-made object": "a structure to be treasured for its weakness, as opposed to the strength of stones" (p. 114). So far, art-for-art's-sake. However, the sentence also features windows and air conditioning for the common reader. We note that pure structuralists are unwelcome: "[H]ere comes Ludwig, the expert on sentence construction ... [who will] probably find a way to cure the sentence's sprawl, by using the improved ways of thinking developed in Weimar"--but Ludwig disappears through another trap door (p. 114). Furthermore, the sentence is shaped by the pressures of outside events, as the narrator meditates on the contemporary world and such phenomena as "the run-mad skimble-skamble of information sickness" (p. 113-114). Most importantly, the narrator is aware of his reader, and even permits himself some old-fashioned nineteenth century character-building advice; he advises us that setbacks are good for the soul; some defeats are

good for your character, teaching you that it is not by success alone that one surmounts life, but that setbacks, too, contribute to that roughening of the personality that, by providing a textured surface to place against that of life, enables you to leave slight traces, or smudges, on the face of human history --your mark (p. 108).

This surprising bildungsroman in the midst of a modern sentence is not meant ironically; the story is full of "you," meaning the

reader, and the narrator even worries how much the reader will retain when "the sentence falls out of the mind that holds it (temporarily) in some kind of embrace, not necessarily an ardent one" (p. 107). The use of the authorial "we" contains a definite sense of I and Thou. "Sentence" is a structure aimed at an audience, not merely Immortality.

In one of his rare theoretical statements, Barthelme argues that:

The reader reconstitutes the work by his active participation, by approaching the object, tapping it, shaking it, holding it to his ear to hear the roaring within. It is characteristic of the object that it does not declare itself all at once, in a rush of pleasant naivete. Joyce enforces the way in which Finnegans Wake is to be read. He conceived the reading to be a lifetime project, the book remaining always there, like the landscape surrounding the reader's home or the buildings bounding the reader's apartment. The book remains problematic, unexhausted.<sup>54</sup>

Sterne similarly evokes the reader's "active participation" by promising he will do "all that lies in my power to keep his [the reader's] imagination as busy as my own," and Denis Diderot says in Ceci n'est pas un conte, "When one tells a story, it is to someone who listens; and however briefly the story lasts, it is rare that the teller is not sometimes interrupted by his listener. That is why I have introduced ... a figure who will play approximately the role of the reader."<sup>55</sup> It is

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(54) Donald Barthelme, as quoted in Klinkowitz, Literary Disruptions, p. 77.

(55) Tristram Shandy, p. 83; Denis Diderot, as quoted in Alter, p. 72.

part of the tradition of the self-conscious narrator to pay attention to the reader, and we should consider the liberating effect on the reader of being catered to, in an era where the audience is largely ignored. That the notion of catering to the reader seems subliterary and bestsellerish is a measure of our recent humility in the face of Art; there is a thriving tradition that the reader is the least important factor:

11. The writer expresses, he does not communicate....
12. The plain reader be damned!<sup>56</sup>

If Finnegans Wake or The Cantos seem impenetrable, then the fault lies in our inadequate educations or pitiful mental capacities, not in Joyce and Pound. But Barthelme's narrators often take the opposite position, and assiduously cultivate the reader's attention.

In "Florence Green is 81," the narrator says, "I am a young man, but very brilliant, very ingratiating, I adopt this ingratiating tone because I can't help myself (for fear of boring you)." "Reader," he continues,

we have roles to play, thou and I: you are the doctor (washing your hands between hours), and I, I am, I think, the nervous dreary patient. I am free associating, brilliantly, brilliantly, to put you into the problem. Or for fear of boring you: which? (Caligari, p. 4).

The narrator of "See the Moon?" similarly senses his audience slipping away: "I know you think I'm wasting my time. You've made that perfectly clear" (p. 155). He worries that the

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(56) "Proclamation," transition, p. [13].

character of his wife, Ann, will interfere with the flow of the story, and that the reader might not be interested in his personal problems:

Ann. I'm going to keep her ghostly. Just the odd bit of dialogue.

"What is little Gog doing."

"Kicking."

