The Other Moral Fiction:

On the Ethic of "Confusion and Doubt"

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Abstract

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Literary realism as championed by John Gardner makes fidelity to the real a moral and aesthetic imperative. This essay contests the morality and plausibility of "realism." A theoretical review discusses the narrative construction of identity and world-view. A discussion of Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* and Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* suggests that they undermine literary realism in ways that also tend to resist extra-literary dogmas. A section focused largely on Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* argues that magical realism goes further, not only resisting the dominant world-view but modeling a way to alter or replace it. As this is an MFA essay, the final section considers whether strategies discussed are suitable for the author's own fiction.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wrote this essay in 1993, after which I left the University of Washington without submitting my thesis. For a few years, this seemed like a reasonable choice; then, for a couple of decades, it didn't, but I thought it was too late to go back. Thank you to my wife Deborah who called the Creative Writing office in 2019 to see if I might not be wrong. Thank you to Director David Crouse who did allow me to come back. Thank you to Program Coordinator Judy Leroux who held my hand from 1,000 miles away. Thank you to Professors David Bosworth and David Shields who picked up where they left off years ago. Thank you to Professor Donna Gerstenberger, no longer with us, the third member of my original thesis committee. Thank you to Emeritus Professor Malcolm Griffith, who was an important influence, though not part of my committee. None of the above are responsible for any missteps herein; those are mine.

Since this is an acknowledgements page, I should perhaps acknowledge the truth of Professor Shields' observation that rebutting John Gardner was not an urgent critical project in 1993. Nor has it become more urgent in the past quarter-century. Professor Bosworth, on the other hand, was surely correct to suggest that some of my attacks on Gardner are unnecessarily strident. This essay is a product of a particular time and a particular stage in my development. Even so, I am pleased to find much in it that I still affirm.

DEDICATION

For Deborah because obviously.

I. Doubts about Fiction and the Real World

This essay will take issue with the verisimilitude advocated by John Gardner in *On Moral Fiction*. I apply the term "verisimilitude" to what he prefers to call "reality," "truth," "honest thought," etc.; he uses the word only once, and then only to acknowledge that it is not crucial, pointing out that its lack in the poems of Coleridge is not a problem (142). The sort of verisimilitude to which this passage refers (a loyalty to facts) is also deemed expendable on page 110, when Gardner expressly permits such characters as dragons, griffins, and Achilles' talking horses. Yet he is made indignant by a passage in Doctorow's *Ragtime* in which a man's "rampant" penis "whipped him about the floor" (78). Says Gardner: "Things do not happen in the world as Doctorow claims they do. Even in the hands of young and highly excited men, penises do not behave as Doctorow maintains" (79). To Gardner, this is a serious artistic failing, and he concludes that, although Doctorow "urges social justice in a more or less moving and persuasive way … he is not concerned with true morality" (78). Returning to the passage on page 110, we note that Gardner can do without "realism" but demands allegiance to "reality":

> To learn about reality by mimicking it, needless to say, the writer must never cheat. He may establish any sort of *givens* he pleases, but once they are established he must follow where, in his experience, nature would lead if there really were, say, griffins …. By rhetoric any writer worth his salt can convince a reader that an eighty-pound griffin falls twice as fast as a forty-pound griffin, but if natural law in a world containing griffins is one of the premises the writer has accepted, the rhetoric is a betrayal of honest thought.

Gardner's is a systemic verisimilitude. Art may feature details he does not recognize as part of his world, but his general notion of what the world is and how it works ought not be challenged. (This seems to apply as much to moral as to natural law, and this essay will imitate some of Gardner's segues; it is among my central points that verisimilitude is no more separable

from ideology than astronomy was from theology in 1633.) A fictional world should be *consistent* in a way that seems familiar. This preference is hardly unique. How many creative writing teachers would argue with Gardner's assertion that "once the character is established for a creature, the creature must act in accord with it" (110)? But when is character "established"? Suppose the first sentence describing the character uses contradictory adjectives? If the writer seems competent, we will probably take it as a sign that the character is complex. And if the first sentence is contradicted by the second? Again, we probably feel that we are reading about a complex being (just as in "real life"). But what if the first chapter is contradicted by the second chapter? What if the first two-hundred pages are contradicted by page two-hundred and one? Many readers (and more critics) will object. We are trained to subscribe to simultaneously vague and arbitrary rules of verisimilitude, which Gardner elevates to a "mode of thought" by which a writer makes "discoveries" when "he asks himself at every step, 'Would she really say that' or 'Would he really throw the shoe'" (109).

But the best answer to such a question is the one Robert Coover gives us in "The Babysitter": not yes or no, but maybe. He might decide, for no clear reason, to throw the kitchen knives instead, then murder his wife with a rolling pin, leaving stunned neighbors to pose for newscameras and say, "He was always such a gentle man." Life, like the newspapers, is full of inexplicable behavior, and it's a poor copy of reality in which nothing improbable happens. This is where many creative writing teachers will fall back on Twain's famous dictum that truth is stranger than fiction because fiction must be believable—demonstrating that the issue has nothing to do with rendering the real, only with a certain tradition of verisimilitude, a tradition that imposes itself both on our fiction and our lives. At this point, I've found, I must settle the point of whether I am advocating a journalistic fiction: no. My point is not that Gardner's is the

wrong way to render the real; it will soon be clear that I question whether rendering the real is ever feasible. I hope only to justify my own unwillingness to abide by what I perceive as a graduate student (even after Gass, Barth, Pynchon, etc. have achieved canonical status) to be the rules taught firmly if implicitly to aspiring writers near the close of the 20th century. To some, my arguments will seem unnecessary and redundant; I plead guilty to the latter charge, but my experience contradicts the former. Even if it were true (and it is not) that Gardner's following died when he did, that every Creative Writing professor concurs with all (or any) of William Gass's rebuttals of John Gardner's claims, this would only have abated a symptom, not altered the condition certain to bring it quietly back. Verisimilitude is not (though it may once have been) a merely literary issue.

In *The Public Burning*, Coover repeatedly notes the way the verisimilar tradition influences our thinking and behavior. For instance, Ethel Rosenberg thinks of those who plan to execute her on the strength of thin and contradictory evidence,

> It's not that they have failed to learn something, but rather that they have learned too much, have built up ways of looking at the world that block off natural human instincts. It's as though society through its formal demands were bent not on ennobling people … but on demeaning them, reducing them to cardboard roleplayers …. And the deeper they got into their roles, the less they remember who they were before they took on the parts. But …. Going on with life at all means having to adopt one role or another … doesn't it? (128-29)

And Coover's Richard Nixon says, on page 449, that "all men contain all views … and only an artificial—call it political—commitment to consistency makes them hold steadfast to singular positions." (Note: Whether Coover convinces a reader to doubt the Rosenbergs' guilt is irrelevant. It is enough if one asks the question "Why have we always been so sure?" and grasps Coover's argument that "the facts" provide an inadequate answer.) Gardner might reject such a

critique on the grounds of no alternative. He assumes a certain inevitability, but verisimilitude is not the only venerable scheme for apprehending both art and the world. Naïve allegory also has a long and honored tradition, and there are those, still, who view "reality" through this lens. Most of us assign such people to the religious lunatic fringe, but their system is not unworkable: they get by, perhaps as well as we do. (Here too, I have found it necessary to reiterate my modest goals. I have not launched an argument that we all should switch to a frankly allegorical view of the world, an allegorical approach to fiction. But the existence of alternatives is the beginning of a rebuttal to Gardner's implicit denial that he has *chosen* to view and render the world in a particular way.)

A clear illustration of the artificiality of Gardner's approach is his own explanation of how it should work. The writer "works out in his imagination what would happen and why, acting out every part himself, making his characters say what he would say himself if he were a young second-generation Italian, then an old Irish policeman, and so on" (115). But what is the point of this exercise if the writer is not a young Italian or old Irishman and cannot possibly know what he would do if nurtured by these cultures? Gardner insists on the impossible, refuses to know that a writer's omniscience cannot extend to the actual, that not even Dostoevski could truly do what he is praised for on 116, create "a *thoroughly accurate* but imaginary Saint Petersburg" (italics mine) for his fictional "experiment." Gardner would extend the requirement of "accuracy" even to symbolic association. The example justifying this further demonstrates the shallow artificiality of Gardner's approach. On 118 and 119 he describes a game called "smoke," once played by members of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, in which one player would choose a famous person and then answer questions such as, "what kind of weather/insect/transportation/etc. are you?" until, as Gardner puts it, "the whole crowd of

questioners builds a stronger and stronger feeling of the character, by unconscious association, until finally someone says the right name." Players are later castigated if their clues were misleading, and this promotes the value of accuracy by showing that even associations may be correct or incorrect, "proves more dramatically than any argument can suggest the mysterious rightness of a good metaphor." The problem with this argument should be apparent when Gardner lists some of the people who might be good subjects for the game: Harry Truman (a Model T), Kate Smith (a turquoise beetle), Leonid Brezhnev (a woodchuck), Marlon Brando ("sultry and uncertain, with storm warnings out")—people of whom every player would know, but people no player would know intimately. It may or may not be a game of mysteriously apt metaphors; it is necessarily a game of popular stereotypes. Gardner may be right to say it proves "that our associations are remarkably similar," but he fails to consider that shared associations may come from sharing an imperfect culture that sometimes deserves to be attacked or subverted rather than celebrated and reinforced.

