DEFINITIONS

In *Art as Experience*, the philosopher John Dewey describes a cycle in art and literary history whereby works initially thought to be too radically experimental ultimately are accepted as "classics" that themselves become objects of imitation:

> [T]he fruits of the new procedure are absorbed; they are naturalized and effect certain modifications of the old tradition. This period establishes the new aims and hence the new techniques as having "classic" validity, and is accompanied with a prestige that holds over into subsequent periods.

Dewey's notion that "new procedures" create "certain modifications of the old tradition" is strongly reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's argument in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that "existing monuments"

> form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.

Both Dewey and Eliot are suggesting that without experiment in art and literature, the "supervention of novelty," the great works of the past merely ossify into a "tradition" that no longer inspires artists and writers to, in effect, outdo the "existing monuments," to bring those monuments into active communication with the present. "Certain modifications of the old tradition" are needed to keep the old tradition from becoming merely old, as well as to invigorate the new through contact with the genuine achievements of the past. Thus both Dewey and Eliot view experiment as a way of maintaining the vitality of the tradition, but also see the tradition as subject to the revision prompted by "the really new."

For Dewey, the reader or audience must as well have some familiarity with tradition in order to appreciate a truly new work of art. According to Dewey, "the perceiver, as much as the creator, needs a rich and developed background which, whether it be painting, in the field of poetry, or music, cannot be achieved except by consistent nurture of interest." Since Dewey believes that the value of art resides in the experience of it, that experience would be impoverished without this "developed background" of tradition. The experimental work of art threatens to be meaningless if the "perceiver" can't recognize the broader practices made visible by tradition that the work still encompasses. "Rich and developed" does not mean encyclopedic, and a reader need not formally "study" literature and literary history. At some point, in fact, a pursuit of tradition for its own sake is as likely to impede our ability to experience art deeply as encourage it, as the customary practices come to seem "normal" and departures from them unwelcome. This embrace of tradition by all too many readers when they encounter "the really new" is finally not just an objection to the "experimental" in literature but effectively also a rejection of the whole notion that literature is "art" that should prompt fresh experience, in favor of the belief it is primarily a source of wisdom..

 Dewey is well aware of the clinical connotations of the term "experimental" when applied to the arts and thus suggests an alternative:

> If instead of saying "experimental," one were to say "adventurous," one would probably win general assent—so great is the power of words. Because the artist is a lover of unalloyed experience, he shuns objects that are already saturated, and he is therefore always on the growing edge of things. By the nature of the case, he is as unsatisfied with what is established as is a geographic explorer or scientific inquirer. The "classic" when it was produced bore the marks of adventure. . . .

In using the term "experimental fiction" throughout this book, I am using it in Dewey's sense as "adventurous." There is, of course, a latent danger of taking Dewey's insistence on "new forms and techniques" too far. If every work of fiction was "new" in these terms, there would be no "mainstream" and no doubt fewer readers of fiction. And it is certainly the case that some "experimental" fiction fails in balancing the formally or stylistically "new" with the need to provide the reader some recognizable variety of aesthetic beauty or pleasure, some tangible sense of satisfaction. Perhaps most experimental fiction fails in this way, or at least doesn't

convince the reader the latter can indeed be found. But much of it, especially the experimental fiction produced by numerous American writers over the past 50 years, has both memorably extended the "growing edge of things" and left behind fully realized works of art.

Dewey has not been alone in finding the term "experimental" not altogether satisfying as a label identifying formally innovative art, fiction in particular. For those who think that every new work of fiction is implicitly experimental, necessarily one-of-a-kind, the term seems redundant. For writers who want their work to be assessed, at least in part, by its departures from formal or stylistic convention, some such term is surely desirable, although not all writers have been comfortable with designating a particular work an "experiment," perhaps objecting to the parallel with the scientific experiment and its association with the principle of "trial and error." Who, after all, wants to invite the possibility that what one has written might be in "error," an unsuccessful experiment?

The categorization of certain works of fiction as unconventional or unorthodox enough to be called experimental has probably been most emphasized by scholars and critics, for whom such a category makes critical discussion more focused (some might say more esoteric). "Trial and error" is not really the defining feature for most critics. Generally, critical commentary on postwar experimental fiction (or more broadly "postmodern" fiction) has focused on "experiment" as, in Jerome Klinkowitz's words, the "disruption" of a "conservative stability of form" in literary fiction as descended from 19th century writers. Certainly modernist experimental writers such as Joyce, Woolf, Proust, and Faulkner "disrupted" this stability as well, but their experiments did not really dislodge the assumptions of realism—they could even be called an extension of these assumptions into what is now called "psychological realism," through which the writer portrays subjective consciousness, not external reality itself, as what is "really real." From the perspective provided by Klinkowitz, "trial and error" is not the guiding principle of experiment but rather the notion that "stability" is itself not a desirable state where the art of fiction is concerned.

It is true that "experimental fiction" is ultimately a catch-all term of convenience that doesn't necessarily signal anything very specific about what experimental writers are up to (another reason why Dewey's "adventurous" is at least somewhat more descriptive). Klinkowitz prefers "disruption," while other critics have written about "breaking the sequence" or "the art of excess" or "anti-story." In most cases, however, these critics are really interested in what Ellen Friedman and Miriam Fuchs in *Breaking the Sequence* simply accept as "innovations in form." Friedman and Fuchs also provide a handy description of the elements of "stability" against which most adventurous writers are rebelling: "Plot linearity that implies a story's purposeful forward movement; a single, authoritative storyteller; well-motivated characters interacting in recognizable social patterns; the crucial conflict deterring the protagonist from the ultimate goal; the movement to closure. . . ." Perhaps the most succinct statement of the motivations underlying experimental fiction would be the remarks made by the experimental writer John Hawkes: "I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting, and theme, and having once abandoned these familiar ways of thinking about fiction, totality of vision or structure was really all that remained."

A critic who did use the term "experimental fiction" straightforwardly was Robert Scholes in his book *Fabulation and Metafiction* (1979). In the chapter of that book called "The Nature of Experimental Fiction," he writes: "Forms atrophy and lose touch with the vital ideas of fiction. Originality in fiction, rightly understood, is the successful attempt to find new forms that are capable of tapping once again the sources of fictional vitality." Scholes's book popularized the term "metafiction" as a more specific term encompassing the tendencies in postwar American fiction that made readers think of them as "experimental": "Metafiction. . .attempts to assault or transcend the laws of fiction—an undertaking which can only be achieved from within fictional form." Writers such as William Gass, John Barth, Robert Coover, and Donald Barthelme were "working in that rarefied air of metafiction, trying to climb beyond Beckett and Borges, toward things that no critic—not even a metacritic, if there were such a thing—can discern."

In my view, the foundational works of American metafiction are John Barth's story collection Lost *in the Funhouse* (1968) and Robert Coover's novel *The Universal Baseball Association* (1968), as well as his collection *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969). These books show the influence of precursors such as Beckett and Borges, as well as Nabokov, but finally Barth

and Coover here bring together most explicitly the strategies used by these precursors that work against the maintenance of transparent realism by calling attention to the act of writing or the processes of representation, pointing the reader away from the unfolding narrative and toward the artificial devices by which all literary narratives are constructed and developed. This self-consciousness, or self-reflexivity, led ultimately to the designation "metafiction"—fiction about fiction—as the term used to identify this kind of fiction that ultimately called into question all established conventions that work to hide their own artifice.

In Barth's fiction, these conventions are challenged directly, in stories that blatantly reveal themselves to be fabrications, that examine self-reflexively the process and tools of storytelling, that delight in all the contrivances and tricks that are involved in storytelling even as they acknowledge that such contrivances are always involved. Coover's fiction indulges in these sorts of diversions as well, although his work is more likely to explore the ways in which fiction and fiction-making incorporate, perhaps inevitably, elements of ritual and myth and to explode the conventions of realism and traditional narrative from within, to produce a kind of kaleidoscopic surrealism rather than the comic anatomies of storytelling to be found in *Lost in the Funhouse*. Metafiction in both Barth and Coover was simultaneously an attempt to clear the ground of the remaining inherited presuppositions about the "craft" of fiction and to make possible a more unrestricted conception of what actually constitutes literary craft, to open up the ground for new practices that might expand fiction's potential range, that might even lead to a renewal of storytelling in new forms and styles.

These books remain the touchstones of American metafiction, but they were soon followed by additional works of equal value and accomplishment, such as William Gass's Willie *Master's Lonesome Wife* (1971), Gilbert Sorrentino's *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* (1971) and *Mulligan Stew* (1979), as well as some of the work of Ronald Sukenick and Raymond Federman. These writers continued to ask questions not just about the conventions of fiction but about the very medium of writing, about the established usages of language itself. Gass and Sukenick play games with typography, Sorrentino adds to metafiction his outrageous humor and inveterate experimentation, Federman uses metafiction (or what he called "surfiction") to question the "reality" of reality. In my opinion, while some of this work may occasionally go out of print, it

will always be rediscovered because it still seems innovative despite the passage of time and the borrowing of its innovations by later writers.

POSTMODERN CONFUSIONS: DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

The collective legacy of these writers has certainly remained visible enough. It is their work that prompted the term "postmodern" to describe their challenges to convention, and the term has persisted as a catch-all way of designating works of fiction that seem anti-realist or don't conform to generally accepted storytelling norms. However, the vague way in which "postmodern" is used to distinguish apparently unconventional from "normal" fiction has obscured the more literal sense of the term as these writers might have understood it. Post-modern fiction was written to both validate and extend the experimental impulse behind modernism, implicitly suggesting this is an impulse that can always be renewed. "Postmodern" has now become a semi-permanent category in which we can place unconventional work (or what is perceived as such), but ultimately the experimental fiction of the 1960s and 70s can provide a model only by demonstrating that the model fiction writers should follow is the absence of a model.

While this category remains, arguably so that critics might keep the occasional fiction assigned to it appropriately marginalized, the past thirty year or so, at least in English language fiction, has seen a retreat to conventional practices, a widespread return to narrative business as usual. Perhaps the earliest and most prominent manifestation of this was to be found in the rise of "minimalism" in such writers as Raymond Carver and Mary Robison. However, in quite obviously signaling a break from the formal experiments and self-reflexivity of postmodern American fiction, the work of these two writers in particular did not merely return to old-fashioned storytelling. The severely pared-back minimalism of their stories seemed to accept the postmodern critique of representation if not its alternative strategies. Character and plot are stripped to the bone, the former presented to us entirely through mundane actions, with no attempt at "psychological realism" (thus we never really get to "know" Carver's characters, we just watch them wandering through their lives), the latter flattening out Freytag's triangle to an unemphatic succession of events. One could plausibly say that Carver and Robison were actually engaged in their own kind of experimentation--how bare and uninflected can realism become while maintaining the reader's interest in fiction otherwise still committed to narrative illusion?

Some writers have continued to show the influence of postmodern experimentation, their work bearing signs of an attempt to engage with the legacy of postmodernism, but that legacy is more likely to be understood as matter of content, of adopting a certain attitude toward the world, not of formal innovation. In this way the most important postmodernist, whose work looms the largest in its influence, is Don DeLillo rather than John Barth or Donald Barthelme. Probably the writer who most clearly represents this more vexed relationship with postmodernism is David Foster Wallace, whose work is marked as least as much by its resistance to what he considered the defining features of postmodernism as an unambiguous affinity with the goals of a writer such as DeLillo. Wallace perhaps expressed his unease with the attitude he associated with postmodernism in his essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction."

This essay is presented as a reflection on the influence of television, but in the long run it is more important as Wallace's analysis of the state of fiction at this time (1992) and, perhaps most significantly, as an implicit statement of Wallace's own preferred practice as a writer of fiction. Here Wallace identifies "postmodern irony" as the characteristic approach of cutting-edge American writers and explicitly identifies DeLillo, as well as Thomas Pynchon, as the older writers identified with such irony. He believes that irony in their fiction "started out the same way youthful rebellion did. It was difficult and painful, and productive—a grim diagnosis of a long-denied disease. The assumptions behind this early postmodern irony, on the other hand, were still frankly idealistic: that etiology and diagnosis pointed toward cure; that revelation of imprisonment yielded freedom."

One could certainly quarrel with Wallace's characterization of 1960s postmodernism. Although it is true that what we now call postmodernism emerged from the same cultural milieu that produced the era's "youthful rebellion," it doesn't seem faithful to the dynamic and largely comic spirit of 60s fiction to describe its effect as "grim," however much it might be responding to grim social and cultural conditions. It is also inaccurate to describe the comedy of this fiction as being of the sort that involves "diagnosis" and "cure." The comedy in Pynchon and DeLillo (as well as Coover, Stanley Elkin, or Barthelme) is not conventionally satirical, proposing solutions to the social dysfunctions and existential dilemmas it portrays. It offers only sustained laughter, although this laughter does promise a liberation into freedom, a "revelation of imprisonment." Still, by calling the postmodern irony of such writers "idealistic," Wallace

clearly wants to exempt them from the criticisms he makes of writes following in their wake, who no longer have the idealism he finds in Pynchon and DeLillo. At worst Wallace wants to call into question the way their example has been assimilated, not the literary value of their books.

The bulk of Wallace's essay is taken up with an extended critique of television, focusing on a similar "ironic" stance Wallace finds there, which he further believes is traceable to the early postmodern writers but robbed of its "idealistic" intentions. Describing the relationship to tv of a fictional everyman, "Joe Briefcase," Wallace observes:

> For to the extent that TV can flatter Joe about "seeing through" the pretentiousness and hypocrisy of outdated values, it can induce in him precisely the feeling of canny superiority it's taught him to crave, and can keep him dependent on the cynical TV-watching that alone affords this feeling. And to the extent that it can train viewers to laugh at characters' unending put-downs of one another, to view ridicule as both the mode of social intercourse and the ultimate art form, television can reinforce its own queer ontology of appearance: the most frightening prospect, for the well-conditioned viewer, becomes leaving oneself open to others' ridicule by betraying passé expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability. Other people become judges; the crime is naivete. . . .