I don't want her bursting in on us with the freshness and originality of her observations. What we need here is perspective. She's good with Gregory though. I think he half likes her.

Don't go. The greased-pig chase and balloon launchings come next (pp. 160-161).

The narrator tops greased-pigs in "Can We Talk," in which the metaphor for a narrative is a new building. He composes a brochure "to lure folk into my new building. Titled 'The Human Heart in Conflict with Itself.' Promising 24-hour incineration. And other features" (Unspeakable, p. 106).

In an effort to hold the reader's attention, the narrator becomes the reader's spiritual guide, or his peer, or some other relationship opposed to the chilling hierarchy of elitist artist and humble reader. In "Rebecca," the narrator uses the gentlemanly locution, "reader":

It is correct to feel for Rebecca in this situation, but, reader, neither can Hilda's position be considered an enviable one, for truth, as Bergson knew, is a hard apple, whether one is throwing it or catching it.

"What remains?" Rebecca said stonily.

"I can love you in spite of --"

Do I want to be loved in spite of? Do you? Does anyone? But aren't we all, to some degree? Aren't there important parts of all us which must be, so to say, gazed past? I turn a blind eye to that aspect of you, and you turn a blind eye to that aspect of me, and with these blind eyes eyeball-to-eyeball, to use an expression from the early 1960's.

... (Amateurs, pp. 143-44).

The narrator is here a moralist in the mode of George Eliot, directing the reader's sympathies.

The messages from the narrator to the reader are not without guile; for example, the narrator of "Rebecca" explains that his story has been written for "several reasons," and that nine of those reasons are "secrets"; but there is at least the possibility of direct communication and trust (p. 144). Direct communication rejects the extreme aesthetic position that the artist "expresses, he does not communicate," and it rejects another fundamental tenet of the avant garde, which is that we all dwell in private epistemologies: in fact, there is a counter-impulse towards a common reality. "I wanted to be a painter," says the narrator of "See the Moon?":

They get away with murder in my view....  
 You don't know how I envy them. They can  
 pick up a Baby Ruth wrapper on the street,  
 glue it on the canvas (in the right place,  
 of course, there's that), and lo! people  
 crowd around and cry, "A real Baby Ruth  
 wrapper, by God, what could be realer than  
 that!" Fantastic metaphysical advantage.  
 You hate them. if you're ambitious (p. 157).

This is meant playfully, but it is a fantastic metaphysical advantage; there is no escaping the gravitational pull of realism. Modern readers have an appetite for escapism, from science fiction to Hobbits, but they have an equal appetite for a sense of the real world, or at least the traditional literary conventions that seem to express the real world (events taking place in coherent temporal sequence, characters acting through comprehensible motivation, and so on). Despite Plato's contention that the things we see around us are just shadows

on the cave wall of the undeveloped intellect, despite Sontag's attack on the "mundane" realism of nineteenth century literary conventions, despite the development of a self-conscious literature that emphasizes the artificiality of the story and the inherent solipsism of the narrator, the reader continues to test the story for correspondence to the world he lives in. Despite the sophisticated notions of literature that we have been associating with the avant garde, the average reader continues to expect from literature useful information and penetrating insights that he can apply to his own conduct -- and if he doesn't find them, he stops reading. Hence, the tremendous popularity of journalism, in which the reader's agent is expected to deliver faithful reports from the information front; hence the 24 hour, 15 channel information bombardment of television; and hence the artistic dominance of movies. Compare the self-conscious narrator who haltingly describes, in coy, parodistic language, a railroad station, a battle and a beautiful enchanted princess with the movie director who rents an authentic locomotive and dazzles his audience with smoke and gleaming steel, 60,000 costumed extras on the historical site of the Battle of Waterloo, and Julie Christie as the princess. The satisfied audience luxuriates in mimesis of the real thing; steel, blood and lovely wide eyes.