This is my chief objection to John Gardner's aesthetic: it requires that literature be consistent with his conception—with his culture's conception—of the world, making conformity to established/majority ways of thinking prerequisite to "sanity and stability" and to moral authorship (Two of his requirements are, literally, liking children and dogs) (Gardner 116). He speaks, in his "governing metaphor," of trolls and chaos, likening art to Thor's hammer, used to beat back "the enemies of order" (3-4). But what he really wants is a carpenter's hammer, or better yet, a trowel. He's interested in building and affirming, never in weakening the foundations of ideas that already exist and may be crowding out other orders equally worthy or even superior. But if, as I believe, there are trolls that partake more of conformity than chaos, it may be that even literature which does not earnestly strive to create but only to undermine and

cast doubt (in Linda Hutcheon's terms, to "de-naturalize") may be a moral enterprise. It may be that an ethic or aesthetic of attention to any one view of "reality" means art more likely to prop up prejudice than overthrow it and rules out categories of profoundly moral fiction.

Certainly, Gardner's pronouncements have often a flavor of repressive dogma, as though he explained from behind a pulpit why damnation awaits Galileo. On page 167, he draws a parallel between "bad art" and heresy. On 168, he says, "Feelings of skepticism about traditional values are … feelings the artist must find his way over or around or under if he's to make the affirmation which defines him." He defines beauty as "truth of feeling," the non-beautiful as that which "feels wrong and must have felt wrong to the artist as well," adding, "If it did not feel wrong to the artist, then he had a bad system of emotions" (144). Beauty is that which feels true to John Gardner and those who share his world-view, and any writer who feels otherwise is emotionally stunted or "intellectually debilitated by lack of love" (76)—like Robert Coover.

Coover is a serial blasphemer against John Gardner's reality, a perpetrator of "attacks on Christendom," and nothing more clearly illustrates the depravity of the times than the academic popularity of his story "A Pedestrian Accident"; says Gardner, "I doubt that anyone would seriously maintain that the world is as Coover says it is" (76). (Perhaps this is just a rhetorical flourish. Gardner can hardly have failed to realize that there are at least a few people out there who do seriously maintain that ours is a callous, Godless universe.) Coover suffers from a condition in which "[c]onfusion and doubt become the primary civilized emotions" (Gardner 77). But there is value in confusion and doubt, emotions that might, more freely indulged, have prevented the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Holocaust. (I have heard Rabbi Neal Weinberg of the University of Judaism point out that after his near-sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham ceases to receive divine communications, and speculate—how seriously, I can't say—that Abraham may have

failed a test for lack of confusion and doubt. After all, people often hear voices they think are God. Is a faith that doesn't ask for I.D.—but merely saddles up and joins the crusade—such a noble thing?) Coover's *The Public Burning* suggests, as does Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*, that the refusal of confusion and doubt made Julius and Ethel Rosenberg's deaths a foregone conclusion, not contingent on serious consideration of innocence or guilt. In Coover's novel, Uncle Sam, sarcastically presented as demigod and superhero, is pitted against "The Phantom," a being associated with communism by the patriotic but characterized more as a satanic than a political force and best described, in one of several aliases, as "the Creator of Ambiguities" (416). This book also earns Gardner's censure for its irrealism, but the world Coover portrays was (is) real to many patriotic Americans. In a sort of postmodern version of Russian Formalism, Coover reproduces a world-view so literally, concretely, and remorselessly that it becomes unfamiliar and bizarre, reveals itself as myth and nonsense. Gardner misses the point when he complains that Coover "reduces large and complex forces to humorless comic-strip cartoons" (Gardner 195). Coover exposes our cartoonish apprehension of these forces.

Coover's great sin (or, in my mind, his great virtue) is that he interrupts the "vivid and continuous dream" that Gardner advocates and that most of us live. Gardner explained this dream in the course of a debate with William Gass. He said, "Writers who give us visions to which we say, with all our unconscious minds as well as our conscious minds, 'That's just not so,' we don't read." And he continued,

> The theory that I'm proposing says, fundamentally, that you create in the reader's mind a vivid and continuous dream. The reader sits down with his book just after breakfast and immediately someone says, "Hermione, aren't you coming to lunch?" One instant has passed although two hundred pages have passed, because the reader has been in a vivid and continuous dream, living a virtual life, making moral judgments in a virtual state. (LeClair & McCaffery, 24)

Gardner applies this metaphor only to the experience of reading or responding to some other art, assuming that once Hermione looks up, she is awake and in contact with the real. Coover, on the other hand, has said, “The world itself being a construct of fictions, I believe the fiction maker’s function is to furnish better fictions with which we can re-form our notions of things” (Lee, 63). The statement does not accord with my reading of *The Public Burning*, which is that it’s less concerned with furnishing fictions than undermining them, but this definition of the world is central to my thesis and merits the support of a theoretical review.

II. A Review of Relevant Theory

Fundamental to much of my thinking is the work of an early theorist of the biases built into language itself. Benjamin Whorf's essay "The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language" might be quickly summarized: You only think or perceive what you can say. Whorf argues that instead of analyzing every phenomenon encountered and reacting accordingly, we react to the denotations or connotations of the labels we apply. This makes sense: we don't—maybe can't—stop and analyze everything; we categorize and assume that something we haven't specifically encountered will behave like other examples of its kind. To borrow an example from Doris Myers' summary of General Semantics, "to call an object a chair builds up certain expectations, including the one that the object will support the weight of a human body. But chairs differ greatly in their solidity and state of repair" (Myers 124-25). And maybe we don't even see some things unless we have categories ready for them. Says Myers:

> A person who takes botany and learns a lot of plant names finds, to his surprise and pleasure, that what was once an undifferentiated mass of greenery has taken on structure and individuality. He sees the plants more clearly because he knows what to call them. (125)

A character in Cortázar's *Hopscotch* is thinking along the same lines when he says, "sometimes it helps to give a lot of names to a partial vision, at least it prevents the notion from becoming closed and rigid" (445). (One mentor suggests to me that many names might just obscure the vision; I counter that perhaps they only remind us that it is obscure, warding off the hubris of believing we have understood that which we have merely labeled.) But Whorf doesn't stop at asserting that language mediates our impressions of objects, or even of visions: his theory concerns large categories of reality, "grammatical patterns as interpretations of experience." He expresses his main idea in the form of two rhetorical questions: (1) Do all people have the same

ideas of "time," "space," and "matter," developed through direct experience of the world, or are such ideas partially conditioned by the structure of our language? And (2) is there any link between one's culture/behavior and one's language? (Whorf, 127-28) Both questions are answered in the affirmative, based on a comparison of our language ("Standard Average European") and Hopi. By way of example, I will summarize only that part of Whorf's discussion that deals with the Hopi experience of time.

Unlike the usage in SAE, in which terms for various times ("winter," "September," "morning," etc.) are nouns and time itself is a mass noun, Whorf asserts that Hopi "phase terms" are "a kind of adverb" (implying that time is an action or occurrence). In Hopi, according to Whorf, one cannot speak of a phase—that is, of *phasing*—as if it were a thing or place, cannot say "in winter" the way one says "in an orchard" and perhaps cannot think of it that way either. (131-32) Whorf also points out that the Hopi language applies plurals only to objects, things of which one could have a perceptible group; this contrasts with SAE pluralization of both objects and events. (The latter constitutes "imaginary" pluralization because one cannot really experience x number of days; one can only experience "day" x number of times.) Because we pluralize events like objects, we objectify them: we imagine "days" as a row of units and experience time as a passage or movement from one day (or week, month, year, etc.) to the next. This is different from the non-objectified Hopi experience of time as a "becoming later." (128-29) According to Whorf, the proverb "Tomorrow is another day" would be incomprehensible to Hopi society (138).

Whorf feels that SAE's three-tense system also contributes to the tendency to imagine units of time lined up in a row. In Whorf's view, this is a distortion of experience, as past and future can only be known through memory or anticipation, can only be experienced in our

imagination, and the (imaginative) experience of the past is identical to the (imaginative) experience of the future; both are experienced as the "nonsensuous," as opposed to the "sensuous," which we call the present. Whorf questions the experiential basis of "past" and "future" but says we do experience a "getting later" or "latering" that is better reflected by the Hopi system: Instead of tenses, Whorf describes two "forms" indicating whether events spoken of are reported or expected: "modes" denote relative earliness and lateness. He further argues that our present tense "introduces confusions of thought" because it doesn't distinguish between what is happening right now ("I see him") and what usually or always happens ("We see with our eyes"). Might the disregard for the future decried by environmentalists rise from a grammar-based difficulty in grasping the difference between what is true now and what will always be true? (133-34)

The alleged crisis-management orientation of our culture is consistent with our objectification and pluralization of time, as if another day were another place, unaffected by what happens here/now. It contrasts with traditional Hopi behavior. Whorf says the Hopi count days using ordinal rather than cardinal numbers and explains,

> This is not the pattern of counting a number of different men or things, even though they appear successively, for, even then, they *could* gather into an assemblage. It is the pattern of counting successive reappearances of the *same* man or thing, incapable of forming an assemblage. The analogy is not to behave about day-cyclicity as to several men ('several days'), which is what *we* tend to do, but to behave as to the successive visits of the *same man*. One does not alter several men by working upon just one, but one can prepare and so alter the later visits of the same man by working to affect the visit he is making now. This is the way the Hopi deal with the future—by working within a present situation which is expected to carry impresses, both obvious and occult, forward into the future event of interest. (138)

Thus he accounts for the practical and ritual "preparing behavior," which, from Whorf's account, may be supposed to dominate Hopi religious practice and life in general. Equally explicable is a relative unconcern with history:

> The Hopi view is unfavorable thereto …. Supplying no ready-made answer to the question of when 'one' event ends and 'another' begins. When it is implicit that everything that ever happened still is, but in a necessarily different form from what memory or record reports, there is less incentive to study the past …. But OUR objectified time puts before imagination something like a ribbon or scroll marked off into equal blank spaces, suggesting that each be filled with an entry. (142-43)

Linguists dispute parts of Whorf's analysis of Hopi (see Voegelin, Voegelin, & Jeanne); the point is that objective, unmediated reality is perhaps not where we live, not the place to which Hermione returns when she puts down her book. And it's a small leap from Whorf's notion of perception influenced by language to the idea that subjective reality (the only reality to which we have access, and therefore the one to which Gardner is loyal) is constructed, as Coover says, of fictions—though many contemporary theorists prefer the word "narrative." Hayden White, in "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," argues that we concede an understanding of real events only to one who can relate them in the form of a story.