Again there is much here that is debatable, however accurate the general account of television "cool" might be. Wallace's definition of "television" seems very broad, seems indeed to encompass the medium as a whole, but in his discussion he seems primarily concerned with sitcoms and commercials. Perhaps it is the case that those responsible for creating this kind of television are also most likely to have read and felt the influence of avant-garde and experimental fiction, but if so, Wallace does little to show that this sort of direct influence was likely. Instead, he suggests that tv and postmodern fiction "share roots," but his assertions about these "roots" only create confusion about what he counts as "postmodern" after all:

> In fact, by offering young, overeducated fiction writers a comprehensive view of how hypocritically the U.S.A. saw itself circa 1960, early television helped legitimize absurdism and irony as not just literary devices but sensible responses to an unrealistic world. For irony. . .is the time-honored way artists seek to illuminate and explode hypocrisy. And the

television of lone-gunman Westerns, paternalistic sitcoms and jut-jawed law enforcement circa 1960 celebrated a deeply hypocritical American self-image.

Further:

It's not one bit accidental that postmodern fiction aimed its ironic cross hairs at the banal, the naïve, the sentimental and simplistic and conservative, for these qualities were just what sixties seemed to celebrate as "American."

From this one would conclude that for Wallace, "postmodern" writers are those writing what he calls "Image-Fiction," writers such as William Vollmann, Jay Cantor, Stephen Dixon, A.M. Homes, and Michael Martone, most of whom could really be called second or third-wave postmodernists if Pynchon, DeLillo, and Coover are the original postmodern writers. (Dixon is of the same generation as Pynchon and DeLillo, although he came to fiction writing at a later age.) It is not really plausible to think that such first-wave postmodernists would have been inspired in their practice by television rather than the modernist writers of the previous generation (although ultimately some of them—Coover, for example—do take the pervasive presence of television as a subject, while Pynchon and DeLillo are certainly sensitive to the influence of television and mass media on American culture), and Wallace seems to be suggesting that tv was as important in the development of "postmodernism" as any specific literary practices. Furthermore, he also seems to be suggesting that television writers may themselves have been led to their own version of postmodern irony primarily by television itself, not by postmodern fiction, after all.

It seems overwhelmingly likely that the irony expressed and the attitude of "canny superiority" encouraged by certain kinds of television shows are mostly a function of the history of television rather than of postwar American fiction. Television becomes just another of the features of American culture that causes both tv and fiction writers to hold that culture at a distance, even if in doing so the tv writers are contributing to the trivialization of that culture, which Wallace correctly enough points out. The ubiquity of the television version of reality as well could perhaps be the main source of tv's influence on fiction writers, as they struggle to register that ubiquity and its distorting effect on actual reality. Wallace is describing what he calls a "cultural atmosphere" in which irony is a privileged aesthetic response to experience, but

the irony of television is superficial and self-satisfied, while the irony of postmodern fiction simply is not.

When Wallace refers to the "U.S. fictionist" who shares this atmosphere but also "sees himself heir to whatever was neat and valuable in postmodern lit," he is surely writing primarily about himself. It was, in fact, clear enough even when this essay was published, but it now seems even more apparent that "E Unibas Pluram" is ultimately a kind of manifesto for Wallace's own artistic practice, at least insofar as that practice is based on prolonged reflection on his own relationship both to the "cultural atmosphere" television helped create and to postmodern fiction. He is drawn to postmodern irony, but finds that the cheap irony of television (of contemporary culture generally) has to some extent usurped it.

Thus finally "E Unibas Pluram" works better as illumination of what David Foster Wallace was hoping to accomplish as a writer than it does as a critique of postmodern fiction. It doesn't really make the case that "TV had absorbed from postmodern lit" any of its own unproductive irony. To conclude that the popularity of irony on television must be related to the prevalence of irony in postmodern fiction is to underestimate the ability of tv writers (and audiences) to understand the appeal of in-jokes and generalized mockery all on their own and, sadly, to overestimate the reach of American writers in the 1960s and 70s, however much in retrospect they seem to have presaged a significant cultural shift. Moreover, Wallace conflates the postmodernism of "postmodern irony" with the specific postmodern practice of metafiction, which he discusses briefly on the way to a much longer discussion of self-reflexivity in television. "Postmodern" irony becomes "self-conscious" irony, which is "the nexus where television and fiction converge and consort."

But metafiction and postmodernism are not synonymous, although their appearance on the literary scene was more or less coterminous. Metafiction was not "deeply informed by the emergence of television" but has its roots in the fiction of Beckett and Borges or, if we want to trace it to its earliest manifestations in fiction, Cervantes and Laurence Sterne. It was not "self-conscious" in the superficial and trivial way in which television celebrates its own omnipresence, but called attention to its own artifice as part of an effort of self-renewal, shedding encrusted assumptions and expectations to make further invention possible, not settling for facile mockery.

To be sure, David Foster Wallace's own fiction is not an exercise in facile mockery. However much it does create an ironic tone similar to that found in the work of DeLillo and Pynchon, Wallace's use of postmodern exaggeration and incongruity is in the service of a very earnest, indeed "idealistic" vision of damaged characters and a sick society both badly in need of "cure." Still, Wallace also evokes this vision through the signature postmodern focus on language and its effects. One could say, in fact, that Wallace's real subject is language, although not just language as style, and not really emphasizing the limitations or uncertainties of language per se as in much postmodern fiction. Wallace's stories and novels are typically an attempt to inhabit the consciousness of his characters, but consciousness as their discursive world, invoked by the language they habitually use in confronting experience and only through which can perceive it to be comprehensible at all. His fiction is composed of the stream of words his characters use to construct a manageable account of the reality they negotiate, although in most cases these characters do not literally speak in their own voice through first-person narration.

Thus the beginning of "The Depressed Person":

The depressed person was in terrible and unceasing emotional pain, and the impossibility of sharing or articulating this pain was itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror.

Despairing, then, of describing the emotional pain or expressing its utterness to those around her, the depressed person instead described circumstances, both past and ongoing, which were somehow related to the pain, to its etiology and cause, hoping at least to be able to express to others something of the pain's context, its—as it were—shape and texture. The depressed person's parents, for example, who had divorced when she was a child, had used her as a pawn in the sick games they played.

This is, of course, the sort of language, used to create a distinctive discourse of jargon words, filler phrases, and practiced rhetorical moves, by which we might expect a "depressed person" to interact with the therapeutic world in which she lives. Something similar is done with characters like the Account Representative and the Vice President in Charge of Overseas Production in "Luckily the Account Representative Knew CPR," from Wallace's first collection of stories, *Girl With Curious Hair*:

There were between these last two executives to leave the Building the sorts of similarities enjoyed by parallel lines. Each man, leaving, balanced his weight against that of a heavily slender briefcase. Monograms and company logos flanked handles of leathered metal, which each man held. Each man, on his separate empty floor, moved down white-lit halls over whispering and mealy and monochromatic carpet toward elevators that each sat open-mouthed and mute in its shaft along one of the large Building's two accessible sides. . .

Particularly the divorced Account Representative, who remarked, silently, alone, as his elevator dropped toward the Executive Garage, that, at a certain unnoticed but never unheeded point in every corporate evening he worked, it became Time to Leave; that this point in the overtime night was a fulcrum on which things basic and unseen tilted, very slightly—a pivot in hours unaware—and that, in the period between this pint and the fresh-suited working dawn, the very issue of the Building's ownership would become, quietly, in their absence, truly an issue, hung in air, unsettled. . . .

Again, these characters and their actions are described through the kind of no-nonsense, robotic language that would mirror the perceptions of the characters, who can be adequately identified merely as "Account Representative" and "Vice President of Overseas Production" (themselves invested with about the same degree of personality as the Executive Garage). This mirroring effect is perhaps especially pronounced in "Mr. Squishy," from *Oblivion*, the last book of fiction to be published in Wallace's lifetime:

In an unconventional move, some of this quote unquote Full-Access background information re ingredients, production innovations, and even demotargeting was being relayed to the Focus Group by the facilitator, who used a Dry Erase marker to sketch a diagram of Mister Squishy's snack cake production sequence and the complete adjustments required by *Felonies!* at select points along the automated line. . .

The Focus Group facilitator, trained by the requirements of what seemed to have turned out to be his profession to behave as though he were interacting in a lively and spontaneous way while actually remaining inwardly detached and almost clinically observant, possessed also a natural eye for behavioral details that could often reveal tiny

gens of statistical relevance amid the rough law surfeit of random fact. Sometimes little things make a difference. The facilitator's name was Terry Schmidt and he was 34 years old, a Virgo. Eleven of the Focus Group's fourteen men wore wristwatches, of which roughly one-third were expensive and/or foreign.

This story is a kind of inventory of the observations and memories that roll through Terry Schmidt's mind as he "facilitates" his Focus Group, captured entirely in this kind of advertising/marketing-speak. What unites all of the passages I have highlighted is that they reveal the extent to which we all inhabit such language-worlds, ways of thinking that determine our interactions with the "outside" world, except that, caught as we are in these linguistic and syntactical webs, there really is no outside. And what each of these slightly different such webs further have in common is that they blanch our words of most of their vigor, leaving only edgeless, etiolated husks.

If Wallace thus does depict an exhausted language, it is exhausted not because its potential resources have been depleted but because the specific practices imposed by an enervated American culture have corrupted it. Ultimately, then, neither Wallace's theme nor the strategy by which it is embodied could really be called distinctively postmodern. The attempt is finally to capture life as lived and experienced, the Way We Live Now, in other words a modified version of realism. The "stream of consciousness" method used by many prominent modernists was a modification of realism, an attempt to get at what is most immediately "real" in human experience, consciousness itself, and Wallace's strategy seems to me a further development of this kind of psychological realism, even if Wallace finds himself writing in an era when even human mental processes can't really be trusted as authentic, determined as they are by culture, by genetics, by forces beyond conscious human control.

How to tell stories when the language you must use is so thoroughly infected by artificial discourses, however authentically you manage to portray the inauthentic? Of course, you really can't, except by simultaneously noting the way in which what you're doing is telling a story. That Wallace's fiction is so often fiction about fiction-making is thus less a sign of its postmodernism than it is again a function of an essentially realist strategy. Since the artificial discourses permeating contemporary American culture are enlisted (must be enlisted) to

construct stories about the world, an unavoidable subject of Wallace's work must be the ways in which these stories work. In *Oblivion*, in fact, almost all of the stories are in part about the fashioning of stories, a few quite explicitly.

"Another Pioneer" is ultimately not one of the better stories in *Oblivion*, finally too long to support its relatively obvious story-within-a-story premise (a tendency to overelaboration is arguably a weakness to which Wallace too often succumbs), and while "Mr. Squishy" is certainly a bravura performance that does make us believe in the portrayal of its protagonist's feelings of being trapped inside a worldview he really no longer believes in, it isn't as direct an example of Wallace successfully employing postmodern, metafictional strategies to meet more traditional literary goals as "Good Old Neon." At its core, this is indeed a story about a story, although we don't know that until its conclusion. We do then discover that the narrative has been an impersonation by "David Wallace" of one of his high school classmates who died in a "fiery single-car accident he'd read about in 1991," an attempt by the presumed author of *Oblivion* to "imagine what all must have happened to lead up to" that crash, why someone "David Wallace had back then imagined as happy and unreflective and wholly unhaunted by voices telling him that there was something deeply wrong him that wasn't wrong with anybody else and that he had to spend all his time and energy trying to figure out what to do and say in order to impersonate an even marginally normal or acceptable U.S. male" would drive into a bridge abutment.

It's a thoroughly convincing impersonation, and emotionally charged in a way that has probably only been enhanced by what we now know about the conditions that precipitated David Foster Wallace's own later suicide. But it is precisely in the act of "baring the device"—self-reflexively disclosing that the story is indeed a made-up story—that "Good Old Neon" produces its greatest *emotional* effect. For in addition to the story's sympathetic representation of the imagined protagonist's emotional distress is the revelation that it was the author's own response to that distress that led "David Wallace" to write the story in the first place. In this way Wallace employs a "postmodern" strategy but does so in order to avoid the impression such a strategy "plays tricks" with the reader, allowing the writer to engage in cheap irony. Instead, this is a "self-conscious" story whose self-reflexivity reinforces the emotional sincerity of its storytelling and character creation.

Wallace was clearly enough attracted to the "idealism" embodied in the practice of the first-generation postmodernists. If such idealism was no longer quite possible to maintain (in Wallace's view, because of its corruption by television and other forms of shallow irony), neither was it possible simply to return to the unselfconscious practices of traditional realism. Thus in a story like "Good Old Neon," as well as in many of his other stories and in his magnum opus *Infinite Jest*, he wrote fiction unconventional and self-knowing enough that he would still frequently be identified by readers and critics as a postmodernist, but with an affective immediacy that also proved intensely appealing to the many readers who responded so fervently to his work. One could describe that work as a kind of "experiment" with the capacity of postmodernism to achieve more emotional resonance, and it would only be fair as well to say that if Wallace's fiction is a further development of psychological realism, its expression of such realism is often surprising and always in Wallace's distinctive style and voice. Still, in arguably reaffirming the ultimate ambition of realism to reflect existing reality as the central ambition of fiction, David Foster Wallace's fiction can't finally be comfortably included as a body of work clearly perpetuating the "really new" in literary art. It partly remains in the shadow of those adventurous writers of the 1960s and 70s on whom Wallace continues to look back with admiration, and partly attempts to escape that shadow by willfully misunderstanding the legacy of these writers and offering solutions to nonexistent problems, solutions that in the long run singal retreat.

SATIRE BY ANY OTHER NAME: JONATHAN LETHEM & GEORGE SAUNDERS

Jonathan Lethem is also a writer whose work has been identified as second-generation postmodernism, although finally it has little in common with Wallace's fiction other than a general disinclination to adhere to conventional storytelling norms. Lethem's fiction as well is often linked with Pynchon and DeLillo as postmodern precursors, but in Lethem's case their "postmodern irony" is mediated through the influence of science fiction, especially the work of Phillip K. Dick. This amalgamation of high postmodernism and popular literature is taken to be his signature variation on postmodernism in fiction, although much of his early work would seem to be more accurately characterized as straight science fiction. Beginning with *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999), Lethem began to publish books more likely to be categorized as "literary

fiction" but continued to include elements of popular fiction (detective fiction and comic books as well as science fiction).