Barthelme's narrators are aware of the gravitational pull of realism, or things as they independently are, even though the brute facts might act as a check on their imaginations. The narrator of "Departures," for example, remembers



his grandfather's contract to build some wooden barracks for army recruits as green as the lumber. At his timber rights in East Texas, the grandfather falls in love with a dryad -- "a wood nymph ... who dances around trees in fine leaf-green tutu and who carries a great silver-shining axe to whack anyone who does any kind of thing inimical to the well-being and mental health of trees" (p. 102). The story is filled with similar whimsical touches, until the narrator deliberately spoils the mood: "This is not really how it went. I am fantasizing. Actually, he just plain cut down the trees" (p. 105).

This plain-speaking with a vengeance, in which the narrator offers a concession to things as they are in the real world, is part of a convention in self-conscious narratives, a kind of internal check and balance on the runaway imagination. For example, now that Don Quixote is taken by so many critics to be the source and font of self-reflexive fiction and flagrant artifice, it might be forgotten that Cervantes makes a personal appearance without his magician's wand and robes to denounce a recent plagiarizer:

What I cannot help resenting is that he upbraids me for being old and crippled, as if it were in my power to stop the passage of time, or as if the loss of my hand had taken place in some tavern, and not on the greatest occasion which any age, past, present or future, ever saw or can ever hope to see.<sup>57</sup>

These lines, touching on Cervantes' wounds at the Battle of Lepanto, act as a stable background to the novel's foreground of artifice; or as an index to Don Quixote's courage (which might

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(57) Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, Don Quixote, trans. J.M. Cohen (Harmondworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1950), p. 467.

otherwise be obscured by the Don's comically exaggerated sense of military honor).

Similarly, Thackeray in Vanity Fair suddenly talks about himself:

This, dear friends and companions, is my amiable object--to walk with you through the Fair, to examine the shops and the shows there; and that we should all come home after the flare, and the noise, and the gaiety, and be perfectly miserable in private (pp. 180-81).

Some critics consider such lines to be artistic flaws.

Dorothy Van Ghent says of Thackeray's methods,

What we feel is that two orders of reality are clumsily getting in each other's way: the order of imaginative reality, where Becky lives, and the order of historical reality, where William Makepeace Thackeray lives.

... Thackeray seems ... to be victimized or tricked [by the convention of authorial asides] into a clumsy mishandling of perspectives....<sup>58</sup>

Robert Alter, commenting on the Thackeray passage quoted above, admits that the lines have resonance, "but it is the wrong kind of resonance."<sup>59</sup> The immediate fictional context of the passage is Thackeray "at his energetic best, and it does not justify this sense of brooding misery, which would seem to be the author's own. In the very act, then, of pointing to his motley garb, he removes his artist's mask and takes his place as a man among miserable men..." (p. 120).

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(58) Dorothy Van Ghent, The English Novel: Form and Function (1953; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1961), pp. 139-40. Note that she could apply the same argument to the Cervantes passage.

(59) Alter, p. 119.

But for the narrator to take his place among miserable men is precisely the effect required to put the reader in the problem, to make him care, and make him trust the manipulative narrator. We all know Eliot's line that mankind can only stand so much reality; the same goes for artifice. Both Van Ghent and Alter argue for a kind of critical tidiness; the author can do what he wants as long as he doesn't slip outside the frame and into historical circumstance (Van Ghent), or shamefully remove the sacred artist's mask (Alter). But perhaps self-conscious narration leads almost inevitably to a counter-voice that turns away from deliberately artificial techniques associated with the self-conscious narration in the direction of realism. In Barthelme's fiction, this counter-voice works against the conventions of the avant garde by presenting the possibility of direct communication and direct understanding, from the page to the reader's heart.

#### The Original, Authentic Self as a Dirty Great Villain

Now for the final thrilling dip on the roller coaster of argument. It was argued that Barthelme's narrators are self-conscious in response to their urban society - a society that discounts the possibility of value in language or literature. The counter-notion was introduced that Barthelme's narrators nevertheless resist the avant garde conventions that arose from the breakdown of traditional art, and that the narrator sometimes acts as a liaison to the common reality of the common reader. But now it is necessary to conclude

that Barthelme's self-conscious narrator does not have the option of consistent realism at his command, for the simple reason that he finds the real world unbearable. Unlike Nabokov's self-conscious narrators, who found that their imaginations could at times act in concert with the laws of the real world, Barthelme's narrators find that their imaginative forays are curtailed by the real world. There is no possibility of integrating the self with the world by means of the artistic imagination because the world is intractable and because the self, the original, authentic self, is a dirty great villain, a creature that civilization will never improve, a killer.