White's analysis is of the development and requirements of history, and his argument consists largely of a comparison of annals, the somewhat "higher" form of the chronicle, and "history proper." Annals strike us as almost incomprehensible because they don't relate causal—or indeed any—connections between the events recorded, events which seem chosen according to no discernible principle. One can't tell what annals are *about*. Says White, "What's lacking in the list of events … is a notion of a social center by which to locate them with respect to one another and to charge them with ethical or moral significance" (11). The chronicle is considered better organized; it "has a central subject, the life of an individual, town, or region, some great

undertaking, such as a war or crusade, or some institution, such as monarchy, episcopacy, or monastery" (16). But a chronicle, though possessed of subject and focus, is not a history because it lacks closure, "terminates" rather than "concludes" (17). White identifies this also as a moral issue, declaring: "The demand for closure in the historical story is a demand … for moral meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a *moral* drama" (20). A proper ending involves a change in "the moral order of the world" (White 22). And what does closure mean, if not that? After all, White argues, "we cannot say, surely, that any sequence of real events actually comes to an end, that reality itself disappears, that events *of the order of the real* have ceased to happen" (22). Ultimately, White concludes that 'historians … have transformed narrativity from a manner of speaking into a paradigm of the form which reality itself displays to a 'realistic' consciousness" and that "this value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary" (23).

David Novitz, in "Art, Narrative and Human Nature," presents the argument that an individual's identity is a narrative construct. He makes the fairly obvious point that: "There is more to my person than the body I stand up in. I am not talking of souls, but … of my past actions, aspirations, jealousies, fears, beliefs, expectations, values, knowledge, neuroses, and obsessions" (58). (Don't we all know the phrase "Tell me about yourself" invites a biographical summary?) And he notes that,

> The many facts that I recall about myself will have to be organized in one way or another before they can help me understand what sort of person I am …. I will need to organize in a sequential, developmental, and meaningful way what I take to be the brute data of my life. To do this is just to construct a narrative or story about my life; a story which, although nonfictional, is in some measure the product of certain creative or fanciful

> imaginings. For although my story purports to be about certain real-life events … the way in which I relate and organize my memory of these events, and what I treat as marginal or central to my life, can be more or less imaginative. (59-60)

Like any history, a life-narrative will be constructed according to certain organizing principles, certain preconceived ideas, and of course, "individuals do not simply pluck these visions out of the air. They are suggested to us in many different ways by the societies in which we live" (68). This, Novitz implies, is a serviceable definition of "socialization."

Once a self-narrative takes shape, it is quick to gain momentum. One tends to live up to it "as if our life-narratives furnish the scripts which are to be enacted on 'the stage of life'" (60). This is well understood by Child Development experts. My wife, a kindergarten teacher, affirms as a fundamental rule that no matter how children behave, one never suggests *to them* that they are not ideal students lest the characterization become a self-fulfilling prophecy. This point echoes that made by previous quotations from *The Public Burning*, which in turn illustrate Novitz's opening observation that the language of the arts seems remarkably apt when used, as it often is, to describe human beings. We say quite as often of real as of fictional people, "Throwing the shoe was a bit *out of character* for him." Thus I argue that verisimilitude is less a matter of faithfully transcribing the real (or the realistic) from life to art than a comfortable but inadequate system for passing essentially literary judgment on life and art alike. Where Gardner feels that empathic mimesis is a net to capture enduring truths of, among other things, human nature, I affirm Novitz's statement that "what we think of as natural in human beings" is "highly variable, depending more on social values and the consequent acceptability of certain narrative identities than on the brute facts and physical substance of our lives" (69).

Novitz asserts, unsurprisingly, that "these narratives (or narrative structures) acquire their legitimacy and normative role from the society that accepts them" (70), and sociologist Peter Berger says the same:

> … we obtain our notions about the world originally from other human beings, and these notions continue to be plausible to us in a very large measure because others continue to affirm them. There are … notions that derive directly and instantaneously from our own sense experience—but even these can be integrated into meaningful views of reality only by virtue of social processes …. there are powerful pressures (which manifest themselves as social pressures within our own consciousness) to conform to the views and beliefs of our fellow men. It is in conversation, in the broadest sense of the word, that we build up and keep going our view of the world. (34)

I maintain that certain categories of profoundly moral fiction require the freedom, limited by an aesthetic of verisimilitude, to opt out of this "conversation" (or to enter into it only tentatively, in what might be considered bad faith) in order to attack its premises.

At this point, my position may again need clarification. The proceeding doubts and definitions of "reality" are not intended as a blanket condemnation of literary (or other) world-building. As Aleksander Pushkin said somewhere, "Better the illusions that exalt us than ten thousand truths." The obvious problem is that illusions don't always exalt; we may also be degraded by the illusions we accept. In the remainder of this essay, I wish to discuss two sorts of fiction. First, taking Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* as my primary example, I will look at fiction as a way of undermining the illusions that degrade; my first category shares features—or at least concerns—with Linda Hutcheon's definition of postmodernism. Then I will look at Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* as an example of fiction that constructs or teaches "illusions" that exalt, whether by replacing or merely supplementing the prevailing "reality"; this category will coincide, more or less, with magical realism as defined by Amaryll Beatrice Chanady. I

think these categories overlap somewhat, but I intend to exploit what clarity can be found in treating them separately.

III. Concerning Illusions that Degrade

My chief example in this section may seem oddly conventional. Robinson doesn't use dragons or griffins, much less make them fall at different speeds. I don't think she holds herelf to Gardneresque standards when it comes to "establishing" characters: Sylvie's abandonment of Ruth, during their day in the woods, seems to make more symbolic than dramatic or psychological sense, and Robinson doesn't go to great lengths to justify Sylvie's vacillations between obliviousness and domestic concern; but most actions described are abundantly motivated. *Housekeeping* seems a traditional novel. However, Robinson does not find her way over or around or under her doubts about traditional values—or traditional reality. She suggests that life is a story one is told or tells to oneself. And she suggests that the story can be avoided or revised.

Gardner would find more obvious fault with my secondary example, Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*. Gardner complains that Barthelme "knows what is wrong, but he has no clear image of, or interest in, how things ought to be" (Gardner 80). This accords with my own reading (of Barthelme, and, to a lesser extent, of Robinson). It's almost as if Barthelme took pains *not* to create new myths or narratives in the process of questioning old ones—thus a novel that may or may not qualify as a story, and much reliance on what the narrator calls "dreck": "matter which presents itself as not wholly relevant (or indeed, at all relevant) but which, carefully attended to, can supply a kind of 'sense' of what is going on" (Barthelme 106). The fact that the book offers no possibility of a "continuous and uninterrupted dream" does not prevent it from being engaging (even Gardner admits that without Barthelme, the world would be a duller place), or from having an impact on my consciousness which is similar to that of *Housekeeping*, and which I consider morally significant. Both books serve, as Hutcheon says of postmodernism,

> to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life, to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us. Even nature, postmodernism might point out, doesn't grow on trees. (2)

The two novels even have their primary targets in common. Each is set in a patriarchal society where, at heart, all stories are arguably versions of Oedipus Rex, and both protagonists contest a narrative described by Teresa DeLauretis:

> … a story too is always a question of desire.
>
> But whose desire is it that speaks, and whom does that desire address? The received interpretations of the Oedipus story … leave no doubt. The desire is Oedipus's, and though its object may be woman … its term of reference and address is man. (112)

DeLauretis also explains the part this narrative assigns to women:

> The end of the girl's journey, if successful, will bring her to the place where the boy will find her, like Sleeping Beauty, awaiting him, Prince Charming. For the boy has been promised, by the social contract he has entered into at his Oedipal phase, that he will find woman waiting at the end of *his* journey. Thus the itinerary of the female's journey … is guided by a compass pointing not to reproduction as the fulfillment of *her* biological destiny, but more exactly to the fulfillment of the promise made to the "little man" … The myth of which she is presumed to be the subject … in fact works to construct *her* as a personified obstacle. (133)

In *Housekeeping*, even the removal of the patriarch doesn't automatically free the family from patriarchal influence. They still live within the structure Edmund Foster built, and though Ruth and her aunt Sylvie dance as the house is invaded by water (Robinson 64), the same element that disposed of Edmund, the house is saved by Edmund's foresight, which led him to build on a hill (74). The result is a narrative of Edmund's heroic achievement: "Two weeks after the water was gone people began to believe that our house had not been touched by the flood at all" (75). When Ruth's grandmother Sylvia Foster dies, she is scarcely mentioned in her own

obituary, which, instead, tells her husband's story (40-41). Edmund Foster's Oedipal narrative, in pictorial form, also bleeds through the white paint on Sylvia's furniture, which displays a hunting scene (an Oedipal quest), a peacock (medieval symbol of Christ, a male deity), and a pair of cherubs, which may represent the ornamental function of Ruth and Lucille in a male heaven (89-90). The last interpretation is supported by a later passage that also demonstrates the profound impression the paintings have had on Ruth:

> Dawn and its excesses have always reminded me of heaven, a place where I have always known I would not be comfortable. They reminded me of my grandfather's paintings, which I have always taken to be his vision of heaven. And it was he who brought us here … trailing us after him unborn, like the infants he had painted on the dresser drawers. (149)

Thus do Ruth and Sylvie seem to be "tethered to the old wreck" (the train in which Edmund died), trying to "pass out of the sight of my grandfather's empty eye" (169-70).