In a review of Lethem's *Chronic City* (1999), Hari Kunzru describes the postmodern element in this novel as in part deriving from the author's implicit acknowledgement that "he's writing belatedly" and, further, the accompanying signal that he "wants us to know he knows." This is indeed a very postmodern gesture, and perhaps in conveying this sense of belatedness Lethem is engaged in the same sort of strategy John Barth had in mind in positing a "literature of exhaustion" that exploited the "used-upness" of fictional form to generate new forms. However, where Barth and his fellow metafictionists forced a new attention on form, style, and narrative strategy, Lethem in *Chronic City* settles for vaguely surreal machinations of plot (an "alternative reality") and loudly "colorful" characters (most of them given obviously Pynchon-derived names). While it might be debatable whether the greatest influence on a book like this ultimately is a version of postmodernism drawn from "the writing that inspired Lethem to become a writer" (as Kunzru puts it) or the demands of fantasy and science fiction, there is finally nothing that could be called formal innovation in *Chronic City*, nothing that really challenges readers to examine their assumptions about the novel as a form.

Lethem's reputation as an experimental writer thus seems entirely based on his incorporation of the narrative conventions of genre fiction into novels that have otherwise been generally accepted as "serious." The plot devices of detective stories and science fiction allow Lethem to ostensibly bypass the requirements of ordinary realism, providing for an approach that blends caricature and pseudo-fantasy to produce what can best be described as whimsy. Whimsy is not a productive mode of either postmodern or experimental fiction, and in *Chronic City* it leaves an impression of aesthetic timidity. As William Deresiewicz says in his review of the novel, Lethem "wants realism, with the credibility it brings—wants us to take the world of the novel as a faithful copy of the world we know—but he also wants to stack the deck by deploying supernatural elements whenever the finds it convenient." Thus the New York City portrayed in the narrative needs to be recognizable enough as New York City that we are able to associate the events and themes with the real place, but not so much that the author can't introduce runaway tunnel robots, an illusory space mission doomed by the presence of Chinese space mines, and snowfall in August.

This sort of controlled fantasia can't really be what the postmodernists had in mind as an alternative to conventional realism, nor is it credible as a revision or reorientation of postmodern challenges to inherited practice, an attempt to extend the reach of postmodern experiment into a different era and changed circumstances. It implies that postmodern experiment was simply a strategy designed to undermine the principle of verisimilitude, so that any work not strictly observing the rules of traditional realism could be called "experimental." And while Lethem's work is consistent with much postmodern fiction in that is essentially comic, the comedy of a novel like *Chronic City* is much too gentle, too shy of the more corrosive humor of the postmodern comedy of Pynchon or DeLillo. It doesn't so much lack "real satiric bite," as Kunzru maintains, as it never rises above *mere* satire, a relatively mild critique of post-9/11 New York under Bloomberg. The satiric purpose, in fact, predominates in a way that sets this novel apart from the postmodern comedies of such writers as Pynchon, John Barth, or Donald Barthleme, which don't attempt to "correct" behaviors and institutions in the manner of conventional satire but portray human behaviors and institutions as resistant to amelioration (but no less deserving of laughter for that).

Chronic City's satire is portentous enough that readers would certainly be justified in concluding it is an attempt to "say something" about America in the 21st century, but the novel hardly conceals any deep meaning not made apparent through its choice of satirical targets. The story of the relationship between narrator Chase Insteadman, former child actor, and Perkus Tooth, former bohemian intellectual turned pothead, allows Lethem to canvass his "alternative" New York from top (Insteadman is something of a mascot for the city's high society types) to bottom and to adjust his satirical focus accordingly. That the purport of the novel's themes does not go much beyond this surface satire is actually in its favor, as we aren't subjected to the kind of tedium the exploration of "ideas" in fiction usually entails. In this way Lethem is finally faithful to his postmodern predecessors: to the extent Barth or Pynchon or DeLillo incorporate ideas, they do so as inspiration for formal or narrative devices ("entropy" in Pynchon, for example) rather than abstractions with which to "wrestle."

However, *Chronic City* nevertheless suffers from its own kind of tedium. It never attains the structural or stylistic vitality required for us to suspend our disbelief in its plot contrivances. The narrative drags along, its narrator's language leaden and unnecessarily prolix. The narrator is

himself an unengaging figure whose status as a blank slate on which his friend Perkus inscribes a more capacious understanding does not make him a compelling character over the course of a 450-page novel. Perkus himself is much less compelling than Lethem wants him to be. He's an essentially stock countercultural type, and his recurrent cluster headaches and other mental problems make him seem more pathetic than heroic.

Lethem's fiction in general is not without its pleasures, both stylistically and in its humor. Much of it displays a lively enough imagination, even if *Chronic City* ultimately falls flat. (And it collapses from an excess of satirical ambition rather than too little.) But precisely as a work that seems to be one of Lethem's most ambitious, this novel does illustrate the way in which a writer clearly influenced by postmodern experimental fiction expresses that influence by muting it, softening its edges while remaining "quirky" enough that his work generally avoids being identified as "mainstream" literary fiction. Lethem circumscribes the most radical implications of the legacy of postmodern experiment, implications that potentially undermine all assumptions about fiction as a literary form, by translating its carnivalesque comedy into ordinary satire, its narrative innovations into eccentric fantasy, its linguistic play into a more or less conventionally literary prose style (although again not necessarily without its pleasures, nevertheless). Perhaps it could be said that Lethem is attempting to enhance the legacy of postmodernism by making it more universally appealing, but at best what we get is really a pastiche of postmodernism, one that may represent the creative sum of Lethem's important inspirations yet never finally goes beyond a kind of comprehensive aesthetic paraphrase of the originals.

George Saunders is certainly a writer whose fiction is seldom if ever identified as "mainstream." Like Lethem's work, however, it is also usually received enthusiastically by readers and critics who admire it for its "quirky" departures from what are still even now the predominantly realistic norms of literary fiction. And it is not so hard to understand why these readers and reviewers would find Saunders's fiction appealing. To first-time readers especially, his stories are no doubt a little puzzling, requiring some accommodation to their surrealistic settings and premises, but ultimately they are puzzling in an entertaining way, the settings and events just off-kilter enough to provoke the reader's curiosity, the premises just outrageous

enough that we find their surrealism both disconcerting and surprisingly tangent to existing conditions of American reality. Above all, the stories are often very funny, so that even if we remain uncertain how to interpret the narratives' mutated reality, we can still enjoy their oddities as conveyed through Saunders's deadpan, understated style, which can assimilate the most stilted, bureaucratic jargon with the most colloquial, slang-ridden expressions, often in the same paragraph or even the same sentence. Reinforced by Saunders's ability to mimic the inanities of American speech in his dialogue, this adept orchestration of voices and languages is frequently a source of pleasure in itself.

Tenth of December (2012) manifests all of these appealing qualities. It may be, in fact, his most consistently engaging book since his first, *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* (1996). The title story of that book introduced a narrative trope that by now has become a signature Saunders device, a trope encompassing both plot and setting, through which the story's protagonist, also the narrator, relates his experiences as an employee of an outlandish theme park in which American life and history have been reduced in scale and repackaged as entertainment— although there is never much indication that anyone is actually entertained by it (certainly not the employees). Parks such as this signify both the way American history has been reduced to its value as the subject of such simplistic entertainments, designed to fulfill the needs of commerce rather than citizens and their shared culture, as well as the way in which American life in the present has organized itself around the commercial imperative, emptied itself of interest in anything except mindless spectacle. "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline" may be the prototypical such story, its title an accurate forecast of the story's portrayal of a Civil War-era theme park in crisis and the unfortunate consequences for its employees, especially the narrator (who winds up dead). The story isn't in fact entirely surreal, since one can indeed imagine an American culture so debased that something like the phenomenon it depicts could arise, but its imaginative amplification of these nascent cultural tendencies is darkly comical and disturbing.

Most of the stories in *CivilWarLand* (including the concluding novella, "Bounty") are of this kind, giving the book itself a structural and thematic coherence. Stories of this type recur in Saunders's later work as well ("Pastoralia"), suggesting that this narrative is especially expressive of Saunders's concerns as a writer, that his return to it allows a continued development of those concerns, almost as if this series of stories can be taken as a substitute for

the novel Saunders has conspicuously not written. There is but one such story in *Tenth of December*, "My Chivalric Fiasco," which is actually one of the least substantial pieces in the book, a diverting enough turn using the theme park setting that gives Saunders an opportunity to indulge in some quasi-Elizabethan verbal tricks but is otherwise rather slight. Most of the other stories in the book nevertheless still seem recognizably to originate in the same sensibility that offers the dystopic theme park narrative as a touchstone of sorts for the aesthetic and thematic assumptions of Saunders's fiction.

Stories such as "Escape from Spiderhead" and "The Semplica Girls Diary" share a setting in what must taken as a near future in which currently ominous practices and trends have proliferated even farther, to the point they have simply become an accepted feature of the cultural landscape. In the first, prisoners have been assigned to a facility where they serve as test subjects for drugs with names like "Darkenfloxx" (administered through a "MobiPak"), which work to alter mood or increase sexual proficiency. (Saunders readers will not be surprised when the tests go horribly wrong.) In the second, a suburban family in distress wins a lottery jackpot and uses the money to keep up appearances by buying "Semplica Girls" ("SGs"), poor young immigrant girls who have essentially agreed to act as lawn ornaments through some sort of new technology that allows them to hang suspended in the air. Both stories could be called satirical, but again they less provoke laughter than sober recognition such things might not be so far-fetched. In each story as well, at least one character resists the general moral drift that accepts the ongoing situation as normal and instead experiences an awakening of sorts. In "Escape from Spiderhead," the narrator protagonist decides he will not contribute to the possible death of another test subject, at the cost of his own life. In "Semplica Girl Diaries," the family's youngest daughter is so deeply upset by the treatment of the SGs that she sets them free, causing the family even greater hardship.

Thus, while stories such as these clearly enough have some satirical intent, they are in most cases just as clearly explicit moral fables, tales of overcoming the degrading and dehumanizing attitudes that appear to underlie the social order depicted in the stories. It seems likely that this quality in Saunders's fiction also contributes to its appeal: the imaginative projections into the future come marked with palpable disapproval of the sorry state of affairs it has produced, but offer some hope that the human capacity to overcome cultural conditioning and make morally

courageous decisions might still survive. This sort of provisional optimism does not color every story, but finally one can't call Saunders a gloomy writer, however much his fiction does illuminate the march of folly on which the human species, especially in America, seems to be proceeding. He has been compared to Kurt Vonnegut, who certainly did have a gloomy outlook, and whose fiction contains the same sort of SFish elements and the same straight-faced humor, but where in Vonnegut the humor is about all that comes between us and nihilistic despair, in Saunders it, as well as the movement of narratives like "Escape from Spiderhear" toward an ultimate moment of moral recognition, acts to reinforce, as in most conventional satire, the critique of social dysfunction. Saunders's fiction leaves the discernible impression its representation of human folly is at least partly meant to suggest we should (and could) stop doing and believing the things that make it possible.

The stories particularly register the depradations of "late capitalism" and the class divisions it perpetuates and intensifies. In addition to the dehumanizing practices depicted in "Spiderhead" and "Semplica Girl Diaries," the demeaning necessities of current economic arrangements are featured in "Exhortation" (composed in that most debased form of capitalist communication, the memorandum) and "Al Roosten," in which a man voluntarily debases himself in the name of good business. Class conflict is portrayed very directly in "Puppy" and "Home" and emerges as the dominant theme in the book's first story, "Victory Lap," which compels attention first of all as the story of a young woman abducted by a madman but rescued by a neighbor boy before she is killed. Finally, however, the thriller-tinged plot (which seems taken from a television crime drama) serves as a device to dramatize the distance that has grown between the young woman and her rescuer, once childhood friends, a distance exacerbated by the pretensions of class. These stories, less fantastic than "Semplica Girl Diaries," Pastoralia," or "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline" (or certainly than Saunders's novella, "The Brief Frightening Reign of Phil"), nevertheless only reinforce the conclusion that Saunders is a writer with the ambition of "saying something" about the state of American life and culture.

However much these particular stories depict characters facing extreme situations, they ultimately might still be characterized as works of narrative realism. Even Saunders's more radically surrealist stories do not really depart from the requisites of conventional storytelling, and in this his fiction is consistent with (probably one of the inspirations for) most of the neo-

surrealist fiction that has become quite a noticeable development in recent American writing (for example in the work of Aimee Bender and Stacey Levine). If anything, this fiction observes the dictums of plot development even more scrupulously than traditional realism, as the freakish or oddball characters and absurdist events are chronicled in a strictly linear way, encompassing appropriately rising actions and clear resolutions and generally satisfying any reader's need for narrative. At the same time, claims are often made that this mode of fiction is nevertheless audacious and unconventional, claims based entirely on its defiance of the surface logic of ordinary reality. Thus the alternative posed to "realism" is a diametrical anti-realism that informs a story's content but not its form. Saunders is probably the most accomplished of these new surrealists, but his stories only illustrate most prominently that such fiction derives its appeal from conjuring fanciful flights from reality related through familiar narrative strategies. That Saunders employs his vision of an altered reality at the satirical level to achieve the traditional goals of realism—to depict the way things are—could lead us to the conclusion that Saunders's ambitions aren't that far removed from those associated with the realist tradition. They might be seen as two sides of the same literary coin.

The relatively large proportion of stories in *Tenth of December* that are more or less straight realism only reinforces this conclusion. It would seem that sometimes Saunders's effort to capture the degeneration of American life requires the surreal satire of "Semplica Girl" or "CivilWarLand," while in other cases the realism of "Puppy" or "Home" works as well. Their shared use of conventional storytelling is allied with another in-common feature that finally helps to account for the appeal of Sanders's work: All of Saunders's stories ultimately create an emotional atmosphere that solicits considerable empathy for his characters and their plight. This is accomplished to a great extent through Saunders's prose style, which can be ingenuous in an almost merciless way but through that very quality also provokes sympathy for a character such as the title character of "Al Roosten," a struggling merchant who has entered into a "luncheon auction of Local Celebrities, a Local being any sucker dopey enough to answer yes when the Chamber of Commerce asked."

> Roosten stepped warily out from behind the paper screen. No one whooped. He
> started down the runway. No cheering. The room made the sound a room makes when

attempting not to laugh. He tried to smile sexily but his mouth was too dry. Probably his yellow teeth were showing and the place where his gums dipped down.