In "Departures," the narrator repudiated his fanciful imagination and returned to the facts of his grandfather's life -- "he just plain cut down the trees." The flat tone represents the world's attack on the imagination, the tonal equivalent of the treacherous realism of Apollonius in Keats' Lamia. The world of brute fact is inimical to the narrator's imagination, leading him in Snow White to posit an alternative universe:

Trying to break out of this bag that we are in. What gave us the idea that there was something better? How does the concept, "something better," arise. What does it look like, this something better? (p. 179).

The heroes of Snow White nevertheless "depart in search of a new principle" (p. 181). "Party" ends with the narrator saying to his wife, "Say, 'No,' refuse me once and for all, let me try something else" (p. 62). The heroine-narrator

of "City Life" imagines that she has become the chosen darling of the city. When the "millions of units crawling about on the surface of the city ... began dancing little dances of suggestion and fear," she imagines that the "dances constitute an invitation of unmistakable import -- an invitation which, if accepted, leads one down many muddy roads. I accepted. What was the alternative?" (City Life, pp. 167-68)..

Snow White contains typographical billboards which seem to be notes to or by the narrator; for example, "ANATHEMATIZATION OF THE WORLD IS NOT AN ADEQUATE RESPONSE TO THE WORLD" (p. 178). Despite this helpful memo, the narrator is generally unable to reconcile himself to the world.

There are two sources of his failure. One is that the world is too much for him in his debilitated state; the other is that he is unwilling to face the more chaotic and barbarous elements of the world that are rooted in his own psyche. The narrative masks, the non-emotions or concealed emotions, the vacillation of the "Brain Damage" narrator, who lives in that "gray area where nothing is done, really, but you vacillate for a while, thinking about it" (p. 134), all are part of the narrator's neurotic shame about his true personality and his real emotions.

The avant garde aesthetic asserts "the creative autonomy of consciousness against the bourgeois reality principle" and demands "a permanent alienation of consciousness from any fixed position and from all previous modes of consciousness," leading "to the irrationalism [and] subjectivism ... that mark

numerous manifestations of modernist art."<sup>60</sup> The question is whether this artistic strategy has any justification, "now that it seems to represent less a critical departure from the state of existing society than a mere reflecting mirror of "it" (p.321). Here are three attempts at psychological self-analysis by three typically self-conscious narrators; the last makes an explicit connection between the society and the observer:

I am not well ("Game," Unspeakable, p.115).

I suffer from a frightful illness of the mind, light-mindedness. It's not catching. You needn't shrink ("See the Moon?" p. 156).

This is the country of brain damage, this is the map of brain damage, these are the rivers of brain damage, and see, those lighted-up places are the airports of brain damage, where the damaged pilots land the big, damaged ships....

And you can hide under the bed but brain damage is under the bed, you can hide in the universities but they are the very seat and soul of brain damage -- Brain damage caused by bears who put your head in their foaming jaws while you are singing 'Masters of War,' ... Brain damage caused by art. I could describe it better if I weren't afflicted with it ... ("Brain Damage," p. 146).

The narrator is as mad as his society, and the artistic process of describing the society generates more madness. "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel" explains just how art damages the narrator's personality. It seems he is disturbed about his mental habit of irony. According to Kierkegaard, the ironist directs his irony at the world and "the whole of existence has become alien to the ironic subject ..." (p. 88). Kierkegaard says that actuality of irony is poetry, and thus he is hard

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(60) Graff, "Babbitt at the Abyss," p. 321.

on a novel by Schlegel called Lucinde. He says that Schlegel has created a new reality that replaces actuality, constituting a "victory over the world" (p. 89). But what is wanted is not triumph over the world, which means animosity towards the world, but reconciliation with the world. The true reconciliation with the world is religion:

Without discussing whether or not the true reconciliation is religion (I have a deep bias against religion which precludes my discussing the question intelligently) let me say that I believe that Kierkegaard is here unfair to Schlegel.... I have reasons for this ... but my reasons are not so interesting. What is interesting is my making the statement that I think Kierkegaard is unfair to Schlegel. And that the whole thing is nothing else but a damned shame and a crime!