The eye of society also continues to view Ruth with an Oedipal gaze. DeLauretis, in a discussion of cinema, gives considerable space to "the gaze" of which women are the object and by which they are objectified (138-149), and Ruth may sense something similar: "I felt the gaze of the world as a distorting mirror that squashed her [Lucille] plump and stretched me narrow. I, too, thought it was just as well to walk away from a joke so rudely persisted in" (Robinson 99).

DeLauretis is equally applicable to *Snow White*, in which the title character, who "lives with her own being as incomplete, pending the arrival of one who will 'complete' her" (Barthelme 70), begins her poem on the theme of loss with "a metaphor of the self armoring itself against the gaze of the other" (59). Of course, when a novel is titled *Snow White*, and when Rapunzel is also invoked by the constant hanging of hair out the window—with little doubt as to "the significance of this act, this hanging, as well as the sexual meaning of hair itself, on which Wurst has written" (92)—it is fairly clear what fairy tale is toyed with, what myth, what

conception of female and male. (One should note, however, that neither *Snow White* nor *Housekeeping* confines itself to this theme; they object to more in the dominant ideology than male dominance. Barthelme's narrator voices doubts about modern/Western/capitalist values in general, saying, for instance, on page 87, "One tends the vats and washes the buildings and carries the money to the vault and never stops for a moment to consider that the whole process may be despicable." And it's hard to imagine Ruth content as an executive: she doesn't want the traditionally male role in the social narrative; she is driven to escape from the narrative altogether.)

Most of the characters in *Snow White* are mindful of their assigned roles, of the imperatives and limitations of the narrative. Paul, the prince, reflects at one point on his princeliness and its attendant rights/obligations, such as saving some beauty and riding away with her "flung over the pommel of my palfrey" (27); later, he will ask himself, "Well, what shall I do next? What is the next thing demanded of me by history?" (55). Jane, "the wicked stepmother-figure" (82), tells herself, "Now I must witch someone for that is my role, and to flee one's role, as Gimbal tells us, is in the final analysis bootless" (158). (Another sign of over-determined lives: a character in *Snow White* can scarcely entertain an idea without recourse to some authority.) And according to the vile Hogo, "Our becoming is done. We are what we are …. I didn't think up this picture that we are confronted with. The original brushwork was not mine …. I operate within the frame, it is true, but the picture—" (128).

To hint, perhaps, that the fairy tale he parodies isn't ancient history, Barthelme changes the dwarves to "seven men," businessmen often described as "bourgeois," prizing "equanimity" (but he does retain the "heigh ho," and thus a metaphor: all march to the same song). And he makes Snow White a woman and "horsewife" of the mid-twentieth century. She is educated at

"Beaver College" (a vulgar pun?), where she studies "Modern woman, her privileges and responsibilities" and a course-list that is a catalogue of stereotypically feminine accomplishments, none of the courses remotely "practical" (25-26). Her cleaning duties are described in comical detail (37-38). Barthelme repeatedly encourages a reader to consider "horsewifery" as a social institution, presenting, on 61, what might be a list of discussion topics for a conference on the subject and, on 99-100, permitting Edward to deliver a speech on "[t]his important slot in our society, conceptualized by God as very nearly the key to the whole thing as Thomas tells us." Nor does Barthelme permit a reader the guiltless stance that Hogo adopts: The questionnaire on 82 and 83, seeking our advice on the further development of the story, invites us to recognize that such narratives don't exist without our (at least) tacit acceptance.

Barthelme also emphasizes the inadequacy of the archetypal narrative he revises; the world proves unable to supply what has been promised. On 41 and 42, Snow White says of her dwarves/men,

> The seven of them only add up to the equivalent of about two *real men*, as we know them from the films and from our childhood …. it is possible of course that there are no more *real men* on this ball of half-truths, the earth.

By 102, she wonders if there really is a Paul, or whether she has "only projected him in the shape of my longing, boredom, ennui and pain." When no one tries to climb her hair, Snow White is disappointed in the citizens who do not even try to "fill the role" and in the world "for not being able to at least be civilized enough to supply the correct ending to the story" (131-32). And when she finally realizes that Paul "is frog through and through," she says, "Either I have overestimated Paul, or I have overestimated history (169).

In *Housekeeping*, the failure of the Oedipal narrative is less widespread; it merely fails, due to special circumstances, to secure a hold on all of the Foster children and grandchildren.

The most important of these circumstances is a wholesale banishment of husbands and fathers, beginning with Edmund Foster: "My grandfather had sometimes spoken of disappointment. With him gone they were cut free from the troublesome possibility of success, recognition, advancement. They had no reason to look forward, nothing to regret" (Robinson 13). Edmund Foster is the strongest masculine presence in Ruth's life, and she knows nothing of him but the story of his death by train wreck—which is too equivocal to be the foundation of her life-narrative. No one seems quite sure what happened; even the two survivors of the train wreck can't provide a credible account (7).

There are other reasons for the loose grip of the standard narratives on Ruth Foster. She has no steady female caretaker from whom to learn a woman's role in a patriarchal world (though later, in the process of narration, she interprets herself in Sylvie's image). Her identity is not socially constructed in a town "chastened … by an awareness that the whole of human history … occurred elsewhere" (62). She is raised in a small and precarious community where "[t]here was not a soul there but knew how shallow-rooted the whole town was" (177), and where all are at the mercy of a lake, a recurring symbol of the natural and mysterious, that regularly threatens physical and cultural constructs. Ruth describes a flood that created "vast gaps in the Dewey Decimal system" and destroyed pictorial narratives in the form of photograph albums, as well as obscuring life-stories when it "flattened scores of headstones," "but, perhaps because the hoard was not much to begin with, the loss was not overwhelming" (62-63). The lake, and the older drowned lake beneath it, represent the sort of darkness our species keeps at bay by telling our stories around a bonfire, but Ruth has fallen under the influence of Aunt Sylvie, once and future transient, of whose preference for darkness Ruth says, "Sylvie in a house was more or less like a mermaid in a ship's cabin. She preferred it sunk in the very element it

was meant to exclude" (99). Small wonder that after the flood, "[t]he restoration of the town was an exemplary community effort in which we had no part" (74).

Ruth's sister responds to the crumbling of narratives by trying to shore them up. When the two are stranded in the dark woods in a makeshift shelter, Lucille compulsively asserts an identity constructed in language: "Lucille crawled out and began writing her name in pebbles on the sand in front of the door" (114); she is characterized as "never accepting that all our human boundaries were overrun" (115). Lucille, through a conscious effort that involves viewing herself through the eyes of Rosette Brown and her mother (103), manages to fit herself into the social narrative of the town. This is clearly an Oedipal narrative, as Lucille's efforts are largely a matter of clothing (125) and of "setting gel and nail polish" (121), which makes her a more suitable object of the male gaze and the Oedipal quest. Lucille develops a "sauntering sort of walk that made her hips swing a little" and hints that Ruth should not cross her arms because it draws attention to the "empty front" of her blouse" (121). The book ends with another image of Lucille asserting a tenuous linguistically based identity, smearing her initials in the steam on a water glass (219).

Ruth doesn't share Lucille's apparent faith in the power of names. After describing the bonfire Sylvie made of newspapers and magazines, she says, "It was absurd to think that things were held in place, are held in place, by a web of words" (200). Nor will she involve herself in the narrative Lucille pursues; she is not interested in what Lucille terms "self-improvement" (123). Ruth shows little interest in any form of patriarchal narrative, wondering about Sylvie's memories of Helen (53), but not about her "putative father," whom she does not remember (14); only Lucille asks about her father (51-52). Ruth is not, at this point, creating a narrative of her

own—"I suppose I don't know what I think"—and feels "incompletely and minimally existent" (105).

Only one patriarchal story demands her attention, and Ruth-as-narrator treats it with irony and skepticism. According to Phyllis Lassner, the novel "begins by asserting the impossibility of searching for patriarchal origins and authority (50), because:

> Although it [the train wreck] is mythic in image and scope, the tale is narrated in language that also marks it as self parody, undermining the epic proportions of the patriarchal legend. The emergence of a seat cushion and a lettuce after the wreck punctuates the dead seriousness of the mysterious lake, while the "ingenious lies" (p.8) of the boy who tries diving to the wreck suggest Huck and Tom suspended between belief and disbelief in myths of their origin and end. (50)

Snow White also resists the narrative imposed upon her. As early as page six, she says, "Oh I wish there were some words in the world that were not the words I always hear!" The others offer her words and phrases "adequate" enough that: "The whole thing was papered over for the time being, and didn't break out into the open." But Snow White is "tired of being just a horsewife" (Barthelme 43), and on page 68 she says, referring, ostensibly, to a cooking mishap, "I just don't like your world …. A world in which such things can happen." By 135, she has determined to withhold sex, housekeeping services, and conversation, though she doesn't know what she hopes to accomplish thereby, a "sulky notion" she attributes to "the rental library."

Of various others in *Snow White* who voice doubts about the status quo, Jane is most worthy of notice. She writes to a stranger selected at random, Mr. Quistgaard, and explains to him that they exist in different "universes of discourse." She writes,

> You may have, in a commonsense way, regarded your own u. of d. as a plenum, filled to the brim with discourse. You may have felt that what already existed was a sufficiency. People like you often do. That is certainly one way of regarding it, if fat self-satisfied complacency is your aim. But I say unto you, Mr. Quistgaard, that even a plenum can leak. (45)

She points out that she has his telephone number and writes, “You are correct, Mr. Quistgaard, in seeing this as a threatening situation. The moment I inject discourse from my u. of d. into your u. of d., the yourness of yours is diluted” (45-46). She is a threat to his narrative, his reality, his order. She is perhaps an illustration of what John Gardner might call a troll, of what I might call an artist.

