

Ordinary Disorder: The Stories of Alvin Greenberg

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Common strategy in a critical article is to begin by assuming that everyone already knows the subject and wants to hear more, but in fact the problem in discussing Alvin Greenberg's stories or those of many other good writers is not so much to address as to create the proper audience. In fact, Greenberg typifies the position or plight of the experimental writer in the early 1980s. There is a journal devoted to Thomas Pynchon and a fairly ready market for discussions of John Barth and a few other postmodern superstars, and even a market for their books, but it is now more difficult than it was ten years ago for talented writers to find even an academic audience. For one thing, writers with good track records now find it difficult to publish experimental work—Greenberg, for example, published the novels *Going Nowhere* (1971) with Simon and Schuster and *The Invention of the West* (1976) with Avon, but two more recent books of fiction, award-winning collections of stories titled *The Discovery of America and Other Tales of Terror and Self-Exploration* (1980) and *Delta q* (1983) were published by Louisiana State University Press and University of Missouri Press respectively. For another, the shift in our institutions of higher learning from humanities to business and engineering and from advanced students to the marginally literate has deprived these writers of a captive audience of students and teachers.

Like many contemporary writers, Greenberg has a full set of academic credentials: Ph.D. (University of Washington); professorship (Macalester); Fulbright (India). Most academic readers probably knew him as an academic critic of high modernist literature. In recent years he has concentrated on a wide range of creative work—novels, stories, poems, drama, libretti—but his subject matter and range of allusion seems most likely to appeal to academic intellectuals. While his books have been respectfully noticed even in magazines of general circulation and his stories have been selected for *Best Science Fiction* and *Best American Short Stories*, the highest honors have been given to his collections by the Associated Writing Programs, “an organization of over ninety colleges and universities with strong curricular commitments to the teaching of creative writing.”

Aside from teachers recognizing and honoring one of their own, is there anything in Greenberg's stories to interest what nonacademics would call the normal person? There is evidence from the content of the stories that Greenberg sees a world not unlike the one we think we inhabit. Judging from his first-person stories (nine of ten in *Discovery*, and the tenth has clear autobiographical overtones; ten of fourteen in *Delta*) and allowing for the usual windage of imagination or inspiration, one can discover quite normal traits in Greenberg and his various personae. He/it wears glasses, likes to cook and eat but is fairly skinny, lives in a northern city in the United States but has traveled widely, is a baseball player manqué, has three children named Matthew, Nicholas, and Ann. There is a female alter ego, variously named—once Zena to his Albert—or designated by title, sometimes wife or departed wife, who seeks order, answers, coherence. More prominent is a very large, hairy, amorphous dog who ran away or died. Sometimes the central human figure has a double, once “an oaf, a freak, an ungainly monster, a whoopee cushion in the overstuffed couch of my life” (“Who Is This Man and What Is He Doing in My Life?” *Delta*, p. 166) once a greying graduate student no doubt “working on some

grimy little piece of pseudoscholarship" ("A Brief Chronology of Death and Night," *Discovery*, p. 81). He reads a good deal: Poe, Kafka, Borges, the usual modernists, as well as history, geography, some science. Once he wonders if he is an android, son of an android. As in soap operas, "acts of violence were rare, worries common. That was the way things really were" ("Dreams and Propositions," *Discovery*, p. 18).