Because that is not what I think at all. We have to do here with my own irony. Because of course Kierkegaard was "fair" to Schlegel. In making a statement to the contrary ... I am trying to annihilate Kierkegaard in order to deal with his disapproval.

Q: Of Schlegel?

A: Of me.

(pp. 89-91)

The narrator, shown here at his most spectacularly self-conscious, is clearly guilty and defensive about both his identity and his artistic methods. His defensiveness recurs throughout the stories. For example, in a manner similar to that of J.D. Salinger in "For Esmé-- with Love and Squalor," in which the narrator says he has "disguised myself so cunningly that even the cleverest reader will fail to recognize me,"<sup>61</sup> the narrator of "The Falling Dog" receives a

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(61) J.D. Salinger, "For Esmé --with Love and Squalor," in Nine Stories (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953), pp. 156-57.

letter addressed to "Mr. XXXXXXXX" (City Life, p. 34). In

"See the Moon?" the narrator says:

I was promising once.... 'You will be a credit to us, George,' the admiral said. That's not my name. I'm protecting my identity, what there is of it (p. 161).

In "Daumier," which is almost a parody of the self-conscious narrative, every stage of the story is helpfully captioned:

FURTHER BOILING OF THE PLOT IN SUMMARY FORM, and so on.

The CONCLUSION contains the explicit moral of the story:

"The self cannot be escaped, but it can be, with ingenuity and hard work, distracted" (p. 183). By way of escaping the self, the narrator of the story, Daumier, performs a kind of self-slaughter; "Not self-slaughter in the crude sense," he explains. "Rather the construction of surrogates. Think of it as a transplant" (p. 163). He therefore constructs two surrogates, a second-person Daumier and a third-person Daumier, who act as stand-ins for the narrator within the plot. In the concluding passages the narrator folds up the story's characters, wraps them in tissue paper, and puts them "carefully away in a drawer" (p. 182). He also saves the two surrogate Daumiers. He says, "the second-person Daumier especially will bear watching and someday when my soul is again sickly and full of sores I will take him out of the drawer and watch him" (p. 183). Clearly the self-conscious manipulation of the narrative is a method of purging the narrator of sores and diseases. This is made explicit at the beginning of the story:



I was speaking to Amelia.

"Not self-slaughter in the crude sense. Rather the construction of surrogates. Think of it as a transplant."

"Daumier," she said, "you are not making me happy."

"The false selves in their clatter and boister and youthful brio will slay and bother and push out and put to all types of trouble the original, authentic self, which is a dirty great villain, as can be testified and sworn to by anyone who has ever been awake" (p. 163).

It is true that other Barthelme stories are more optimistic about the nature of the self. "The Sandman," for example, consists of a letter from the narrator to his girlfriend Susan's psychiatrist; the letter proposes an end to the therapeutic sessions because, in the narrator's opinion, "Susan is wonderful. As is" (Sadness, p. 95). Furthermore, "Daumier" itself offers several qualifications. When Daumier says the self is a dirty great villain, Amelia replies, "The self also dances ... sometimes" (Daumier answers, "I have noticed that, but one pays dear for the occasional schottische" [p. 163]). Daumier's friend delivers an amusingly doctrinaire speech on the necessity of self-learning, and Daumier makes a great pretense of having given profound thought to his conclusions on innate depravity, citing a LIST OF RESEARCH MATERIALS CONSULTED:

... Self-Abuse by Samuels, The Armed Self by Crawlie, Burt's The Concept of Self, Self-Congratulation by McFee, Fingarette's Self-Deception ... The Many-Colored Self by Winsor and Newton... (p. 169).