Frozen in the harsh spotlight, he looked so crazy and old and forlorn and yet residually arrogant that an intense discomfort settled on the room, a discomfort that, in a non-charity situation, might have led to shouted insults or thrown objects but in this case drew a kind of pity whoop from near the salad bar.

The most transparently emotion-laden story in the book is perhaps the title story. In it, a boy and a middle-aged man are making their way through a patch of woods. The boy is simply enjoying himself, lost in fantasy, but we discover that the man is ill with cancer and has come to the woods to commit suicide. The man winds up rescuing the boy when he falls through the ice on a pond, and the man decides he wants to live, after all. The plot itself tugs pretty strongly at the heartstrings, but the language used to convey the suicidal man's despair (Saunders hews pretty closely to the character's stream of thought) bears an especially direct emotional weight as well:

Ouch, ouch. This was too much. He hadn't cried after the surgeries or during the chemo, but he feels like crying now. It wasn't fair. It happened to everyone supposedly but now it was happening specifically to him. He'd kept waiting for special dispensation. But no. Something/someone bigger than him kept refusing. You were told the big something/someone loved you especially but in the end you saw it was otherwise. The big something/someone was neutral. Unconcerned. When it innocently moved, it crushed people.

A passage such as this does not hide the underlying pathos through irony or "wacky" humor (of the sort both Saunders and Jonathan Lethem do frequently employ) or agile writing. The emotion it is clearly soliciting from the reader even verges on being sentimental. (I would maintain it actually crosses that line.) The story's placement at the conclusion of this book would seem to further indicate that Saunders regards it as bringing together common concerns or embodying important assumptions. For me, the story works to clarify that, despite the fact many of his stories court the bizarre and chronicle extreme states of being, finally George Saunders's fiction fits comfortably enough within the established protocols of the American short story as

recognized and accepted by most readers. That this is true does help explain the widespread enthusiasm for Saunders's work—the surface content of his stories is pleasingly weird, but they are also told in familiar ways and engage the reader's emotions rather straightforwardly. At the same time, it does little to help justify claims that Saunders's fiction, in addition to being entertaining, also occupies a place on the cutting edge of American fiction.

PERILS OF THE APOCALYPSE

Often enough, a genuinely adventurous work of fiction doesn't finally succeed in using an aesthetically adventurous technique, form, trope, or narrative to create a fully satisfying work of literary art, even judging it by the terms set out by its own methods and intentions. It is also possible for a novel or story to be adventurous (or adventurous enough) in its formal or stylistic strategies only to use such strategies to, in effect, dress up an otherwise entirely conventional narrative. Matthew Sharpe's *Jamestown* seems to me a good example of the former, while the latter happens in Steve Erickson's *Our Ecstatic Days*.

Both of these novels are "post-apocalyptic" narratives, a kind of story that certainly has become familiar enough that it now essentially comprises a genre of its own. Since genre fiction begins by accepting certain necessary conventions of form, setting, and theme, claims on behalf of the post-apocalyptic setting as somehow inherently adventurous are of course unsustainable. However, of these two novels, *Jamestown* does manage to escape the confines both of genre and of satire (which in my opinion the post-apocalyptic narrative is always in danger of becoming) and partly succeed in its goal of recasting the present as historically-grounded fantasy in order to illuminate the continuities of history, to show where present and past meet (and where both meet with the future).

Still, to the extent *Jamestown* does belong to the post-apocalyptic genre, it manifests an aesthetic limitation endemic in the genre. According to Laura Stokes in a review of T*he Apocalypse Reader* (*The Brooklyn Rail*, July 2007), "the focus of post-apocalyptic literature has. . .shifted away from the logistics of the world's end to the specifics of survival—that is to say, less of a preoccupation with how the world ends, and more of an interest in who is left behind." *Jamestown* fits this description in that it does focus primarily on "who is left behind," but finally

the "logistics of the world's end" is never very far removed from the writer's, or, more importantly, the reader's interest.

Because the ostensible emphasis in *Jamestown* (or in Denis Johnson's *Fiskadoro* or Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things*) is on "the intimate details of apocalyptic experience," as Stokes further puts it, any simple exposition of *what happened* is excluded, the details of the apocalyptic event are delayed, only alluded to, left cryptic. The reader surely wants to know what happened—a generic "things went bad" seems like cheating, especially when one feels that things are already going bad in reality—and thus is likely to read largely for clues, for those moments when the backstory gets moved to the front. To say the least, this makes attending to the "intimate details of apocalyptic experience" problematic, since such details seem like part of a concerted effort to avoid the real issue at hand. Yet the very attempt to avoid passages of "infodumping" and to stick to the perceptions of the novel's main characters as they are recorded in various kinds of first-person accounts paradoxically converts *Jamestown* as a whole into a kind of infodump leading us to the revelations of its final pages.

This doesn't mean *Jamestown* is a failure. As numerous of its reviewers noted, it does exhibit humor, lively prose, and its creation of distinctive voices among the various narrators who collectively provide us with its account of a new Jamestown is impressive enough. However, it can be difficult to fully appreciate the humor (too much of which is created by the simple and ultimately somewhat monotonous use of anachronism) or the prose and its evocation of voice because the context in which the jokes are supposed to be funny is obscured, as is the reason why, for example, Pocohantas talks in a late 20th century, young girl idiom (even at times breaking out into what seems an African-American dialect of sorts). Still, we can also recognize the skill with which Sharpe manages to get his story told (not settling for the plodding conventions of "psychological realism") and the energy he invests in his prose from sentence to sentence, while as well wondering whether too much of that energy has been expended in painting a portrait of the post-apocalypse that seems rather tepid and familiar in its depiction of human society gone feral after the worst, predictably enough, has happened.

The apocalyptic vision presented in *Our Ecstatic Days* is equally predictable, but it is accompanied by some formal flourishes--multiple narrators, shuffled chronology, various

typographical devices (including a line of text, separate from the main text, that runs across the botton of the page and mirrors the act of "swimming" the main character has undertaken)--that most readers would no doubt find adventurous, something different from the usual run of "literary fiction." However, these flourishes (themselves at this point not exactly novel) are finally no more than that, adding very little either aesthetically or thematically to an otherwise garden-variety post-apocalyptic plot.

As in most such fantasies, a catastrophe has occurred--in this case Los Angeles has turned into a lake--and the characters left to negotiate the wasted landscape do so by paring existence to the bone, surviving in an altered environment by taking nothing for granted and everything as contingent. Extremes of behavior (such as acting as an S&M mistress) no longer seem so extreme when extremity itself has come to define reality. Clearly enough, the bleak world depicted in the novel is a projection of/version of/transformation of the present (in ths case, specifically Los Angeles), as is usually the case in post-apocalyptic narratives, making most of them, including *Our Ecstatic Days*, essentially satires without the humor.

Thus the formal manipulations in the novel are really incidental to the vision of LA drowned that Erickson wants to express and that finally overrides all other considerations of character, point of view, style, etc. Even if we are interested in dsytopic visions of what the future might hold, this one seems entirely routine (things will be bad indeed if we're not careful!) once we have grasped the novel's controlling metaphor. The typographical games notwithstanding, *Our Ecstatic Days* is more concerned with the ideas its author wants to advance about LA's self-destruction than with challenging readers to reconsider what novels can do. In an interview Erickson has explicitly said that "I don't think of myself as an experimental writer. Experimental writing is about the experiment, and experiments per se usually are for their own sake. My interest is in whatever serves the larger story or characters" (*Bookslut*). Unfortunately, in this novel neither the story nor the characters can elevate it beyond the constrictions of the genre that reduces its "experimental" devices to mere gestures.

It was perhaps inevitable that Ben Marcus's fiction would come to seem more conventional following on his first book, *The Age of Wire and String* (1995), which could be taken either as a

collection of short pieces employing a common subject and method or as a novel, and which surely qualifies as experimental in any intelligible definition of the word as it applies to the writing of fiction. It is an utterly singular work, requiring the reader to put aside all assumptions about the role of narrative, character, and setting in fiction. Not only does this book (considered either as a whole or in its parts) eschew all of these elements, but it almost seems to invent a form in which they could have no role; in this work they are notions as strange in their application to the "world" the book describes as the devices it does use no doubt seem to readers who assume "narrative" and "fiction" are essentially synonymous terms. Its own first words proclaim it "a catalog of the life project as prosecuted in the Age of Wire and String and beyond," and the most satisfying reading of *The Age of Wire and String* allows it to resolve the uncertainties of this self-characterization as it will.

Notable American Women (2002), Marcus's next book, could hardly be called a conventional novel, but it does begin in a recognizable situation (family dysfunction), introduces relatively recognizable characters (the family of "Ben Marcus"), and tells a story of sorts (the story of how "Ben Marcus" is instructed in the tenets of the "Silentist" movement, which is dedicated to the achievement of complete silence). This novel could be called a narrative rather than a "catalog," although it is a highly fragmented one that moves freely back and forth through time. Given the outrageous premise, this is not a novel of "realism," although it never crosses over into outright fantasy. Instead, it works allegorically, using the outrageous premise to render the Marcus family drama more emphatically, to convert the apparently autobiographical elements of this drama into emblematic, if absurdist, melodrama.

The allegorical mode is again Marcus's chosen method in *The Flame Alphabet*, although now it is more a straightforward sort of allegory without the explicit autobiographical focus on the experiences of "Ben Marcus" (however wary we should be of identifying this character literally with the biographical author) found in both *The Age of Wire and String* and *Notable American Women*. It is, in fact, more or less a post-apocalyptic narrative, but where *Jamestown* and *Our Ecstatic Days* project into the future present political and cultural tendencies that have led to the dire conditions portrayed, *The Flame Alphabet* posits a more metaphysical source of affliction. Here, Marcus brings together motifs and themes that are treated more obliquely or more partially in his previous books, most obviously the notion that human beings have a vexed

relationship with language, that language as a human attribute may finally do more harm than good, and that in our struggle to control language, to use it in ways that foster communication or expression, more often than not we fail. In *The Flame Alphabet*, the danger we court in our careless and frequently hurtful uses of language has been literalized in the form of a "language toxicity," a plague whereby adults are sickened by, and presumably eventually die from, the words spoken by children (in the later stages, by all forms of language).

Prominent in the struggle to control language would be, of course, the struggle of the writer to induce it into satisfying rhetorical and aesthetic forms, to invoke it in a way that affirms human potential. *The Flame Alphabet* could be interpreted as a fable about this struggle, substituting a more subtle kind of metafiction for the blatant self-reflexivity of the previous books and their invocation of "Ben Marcus." The narrator not only chronicles the toll the "language toxicity" takes on his own family, but also desperately tries to find a cure, experimenting with a new alphabet to address the fact that

> the alphabet as we knew it was too complex, soaked in meaning, stimulating the brain to produce a chemical that was obviously fatal. In its parts, in combination, our lettering system triggered a nasty reaction. If the alphabet could be thinned out, shaved down, to trick the brain somehow, perhaps we could still deploy this new set of symbols, or even a single symbol, the kind you hold in your hand and reshape for different meanings, for modest, emergency-only communications.

The narrator surveys linguistic history to determine if any of its historical "scripts" might be free of the taint modern language can no longer conceal, an effort which ultimately fails, although at the novel's close a serum is developed that makes it possible for the human race to temporarily survive. The implication clearly enough seems to be that language will never be safe for human production or consumption, that its effects will always be beyond our abilities to anticipate or understand them. It is an odd theme for a novelist, unless we are to regard *The Flame Alphabet* as an instance of the struggle with language that provisionally succeeds, manages in its verbal ingenuity a momentary stay against the confusion that language itself breeds. Perhaps the book itself, in its achieved coherence, stands as the author's own temporary victory in the struggle, as a tentative affirmation of the human.

The post-apocalyptic genre has become such a recognizable vehicle for writers wishing to convey a message, to "say something" about the state of humanity, that it is to me somewhat surprising that a self-confessed experimental writer such as Ben Marcus would turn to its narrative formula in the first place. Yet another tale of the twilight of the human race, however much it does avoid the usual social and political commentary to which such narratives can often be reduced, *The Flame Alphabet* doesn't seem like a noteworthy contribution to the further development of innovative fiction. It unfortunately might leave the impression that "experiment" in fiction has been reduced to a vaguely futuristic story illustrating strange ideas about language.

Even if we don't think they are so strange, we might nevertheless conclude that Marcus's own skill with language implicitly threatens to undermine these ideas:

> . .in Wisconsin there were early adopters. A fiendish strain of childless adults who consumed the toxic language on purpose, as a drug, destroying themselves under the flood of child speech. They stormed areas high in children, falling drunk inside cones of sound. They gorged themselves on the fence line of playgrounds where voice clouds blew hard enough to trigger a reaction, sharing exposure sites with each other by code. Later these people were found dried out in parks, on the road, collapsed and hardening in their homes. They were found with the slightly smaller faces we would routinely see on victims in only a few weeks.

Such a passage as this is both imaginative and exact. It succinctly captures the actions described through figurations that show impressive command of the resources of language. There is also a deadpan humor here that further confirms Marcus as a writer able to use words skillfully and with sensitivity to their effects. It doesn't really suggest through its own formal or stylistic choices that this meaning is dangerous or unstable or even uncontrollably ambiguous in its proliferation. If language is indeed an elusive phenomenon whose power exceeds our capacity to wield it, this is a proposition that comes to our attention because it is advanced directly, in no uncertain terms, by the novel's narrator and its narrative, not because the novel itself embodies the idea aesthetically either in style or form. The dissonance between the novel's doom-laden message about the perils of human communication and its author's proven facility — here and in

his previous work — with the medium through which it occurs is rather hard to ignore, and it makes *The Flame Alphabet* seem an artistic misstep.

I would maintain that the genre of post-apocalyptic fiction has been an artistic misstep for contemporary American fiction as a whole, particularly for those writers whose work could otherwise be called adventurous (Marcus, for one, as well as Paul Auster or Cormac McCarthy) but who still seem to share the mistaken assumption that the adventurous "content" of stories of a future dystopia that overcomes America (in various manifestations) adequately substitutes for formal or stylistic innovation, or at least some specifically aesthetic strategy designed to expand our awareness of the possibilities of fiction *as* a form. The-post apocalyptic narrative does not inherently preclude such innovation, as evidenced by David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, a truly innovative, adventurous novel (by a truly adventurous novelist), but the "story" in this novel is never more than provisional in the first place, since it may be the delusion of the narrator, who believes herself to be the last human being left alive. Her circumstances (at least as she understands them) are not delineated directly but merely suggested by the series of often enigmatic statements she sets down (a la Wittgenstein) and that together comprise the novel's formal structure. Thus the story emerges as a function of the structure rather than subsuming the structure to its own requirements.