For a time, it seems that Snow White may develop into a Jane. She gets credit for disconcerting the seven men: “Snow White has added a dimension of confusion and misery to our lives. Whereas once we were simple bourgeois who knew what to do, now we are complex bourgeois who are at a loss” (87-88). But her rebellion is not successful. She says on 59 and 60 that she stays with the seven men because “I have not been able to imagine anything better,” but warns: “My imagination is stirring.” Ultimately, it stirs very little. She imagines only the conventional, scripted alternative: “Someday my prince will come” (70). When that falls through, the seven men are out of danger. Hanging their leader, a would-be artist, is enough to restore “a certain degree of equanimity” (180).

Ruth has more success at writing a narrative of her own, an extreme revision of the parallel narrative Fingerbone might have condoned, the story of her biblical counterpart. Like her, Lassner observes, “Ruth adopts an older woman, one who because she is not quite a mother, like Naomi in the biblical story, redefines mother-daughter dependencies.” However, “there is no Boaz here to reintegrate Ruth into community and continuity,” and the outcome is altogether different: “The biblical story rids itself of Ruth once she has provided a son to continue the stories of origins and generation, while Robinson’s Ruth writes her own story in order not to regenerate patriarchal myth.” (51-52) Martha Ravits also notes a rewriting of biblical narrative,

pointing out that the novel begins with a "genealogy of ordinary women, a revision of patrilinear genealogies" (646).

A more immediate concern, however, than contesting biblical models, is contesting the assertions of Lucille. Ruth, describing a disagreement with her sister, refers to their disparate myths of origin, incompatible descriptions of "her mother" and "my mother" (Robinson 109-110). By this point, as Marcia Aldrich points out (135), Ruth and Lucille have already argued about the color of their mother's hair (43). Aldrich argues that the sisters' narratives are different not only in detail, but also in kind:

> … Lucille constructs a mother who is "orderly, vigorous, and sensible, a widow who was killed in an accident" (109). In other words, Lucille, more than Ruth, aligns herself with the figurative operations of language … Ruth's construct of her perished mother attempts to produce a relation to a present body or bodies rather than to reproduce her mother or to replace her mother's figure with her own determinate signification … Ruth must constantly defer or displace signification, and substitute for Lucille's determinate meanings, indeterminate ones. (135)

Ruth is not trying to shape her memories into signifiers that will cast her experience in terms of society's standard myths (of motherhood or anything else); she is trying to understand her place and identity through new myths of her own making. For Ruth, the fundamental question is "When did I become so unlike other people?" (Robinson 214). By the end of the novel, she is able to narrow the answer down to three possibilities, summarize all three, and pick one: crossing the bridge (214-215). This is possible only after two-hundred pages of self-definition, beginning with the first sentence: "My name is Ruth."

Ruth's first description of her earliest memories (life with Helen) is presented not necessarily as a factual account, but as a tale she could have told Sylvia: "If she had asked me, I could have told her that we lived in two rooms at the top of a tall gray building …" (20). In this

light, it is interesting that that Ruth's initial list of caretakers does not include Helen, her mother (3). At that point, perhaps, her earliest childhood had not been narrated/invented. On page 116, Ruth speculates: Say that my mother was as tall as a man, and that she sometimes set me on her shoulders, so that I could splash my hands in the cold leaves above our heads … Such details are merely accidental. Who could know but us?" By page 212, not only has this become a real event, Ruth is able to describe the park where it took place, specify that they had hamburgers, describe the sound of the ferries, and describe Helen's mood at the time. Ravits notes another revision: Ruth's early narrative, on page 96, about her mother being resurrected to feed her wild strawberries and touch her hair, becomes, on pages 152-53, after "Ruth reflects back on the disappointments of experience," a "poetic vision … embedded in a metaphor of longing" (Ravits 652).

Some stories Ruth tells of her grandmother are difficult to credit as "factual" accounts. The pocket-watch story (Robinson 12), the fantasy of Edmund as savage (17), and, especially, the experience in the garden (19) are told in intimate detail. Sylvia would not be likely to tell Ruth such stories if her goal in raising Ruth and Lucille was "re-enacting the commonplace" of raising her own daughters (25), not when her approach to raising them included remaining as "unremarked as daylight" (19). Sylvia is said to have told Ruth about her dreams (25) but not in any kind of detail.

Ruth crawling under Sylvie's body and "out between her legs" (146; it happens again on 170) may be an "actual" event, but its significance, Ruth's "birth" as Sylvie's child, is established and elaborated through narrative speculation: "Say that the water lapped over the gunwales and I swelled … until I burst Sylvie's coat … Then, presumably, would come parturition in some form" (162). Narration of this event is also colored by preceding speculation:

"She could as well be my mother. I crouched and slept in her very shape like an unborn child" (144-45).

It should not be surprising that Ruth chooses Sylvie as a mother; not only is she the source of Ruth's transient lifestyle, she may be the model for her storytelling habits. The nature of Sylvie's stories is illuminated when Lucille badgers her into admitting a story about a woman on a bus that Sylvie had related as truth might not be veracious: "Well, I don't really know that she did" (67). Sylvie's soldier/sailor husband also turns out, apparently, to be fiction (101-102).

The grandmother may be another source of stories if not narrative habits. Elizabeth Meese mentions that there is a similarity between the "ghost children" seen by the great-grandmother's friend and those later sensed by Sylvie (Meese 59) but doesn't speculate as to the significance of this correlation. Possible interpretations include the idea that Sylvie may be reprising Sylvia's stories and (more interesting because it makes more of Ruth's narrative suspect from a factual standpoint) the notion that Ruth may be adapting her grandmother's story, casting Sylvie in the role of the woman who sees ghosts. This may imply that Ruth, who lacks a certain "reality" when her life lacks a narrative context (I propose a variation on Hayden White's theory), was a sort of ghost, and only Sylvie could really see and help her; or it may be that Ruth wishes to cast herself as having joined the ranks—through an experience Ravits calls a counterpart to male rituals of initiation (654)—of beings who were "light and spare and thoroughly used to the cold" so that "it was almost a joke to them to be cast out into the woods" (Robinson 159). The latter interpretation accords with Ruth's wish, expressed on the same page, that the ghosts "come unhouse me of this flesh …. I would rather be with them …" Before the book ends, she will feel that something like this has been achieved, and tell a "very melancholy story" about herself as a girl who is "fleshed in air and clothed in nakedness and mantled in cold"

as well as "happily at ease in the dark," though in danger, because of Sylvie's temporary compliance with Fingerbone's norms, of being "transformed by the gross light into a mortal child" (203-204).

The fact that the "melancholy story" is told in the third person is one of various indications, some quite explicit, that Ruth's narration is or becomes self-conscious and purposeful. For example, in describing the night in the makeshift shelter, Ruth concedes that "Lucille would tell this story differently" (116). And she hints in several places that she may not be constrained by facts. After spinning a tale of her Aunt Molly as a "fisher of men," who would retrieve all the dead from Lake Fingerbone, including Ruth's mother, along with "fallen buttons and misplaced spectacles," Ruth says, "What are all these fragments for, if not to be knit up finally?" (91-92). In another place, Ruth defends the primacy of perception over objective reality:

> Anyone that leans to look into the pool is the woman in the pool … and so our thoughts reflect what passes before them … the faceless shape before me could as well be Helen herself as Sylvie … And if she were Helen in my sight, then how could she not be Helen in fact? (166-67)

But there are suggestions that Ruth's view of herself and her relation to the world—born as it seems to have been on a lake that combined the traditional water symbolism of baptism and rebirth with images of drowning and death as escape (164), that is, with connotations of removal from the human community (this followed by a dream that Sylvie was teaching her to walk underwater)—may be less culturally mediated, closer to "the real" than most:

> If appearance is only a trick of the nerves, and apparition is only a lesser trick of the nerves, a less perfect illusion, then this expectation, this sense of a presence unperceived was not particularly illusory, as things in this world go … By so much was my dream less false than Lucille's. And it is probably as well to be undeceived, though perhaps it is not. (122)

If Ruth is undegraded, there is little hint of exaltation. Robinson does not assert, as Silko does in *Ceremony*, that her protagonist's storytelling can not only resist the dominant social narrative but overpower it, redeeming individual and world. Ruth's narrative is wholly defensive and largely desperate, achieving freedom but not what most readers would consider a happy ending. Ruth says at one point: "I will try to tell you the plain truth. Sylvie and I walked the whole black night across the railroad bridge at Fingerbone—a very long bridge, as you know if you have seen it …" (216). This address supports (and nothing in the narrative contradicts) the theory that the narratee is a fellow traveler unfamiliar to Ruth, supports Meese's claim that "the author obviously speaks of her own narrative" (64) in this passage:

> You may have noticed that people in bus stations … if you let them sit beside you … will tell you long lies about numerous children who are all gone now, and mothers who were beautiful and cruel, and in every case they will tell you that they were abandoned, disappointed, or betrayed—that they should not be alone, that only remarkable events, of the kind one reads in books, could have made their condition so extreme. And that is why, even if the things they say are true, they have the quick eyes and active hands and the passion for meticulous elaboration of people who know they are lying. Because, once alone, it is impossible to believe that one could ever have been otherwise. (Robinson 157)

Because this passage follows close after Ruth's description of the ghost children in the woods, even the "numerous children who are all gone now" may be seen as an element of Ruth's story. I am inclined to think the narrator refers not only to her narrative but to her current situation, pressing a long, elaborate story or lie on a stranger at a bus stop. In that case, the passage presents an almost pathetic image of Ruth, emphasizing the difficulty and the cost of constructing her own narrative rather than accepting her assigned role in the narrative to which her society subscribes.

In another passage where, Meese says, “the text speaks of itself—its purpose and effect” (62), Ruth speaks of transients:

> Like the dead, we could consider their histories complete, and we wondered only what had brought them to transiency, to drifting, since their lives as drifters were like pacings and broodings and skirmishings among ghosts … However long a postscript to however short a life, it was still no part of the story. We imagined that if they spoke to us they would astonish us with tales of disaster and disgrace and bitter sorrow, that would fly into the hills and stay there in the dark earth and in the cries of birds. (Robinson 179)

The newspaper clipping about Ruth and Sylvie’s deaths (213) confirms that transiency ends Ruth’s story in the eyes of society. Lassner says they have “disappeared into a story of their own making” (51), but Ruth’s narrative gives that story short shrift. Escape from the Oedipal story into a marginal existence seems the extent of her triumph.