Despite these undercutting ironies, the fact remains that the self-conscious narrative techniques are the narrator's

attempt to "distract" attention from the evil at his heart. Furthermore, the narrator's personal evil is matched by an evil and destructive aesthetic:

All modernist writing is in some ways experimental and revisionary, thriving on the decadence of previous forms and norms like Swift's tulips rising out of dung. Modernist writing is ebulliently parricidal and cannibalistic. It revels apocalyptically in the end of culture -- the death of the novel, the death of rhyme, the exhaustion of narrative, the end of the nineteenth century -- yet feeds lustily on its murdered forebears....62

One suspects that Dickstein treats terms like "parricide" and "cannibalistic" as colorful but harmless metaphors. Otherwise he might have avoided "ebullient." The destruction of the literary tradition and the fine old values of the nineteenth century, a sense of presiding over the cataclysmic conclusion to culture -- this entails a certain amount of pain, particularly to the artist who might be expected to have a greater appreciation of culture and tradition than the average hoodlum.

The guilty narrator of "Kierkegaard and Schlegel" makes it clear that Barthelme's narrators are aware of the artistic sins they commit; they are not always as "ebullient" as the humor of their cultural pranks might suggest. One could trace a certain lowering of high spirits from the cheerful early stories to the latest, as it gradually becomes more and more difficult to sustain what Daumier calls narrative "brio." A critic has complained that Barthelme "stopped being

hilarious and became so deadpan you couldn't tell what he was up to";<sup>63</sup> but if one concentrates on the longer narratives, Snow White and particularly The Dead Father, there is sufficient evidence that Barthelme's self-conscious narrators are modernist parricides, depraved at heart, and sick about it.

Snow White ends with the murder of Bill, the leader of the dwarfs. His major sin, aside from the comic "vatricide," is "failure" (p. 180). One presumes that the following -- "THE FAILURE OF SNOW WHITE'S ARSE/REVIRGINIZATION OF SNOW WHITE/APOTHEOSIS OF SNOW WHITE" (p. 181) -- is a euphemism for the murder of Snow White as well. Paul, the only redemptive figure in the novel, is poisoned. The last words of the novel, Heigh-Ho, etc., are cheerful enough, but rather inconclusive, just as Snow White itself is a somewhat rambling narrative, reading like a series of tour de force set pieces on a comic theme, which is an old fairy tale (more Disney than Grimm) brought up to date. The Dead Father on the other hand, is conclusive indeed.

The hero, Thomas, and his two girlfriends are conducting the Dead Father on an epic expedition to find the golden fleece, which the Dead Father hopes will revivify his fading powers. Such is the ostensible purpose of the journey, the purpose the Dead Father believes in. The actual purpose of the trip is to bury him alive in a giant grave that will be filled in by the final word of the story, "Bulldozers."

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(63) Joe Goldberg, "Hyperactive Ho-hum?" Creem, May 1978, p. 62.

The Dead Father is of course God the Father. Barthelme's stories are all tinged with rather sacrilegious eschatology, Roman Catholic generally, although the issue of Jesus Christ rarely, as it were, arises. His interest is in the one true God, the source of value -- "On Angels" begins, "The death of God left the angels in a strange position" (City Life, p. 127). The Dead Father is also the dead tradition of art and culture, although he is presented as something of an ethical barbarian; he represents tradition in its least attractive aspect: oppressive power. The Dead Father is a father, a parent, and thus his burial is the end of family love, respect and benign authority. An interpolated section called A Manual For Sons is less than respectful; many of Barthelme's stories turn on divorce and a strained relationship with children. In "The Genius," for example, "The genius has noticed that he does not interact with children successfully" (Sadness, p. 28).

In other words, The Dead Father is a parable about the death, the murder actually, of value. Thomas and his cohorts are moral monsters, cruel in the supercilious and ironic modern manner, so greedy and unfeeling that one would sympathize completely with the Dead Father, if his Old Testament qualities weren't constantly emphasized:

Then his anger grew and he called for a brand of even greater weight and length which was brought him by a metaphorically present gillie and seizing it with his two fine-formed and noble hands he raised it above his head, and every living thing within his reach trembled and every dead thing within his reach remembered how it got that way... (pp. 52-53).

The Dead Father is killed by Thomas, who first undergoes a mock initiation rite in which two torturers conduct Thomas to the Great Father Serpent, who riddles Thomas a riddle. Thomas reads the correct answer in a secret place, and in his habitual stutter correctly answers the question, "What do you really feel?"