The post-apocalypse genre is finally all about story in this way. "What happens" is unavoidably the central and ultimate source of interest, but at same time the genre encourages stories that aspire to "say something" even more than to simply reveal what happens. Markson's novel could be called experimental because the story it tells cannot be separated from the form through which it is related, ultimately because it is really just the fortuitous outcome of the rigorous attention Markson pays to the form, to its aesthetic integrity. If experimental fiction is to remain valuable as the cutting edge of literary practice, it must at the least contest the notion that "telling a story" exhausts the possibilities of fiction as a literary form or that a novel works best as a disguised form of social commentary. The popularity of the post-apocalyptic genre among writers not otherwise inclined to produce "mainstream" literary fiction suggests that this genre has become a kind of substitute for more challenging demonstrations of what is possible in fiction.

INNOVATIVE SENTENCES: GARY LUTZ AND DIANE WILLIAMS

If currently there is a writer whose work does represent the cutting edge in advancing the art of fiction beyond prevailing conventions and stale assumptions, in my view that writer is Gary Lutz. Lutz's short stories indeed question the presumption that the inherent goals of fiction are to tell stories and communicate "themes" by establishing instead that the core element of fiction is the sentence and that the art of fiction consists of the resourceful accumulation of sentences—in Lutz's case the accumulation of singular, surprising, and painstakingly constructed sentences. These innovative sentences in turn give rise to the larger discursive and aesthetic order indeed to be found in Lutz's stories, but, like Markson, Lutz first attends to the aesthetic integrity of his fiction at this more fundamental level, such that "content" and "form" become inextricable.

Lutz has himself described the method by which he builds his sentences in some detail, most notably in the essay "The Sentence is a Lonely Place," but also in numerous interviews he has given over the years since *Stories in the Worst Way*, his first book, was published in 1996. Most of Lutz's stories, he explains, are conceived as sentences, or the gradual development of sentences, without relation to character or a plot. He describes his interest as being almost exclusively in placing these sentences together in the most resonant way he can devise, resonant literally in how words reinforce and echo one another and how the sonic and grammatical relationship between those sentences maintains and magnifies such echoes. Assonance, consonance, and alliteration play an important role in this process, as does manipulations of grammar, odd juxtapositions, unusual word choice, word combinations and neologisms. We don't have to get very far into the first story in *Divorcer*, the title story, to find a passage that immediately illustrates many of the typical features of Lutz's prose:

> The afternoon welcomed me into its swelters. An hour went by, then cleared the way
> for another. I had found a bench near the store and stood in quiet beside it. Others came and
> sat: unfinished-looking men, a pair of proudly ungabby girls I took for lovers done for now
> with their love, a woman graphically sad in ambitious pinpoints of jewelry. Then a man so
> moodless, I could see all the different grades and genres of zilch behind his eyes. The city

flattered these people who in the country would have been flattened fast for all to see all the same.

The reader is immediately invited to pause and consider the first sentence as a self-contained linguistic unit. Why this unorthodox figure—"welcomed me into its swelters"—with its verb made into a noun? The second sentence also draws attention to itself, this time through the strange and arresting use of personification, reinforcing the conclusion that Lutz wants us focused in at the sentence level. Indeed, to fully appreciate Lutz's singular sentences, we must be willing to restrain the impulse regard them as links in a discursive chain, to in effect merge them into a kind of verbal stream that carries us headlong not only from sentence to sentence, but through all the story's verbal formulations and devices, regarding them all as simply the transparent means to the ultimate goal of narrative development and resolution. In a Gary Lutz story we must on the contrary pause to contemplate what "unfinished-looking men" might actually look like, to judge the fitness of the phrases "proudly ungabby girls" and "a man so moodless" in creating the impression these figures leave. We must note not simply the wordplay of "flattered" and flattened" but also that each word separately produces its own distinct connotations while, in this syntactical pairing the two work together to give the whole passage additional meaning uniting the particular details, as does the following repetition of "for all to see all the same."

 For readers willing to accept Lutz's redirection of our aesthetic interest, it is perhaps tempting to conclude that Lutz's art is indeed an art of the sentence, considered in isolation from narrative, character, or setting. Thus almost all reviewers and interviewers who express admiration for his fiction concentrate their attention on Lutz as a unique stylist, ignoring the way his stories do in fact retain these other elements. The formal patterns that emerge are both a result of and a natural aesthetic complement to the singular sentences that constitute his work. If individual sentences in a sense leave us suspended in their word twists and serpentine syntax, the stories in which they appear do something similar, accumulating these sentences to create a kind of layering effect that gradually expands our sense of character and situation without making them secondary, mere vehicles for advancing a conventionally developed plot. The stories work by linking sentences to paragraphs to episodes, establishing a relationship of mutual resonance and reinforcement, building up from character and situation an impression of depth or breadth

that can seem static, but could also be accepted as an aesthetically coherent alternative to the notion that "story" entails movement forward.

"Divorcer" introduces us not only to this alternative strategy, but also to the theme that pervades the work and allows Lutz to expand his technique beyond the bounds of what would be possible in an individual story. Like all of the other pieces in *Divorcer*, it is composed of marked fragments, each one adding a layer to the narrator's account of his short-lived marriage. The sections move freely around the narrator's recollections of the marriage, each of them capturing a moment or arriving at an insight that illuminates the circumstances of the marriage and its ultimate failure, but by no means suggesting that human relationships can be explained by representing them in a "story." As one would suspect, the reality of failed marriage is most memorably evoked in the most bracing sentences:

> Marriage had not worked out to be a doubling of each other's life, though there were   duplicate juicers and sources of music.

> My penis might have had reach, maybe, but it never increased itself for her.

> My wife: she was the active one in the marriage, mixing other men into it.

Both through sentences like these and through a formal arrangement that reproduces for the story as a whole the poetic suspension in which such sentences are designed to hold the reader, "Divorcer" allows us, in effect, to inhabit the experience of divorce rather than simply read about it.

The other stories in the book expand and enhance this effect, approaching the experience from different angles, augmenting it through depth of treatment, their characters compelling precisely because they seem to blend into each other, their shared predicament conveying a powerful sense of pain, confusion, and loss, as well as, frequently enough, self-hatred. In "The Driving Dress," the narrator loses weight in order to begin wearing the clothes left behind by his ex-wife, coming to terms with his (second) divorce by fleeing his own identity. In "Fathering" and "Middleton," no actual divorce is involved, but each introduces us to a marriage at a point when its failure is implicit. In the former, a father focuses his attention on helping his daughter through school, after which his job as a father will be mostly done. Meanwhile, he arranges trysts with other men for his wife, as if acknowledging that the marriage itself is now past its

usefulness. In the latter, a husband's wife has died, and as the husband briefly relates to us the events of the funeral, it becomes clear the marriage had become perfunctory: "There had in fact been talk of divorce, but we talked about it the way other people talked about getting a pool or maybe just a pool table, even just the miniature kind that rests atop a regular table, even a card table." That the marriage was inadequate to the husband's needs is confirmed when shortly after the funeral he begins a sexual relationship with a man.

Two additional stories, "To Whom Might I Have Concerned?" and "I Have to Be Halved," widen the focus to include same-sex relationships as well, although they are portrayed as just as subject to disillusionment and dysfunction as their heterosexual counterparts. Thus sexuality in *Divorcer* is not shown to make a significant difference in tempering the fragility of intimate human relationships. All human beings are prone to the same blindness, indifference, and casual cruelty, all human love accompanied by an expiration date. As the narrator of "Womanesque" explains his failures, "It's just that I was born, grew some, started differing, didn't stop."

These are certainly not original insights. What is original in Gary Lutz's fiction is the especially powerful way in which these insights are expressed, emotionally affecting without resorting to traditional narrative devices. He does not narrow the possibilities of "literary" language to the usual sort of figurative flourishes that too often serve mostly as linguistic decoration, nor does he rely on typical notions of plot or of "well-rounded" characters or any of the other established elements of fiction that draw attention away from language. If much experimental fiction is primarily experiment with form, Lutz's innovation is in paring back form in order to reconceive the purpose of the sentence as the truly essential element of prose fiction. In the way they reinvigorate the English sentence, Lutz's stories in *Divorcer* ought to inspire other writers to consider how close attention to the shapes and sonorities of sentences can in turn bring a satisfyingly new kind of organization to fiction.

If there is another current writer whose work in its sensitivity to the syntactic and auditory intricacies of the sentence does invite comparison with Gary Lutz, it might be Diane Williams. Williams works primarily in what is usually categorized as "flash fiction," as did Lutz early in his career, but in his later work he has combined a focus on the sentence as center of

interest with a fuller exploration of character and plot. In doing so Lutz may have sacrificed some of the nonlinear purity and hallucinatory intensity found in Williams's fiction, and her stories are also more highly wrought, with a greater attention to the possibilities of the form as a means of foregrounding language itself, than most flash fiction has become. They do not settle for snapshot realism, and, despite their length, they in fact encourage slower, more careful reading. If flash fiction potentially appeals to a new, attenuated attention span among some readers, Diane Williams's stories reward expanded attention and encourage rereading. One could spend as much time lingering over her brief fictions as reading much longer stories by more conventional writers, too many of which require too little of the reader's close attention.

"My Defects," the first story in *Vicky Swanky Is a Beauty*, might serve not just as an introduction to this book but also to Williams's work as a whole:

> I'm happy at least to do without a sexual relation and I have this fabulous reputation and how did I get that in the first place? I am proud enough of this reputation and it stands to reason there's a lot that's secret that I don't tell anyone.

> I want to end this at the flabber, although I am flabbergasted.

> I opened the cupboard, where the treats are stored, and helped myself and made a big mess, by the lakeshore, of the food, of the rest of my life, eventually.

> Michelle, the doctor's nurse, showed me a photograph of her cats. The smart cat opens the cupboard, Michelle says, where the treats are stored, and she can help herself, and she makes a big mess!

> I crossed the street to survey the lake and I heard crepitations–three little girls bouncing their ball. I used to see them in perspective–my children–young people, one clearly unsuitable. She can't help herself–she makes a big mess.

> With my insight and skill–what do I search for at the shore?–the repose of the lake. But sadly, although it does have a dreamy look, it is so prone to covering familiar ground.

On first encountering Diane Williams's fiction, readers are likely to puzzle over the classification of such a condensed and often enigmatic work ("My Defects" is quoted here in

full, and it is typical Williams in its length) as a short story. Short, yes, but story? Prose poem, maybe? Prose fragment? Surreal reverie? Williams's stories have characters, but they hardly "develop" in any conventionally recognizable way. Sometimes a story seems to be advancing a plot only to abandon it or veer off in an apparently different direction. Most of the stories are too brief to evoke many details of setting, and while Williams does return to particular themes–especially sex–the stories are generally too elusive for the reader to find them dedicated to "saying something."

In "My Defects," we are introduced to a character whose identity seems continuous enough but who is never really developed beyond her initial assertion that "I am happy at least to do without a sexual relation" and her accompanying puzzlement that "I have this fabulous reputation and how did I get that in the first place?" It could be said that the story is essentially an illustration of the narrator's declaration of her circumstances in the first paragraph. To adequately discern the nature of the story's portrayal of the narrator's situation, however, we must understand the extent to which her initial words are both completely truthful and disingenuous. She doesn't tell us why she is without a sexual relationship or why she is happy about this, nor what precisely her "reputation" is. (Perhaps she speaks for the author, who certainly does have a "fabulous reputation" among her admirers?) Yet at the same time, the narrator expresses in the first paragraph what surely does seem to her a literally accurate account of her life's circumstances, however elliptical the reader might find it.

In a sense, the narrator tries to clarify what she means by this initial statement in the following paragraphs, which at least appear to present a semblance of plot and action. As is usual in a Williams story, the transition is abrupt, the connection at first obscure, facilitated only by some characteristic Williams wordplay. We might all along think that the narrator is speaking from her kitchen, except for the abrupt shift to the doctor's office, which suggests that these scene changes may just be arbitrary. However, the parallel invocation of "a big mess" encourage us to find continuity after all, naturally enough inviting us to wonder what the mess might be. (Are all references to the "mess" just versions of the narrator's?)

That the next paragraph finds the narrator watching children at the lake, imagining her children, "one clearly unsuitable," along with a general air of regret perhaps unavoidably leads

us to suspect that the narrator's visit to the doctor might have been to seek an abortion, although the visit could be simply an implication that she is pregnant. The syntax and transitions are opaque enough that perhaps neither of these scenarios apply, however, and we are probably best advised not to try pinning down the story to its particulars at all. The unanswerable questions persist in the final paragraph. Is the narrator being ironic or sarcastic in referring to her "insight" and "skill," since she ultimately gives us little reason to think she believes herself to possess much of either? Does the "dreamy look" of the lake coincide with the "repose" she seeks there, and wouldn't "familiar ground" actually contribute to repose? And we should again be attentive to the wordplay: a lake by its nature covers unfamiliar ground, although it could also be just a continuation of the ground the narrator currently finds frustratingly familiar.

A story like "My Defects" seems designed–and both its radical compression and its oblique structural devices certainly appear to be products of design–to unavoidably provoke the reader into looking for coherence and continuity while also frustrating any attempts to collapse the story into a too-facile coherence or to find continuity too readily. Like many of Diane Williams's stories, it suspends the reader in its own dreamlike shifts and playful language such that the most satisfying response may be to relax the demand that the story yield up its meaning immediately, to perhaps be willing to tolerate indeterminacy. This would not really mean conceding the story is meaningless, a conclusion reached by too many readers when encountering "difficult" fiction, but rather accepting that its meaning (even at the level of "following" the plot) is suggestive rather than certain, including even the possibility of overlapping, multiple meanings.