As one might infer from the android question, since that is not the kind of thing one goes about asking even in a Greenberg story, his first-person narrators tend towards introspective monologue and might well be categorized, though not by Greenberg, as obsessive, even neurotic. At the very least, they are strange—and often estranged or isolated from what one of them defines as "the serious world—the world of appointments and lectures and hotel reservations, the world of pain and money and doctors" ("The Serious World and Its Environs," *Delta*, p. 38). But unlike the isolates of Poe or Kafka, they use their vantage points not to express their pain or confusion but for the most part to discover their wonder and even delight at a world that is "Not a Story by Isaac Bashevis Singer" or even, insofar (not very far) as he can arrange it, by Alvin Greenberg, but "just the world, a very shifty place" (*Delta*, p. 187). Embodied for the most part in a cool, complex, and essentially additive prose, this theme persists, whether the stories take the form of travelogues as quests ("The Origins of Life," "The Land of Milk and Honey," "The Discovery of America," "Footnotes to a Theory of Place" in *Discovery*; "The Serious World and Its Environs" in *Delta* q); skewed science fiction (the award-winning "Franz Kafka" by Jorge Luis Borges in *Discovery*; "The Main Chance" and "The State of the Art" in *Delta*); or the baseball story ("The Real Meaning of the Faust Legend" in *Discovery*; "Game Time" in *Delta*). There are no climaxes: the narrator of the first baseball story quits in mid-season on achieving his dream of hitting .368, .0002 ahead of his goal. The central character of the second, Jesus Caracas, waits with his arms eternally lifted beneath a pop fly in a meaningless intra-squad practice game, aware "that in the perfection of its poise and waiting, this is the most *baseball* moment of his life" (p. 36), redeeming no one, poised eternally like a figure on an urn or in Robert Coover's *Universal Baseball Association*. The characters in the science-fiction stories learn that even more difficult than being an alien or an android in a world of humans is being a human in such a world or that interplanetary flight brings horror, madness, and death because "we are come where we are not wanted" ("The State of the Art," p. 104). The travelers step back to ask "what do you *do* with your Holy Grail once you've found it? Set it on the mantle? Put it in the trophy case? Fill it with cut flowers? No longer an object to seek, it becomes merely an object to behold; sought after, it is motion, life, but found, it is only a dead thing. Completion is stasis" ("The Serious World and Its Environs," p. 45).

One of Donald Barthelme's characters announces that "chaos is tasty AND USEFUL TOO" ("Alice," *Sixty Stories* [New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1981], p. 70). For a number of experimental writers, including Greenberg, it is essential. Both fictionally and, if that is the right term, theologically, the central tenet of Greenberg's universe of discourse is that "No one is watching" ("The Ascent of Man," *Delta*, p. 90). No God controls, either to reward or punish; the central character in "Not a Story by Isaac Bashevis Singer" is not a Job to be tested or even, finally, a character subject to the rules of Singer's universe; the narrator of "Myopia" struggles to convince us that he is "not making art," "That I do not succumb to the peculiarly modernist delusion that one more set of spectacles, one final adjustment of curvature, one last lucid point of view, and all will come clear. All will not come clear" (*Delta*, p. 139). Clear enough, including the injunction "Do not be afraid" because, "Glasses gone, all pretense at clarity dissolves. No borders, no certainties, no demands" (p. 146). Rather like the Beatles' song about no wars, no religion, only perfect peace, wouldn't it be lovely. But if Jesus Caracas's pop-up ever comes out of the sun—which Greenberg, God of this creation, can keep it from doing, of course—he'd better have his glasses on and flip the sunglasses over them.

In fact, Greenberg specifically rejects Aristotelian or neo-Classical structures of rising, peaking, and falling action (F6, as a pop-up to the shortstop would be registered in a baseball scorebook) which he illustrates in "Footnotes of a Theory of Place" (*Discovery*) by a line rising to a crest and then falling away, in favor of a line with a series of small, equal protuberances above the horizontal which he calls "the ripples of real time" (p. 102). Art is not a pop fly but a sort of infinite ground ball with no pebbles in the way. One of his narrators insists that "the most significant events were those that happened to the most people with the greatest frequency" ("Dreams and Propositions," *Discovery*, p. 17) and therefore that "the dramatic form best suited to the fullest expression of the human condition could be nothing other than the soap opera" because "It was true. It was ordinary. It was what happened." Furthermore, the glacial pace of soap opera enables the spectator "to step in between the discrete moments that made up each event" (p. 18) and to understand and savor them as he cannot in his own life. Art may not be a pair of spectacles, but it need not be an explanation because "We only have to know what happens" (p. 23.)

And, in the view of another narrator, "when no one is watching, anything can happen" ("The Ascent of Man," *Delta*, p. 92). In a story, of course, something has to happen. In a Greenberg story, characteristically, the central figure either fights a losing battle to attain meaning or, by recognizing the futility of his quest, abandoning it, and accepting the density and presence of the real, living world, attains a kind of knowledge and, if not always peace, a moment of recognition more tranquil or at any rate less traumatic than the stock modernist epiphany.