Like murdering, I answered.... Why bless my soul, said the Great Father Serpent, he's got it, and the two ruffians blinked at me in stunned wonder and I myself wondered, and marveled, but what I was wondering and marveling at was the closeness with which what I had answered accorded with my feelings, my lost feelings that I had never found before. I suppose, the Father Serpent said, that the boon you wish granted is the ability to carry out this foulness? Of course, I said, what else? Granted then he said.... I was abroad in the city with murdering in mind... (p. 46).

Debilitating self-consciousness and attenuated emotions can only be dispelled by destruction. Thomas, who discovers his lost feelings, is the principal character of the story, and the narrator of his interpolated mock rite. The "second-person surrogate" appears briefly at the beginning of the narrative (which is generally told in deadpan third person omniscience). He seems to be a spokesman for society, the citizens of the city controlled by the giant figure of the Dead Father. The Dead Father works for the good of all, but his leg is often punctured by tiny arrows: "We want the Dead Father to be dead," says the voice of the murderous people. "We sit with tears in our eyes wanting the Dead Father to be dead -- meanwhile doing amazing things with our hands" (p. 5).

## Conclusion

This chapter has recorded the failure of Barthelme's self-conscious narrator. Not an artistic failure, since there is "enough aesthetic excitement here to satisfy anyone but a damned fool" ("The Indian Uprising," p. 9); but a failure in terms of the moral development and psychic integration of the narrator, who is "not well." Sequential plot, realistic setting, logical motivation, consistent characters and other standard elements of the literary narrative have broken down over the century, so why not the self-conscious narrator?

"To bore the doctor is to become ... a case similar to other cases; the patient strives mightily to establish his uniqueness" ("Florence Green is 81," pp. 8-9). Unfortunately for the narrator his case is not unique; his whole society is sick. It has no history, no sense of community, no family traditions, no connection with nature. There is no governing code of ethics; hence all behavior is equally permissible and futile. Language has been replaced with verbal trash, and everyone has a problem expressing value and emotion; in fact, the narrator's prose seems calculated to give nothing away.

The narrator is aware, however, that his self-consciousness is typical of the society, and that his particular problems are also the clichés and glib generalizations of pop sociology and undergraduate literature courses; thus he is rarely the spokesman for received ideas. Although he struggles with the revolutionary advances of "experimental" literature, he is not enough of a doctrinaire avant garde artist to search for a scratch to start from.

Instead, the narrator is old-fashioned enough to attempt to keep in touch with his readers, even to the extent of appealing to the reader's common-sense notions of reality. Although the avant garde contains an impulse to abandon the ordinary reader in favor of totally private fictional worlds, verbal gardens filled with artificial flowers and statues of Narcissus, Barthelme's narrators cater to the reader (with mixed motives, to be sure):

Reader ... we have roles to play, thou and I: you are the doctor (washing your hands between hours), and I, I am, I think, the nervous dreary patient. I am free associating, brilliantly, brilliantly, to put you into the problem. Or for fear of boring you: which? ("Florence Green is 81," p. 4).

The narrator's self-conscious dialogue with the reader and with himself reveals that his problems are not entirely due to the complex of Breakdowns (language, philosophy, religion); in part, the narrator's problems lie within himself. He knows himself guilty, irredeemable and depraved. Barthelme uses his self-conscious narrators to show that civilization in America is a façade, and that hypercivilized self-consciousness is a means of evading the literally brutal truth -- "We want the Dead Father to be dead."

One wonders what will happen in Barthelme's fiction in the future. His narrators certainly foresee a struggle, a typically violent, "parricidal and cannibalistic" struggle:

Our reputation for excellence is unexcelled  
... And will be maintained until the de-  
struction of our art by some other art...  
("Our Work and Why We Do It," Amateurs,  
p. 9).

Perhaps in Barthelme's future work the self-conscious narrator will become the self-destructive narrator.