Not all of Williams's stories are as compressed as "My Defects" (although some are even briefer and more compressed). The title story provides a character study of sorts of Vicky Swanky, who, "years ago," was a beauty. Now, "her breasts were flat. Her hips were flat. She looked older than her forty years." The first part of the story offers a reasonably cohesive portrait of Vicky Swanky, whom the male narrator announces as an "old friend" who is "going through a divorce" and who invites the narrator over to her house. What the two do together is suggested in typical Williams ambiguity: "In connection with sex, we lightened up a little then and we dumped some of it off the edge at a minimum." The second half of the story introduces elements that seem to develop the situation: the narrator brings over a dog; it snows; Vicky Swanky serves food. The narrator expresses his own uncertainties about the situation: "It was getting busy

concerning the basic meaning, the degree, and the quality." In the story's final paragraph, a plumber arrives and indicates that he will need "to remove everything from the nipple in the wall to the toilet."

"Vicky Swanky," although still very short, is nevertheless characteristic of Williams's more extended fictions. Such stories appear to progress by accumulating incidents, but these incidents lead the reader on paths that inexorably wander in uncharted directions, sometimes changing tack altogether. This is especially true in the novellas Williams has written, such as *On Sexual Strength* and *Romance Erector*. In these longest stories, something like a narrative does develop, but the reader should not expect its episodes to be related through their logical coherence, even if they do unfold in what seems a kind of progression. The narrative is built up out of the accumulation of the smaller units of exposition and "action" we find in the briefer fictions, but it anything the effect over the course of the story is even more digressive than in the flash fictions, as the narrative oddities have more space in which to proliferate.

Thus *Romance Erector* tells the kind of story, about love and sex, the confusions in the former cause by the latter, one would expect from the title, but while it does feature recognizable characters experiencing those confusions, their actions are sufficiently elusive, at times almost arbitrary, that the reader might share their confusions. But the practiced reader of Williams's signature short pieces will surely note the metafictional implications of the narrator's words in Chapter 7, which opens with the narrator telling us "The real story begins on Thursday— pungent, warming—the translucent tale." At the end she admits, however, that "I have storyish ideas but no story in me. This is the row of empty marks. These are the signs of what is next." This of course applies to all of Diane Williams's fictions—they embody "storyish ideas" but relate stories only in the sense that things seem to happen, even if we don't quite know how or why.

In both her longest and shortest fictions, Williams fashions a kind of "story" that proceeds entirely from the "empty marks"—words—that are made into the "signs" that determine "what is next," the sentences that in the intricate process of their unfolding work to shape narrative and character development. The result is indeed "translucent" prose compositions with enough of the

familiar features of a "tale" to be recognized as a story but also cloaked in enough shadow and distortion as to remain mysterious.

DON'TS AND DO'S I

Conceptualisms

Arguably the experimental fiction of the past 50 years has been inherently a "conceptual" fiction. The efforts among such postwar American writers as John Barth, Gilbert Sorrentino, and Raymond Federman to question established norms and to extend the formal possibilities of fiction challenged readers to put aside the assumption that a work of fiction is identical with its "story," which in turn enlists "character," "setting" and "theme" to give it substance. Not all readers would necessarily describe their expectations in this way, nor cling rigidly to them, but even the innovations of modernism (which arguably only altered perceptions of how plots could be organized and characters presented) did not finally overturn assumptions about the centrality of narrative as the default structural principle of fiction.

Writers like Sorrentino and Federman contest these assumptions by disrupting complacent reading habits and substituting for the formal structure provided by narrative (a structure that pretends to be no structure at all but instead the embodiment of fiction in its natural state) an alternative form created for *this* particular work, whose "concept" the reader must ultimately grasp in order to affirm the work's aesthetic integrity. Inveterate experimental writers such as these essentially attempt to reinvent "form" with each new work, requiring that readers regard literary form (at least in fiction, although the stakes are the same in poetry as well) as perpetually unsettled, always subject to revision and re-creation. Most readers of fiction, of course, remain unwilling to relinquish their inherited conception of form as something already known, an established paradigm by which to judge the work's "success," and so experimental or adventurous writers must still attempt to break through ingrained reading habits by, if necessary, rudely interrupting them.

Perhaps it is the persistence of these passive reading habits, despite the efforts of various outlaws, absurdists, metafictionists, and other assorted postmodernists, that accounts for the appearance of a more direct form of conceptualism in Davis Schneiderman's *[SIC]*, as well as

his previous novel, *Blank*. Both books bring to fiction the programmatic conceptualism that has featured prominently in American art since Joseph Kosuth's 1969 manifesto, "Art After Philosophy," and that more recently has been rather flamboyantly adapted to poetry by the poet Kenneth Goldsmith. *Blank* is a series of pages that are, well, blank except for a few pages with chapter titles on which the blank pages refuse to elaborate. Schneiderman has said of the book that it "takes as its starting point that there is no starting point. . .this is literature that exceeds its frame and grows to encompass and then process its own discussions" and that it is "a conceptual work that allows you an entry point into a world beyond realist and experimental/innovative literature. This is conceptual work that responds to the at-times alienating character of contemporary art" (*The Nervous Breakdown*, April 26, 2011).

While such remarks surely do manifest a kind of postironic glibness that warns us not to take them altogether seriously, finally we have to accept that the provocation of *Blank* is indeed directed toward the purposes Schneiderman describes here, or the book threatens to become merely a joke (although we should not underestimate the extent to which it is indeed intended partly as a joke). No doubt Schneiderman does want us to think of his book as going "beyond" both "realist and experimental/innovative literature" and to regard its "content" as radically indeterminate (if it can be said to have content). That the book is meant as a response "to the at-times alienating character of contemporary art" is somewhat vague—What kind of response? To what feature of contemporary art that makes it "alienating"—but more generally this notion that art is fundamentally a response to the nature of art is one of the controlling ideas behind conceptual art going back at least to Kosuth (who himself argues it goes back to Duchamp). Presumably Schneiderman wants us in particular to have in mind the "character" of contemporary fiction (especially in its "literary" version), but the moves he makes in describing his "conceptual book" are recognizably those associated with conceptualism.

Blank certainly follows the central principle associated with conceptual art: once we have identified its motivating concept, we have appreciated its "art," which has almost nothing to do with execution, with the way the writer works with the "materials" at hand. We do not judge this book by its artful disposition of words, since it contains none (aside from the chapter headings, which more call attention to the absence of words than furnish us with a few scarce specimens). *[SIC]* is equally conceptual, although in this case the text is full of words--except that none of

them have been written by the author. (He does conspicuously lay claim to them, nonetheless.) Part 1 of the book consists of a series of appropriated canonical literary works, proceeding in a more or less chronological sequence, form "Caedmon's Hymn" to Joyce's *Ulysses*, each work presented as "by Davis Schneiderman." Part 2 is a "translation" of Borges's "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," although it is actually a transformation of the text through several different languages as produced by an online translation program. Part 3 consists of a miscellany of documents produced since 1923 (the cutoff date for determining the "public domain"), including Dwight Eisenhower's farewell address, a recipe for a "1943 Victory Cake," the source code for the Melissa virus, and the first 30 Tweets—all again putatively "by Davis Schneiderman."

Thus while *[SIC]* unlike *Blank* seems to provide a text we might read (a text composed of other texts), it turns out to be one we don't need to read. Again once we have assimilated the underlying concept bringing the texts together, unless we would like, say, to re-read Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" for its own sake, we have little reason to do more than skim through the book's pages to get its "point." *[SIC]* is an implicit critique of copyright, of the "ownership" of writing and the taboo of plagiarism. Conversely, one might see it as the celebration of the possibilities of appropriation, a kind of literary remixing. Finding this critique satisfying must finally depend on the extent to which the reader also finds him/herself in sympathy with the philosophy of artistic appropriation and considers the product of such appropriation compelling as a work of art, since there are otherwise no aesthetic standards against which a book like this can be measured. Certainly there are many readers who would find this sort of thing simply irrelevant to art, perhaps its very antithesis. Others would just as surely defend it as a necessary tonic against bloated claims on behalf of "originality" and a challenge to us to think seriously about what we do expect of art.

I myself do not find originality an altogether empty term, at least if we concede that originality in art or literature is always a relative claim, a perception that a specific work or writer has exploited a formal possibility not previously so fully realized or produced effects with language so well-rendered, not an assertion that something wholly new, entirely unconstrained by convention or uninfluenced by other artists and the history of the form, has been created or is even possible. Davis Schneiderman would likely deny that in its way his book aspires to

originality, but it seems to me that it asks to be taken as original in the most radical sense, a book so utterly removed from the ordinary practices of "literary fiction" that it is a work of art on its own terms, not on those tied to existing formal requirements or to literary history. It seeks to be regarded as *sui generis*, a book that can be judged only by the criteria its sets up for itself. However, if there are few, if any, touchstones in previous fiction by which to assess it, *[SIC]* is recognizable enough as a fellow traveler with conceptualism in contemporary art, as well as with the escapades of Goldsmith. In this context, *[SIC]* can't really be called original (save perhaps in bringing conceptualism to fiction), but, more importantly, it's really not that interesting, either.

Finally it is rather hard to know why we shouldn't prefer a straightforward nonfiction polemic against the ill effects of copyright (including its perpetuation of the myth of "ownership," of "intellectual property") over the more indirect version of this critique as found in *[SIC]*. In some ways a writer like Davis Schneiderman performs a worthwhile enough service in reminding even those of us who favor experimental writing that we can still impose too many formal requirements on a work of fiction, and "The Borges Transformations" is a provocative demonstration of the inherent instability of meaning in any text. But in restricting the scope of his iconoclasm to what the book wants to "say" about the subject it indirectly raises, *[SIC]* almost negates whatever adventurous impulse might seem to animate a work ostensibly so unconventional. Such didacticism only makes experimental fiction a means of achieving the sort of conventional goal—in this case, communicating a "theme"—emphasized by the "realist" fiction to which it is supposed to be an alternative.

Although Gabriel Blackwell's *The Natural Dissolution of Fleeting-Improvised Men* is a satisfying and successful book on its own, considering it in tandem with Blackwell's previous novel, *Shadow Man* (2012) perhaps helps to clarify the aesthetic assumptions motivating both. For some readers, considering the two novels together might confirm that what otherwise seems in each of them a kind of clever mimicry of genre conventions or of a particular writer's prose style is really just the most visible manifestation of a more deliberate and comprehensive literary strategy. While this strategy could loosely be described as one of "appropriation," in Blackwell's fiction the mere act of appropriating other writers and their work is not so much presented as itself a radical move but provides the material with which the writer continues to create new

work using recognizable elements of fiction ("character," "point of view," etc.), even if what results still begins with what others have already written.

The Natural Dissolution of Fleeting-Improvised-Men is subtitled "The Last Letter of H.P. Lovecraft," and literally it is offered to us as a letter putatively written by Lovecraft a few days before his death, along with an introduction by the man who claims to have found it ("Gabriel Blackwell"), a series of annotations, and at the conclusion a few extended endnotes. The novel's most impressive achievement is its persuasive impersonation of Lovecraft's style—the letter relates Lovecraft's own final experiences in the same manner as his stories—complete with his signature stylistic effects: the breathless cadences, melodramatic descriptions, and often stilted diction. Likewise in *Shadow Man*, Blackwell channels the hard-bitten, wised-up prose style of classic detective fiction in authoring a "biography" of Lewis Miles Archer, purportedly the real-life detective on which Dashiell Hammett's "Miles Archer" was based (himself a character to whom Ross McDonald's "Lew Archer" was subsequently a clear homage). Both Hammett and Raymond Chandler make appearances in this account, and much of the story itself concerns people and events that readers of Chandler's *The Big Sleep* will immediately recognize. (Ultimately we are to believe that Archer himself is the prototype of Chandler's Phillip Marlowe.)

If a common complaint about "experimental fiction" is that it too readily turns its back on the traditional readerly pleasures provided by narrative, narrative voice, and character, both of these novels parry this objection by providing plenty of each. *Shadow Man* features the same sort of labyrinthine plot found in Chandler's fiction, which appeals through its very complications and sudden twists, while *Natural Dissolution* adds to the horror narrative embedded in the Lovecraft letter another narrative strand relating the circumstances by which the letter came into Gabriel Blackwell's possession. This narrative emerges through the annotations to the letter, and eventually the two stories almost merge, each of them a story of "dissolution"—Lovecraft's into the hallucinations preceding his death (induced no doubt by the undiagnosed cancer that killed him), Blackwell's into ennui and debilitation after his girlfriend leaves him. Thus not only does The *Natural Dissolution of Fleeting-Improvised-Men* highlight story, but reinforces the centrality of story by drawing the reader's attention to the parallels between its twin narratives.

Clearly, however, Blackwell's storytelling is still not an ordinary kind of storytelling, concerned as it seems to be with reiterating existing styles, narrative practices, and even characters. This approach certainly takes an inherent risk: Although Blackwell's simulations of a Chandler novel and a Lovecraft tale are very skillfully realized, and part of the enjoyment of reading a book like *The Natural Dissolution of Fleeting-Improvised-Men* comes from appreciating his rendering of Lovecraft's prose style and his reproduction of the typical features of a Lovecraft story, readers who have not read much, if any, of Lovecraft's fiction will necessarily be less able to experience the full effect of Blackwell's performance. The fictional narrative taking up most of the Lovecraft letter has enough of the menacing, metaphysical horror and quasi-psychedelic imagery characteristic of Lovecraft's better stories that even these uninitiated readers can still find the story of H.P. Lovecraft's disintegration compelling, especially in its increasing resonance with Gabriel Blackwell's descent into his own hellish circumstances, both of them becoming the story of "fleeting-improvised-men." Nevertheless, readers who are familiar with Lovecraft's work will inevitably be more aware both of Blackwell's strategy and his accomplishment in creatively appropriating that work.

Perhaps readers of genre fiction more generally will be drawn to Blackwell's work, as both *Shadow Man* and *Natural Dissolution* are specifically appropriations of genre fiction. One might say that Blackwell has taken the tendency among some contemporary writers to incorporate elements of genre to a literal and logical extreme, manifesting a relationship to genre conventions that goes beyond homage or assimilation to one that might be called parasitical. While surely Blackwell is an admirer of the genres (and authors) from which his novels borrow, neither of them is really very far from parody or satire. This tongue-in-cheek tone is part of what makes these novels appealing, while forcing greater distance between the invented narrative and its underlying source prevents them from becoming versions of "fan fiction." Ultimately neither book so much toys with the elements of genre per se, or the specific conventions of detective and horror fiction, as they use these particular genres to create a fictional world out of fiction, to fashion alternative forms of storytelling from the shards of conventional storytelling.