IV. Proposing Illusions that Exalt

I suggested above that *Housekeeping* rejects a Gardneresque view of art and the world, but doesn't flagrantly or often violate the letter of Gardner's laws. It yields the sort of narrative sense the average reader will expect, and the end, in hindsight, even has a tragic inevitability Gardner would certainly approve (Gardner 113-114). In my reading, the novel rejects the narrative orthodoxy Gardner condones, but—Robinson knowing to what we are trained to respond—uses a fairly orthodox narrative to do so; *Housekeeping* is an example of what Linda Hutcheon calls "complicitous critique" (which she propounds as the characteristic stance of postmodernism). *Ceremony* is an equally perfect example of Amaryll Beatrice Chanady's magical realism, which means the narrative logic in unlikely to be so familiar, and if anything is inevitable, it is that Silko won't be bound by the rule of consistency that is one of Gardner's most cherished principles.

Chanady differentiates between "fantasy," fiction set in a world that is not ours, in which different (magical) rules apply; "the fantastic," fiction set in our (modern, Western, scientific) world, into which there is some startling magical irruption; and "magical realism": fiction narrated from a familiar, modern perspective, but in which the narrator relates the story of characters whose world-view is not modern, Western, scientific, etc., who therefore live lives including what we would call magic. One may not substitute the word "superstition" for "magic" in the last definition. The peculiarity of magical realist fiction is that it manages simultaneously to credit two contradictory world-views, casting doubt, perhaps, not on one or the other, but on neither or both. As for how this is accomplished, Gardner might call it a matter of rhetoric and—like the griffins who fall at different speeds—"a betrayal of honest thought." But this charge has

little force if the reality on which it is premised is seen to be constructed largely by rhetorical means. (Of course, the word "narrative" represents my thinking better than "rhetoric" does.)

The impact of magical realism is described by editors David Young and Keith Hollaman:

> [T]he most distinctive aspects of magical realism lie at the point where two different realities intersect, perhaps to collide, perhaps to merge …. What matters is that the domination of any one way of looking at things is, at least temporarily, placed in jeopardy. Normal notions about time, place, identity, matter and the like are challenged, suspended, lured away from certitude. (2)

Silko's *Ceremony* might be seen as a magical realist primer, in that it not only presents this intersection, but also dramatizes an ideal response. Her protagonist, faced with two world-views and unable to wholly accept or reject either one, can only rescue his identity and his world by synthesizing a new world-view, adopting a new cosmological myth that reconciles elements of both.

Tayo is an orphaned half-breed, raised on a Laguna reservation where traditions are breaking down and children attend U.S. government schools. He is exposed both to the traditional Laguna and the modern (white) American worlds, each of which seems incapable of recognizing the other: One of Tayo's teachers laughs until he cries at Navajo and Laguna beliefs that prohibit killing frogs (194-95), and Tayo doesn't try to explain modern warfare to a medicine man because "even if he could have taken the old man to see the target areas, even if he could have led him through the fallen jungle trees and muddy craters of torn earth to show him the dead, the old man would not have believed anything so monstrous" (36-37).

The Laguna world-view, a revision of which Tayo ultimately adopts, is transmitted to him in stories and myths of "oldest times" told by his grandmother and Uncle Josiah—stories, for instance, of Hummingbird and Fly, who must pacify the mother when she takes away the rain because her altar is neglected by people enamored of alien magic. Josiah is also the first to

attempt the sort of adaptation which Tayo eventually achieves: he tries to combine elements of two worlds by breeding Herefords with wild Mexican cattle to produce beef animals that will survive reservation drought. Josiah understands that Western science cannot guide this enterprise, and puts aside books on "scientific cattle raising":

> "I guess we will have to get along without these books," he said. "We'll have to do things our own way. Maybe we'll even write our own book, *Cattle Raising on Indian Land*, or how to raise cattle that don't eat grass or drink water." (75)

The other world-view with which Tayo is faced will be more familiar to most readers, but Silko's portrayal encourages us to note some of its distortions, such as a racism that infects even those it maligns. The resulting self-contempt is the ruin of Tayo's mother (68-69), and Tayo notes it in himself on page 191:

> Why did he hesitate to accuse a white man of stealing but not a Mexican or an Indian? … He knew then he had learned the lie by heart—the lie which they had wanted him to learn: only brown-skinned people were thieves; white people didn't steal because they always had the money to buy whatever they wanted.
>
> …. The liars had fooled everyone, white people and Indians alike; as long as people believed the lies, they would never be able to see what had been done to them or what they were doing to each other.

The dominant world-view is metaphorically characterized two paragraphs later:

> The moon was bright, and the rolling hills and dry lake flats reflected a silvery light illusion that everything was as visible as if seen in broad daylight. But the mare stumbled and threw him hard against the saddle horn, and he realized how deceptive the moonlight was; exposed root tips and dark rocks waited in deep shadows cast by the moon. Their lies would destroy this world. (191-92)

This illusion of clarity may be meant to contrast with a traditional Laguna view, which is presented, I think, as more comfortable with subjectivity. The book is filled with references to the power of stories and to reality as a story, and several of these references seem attributable to

Laguna tradition; in fact, the first of such references are found in the first of the Laguna myths/poems distributed throughout the novel (more on these below) (1-2). Silko emphasizes the dogmatic arrogance of scientism: "He knew what white people thought about the stories. In school the science teacher had explained what superstition was, and then held the science textbook up for the class to see the true source of explanations" (94-95).

Though not sufficiently widely read to make any broad pronouncements, I suspect that deflating this arrogance is a frequent aim of magical realist writing. Declare Young and Hollaman,

> It is important to recognize this collision in cultural terms because its very scale helps us understand that magical realism is not so much a challenge to the conventions of literary realism, as it is to the basic assumptions of modern positivistic thought, the soil in which literary realism flourished. Magical realism's inquiries drive deep, questioning the political and metaphysical definitions of the real by which most of us live. (3)

A particularly biting example is José Arcadio Buendía's proud and foolish obsession with science in the early chapters of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. García Márquez, in writing of science, never allows one to forget its dubious ancestry: José Arcadio's first branch of the sciences is alchemy, his first scientific endeavor the effort to multiply Ursula's gold by cooking it, with other ingredients, in hog fat; he manages only to transform her inheritance into "a large piece of burnt hog cracklings that was firmly stuck to the bottom of the pot" (16-17). Later, José Arcadio manages to separate the gold from the mess he made of it, and Ursula "gave thanks to God for the invention of alchemy," though it clearly brought her no profit, concocting from what was once gold coins only a "dry and yellowish mass" that looks, to her eldest son, like "dog shit" (36). José Arcadio seems unable to acknowledge or appreciate greater accomplishments not susceptible to scientific explanations. The first time Aureliano foresees the future, José Arcadio interprets it as a "natural phenomenon," and the narrator comments, "That was the way he

always was alien to the existence of his sons, partly because he considered childhood as a period of mental insufficiency, and partly because he was always too absorbed in his fantastic speculations" (24). When a flying carpet passes his laboratory window, José Arcadio says, "Let them dream … We'll do better flying than they are doing, and with more scientific resources than a miserable bedspread" (38). And when he fails, using daguerreotype equipment, to obtain an image of God, he becomes convinced of God's nonexistence (66).

Tayo's half-brother, Rocky, is also a convert to positivism. Anticipating an athletic scholarship and success in the white world, he heeds the advice of professors and coaches:

> They told him, "Nothing can stop you now except one thing: don't let the people at home hold you back." Rocky understood what he had to do to win in the white outside world. After their first year at boarding school in Albuquerque, Tayo saw how Rocky deliberately avoided the old-time ways. Old Grandma shook her head at him, but he called it superstition, and he opened his textbooks to show her. (Silko 51)

Rocky objects to Josiah's dismissal of books on the science of raising cattle:

> "Those books are written by scientists. They know everything there is to know about beef cattle. That's the trouble with the way the people around here have always done things—they never knew what they were doing." He went back to reading his book. He did not hesitate to speak like that, to his father and his uncle, because the subject was books and scientific knowledge—those things that Rocky had learned to believe in. (76)

Rocky's allegiance is to the white world, and when he and Tayo join the army—which, in Tayo's case, means breaking a promise to stay after high school and help Josiah with the Mexican cattle—Tayo is, in effect, making the same choice. But for Tayo, this means adopting an ideological position that proves to be untenable. The rationale for the war (Tayo's pass to white society) doesn't make sense to him; he becomes preoccupied with the fact that all corpses look alike, and he is unable to demonize "Japs":

> That had become the worst thing for Tayo; they looked too familiar even when they were alive. When the sergeant told them to kill all the Japanese soldiers lined up in front of the cave with their hands on their heads, Tayo could not pull the trigger. (7)

Tayo looks at Japanese prisoners and corpses and sees Josiah. Rocky tries to reassure him: "But, Tayo, we're *supposed* to be here. This is what we're supposed to do"; but Tayo is unmoved by his proselytizing: "He shivered because all the facts, all the reasons made no difference any more" (7-8).