## CONCLUSION

One is tempted to make pronouncements and predictions about the future of the self-conscious novel. Has "the cycle of relexivity ... gone about as far as it can," as Maurice Beebe believes,<sup>1</sup> or does the good fight remain to be fought against what some critics tell us is a lumbering superannuated monster, the realistic novel:

[John Gardner's Grendel] is another fierce blow struck against the realistic novel, the dead novel. Good, I say: let's hold no more mirrors up to nature. Make nature approach the artist; make nature grovel.<sup>2</sup>

The temptation to make predictions should be resisted, because it should be obvious by now that critical orthodoxies regarding the self-conscious narrator quickly go out of fashion. We cited Ford Madox Ford as a crusty and petulant foe of the self-conscious narrator, but it is only fair to remember that Ford was aware that tastes change:

That this is not the final stage of the Novel is obvious; there will be developments that we cannot foresee, strain our visions in how we may. There are probably -- humanity being stable, change the world how it may -- there are probably eternal principles for all the arts, but the applications of those principles are eternally changing, or eternally revolving. It is for instance an obvious and unchanging fact that if an author intrudes his comments into the middle of his story he will endanger the illusion conveyed by that story -- but a generation of readers may come

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(1) Beebe, p. 25.

(2) D. Keith Mano, as quoted in Ditsky, p. 297.



along who would prefer witnessing the capers of the author to being carried away by stories and that generation of readers may coincide with a generation of writers tired of self-obliteration.... Or you might, again, have a world tired of the really well constructed novel every word of which carries its story forward: then you will have a movement towards diffuseness, backboneless sentences, digressions, and inchoateness.<sup>3</sup>

Ford is thinking of the "intrusive author" of the nineteenth century, and also, it would seem, of Sterne. Although critics would now tell us that every line of Tristram Shandy contributes to a rigid, logical scheme -- Ford's "well constructed" novel, perhaps -- it remains true that Sterne gives the impression of being diffuse, digressive and inchoate. The self-conscious narrator is a device at the disposal of the innovative artist. The following is not an interchangeable example of the typical self-conscious narrator, it is an example of Sterne's unique narrator in inimitable action:

I have dropp'd the curtain over this scene  
for a minute, -- to remind you of one thing,  
-- and to inform you of another,<sup>4</sup>

The very punctuation -- those ubiquitous dashes -- captures the effect of a narrator who prizes the singular and the telling detail above everything, and whose kindly, sentimental view of the world is expressed, paradoxically enough, through an agile, indeed restless, intellect. Those dashes seem to be the typographical equivalent to a stray thought snatched from the thin air inside the narrator's head -- or a quick trip to France.

Think of the self-conscious narrator as a literary tool which is kept in a kind of co-op warehouse open to any writer in

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(3) Ford, pp. 148-49.

(4) Sterne, p. 109.

any century. It should be obvious that the use of the self-conscious narrator does not imply any promise on the part of the artist to create an anti-realistic work. Ford says the self-conscious narrator (which he thinks of as an intrusive author) necessarily implies the breakdown of fictional verisimilitude, but there is no reason why the self-conscious narrator can't be as vivid and realistic a presence as a character. Such things don't happen in real life, says Nabokov's sad narrator, signifying his willingness to play by the rules of the universe. Look for yourself, says Barthelme's bitter narrator, signifying the correlation between the fictional world and the reader's world.

But if each artist transforms his artistic devices, and presents a unique vision, then isn't the fictional world private, solipsistic, escapist ...? No, because the artist gives fresh and unique expression to the old and unchanging issues -- which is why literature from ages long gone and forgotten still interests us. There is nothing new under the sun, and it is the task of the artist to revitalize such tired clichés as "There is nothing new under the sun." What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed is still a definition of great art, despite the romantic revolution that separates our times from those of Pope. The self-conscious narrator is the means by which the reader is seduced to become interested once again in the tired old subjects of love, justice, sin and death. He is not there to caper like Ford's fool for the equally foolish reader, or to act as the spokesman for sterile philosophers of meaninglessness. He is there to act as a bridge between the artist's vision and the

reader's world:

He wanted to be an Untouchable, Paul did.  
That was his idea of a contemporary career.  
But then a girl walked up and touched him  
(slapped him, actually; it's a complicated  
story). And he joined us, here in the  
imbroglio ("See the Moon?"; p. 158).

Joined us, here in the common imbroglio.

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