In this way, a book like *The Natural Dissolution of Fleeting-Improvised Men* could certainly be called a work of "metafiction"; if anything, it is more radically "fiction about fiction" than the work of those first associated with it (Barth, Sorrentino, etc.). Self-reflexivity as

practiced by these writers was meant to disrupt the reader's suspension of disbelief, reminding us we are reading fiction, with all of its artificial devices. Blackwell's novel doesn't ask us to be mindful of the distinction between fiction and reality. Instead it invites us into a fictional creation we already know to be blatantly artificial. However much "the last letter of H.P. Lovecraft" is framed through circumstances meant to vouch for its authenticity, and despite the quasi-scholarly tone of the Introduction, no readers are likely to assume the letter is real and thus to further accept the accompanying account of the hardships faced by "Gabriel Blackwell" as anything other than an invention. One could say that *The Natural Dissolution of Fleeting-Improvised Men* asks the reader to suspend the inclination to *believe*—that what we are reading could at some fundamental level "really happen," or that the experiences related must in some way reflect the author's own.

In explaining his own turn to metafiction, John Barth invoked what he called "the literature of exhaustion," a kind of fiction being written by Barth and others that proceeded on the assumption that the received conventions of fiction had been "used up" and that the task facing the adventurous writer was to find a way to create something new out of the very "exhaustion" of fiction's traditional resources. Barth himself did this by always reminding the reader that the imperatives of storytelling are not the imperatives of life, that the former should not be constrained by the latter. Gabriel Blackwell accepts this task as well, perhaps even taking its potential a step farther. The *Natural Dissolution of Fleeing-Improvised Men*, as well as *Shadow Man*, pretend to give up on the possibility of telling new stories in fiction and instead recycle elements of "old" fiction, in the process paradoxically producing something new, after all.

DON'TS AND DO'S II

Dynamics of the Page

Even fans of Mark Danielewski and his typographically adventurous novels *House of Leaves* and *Only Revolutions* should be disappointed with *The Fifty Year Sword*. Previously published only in the Netherlands in 2005, this novella adds almost nothing to a consideration of the aesthetic possibilities of manipulating the physical features of a printed book not already present in the two novels, and if anything the underlying narrative to which these manipulations

are meant to contribute is even less compelling than those we encounter in *House of Leaves* and *Only Revolutions*. If the former manages to bring some life to what is finally an overly familiar narrative (perhaps two interlocking but overly familiar narratives) through its challenges to the protocols of the printed page, and the latter partially substitutes, at least for a while, the sheer audacity of its defiance of these protocols for an even more lackluster narrative, *The Fifty Year Sword* does neither of these things. Its textual provocations are tepid, mere flourishes, its story, such as it is, little more than a convenience and difficult to take seriously.

The Fifty Year Sword does little more to depart from the typographical conventions of fiction than to give the appearance of printed verse, or verse dialogue. (That the lines of dialogue are color-coded as a way of identifying the speakers seems simply a repetition of the same sort of device used in the two novels, and altogether it is not a particularly interesting device, anyway.) At one point the text is printed vertically rather than horizontally, requiring us to rotate the book in our hands, but again this move is the sort of thing we have come to expect from *House of Leaves* and *Only Revolutions*, and once it has been established that our assumptions about how to properly read a book are to an extent arbitrary, to simply keep issuing this reminder without offering compelling demonstration of how literature might continue to be enhanced by reading differently makes the effort seem mostly gimmickry. (Fortunately, in *The Fifty Year Sword* use of the device is limited, so we aren't really forced to dwell on its apparent lack of purpose.) Otherwise, the unconventional or "innovative" elements of *The Fifty Year Sword* are restricted to the use of graphic illustrations (many of them) and various misspellings and neologisms, neither of which are in fact innovative at all. The wordplay seems particularly derivative of Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* — "pricksticking," "indacitation" — while the illustrations are generally unremarkable, albeit not terribly intrusive.

Danielewski gave a reading of The *Fifty Year Sword* in 2010, when it was still unavailable in the United States as a printed text. Perhaps this "theatrical performance," as it was described, managed to make the novella's story seem more substantive, or at least more dramatic, but shorn of the whizz-bang and stagy spectacle it doesn't make for very captivating reading as a book. It is more or less a children's story in which a group of orphans listen to a figure identified as "the Story Teller" relate a story about magical swords. A touch of "adult" interest is added in the conflict between the seamstress Chintana and Belinda Kite, who has had an affair with

Chintana's husband. The novella ends with Belinda Kite literally being cut to pieces (in a delayed response to one of the swords) and falling apart "even as slices of joints and nails/scattered apart on the frosty stone/followed /by the slow tumbling/slivers of the rest/of Belinda Kite's/hand." Again this scene might have greater effect when reproduced in a "theatrical performance," but then perhaps it might have been written directly for such a performance rather than as a work of fiction, where the artificial arrangements of the words in this description can neither substitute for the visual immediacy of the scene as performed nor finally elevate it beyond the rather ordinary fairy tale-ish story it concludes.

The most useful service the publication *The Fifty Year Sword* might offer is to confirm the initial achievement of *House of Leaves*, but also to illustrate the limitations of that achievement, at least as Danielewski has so far shown in his attempts to follow up on the accomplishments of his first novel. *House of Leaves* established the basic principle underlying his alternative practice as a fiction writer, that "the book" as traditionally conceived and formatted is an object whose properties we have come to consider fixed but are in fact entirely contingent and thus open to revision. *House of Leaves* is a prodigious attempt at such revision, including experiments with typeface, print placement (in the traditional column, multiple columns, in areas cordoned off in various ways, rightside-up, upside-down, sideways, in brief snippets at the top, bottom, and middle of the page), the insertion of visual/graphic aids, the "proper" function of the page in general. Danielewski wants the reader's eye to roam around the page, to suspend the expectation that a literary text must adhere to the conventions of reading associated with the European codex (left-to-right, top-to-bottom) that now define what "reading a book" signifies. This is certainly a perfectly valid strategy, based on a valuable insight that could continue to inspire writers of innovative fiction. However, Danielewksi and his admirers have attempted to promote his work as if this insight is unique to him and his fiction *sui generis*, when in fact writers such as Ronald Sukenick and Raymond Fedeman investigated the possibility of taking the printed page as malleable 40 years ago. Federman's *Double or Nothing* (1971) and *Take It or Leave It* (1976), in fact, are at least as radical as Danielewski's novels in their textual disruptions, and, in my opinion, more aesthetically satisfying.

House of Leaves provides its share of aesthetic satisfaction, but even it is marred by a well-worn and formulaic story, the story of an "outsider" existing on the margins of society (in this

case an outcast with a scholarly bent and a mental illness) the conventionality of which isn't really enlivened much by its intersection with a secondary narrative that doesn't rise much above the level of an ordinary horror story, nor can either of these stories really sustain interest to the end of a 700-page novel. This has in turn the unfortunate effect of more heavily burdening the novel's textual play with even more of the responsibility for maintaining the reader's attention, a burden it cannot quite fully shoulder at such length. The formal experiments of *House of Leaves* thus threaten to seem grafted onto a narrative that is really only an excuse for the exercise of these experiments. The fiction by Sukenick and Federman engaging in similar, and antecedent, experiments, never left such an impression. Their experiments were integral to the story being created through the formal effects, the "content" not distinguishable from the "form" that gives the story its singular expression. These works are also self-reflexively aware of themselves as stories in process, so that the literal act of inscription, of arranging words, sentences, and paragraphs on the page becomes part of the narrative content. Although *House of Leaves* does depict its protagonist as a writer of sorts, at least as the "editor" of the manuscript that brings the twin narratives together, this activity finally seems as much a fortuitous justification of the novel's typographical pyrotechnics as an effort to explore the implications of this inscriptive free-for-all in a reconsideration of the aesthetic ordering of fiction.

This limitation is even more pronounced in *Only Revolutions* and *The Fifty Year Sword*. In *Only Revolutions* the pyrotechnics finally seem the novel's only real source of interest, since once the reader is able to discern its narrative line (and this isn't easy), it proves to be yet again formulaic and dull, essentially a version of a "road novel" in which its two peripatetic outsider characters travel across the country, with the additional twist that they drive across time as well. This science fiction element parallels the horror element in *House of Leaves*, intended to provide the otherwise perfunctory story with some additional appeal, but if anything it falls even flatter. The story of the two young lovers and their adventures across time and space has almost no drama, not even of the episodic kind found in most picaresque narratives, and its characters are entirely colorless. Thus while the pyrotechnics might be even more flamboyant — competing accounts meeting in the middle of the book, requiring us to flip the book over and read from both "front" and "back" — eventually the tedium induced by the narrative makes it increasingly difficult to continue the attempt to assimilate them. Ultimately it is hard to deny that *Only Revolutions* is indeed a very experimental novel, but it is a decidedly failed experiment, albeit of

a sort that might still be adapted successfully in another context — something briefer, or at least with a more effective fusion of matter and manner.

Unfortunately we cannot conclude from *The Fifty Year Sword* that *Only Revolutions* might be just an understandable misstep after the audacious debut of Danielewski's iconoclastic project in *House of Leaves*, its flaws the product of unfocused or misdirected ambition. It does not show us a writer exercising much ambition at all but merely repeating the same moves his first book prepares us to expect, repetition *Only Revolutions* continues at exhausting length. Certainly *The Fifty Year Sword* is a very slight work, and a first-time reader of Danielewski who starts here is most likely to conclude it is superficially unusual, but hardly in a way that is likely to change the course of literary history. Such a reader might in fact find it simply boring. Still, the disappointment of this book should not altogether rule out the chance Danielewski will discover a new and surprising strategy in a future work exploiting his essential insight into the plasticity of the literary text, one that allows neither our notions of "text" nor of "story" to go unexamined. *Only Revolutions* was not that work, but perhaps the "serial novel" Danielewski is soon to be publishing will be. (Simply that he has chosen to publish it in serial form is not, of course, itself a particularly venturesome or innovative move.) For now, *House of Leaves* remains as an admirable literary performance that unfortunately threatens to become merely a curiosity.

In many ways Steve Tomasula's *Once Human* (FC2) is a very good introduction to the work of this conspicuously unconventional writer for those who are either unfamiliar with his previous work or have shied away from it because it promised to depart too radically from the conventions of "normal" fiction. Venturesome readers with find that this book indeed exhibits Tomasula's trademark assimilation of visual elements—photos, illustrations, graphs and charts, drawings—into the verbal "text," as well as the inveterate manipulation of typography and page design. However, encountering these devices through a selection of stories allows the reader to contemplate Tomasula's strategies in shorter samples, while the selection also provides some variety, perhaps encouraging readers to appreciate that these strategies are both purposeful and ultimately accessible.

Tomasula's approach is evident in the book's first story, "The Color of Flesh." The story of protagonist Yumi's discovery that her boyfriend may be attracted to her not despite the fact she has a prosthetic limb but because of it and his pornographic obsession with disfigured female bodies is enhanced by drawings that give the story most immediately the look of a graphic novel. But the story actually contains plenty of text, and the drawings are not themselves the medium through which the narrative is presented. Neither are they merely decorative, although they are certainly well-rendered. So striking are they, in fact, that it soon enough becomes clear we are meant to do more than just glance at the drawings as a kind of accompaniment to the written text but to consider them a constituent part of a reconceived "text" that integrates writing and visual devices, with each contributing its own effect to the new, hybrid text. Thus, in "The Color of Flesh" the illustrations impress as more than ornamental, a drawing of prosthetic limbs "dangling from the ceiling" of a "shop that sold such things" in particular adding a spooky (if stylized) palpability that isn't quite achieved by the prose description alone, not even the comparison to "Gepetto's workshop."

It might be tempting to call Tomasula's approach "multi-media," especially since he has produced one "book," *TOC*, that can only really be described as multi-media, as it is not published as a book at all but on DVD and predominantly takes visual form, but the goal does not seem to be to blend prose fiction and visual media as much as to extend our conception of what prose fiction might be. Is it the case, a story like "The Color of Flesh" asks us, that when visual art is added to literary art a work of fiction becomes something else, no longer fiction but precisely a hybrid, something separate that should be judged by standards other than those traditionally applied to fiction, or does it remain within the boundaries of that form as historically established, albeit questioning where those boundaries should lie? Readers could come to different conclusions about this, but arguably Tomasula's fiction is most consequential if we think of it as still belonging to literature, as an attempt to reckon with the status of fiction at a time when visual representations are more pervasive than ever.

Tomasula has cited the influence on his work of such writers as Raymond Federman, Gilbert Sorrentino, and William Gass, all of whom similarly unsettle our usual way of reading— on pages with blocks of text, read sequentially from top to bottom—although none of these writers (aside from Gass in his novella *Willie Master's Lonesome Wife*) really included pictorial

elements. Tomasula's own work is thus perhaps best understood as extending their experiments, proceeding under the fundamental assumption that the page (and all of his books aside from *TOC* do take the printed page as fiction's native medium) is infinitely pliable, a site where the literary artist might create aesthetic effects not confined to the usual felicities of prose style, and might also contribute to a reconception of form that includes but goes beyond sole reliance on traditional verbal narrative. If we judge much conventional fiction by the degree to which it encourages us to transcend the page, to give ourselves over to the illusion good writing is supposed to cast, Tomasula's stories and novels keep us firmly rooted to the page, refusing to let us forget the materiality of the medium.

Although the drawings and photographs in *Once Human*—some of which are quite complex and detailed—are the most conspicuous illusion-suspending elements, Tomasula's attention to the dynamics of the page is also manifest in typography and typeface. No two stories come in the same font size, and the page layouts follow no rules of prose composition other than those the author has invented. The pages of some of the stories often shift in appearance, in some cases multiple times. The text of "The Color of Flesh" begins in a single column, switches to double columns, and in the second half of the story kaleidoscopically changes fonts, page color (black on white to white on black), and page design (the text presented in something resembling thought balloons). "Self-Portrait" at first seems a more or less conventionally printed story, free of both visual aids and typographical oddities, except that a closer look reveals a column of words running down each of the inner margins, one column repeating the work "stroke," the other "snap," the two actions performed by the story's protagonist, a lab technician responsible for euthanizing mice for testing.