Rocky is killed and Tayo ends up in a VA hospital where he exists as "white smoke": "He did not realize that until he left the hospital, because white smoke had no consciousness of itself" (14). He refers to himself in the third person (15) and has, in his view, no identity: "It had been a long time since he had thought about having a name" (16). He is released without being cured. The Laguna world-view that might or might not have been a viable option before is clearly not available now, as symbolized by the fact that Josiah lost the cattle and died while Tayo was away. Without a coherent world-view to serve as an organizing principle, Tayo experiences his life and memories as a plotless jumble:

> He could get no rest as long as the memories were tangled with the present, tangled up like colored threads from Old Grandma's wicker sewing basket when he was a child, and he had carried them outside to play and they had spilled out of his arms into the summer weeds and rolled away in all directions … (7)

He strives for any context, any categorization he can achieve, even if it's only noting which items of clothing date from before, and which from after the war:

> He got out of the bed quickly while he could still see the square of yellow sunshine on the wall opposite the bed, and he pulled on his jeans and the scuffed brown boots he had worn before the war, and the plaid western shirt old Grandma gave him the day he had come home after the war. (9)

Many passages early in the novel are reminiscent of the simple constructions, concern with mundane detail, and sense of repressed hysteria in "Big Two-Hearted River," in which Hemingway's shell-shocked Nick Adams tries to convince himself that the world in which he grew up still exists. Other Laguna war veterans try to continue living in the world as they knew it during the war, when they were accepted, briefly, by white society. War-time stories take on a ritual character: "They repeated the stories about the good times in Oakland and San Diego; they repeated them like long medicine chants, the beer bottles pounding on the counter tops like drums" (Silko 43). A prominent member of this group is Emo, whose story of sexual success with white women is put in the same poetic form Silko uses for Laguna myths (59-60). All of the Indian soldiers are again rejected by the white world as soon as the war is over, but Emo, like many, holds to a white-influenced world-view and disparages Laguna values:

> Emo liked to point to the restless dusty wind and the cloudless skies, to the bony horses chewing on fence posts beside the highway; Emo liked to say, "Look what is here for us. Look. Here's the Indians' mother earth! Old dried-up thing!" Tayo's anger made his hands shake. Emo was wrong. All wrong. (25)

Tayo becomes so angry at Emo's stories that he stabs him (63), but offended as he is by the world-view Emo preaches, he can't seem to find a credible alternative. He has been treated by representatives of two worlds, by a white psychiatrist (14-17) and a Laguna medicine man (33-39), but neither is sufficiently convincing to effect a cure that must be, essentially, a conversion:

> He dozed in the back seat of the police car all the way to Albuquerque; he knew what his eyes had seen, and what his ears had heard; he knew what he felt in his belly and up and down his backbone. But he wasn't sure any more what to believe or whom he could trust. He wasn't sure. (63)

Tayo finds something to be sure of when, in desperation, he visits Betonie, a Navajo/Mexican medicine man whose Hogan is filled with both the traditional medicine

paraphernalia and artifacts of the white world, such as old phone books and calendars, arranged in a ritualistic pattern. Betonie denies that white encroachment has made Indian ways obsolete. Noting that his traditional dwelling, oddly situated in the foothills on the edge of Gallup, predates the white community, he claims, "It is that town down there which is out of place. Not this old medicine man" (118). But he acknowledges the futility of relating to the world as though the whites did not exist:

> "At one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong. (126)

"I have made changes" turns out to be an understatement. Betonie teaches Tayo a new myth, accounting for whites and the contemporary world in a way compatible with traditional Pueblo beliefs.

I'll digress briefly to define "myth," not very daringly, as Novitz's life-narrative made communal. Myths define the identity and world of the group that believes them, mediating reality and to some extent, perhaps, creating it. They may be as indispensable to a culture as a fairly coherent self-image is to an individual. If something or someone changes the world to the point where the fundamental myths can't be applied, they must be replaced, even if the only myth a group can come up with perpetuates an undesirable position in the world. This explains a myth collected among the Chiricahua Apache after they were overrun by whites. The new myth traced the world population to the few survivors of a flood sent because people once worshipped the wrong gods. After the flood, two men were offered a gun and a bow. The man with first choice took the gun and became the white man; the other man had to take the bow and be the Indian. Given first choice and the gun, the second man would have been white. (Sproul 258)

Betonie's myth is dire but not hopeless: The current state of the world results from a long-ago contest of evil witches, a contest won by a witch of unknown tribe who told a story that began to come true as it was told, a story of people as white as fish-bellies who seek to destroy nature because they misunderstand and fear it. These people would come from across the ocean, spreading war and disease, destroying the land and the Indians (who would cooperate by feeling self-hatred when they failed to prevent it), and would eventually "explode everything" by means of "rocks with veins of green and yellow and black" (uranium). (Silko 132-38) For Tayo, part of a community disintegrating under the effects of racism, drought, and cultural decline, Betonie's myth is the core of a world-view offering opportunities for constructive action. After all, witches aren't the only storytellers, and stories—as Betonie demonstrates—can be revised. This is the task Betonie assigns Tayo—somewhat retroactively. When Tayo proclaims his guilt at not having done anything for Rocky or Josiah, Betonie says, "You've been doing something all along. All this time, and now you are at an important place in this story" (124).

Betonie forces a convergence of the reality of the Laguna stories, scattered throughout the book in poetic form, and the westernized reality of Tayo's perception, a confused modern reality, rendered in confusing modernist prose. (I have noted localized echoes of Hemingway, but the first half of the novel is more often reminiscent of Faulkner or Woolf.) Betonie tells a story—at least it seems plausible to conclude that Betonie tells this story—of a man taken by Coyote and turned into some sort of human/coyote hybrid; he has to be "called back" by the Bear People (139-41). Betonie and his helper, who appears to be one of the Bear People himself (128-30), perform a ceremony over Tayo that duplicates the one performed over the victim in the myth (141-44). The two storylines overlap to the point that on 142-44, one can't know for certain whether one is reading the chant Betonie performs over Tayo or the mythical account of the

chant performed by the Bear People. Afterwards, looking at the horizon, Tayo recognizes that his reality is now that of the myth and of the ceremony:

> He remembered the black of the sand paintings on the floor of the Hogan; the hills and mountains were the mountains and hills they had painted in sand. He took a deep breath of cold mountain air: there were no boundaries; the world below and the sand paintings inside became the same that night. (145)

More important, however, is a shift that takes place in a reader's perspective. Mary Slowik says of the Laguna myth/poems: "In the first half of the book, these tales interrupt the narrative line at crucial points subtly remaking our expectations" (106). I am both impressed and influenced by Slowik's reading, but I believe the majority of Silko's readers will be less subtle and malleable than Slowik assumes, at least on the first reading.

The first myth to interrupt the prose cuts into a section in which Tayo recalls being a POW in the Philippines and cursing the rain that made Rocky's wounds turn green. He returns to a New Mexican drought and seems, in his sickness, to entertain the notion that the drought is his doing. The inserted myth tells how the hard working Corn Woman scolded Reed Woman for bathing all day, after which Reed Woman went away and took the rain with her. (Silko 11-14) According to Slowik:

> The discordant tone in a subtle way begins to revise our understanding of nature and of curses. The bickering between the gods prevents us from taking Tayo too seriously. If nature goes into cycles of rain or drought because of the spite of the gods, it certainly will not be responsive to the self-projections of a human being. (107)

On the same page, Slowik says, "If the Indian tale undermines the seriousness with which Tayo believes he is affecting nature by cursing it, it likewise questions our own realist assumptions as well." But the modern, western reader of a tale apparently modern and western in style never took Tayo seriously for a moment. If he believes he cursed the rain away, it's a sign that he's

going insane. Nor are our own realist assumptions so easily called into question. We see a quaint story that may account for Tayo's wild idea, but not a guide to the interpretation of any event outside Tayo's head. And most of the myths seem far less relevant than this. The story of Hummingbird and Fly, helped by the mother to perform the missions necessary to placate the mother and restore their world, punctuates most of the novel and seems to have little in common with the story of an Indian who can't shake his battle fatigue, a veteran lost in nausea and disjointed memories, surfacing only for occasional bouts of drinking. This changes somewhere between the middle and end of the novel. As Slowik notes, "Although old Betonie is a character anchored in the realist story, he shifts Tayo's narrative function, thereby changing the entire nature of the realist story" (110). Tayo "becomes the protagonist of an adventure story resembling the Indian folktales" (111).

A reader gradually realizes the prose has abandoned its fragmented introspection to take up and complete the more straightforward story of the myths, incorporating Betonie's revision. Like Hummingbird, Tayo accepts a mission, the recovery of Josiah's cattle. He finds them where Betonie says he will and recovers them with the help of a mysterious woman who greets him with, "Who sent you?" (Silko 176), a woman included on the list of things Tayo labels "superstition" during a moment of wavering faith (194). After this success, it snows. Of course, Tayo's quest makes psychological sense at this point, as he adopts a world-view similar to Josiah's. And rather than Hummingbird/Tayo's reward, the drought's end may be read as a coincidence and a symbolic cliché—but Silko handles it as a violation of the way we know things happen in the world. On 208, the mysterious woman's companion says, "The tree … you better fold up the blanket before the snow breaks the branches." The woman folds up her "storm-pattern blanket," and the snow stops. The man's remark is explicable only if one assumes she

started and stopped the snow, ambiguous only if one doesn't interpret it at all—many of my students, apparently, didn't notice it—if one views such minor anomalies as stylistic flourishes similar to the myth/poems themselves. But such a reading will become steadily less plausible and will eventually be impossible to sustain.