In the title story of *Delta q*, the focal character (call him the cook) seeks reality, definition, in leftovers because fresh food already exists in the past; by insisting on the pastness of the leftovers he can attempt to control, arrest, and understand time-bound process and thereby place and define himself. The interlocutor complains that "It's not at all clear to me that this is getting somewhere. Escalation yes, but progress no. It is merely getting more complex, and not at all clearer" (p. 116). Inevitably, reasonably, and comically so. The cook rushes in smaller and smaller concentric circles to the point where "the hamburger will disappear in a whirl of momentum, devoured before it can truly become a leftover. The still world, on the other hand, is incredibly complex, positioned in an unidentifiable complexity. What is one to do?" (p. 120) He wants "to know that I am eating the mousse while I am eating the mousse" (p. 120) The interlocutor, originally suspicious of the whole process, becomes involved in the actual process of eating, made indifferent to definition or certainty by the urge of appetite and the pleasures of tasting. Refusing to wait for Godot bearing a menu, he has chosen the better part, accepted the fact that he cannot fix his position or chart his movement, and assented to, while the cook resists, Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle.

Stories like "Delta q" work, not because they cite Heisenberg (though they would not work without the concept), but because they show a character struggling with the principle and with his world in an unexpected and in this case comic fashion. Quite properly, as Greenberg might agree, the engagement is the point.

That engagement is more seriously and perhaps most effectively created in "Disorder and Belated Sorrow: A Shadow Play," which concentrates in just over eight pages Greenberg's characteristic materials, attitudes, and methods and demonstrates the way in which experiment is not merely a game but a way to extend and enrich meanings as conventional techniques could not. The difference between Greenberg's "I" and Professor Cornelius in Thomas Mann's "Disorder and Early Sorrow" is not merely that the "I" has abandoned his home and family but that the "I" is forced to create his world if it is going to exist at all.

Like many Greenberg stories, this one deals with a quest for order, for what is *enough*. Mysticism, rationalism, categorization, irony, symmetry, depth are examined and rejected, and the search itself is shown to be mistaken, even guilty.

Presence may be enough, but he can be present only as a shadow, “plotless and ephemeral” (p. 165). Neither the constantly solidifying reality of the house and its living inhabitants nor the shadow thrown by the light of imagination on the screen of the past is enough. But it is all there is.

“Disorder and Belated Sorrow” is at the same time a confession, a penance, and an artistic manifesto. Both in the process of telling and in the tale told there is the recognition of the desire to impose form on life as well as on art and of the price exacted by doing so. The conclusion is no conclusion, the answer no answer, but the story is given form and the narrator achieves awareness in spite of the recognition that imposed order kills and the understanding that complete knowledge is not possible. It is a very moving story because it not merely portrays the abandoned and irrecoverable past but exhibits and criticizes the techniques by which we attempt to recapture it and thereby assuage our pain.

As postmodernism matures or wanes and its characteristic themes and devices are assimilated into conventional practice, it becomes possible to distinguish between what authors find it possible to write and what they find it necessary to write. For example, Donald Barthelme found it possible to bring together nineteenth century engravings and contemporary texts in ironic, comic, and sometimes meaningful juxtaposition, but judging from the absence of these fictions from *Sixty Stories*, he no longer thinks it necessary. Alvin Greenberg found it possible to posit a story by Jorge Luis Borges whose unknown alphabet was invading life; more recently he rejects the power of Isaac Bashevis Singer to impose his fantasy upon any of us; and though he might wish to continue to pay tribute to Borges as he did in 1970, he does not need to write another Borges story. Max Apple and Guy Davenport have played with the idea—at least as old as the Roman genre of dialogues of the dead—of imagining lives and conversations of historical figures, as Greenberg imagined sporadic encounters with Amerigo Vespucci in “The Discovery of America.” All of these writers found it amusing and sometimes fruitful to play with external forms derived from physical and literary games in order to parody, celebrate, or reject them.

But all of these methods are essentially parasitic; all are ways of avoiding, though of circling around, the question (older than Conrad) of how to *be*. No doubt it is fatal for any writer to confront that question too directly, but it is no less fatal to ignore it. At his best, Greenberg imagines the confrontation without presenting it either too coyly or too directly, and in these stories he justifies the assertion that “All problems are formal problems” (“Dreams and Propositions,” *Discovery*, p. 20). The material may be ordinary, but the disorder of art is not.