If at first this might seem a random, even frivolous gesture, ultimately it does have the effect of continually reminding us of the "work" the technician carries out, which presumably we are to consider important to the story's explication, even as the story appears to develop the situation in other, tangential directions (the protagonist's romantic involvement with his co-worker, for example). This sort of literalization of motif or image can perhaps be seen most clearly in stories such as "The Atlas of Man" and "The Risk-Taking Gene as Expressed by Some Asian Subjects." The narrator of the first is a researcher who collects data on human body shape. He falls in love with a fellow researcher (unhappily). The text of this story includes several

illustrations of bodies and body types, as well as various graphs representing the work the narrator has done in studying the human body. Together, these visual elements reinforce the contrast between the narrator's usual impassive approach to the world as filtered through his work and his growing self-awareness of the implications of that work in relation to himself, a contrast that ultimately works to create some sympathy for the man's emotional confusion.

"The Risk-Taking Gene" again focuses on a researcher, in this case studying the purported "risk-taking gene," the "genetic propensity discovered by Cloninger, Adolfsson, and Svrakic for some people to put themselves at risk in order to feel the level of arousal most of us get from the petty concerns of our day." The narrator in this story is conducting interviews in an Asian-American neighborhood (or trying to), and winds up being surprised by the identity of the "subject" who is indeed most willing to take risks. The story relies less on pictorial devices and more on page design and typography for its effects. Reflecting the narrator's line of work, some of the pages are printed on a facsimile of a questionnaire, others on what appears to be a representation of a DNA gel. Both of these stories employ a non-conventional fusion of text and visuals, each playing off of the other, that typifies Tomasula's literary method. Since finally his fiction does not at all abandon narrative—some of these stories have rather dramatic plots—it offers not an alternative to "story" but an alternative way of telling a story still anchored to the printed page.

Both "The Atlas of Man" and "The Risk-Taking Gene" are also obviously related in their focus on a character doing "research" on the human body. In this they share a dominant theme of Tomasula's work, exemplified most notably in *VAS*, his best-known novel and probably greatest achievement to date. Subtitled "An Opera in Flatland," the novel is first of all a kind of pastiche of a previous novel, Edwin Abbott's *Flatland*, a geometry-based science fiction "romance" published in 1885. Tomasula takes over the premise of "people" living in a two-dimensional "flatland," people who are themselves geometrical figures. Thus the main characters of *VAS* are "Square" and his wife, "Circle." The plot of this novel is minimal but, narratively speaking, straightforward. After a series of failed pregnancies (resulting in miscarriage or abortion), Circle has asked Square to get a vasectomy, to which he has agreed, although as the novel begins he has not yet signed the consent form required. Most of the rest of the novel follows Square as he

ponders the implications of his decision and the state of his relationships both with Circle and his daughter, Oval.

VAS becomes "operatic" in the way it illustrates and embodies the story of Square reckoning with his situation by depicting it through very elaborate drawings, photographs, and other visual elements comprising a large portion of the text, these elements becoming something like the music that transforms a play into an opera. The novel is an "opera in Flatland," of course, because it takes place not in the three-dimensional space of theatrical operas, or even the simulated space of film, video, or cyberspace, but on the page, through the "flat" surfaces of text and graphic image. Thus *VAS* is still dedicated to *literary* experiment, to testing the limits of the page as literature's traditional medium. Online publication has obviously challenged the seemingly necessary connection between literary works and the printed page, but Tomasula continues to take the page as his focus, aside from *TOC*. Indeed, most of his published fiction depends on its realization on pages, and its effects would be almost totally lost on, say, a Kindle.

Tomasula employs his effects in part to fulfill one of the most traditional of literary goals, developing "theme." If anything, Tomasula's fiction is even more devoted to communicating theme than most mainstream literary fiction. The researchers and scientists in his fiction are engaged in work ultimately intended to help overcome the supposed limitations of human biology and genetics, to remake our physical existence. *VAS* is probably the work in which Tomasula most intensively explores the implications of the scientific intervention into nature as represented by the human body (one thinks of Hawthorne's stories about human beings "playing God") and the creation of a "postbiological" future. Square familiarizes himself with the history of eugenics, human experimentation, genetic engineering, and various other "advances" in medical science, his contemplation of these subjects accompanied by an almost dizzying variety of visual and typographical devices that make the motives behind and ultimate consequences of the rise of the "postbiological" even more disturbing.

Remaking reality is of course the ambition of fiction as well, and Tomasula's work can also be taken as variant of metafiction, subjecting fiction to the same scrutiny as these other efforts to reshape and reorder the world. The representations of the body offered by the scientific methods of mapping and measuring it are themselves represented literally in Tomasula's

pictorial imagery, provoking us to reflect on the extent to which literature aspires to the pictorial even while doing so through the descriptive and figural powers of language. Similarly, his typographical variations insistently remind us that the arrangement of print on the page has also always reinforced a particular way of organizing literary representation, one that is assumed to be the "natural" form that reading takes but that Tomasula's work proceeds to show can be altered. "Representation" is itself the subject of his 2006 novel *The Book of Portraiture*, the title of which is taken from the supposed journal of the painter Velasquez, which among other things chronicles the creation of Velasquez's "The Maids of Honor," a notoriously self-reflexive painting that depicts the painter himself among the other subjects of the painting, standing at his easel and apparently staring outside the painting at the viewer. The other sections of the book (including a reworked version of "Self-Portrait") also invoke the human urge to re-present reality, to both productive and destructive effect, making *The Book of Portraiture* the most avowedly metafictional of Tomasula's books, but one that doesn't just expose the inherent artifice of narrative but reveals the transformative effects, potentially liberating but also potentially dangerous, of human beings' capacity to reimagine themselves.

Once Human is not as intently focused either on the scientific and technological manipulation of nature as *VAS* or the implications of representation as *The Book of Portraiture*. The most explicitly metafictional story in the book is probably "Farewell to Kilimanjaro," which is finally more conventional parody than metafictional self-reflection in its "what if" story of an elderly Ernest Hemingway (in the story simply called "E") experiencing degradation in an old folks home. "Medieval Times" has a family resemblance to one of George Saunders's theme-park stories ("CivilWarLand in Bad Decline"), although it ultimately satirizes current events through analogy more directly than Saunders does. "The Color of Pain and Suffering" is of a piece with "Self-Portrait" and "The Atlas of Man" in its focus on the romantic travails of a medical illustrator. Still, even if *Once Human* is something of a miscellany collecting Tomasula's shorter fiction, that very quality gives readers a valuable sampling of the work of a compelling and genuinely experimental writer.

NO WAVE: *30 UNDER 30*

The most serious obstacle to taking the anthology *30 Under 30* as an illuminating introduction to "innovative fiction by younger writers" is that, literally, it provides no introduction. The thirty stories are presented to us without context, with no preliminary statement by the editors, Blake Butler and Lily Hoang, of the principles of selection they used, no discussion of the variety of experiment or innovation the reader will encounter, no indication of the logic, if any, behind the order of the stories' presentation. Essentially we are asked to make sense of the anthology as we can, without the assistance of those who presumably believed it was important that an anthology of innovative fiction by writers under 30 be published in the first place.

Perhaps this is deliberate. Perhaps the editors hoped to let the stories, in effect, speak for themselves. As a gesture in support of the integrity of the selections included, this might be laudable enough, but arguably any anthology of innovative or "experimental" fiction requires some advice and direction for readers not already sympathetic with its ambitions, perhaps even intimidated by it, and it would seem especially important to provide some guidance for a book such as *30 Under 30*, which in concentrating on experimental fiction by a rising cohort of writers brings up several implicit questions: How does this new cohort understand the concept of "innovation" as applied to works of fiction? How do the writers situate themselves in relation to previous innovative writers? What new avenues of exploration do these stories open up for fiction writers who might in turn be inspired by them?

An editor's introduction that addressed these questions certainly could not answer them definitively, but an awareness that such questions naturally suggest themselves in confronting a book like *30 Under 30* surely would help the reader to read the selections attentively, in a way that rewards the effort. Most of all, it would help the writers whose work has been selected, since their fiction could be judged in its appropriate context, in relation to both the work of their predecessors in the development of self-consciously innovative fiction and the other writers included in the anthology. Instead, the reader is left to apply whatever connotations of "innovative" he/she already brings to the stories, if any, which potentially leaves some of the selections incomprehensible to some readers and does nothing remind us that connotations of

"innovation" and "experiment" must remain in flux, that expectations of fiction evolve along with the form itself. "An anthology of innovative fiction by younger writers" is brandished in the book's title as if of course we already know what innovative fiction looks like and the book's contents exemplify it in some readily apprarent way that needs no further elaboration.

Moreover, readers who do expect that an anthology of "innovative fiction" will exhibit significant formal innovation will probably be disappointed with *30 Under 30*. On the whole, the selections included are quite heavy on narrative, even old-fashioned linear narrative, however surreal or fantastic the events chronicled often are. Indeed, surrealism or a fantasy-inflected version of absurdism seems the dominant strategy in these selections, but it is a fabular, allegorical mode of surrealism in which the reader's attention is consistently oriented toward story. Many of these stories have strong affinities to the work of Aimee Bender and George Saunders, who, to judge by this anthology, may be among current writers the strongest influence on the rising generation of "younger writers," although some of the fiction in *30 Under 30* subtracts the essentially whimsical humor that characterizes Bender's and Saunders's work, making these surrealistic fables somewhat starker in their distortions of reality.

Another inspiration for the flights from reality that mark most of these stories seems to be various narrative forms of popular culture: movies, tv, comic books, perhaps video games. Matt Bell's "Jumpman vs. the Ape," for example, recapitulates King Kong by way of DC comics, its protagonist attempting to himself ascend the structure the ape is climbing in order to rescue the heroine from its clutches. The story in substance extracts the melodrama of heroism and victimization from such popular genres, but, in a move reminiscent of *Groundhog Day*, Bell portrays Jumpman failing in his goal of winning the girl and being compelled to repeat the quest again and again. Jaclyn Dwyer's "Biography of a Porn Star" is an affecting if askew account of the life and work of the title character, which portrays them as decidedly unglamorous. Both of these stories take familiar narrative types and twist or invert them, a strategy that works well enough in these two stories but that surely now isn't very "innovative," previously employed as it was by such "postmodern" writers as Donald Barthleme and Robert Coover. The same thing might be said of Devin Gribbons's "A Short Story," which is an enjoyable enough metafiction (its first-level "plot" revolving around the development of a device that destroys souls) but can't

really be said to much extend the possibilities of metafiction beyond those already established by the postmodernists.

There are some stories in *30 Under 30* that do obviously experiment with form. Zach Dodson's "I Write to You" is presented in the form of a familiar Mead Composition book (complete with cover and appropriately lined pages), but finally there's really nothing about the substance of the story–a series of typically disconnected musings by an unidentified diarist–that really is either enhanced by the formal framework or seems to require it. Adam Good is described in the contributor's notes as an "interdisciplinary artist" rather that a fiction writer, and while his "Guided Walks" might provoke some curiosity as a "word installation," it doesn't seem likely as a model for future development in fiction. The most interesting and successful of these formally unconventional stories is Todd Seabrook's "When Robin Hood Fell With an Arrow Through His Heart," which relates the death of Robin Hood and the demise of the Merry Men through a first-person account by one of the latter that observes no typographical rules or boundaries. But in this case the ortho/typographical idiosyncrasies have an aesthetically justified and reinforcing function, as the wandering prose and depleted verbal resources mirror the lost focus and declining powers of the Merry Men in the wake of Robin Hood's death.

A kind of lassitude and lack of focus thematically lingers over much of this collection. In addition to the frustrations of purpose conveyed by the narratives of stories like Bell's and Seabrook's, many if not most of the selections portray characters who are at loose ends, disconnected from their environment, alienated and aimless. In many ways the prevailing surrealism seems a way of emphasizing such disconnections and alienation, but the loss of direction is perhaps most directly represented in the extreme fragmentation characteristic of the selected work as a whole. If narrative is emphasized in these stories, it is not narrative continuously presented. But, again, fragmentation cannot really any longer be considered particularly innovative as a narrative strategy, however much it does seem appropriate to the characters, setting, and circumstances of specific stories and to the worldview that emerges from the collection in general. Michael Stewart's "Sister," comprised of twenty-two very brief "chapters" (in an eight-page story) is just one example of a story unfolding in fragments, although its structure particularly highlights its radical compression. The cumulative impression left by stories like this is that even though the need to tell stories remains, the possibility of

telling them straight–either through the assumptions of realism or through sustained narrative exposition–seems to have been exhausted, no longer among the resources currently available to the writer of fiction.

"Compression" is at work in *30 Under 30* in other ways as well, specifically in the form of "shorts" or "flash fiction." Several of the included writers are represented by a series of such pieces, including James Yeh and Joshua Cohen. Yeh's pieces are untypically (for this volume) realistic sketches that seem carefully composed for the "flash" form. Although it is tempting to find continuities between the five short pieces that would allow considering them as a larger whole, finally they are probably related only by the first-person narrator common to each. Cohen's seven shorts seem even less integrated, but since Cohen is arguably the most accomplished innovative writer included in this book, and since his already published work has been of the maximalist rather than the minimalist variety, it is tempting to wonder whether he might be experimenting with the juxtaposition of seemingly disassociated short prose pieces, or whether these pieces simply have been gathered together here, odds and ends of a sort.

While "flash fiction" is hardly a new phenomenon, it is fair to say it has yet to achieve full acceptance as a literary form separate from the "regular" short story or as a possible convergence of short fiction and prose poetry. Of the approaches to be sampled in *30 Under 30*, it seems to me the most likely to continue offering writers the opportunity to extend the horizons of fiction. Simply inverting realism through surrealistic distortion and discordance (as if "realism" is still the primary enemy of innovation in fiction rather than conformity of practice more broadly) is a limited strategy that can become just as conventionalized as realism. Working toward a hybrid of fiction and poetry (which need not be restricted to short forms) would perhaps encourage writers–and readers–to focus more on language as the essential element of both.