Before the novel ends, Tayo, having fled to the mountains to escape agents of the army (stirred by Emo's stories to come and capture a crazy Indian veteran), finds himself hiding at a uranium mine watching Emo torture a friend by cutting off his genitals and the whorls of his fingertips and toes, as the witches did in Betonie's story. He recalls a story revealing that witchery doesn't work if there is a witness, and also rejects his impulse to rush out and kill Emo with a screwdriver, realizing afterwards:

> The witchery had almost ended the story according to its plan; Tayo had almost jammed the screwdriver into Emo's skull the way the witchery had wanted, savoring the yielding bone and membrane as the steel ruptured the brain. Their deadly ritual for the autumn solstice would have been completed by him …. The white people would shake their heads, more proud than sad that it took a white man to survive in their world and that these Indians couldn't seem to make it. At home the people would blame liquor, the Army, and the war, but the blame on the whites would never match the vehemence the people would keep in their own bellies, reserving the greatest bitterness and blame for themselves, for one of themselves they could not save. (253)

Tayo, having changed the story and defeated the witchery through his restraint, returns home, entirely cured and unthreatened by the army (which is not mentioned again). When the story finds its way back to Tayo's family that Emo has—apparently accidentally—shot Pinkie (an accomplice) and been exiled by the FBI, his grandmother says, "It seems like I already heard these stories before … only thing is, the names sound different (259-60). One has not read the novel as a fantasy, as a novel set in some other world, and there has been no jarring irruption of the magical, as in what Chanady would call the fantastic; yet, without quite abandoning the

stance a modern reader adopts towards a "realistic" fiction, one can only understand this ending as the completion of the mythic story. The novel is comprehensible because one finds oneself reading from some approximation of a Laguna perspective, a stance that has unexpectedly become the path of least resistance.

The impact of this shift will not be lessened if it takes place, as it will for many readers, late in the novel: the effect is retroactive. The significance of early events is revised by late understandings, and what is read from one perspective is likely to be recalled from another, as when Tayo first encounters a version of the goddess who chooses him as the hero of the contested story. The dancer called Night Swan, a paramour of Josiah, is handled in a way that closely parallels the treatment of T'seh, the mysterious woman who helps Tayo recover the wild cattle. In recollection, the two melt into one character—if "character" is the right word ("archetype" or "motif" might be better). Both are strongly associated with earth/nature imagery, especially during sex with Tayo (99, 180-81). Both are associated with drought-ending rain: Tayo meets Night Swan (and ends up in her bed) when rains keep Josiah in the fields and he sends Tayo with his apologies (96-100). Both are instigators of "supernatural" events, though Night Swan's story of killing a former lover with a dance is more easily dismissed as a coincidence or—since we don't get it straight from the narrator—as a tall tale (85-86). And both are linked with the same sacred mountain:

> She [Night Swan] winked at him and Josiah pulled her close, promising himself he would never ask her what it was about the mountain that caused her to stop there. (87)
>
> She [T'seh] was looking at Pa'ta'och, and the hair was blowing around her face. He could feel where she had come from, and he understood where she would always be. (230)

On page 100, Night Swan says to Tayo, "You don't have to understand what is happening. But remember this day. You will recognize it later. You are part of it now." On first reading, one hardly feels obliged to notice this. It is probably a vague, melodramatic comment on Tayo's introduction to sex. But we, like Tayo, recognize it later. We read the confusing first half of the novel as *The Sound and the Fury* taught us to read, waiting for the equivalent of the Jason and Dilsey sections, waiting for a context that makes the story clear. And when it happens, when the story is placed in its mythic context and everything slides into focus, all of the tentative reading we have done so far is revised. If we are loyal to verisimilitude and consistency, we may resist and reject, may read the end from a modern, western perspective and find it wanting, but it's really too late for that. An alert reader may anticipate Tayo's change of world-view, but when it comes to the narrative's positioning of the reader, one is far less likely to realize the perspective is shifting than to realize it *has shifted*. However one reads the ending, there will have been a moment during which, in reviewing the story, one saw it both ways and discovered the cognitive possibility of making more space. Mr. Quistgaard will have learned to harbor the suspicion that what is contained in his "u. of d.," or even his culture's u. of d., is not "a sufficiency."

Gardner, as I have noted, objects to that sort of thing, to what might be characterized as a literary shell game: "Neither can the honest writer make the reader accept what he says took place if the writer moves from *a* to *b* by verbal sleight of hand; that is, by distracting the reader" (Gardner 110). Gardner might call it a missed opportunity, saying as he did of Doctorow, "what truth the writer might have discovered if he'd carefully followed how things really do happen we will never know" (79). But I would argue that Silko, who is, like her protagonist, the product of contradictory cultures, understands that some "truths" never will be discovered by Gardner's

verisimilitude. She understands the point made by Gabriel García Márquez in a Nobel Prize acceptance speech insisting on the difference between his world and that of the West:

> Poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, soldiers and scoundrels, all we creatures of that disorderly reality have needed to ask little of the imagination, for the major challenge before us has been the want of conventional resources to make our life credible. (García Márquez, "Solitude of Latin America" 209)

V. Reconsidering Gardner, Considering McAdams

It would be arrogant, and perhaps libelous, if I were to stop writing before I conceded that the world-as-construct-of-fictions idea doesn't seem to have been unknown to John Gardner. In the last paragraph of his first section, "Premises on Art and Morality," he says, "Real art creates myths a society can live instead of die by" (Gardner 126). We quarrel mainly because he goes on in the same paragraph to say that "false art can be known for what it is if one remembers the rules." I don't think it's an insult to John Gardner that I am not prepared to grant him—or his (our) culture—the authority to enumerate these rules. Gardner feels the rules may be discovered in true art, but since true art may be recognized only if the rules are already known, this argument is flagrantly circular. Therefore, he often resorts to common sense (the name of which reveals it, as Whorf says on 142, to be largely a matter of "talking so that one is readily understood"). The worth of his rules is demonstrated when they affirm what we already know, that King Alfred was the moral superior of Ivar the Boneless (Gardner 22), that "*The Iliad* is the greatest single poem in our tradition" (131). Of course, this argument is also circular, and I think the verisimilar aesthetic is fundamentally circular. One cannot guarantee the truth of one's art through loyalty to the "real world" if (as I argue) art (broadly understood) is primary, the cause of which the world is largely an effect. (Nor is it relevant to argue that there must have been a world before there could be any art: we have no access to such a pristine world.)

The ultimate premise of Gardner's theory is that "the mind does not impose structures on reality … but rather, as an element of total reality … discovers, in discovering itself, the world" (122). I have devoted my second section to contesting this idea, but as this is my section for concessions, I will concede that it recalls the premise of the "inductive faith" advocated by Peter Berger—Berger is a sociologist, but the work I cite in Section II is best described as

theological—and that I am not altogether prepared to dismiss Berger's claim that "there is a fundamental affinity between the structures of consciousness and the structures of the empirical world" (45). My argument is not that there is no such thing as truth or that it isn't a virtue to seek it (in fiction or anywhere else); it is that one never can or should be certain one has found it. The voice from the whirlwind told Job more than "hold your tongue"; I think it said: do not presume to hold such firm opinions. I theorize that the most promising virtue may be an epistemological humility. I won't try to measure the extent to which Peter Berger achieves this, but he does make a credible effort to base his inductions on human universals. This is less ethno- and ego- centric than Gardner's assumption that the culture defining the "real" in our "realism" may be trusted without misgivings, that a mainstream American consciousness is the final arbiter of what is good and what is real. I assume that any worthwhile pursuit of truth, any genuinely moral fiction, will be more complicated and less complacent than that.

Which finally leads me to the question of what complications I want to embrace in my fiction. I can only speculate: as a manifesto, this essay is premature. The most I can do with confidence now is diagnose my own obvious failings. Is it reluctance to retell standard narratives that sometimes prompts me to resist plot, even coherence? Better strategies will have to be found. My wish is to induce not confusion but perhaps a serene awareness of confusion, maybe a sense of confusion as finer than the capitulation of easy convictions.

I want to learn something from magical realism, but not to slavishly imitate Silko. Not a true relativist, I can't affirm any array or blend of cultures as a highest value. Also, I doubt it is possible for anyone to practice Silko's art who is not multicultural in the same way. To adopt as one's narrative voice, for instance, the voice of a community that has absorbed the viewpoint of the modern world without abandoning that of the *indígenas*, takes, I imagine, not only the genius

but the cultural background of a Gabriel García Márquez. Of course, my own region, the Greater Los Angeles area, is a town square in the global village, and the babble of that/those culture(s) might be well suited to some of my ambitions, but I am not the polyglot social novelist who longs to master that schizoid voice. My imagination sends and receives within a narrower band. Lois Hudson once dismissed one of my favorite writers as a chronicler of "the spiritual crises of the middle class"; it was a fair description that fairly described my jurisdiction as well.

I am sufficiently the twentieth century heir of nineteenth century Romantics that I prefer to filter and create a fictive world through the sensibilities of a fictive individual. This presents an obstacle to what I see as the essentially third-person spirit of magical realist storytelling. (Perhaps I should say "third-persons"; I think the voice is generally communal.) Granted, the narration of *Ceremony*, though grammatically third-person, is focalized through Tayo; but the premise of the book turns out to be, and always to have been, a world derived from a hybrid Laguna culture—Tayo was a part of this story well before he became aware of it. Young and Hollaman's *Magical Realist Fiction* includes first-person stories that are farther from the model Chanady describes—they include examples, perhaps, of both fantasy and the fantastic—and which I could more easily imitate, but none, to my mind, rival the accomplishments of a Silko or a García Márquez. It is especially difficult for me to adapt this magical realist paradigm to a story taking place in a single head because my individual is an old-fashioned, almost mystical model, more and other than the sum of social influences, not readily conceivable as a conscious mosaic.

One way or another, I will have to reconcile conflicts between my devotion to the narratives of Romanticism and the elements of my aesthetic born of Donald Barthelme's pronouncement that "the principle of collage is the central principle of all art in the twentieth

century in all media" (Howard, 713-14); and I'll have to reconcile the latter with my primitive need to tell stories. Perhaps, after all, it will be as simple as writing the ultimate picaresque novel, in which the protagonist wanders agnostically from adventure to adventure, narrative to narrative, world(-view) to world(-view). I can't diagram a solution here: I expect to solve the problem more through experiment than cognition. When (if?) I do work it all out, I will be quick to repudiate tedious theorizing. I intend to emulate William Faulkner, insisting that any successful stories just came to me, all at once, in the barn.

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