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Stanley Elkin's Magic Carnival

As has happened with many other American fiction writers of the 60s, 70s and 80s—those heady pre-Raymond Carver days of maximalists and metafictionists, when literary disruptions were the norm and anything could happen—there has been a precipitous decline in academic (as well as non-academic) interest in Stanley Elkin's work. Were he still alive, Elkin would have interpreted the decline as yet another of the slings and arrows outrageous fortune has thrown his way, including the failure to achieve commercial success. Even in dying, this Rodney Dangerfield of contemporary American fiction couldn't get any respect, or at least not enough. (For Elkin "enough" was never enough, was never an option.) His obituary was the briefest by far of the three on *Newsweek's* 12 June 1995 "Newsmaker" page dominated by the story (two photos, three full columns, lots of text) of the equestrian accident that paralyzed actor Christopher Reeve. Stanley Elkin goes head to head, *mano a mano*, with Superman and, of course, loses. In a way, Elkin was maker, if not master, of his fate, and not just because he refused to settle for less.

Of all the noteworthy writers with whom he has been variously linked, Elkin was the least programmatic, the most resistant to easy classification, and at times the most ornery and contradictory. Although his prose is as distinctive and idiosyncratic as John Barth's, Donald Barthelme's, or Robert Coover's, Elkin's work resists labels in ways that

theirs do not. Neither metafictionist nor “Jewish American” enough (though he palled around with William H. Gass and Coover and greatly admired Saul Bellow), Elkin is *sui generis* with a vengeance. (For Elkin vengeance was always an option.) He was the least given to literary manifestos; no literature of exhaustion or replenishment for him, no surfiction, no moral fiction either. Elkin is certainly idiosyncratic but his inclusion in collections such as Tom LeClair and Larry McCaffery’s *Anything Can Happen* (1983) and Heide Ziegler’s *Facing Texts* (1988) was as *de rigueur* then as Elkin is *de trop* now. He is barely visible in the *MLA Bibliography* and nowhere to be seen in retrospectives such as the Norton anthologies of American Literature and of postmodernism and in sweeping surveys such as Josephine Hendin’s *Concise Companion to Postwar American Literature and Culture* (2004). To make matters worse, Elkin is no longer contemporary; time does move on and so does academic criticism made in the image and under the shadow, or aegis, of the capitalist economy. Oddly however, while Elkin has been moved out of the mainstream and into the archive, the Dalkey Archive that is, critical fashion has moved into at least one area where Elkin’s fiction has a great deal to offer, disability studies.

Here, however, I want to take up another neglected, although not unrelated aspect of Elkin’s work, or rather of the one work that David Dougherty rightly calls his “most important” and whose very title creates as a little stumbling block, disabling readers before they can even get started: *Stanley Elkin’s The Magic Kingdom* on the title page and (for example) in Dougherty’s bibliography, *The Magic Kingdom* on the copyright page and (for example) in Dougherty’s index. Elkin liked to point out that in his writing situation is paramount and therefore takes precedence over every other consideration,

including plot, which never much interested Elkin, and even style, which always interested him (Elkin, *Pieces* 191). And nowhere in his work is situation more important and more problematic than in *The Magic Kingdom*, as we have agreed to call it for this collection. Elkin took pains to explain the situation from which the novel grew, not once but several times, not just at the time of the novel's publication in 1985 but long after as well, as if the audacity of the project shocked and continued to shock even this seemingly shock-proof author:

Oh boy. Oh boy. I got the idea for *The Magic Kingdom* when I was in England. On the television news there was this three-minute special interest piece about a bunch of British children who were being schlepped to Disney World in Florida—they all wanted to see Mickey Mouseville. You know, I was never going to write another novel after *George Mills*—I had decided that I didn't want to write any more novels. And I was watching this thing, and I began to choke up, because I had never heard of terminally ill kids being taken. And they showed these kids: they were the lame, the halt, the blind, the failing—they were in terrible shape. And I thought, my God, how are these kids even gonna make it across the ocean, much less make it back? And I told Joan, I said I had an idea for a novel; it would be terrible to write such a novel, but it's a good idea for a novel. Now the challenge of *The Magic Kingdom* is to write the novel and not make it sentimental. And I don't think it is sentimental. I hate the idea of a Last Wish society and all that. (Bailey, "Hat" 24)

The deaths of Dickens's Little Nell and Stowe's Little Eva may be more than a century and a half in the past, during the Victorian cult of the child, but the number of recent American stories, novels and films about children at risk (the literary equivalent of the child abuse panic of the 90s) and especially the phenomenal success of Alice Sebold's novel *Lovely Bones* (and the almost certain future success of *Lord of the Rings* director Peter Jackson's film adaptation) demonstrate the continuing viability of a cultural trope so powerful it even affected news coverage of the December 2004 tsunami, which emphasized the children who had died or been made orphans. One way to measure the risk Elkin took in writing unsentimentally about dying children is Elkin's own response:

that not only would it be “terrible to write such a novel”; it “would be wrong” (qtd. in Berger). (Then again, what better way to avenge the wrong he had been recently dealt, the commercial failure, as he saw it, of the book he believed his best, *George Mills*. It was a wrong whose pain a National Book Critics Circle award did little to assuage but one that Elkin could nonetheless avenge.) Another way to measure the risk Elkin ran in writing *The Magic Kingdom* is by counting how few writers have followed his example, let alone succeeded so well. Brilliant in its way, not even Lorrie Moore’s archly titled (and semi-autobiographical) “People Like That Are the Only People Here: Canonical Babbling in Peed Onk” comes close, nor does Stephen Dixon’s story “Sleep,” which deals with the death of the narrator’s wife in no less an unsentimental and affecting way. Possessing as “ferocious [and] audacious” a heart as photographer Diane Arbus and a heavy-duty, built-in shit detector worthy of Ernest Hemingway, Elkin did not need a Gordon Lish to save him from the sentimentalizing to which Raymond Carver was prone (Max), nowhere more so than in Carver’s story about the death of a child, “A Small, Good Thing” (1983) as distinct from the chilly (and arguably superior) minimalist version Lish edited for *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981).

“Everybody dies, everybody. Sure,” Elkin’s first novel begins. Asked why he made “mortality the driving fact of Boswell’s life,” Elkin, who had suffered his first heart attack at 38 and been diagnosed with MS at 42, replied, “That’s the driving force of my own life. There isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t think, ‘Jesus Christ, how many more months do I have left?’ Or years, I hope. I am totally preoccupied with my own death” (LeClair 119). Even when death is not the central fact in an Elkin fiction, its handmaiden, pain, is. As Elkin, whom Naomi Leibowitz has described as “the great poet of our pain”

(qtd. in Parker), liked to say, “All books are the book of Job,” and none more so than Elkin’s own, especially the Ellerbee section of *The Living End*. Yet for a writer who wrote his PhD dissertation on religious themes in Faulkner and who admired Saul Bellow above all other contemporary writers, Elkin steadfastly chose not to represent pain or death conventionally and certainly not as conventionally redemptive. Where the more sentimentally and transcendently inclined Carver took as his guiding principle Chekhov’s line “And then suddenly everything became clear,” Elkin preferred Faulkner’s “Between grief and nothing I will take grief.” The grieving besieged flesh may be weak—and in Elkin’s fiction the flesh always is—but it is all his characters have. “Behard Mr. Softee,” a fellow patient (soon to die) tells *The Franchiser*’s MS-stricken Ben Flesh. Easier said to, and of, an adult than a child.

One way around the difficulty of approaching a novel which deals not just unsentimentally but comically with dying children is to read *The Magic Kingdom* as not really being about its ostensible subject: “the cruel absurdity of childhood mortality and the helplessness and rage we feel in coping with such an unfair arbitrary issue. By the logic implicit in the novel, dying children, these seven biological abnormalities, are the vehicle of a synecdoche whose tenor is all dying people or everyone whose life contains the inevitable seed of his own death” (Dougherty, *Stanley Elkin* 85). This is what the novel itself would call “a reasonable explanation.” It is far too reasonable to reject but not so reasonable that it can’t be improved by emphasizing the children’s literal and physical illnesses, rather than their metaphorical and metaphysical ones, by connecting Elkin’s novel and Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of carnival and the carnivalesque. In making this connection between Elkin’s novel and Bakhtin’s theory, I do not mean to suggest that the

former is a perfect illustration of the latter, nor do I assume that Bakhtin's theory is without problems. In fact, Michael Andre Bernstein's critical reading of Bakhtinian carnival in terms of Nietzschean resentment provides valuable insight into the wellspring of Elkin's narrative energy. These caveats notwithstanding, Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque provides a means for connecting features of Elkin's style with larger concerns about the body and more especially with death and dying. The exaggeration, hyperbole and excessiveness that Bakhtin sees as characteristic of grotesque realism and the carnivalesque are equally characteristic of Elkin's fiction, especially *The Magic Kingdom*. Both draw from a "boundless ocean of grotesque body imagery" which includes "not only the outward but also the inner features of the body: blood, bowels, heart and other organs" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 319). Both use laughter to degrade and materialize (*Rabelais* 20), to expose conventionality as well as to conquer terror. And both use decrowning doubles to bring all that is lofty, abstract, and remote to the level of the low, the physical and the near-at-hand, in the realm of the living present.

The Magic Kingdom works the way that carnival does, as a decentered space in which everything and everyone is brought together. It is the one Elkin novel which, even more than *The Living End*, is about *no one*. Eddy Bale may be "the UK's most visible, most recognizable beggar" (6), but he is not the novel's protagonist in the way franchiser (franchisee) Ben Flesh or streets commissioner Robert "Bobbo" Druff is. As the novel's Pied Piper, Peter Pan and pitchman/carnival barker all rolled into one, he shares narrative space with the "crew" of "self-exiled outcasts" he assembles (but hardly controls) and the cast of terminally ill children they collectively select. As his and their names suggest, they are not so much characters as caricatures rendered in the style of grotesque realism.

There is Nedra Carp, the nanny with a portwine stain on her chest and a Hansel and Gretel pedigree so comically excessive as to form a mise-en-abime of parental (and step-parental) deaths and sibling rivalries and rejections. There is Colin Bible, who undertakes the trip in order to secure the children's releases so that his lover, also named Colin, can turn them into wax exhibits at Madame Tussaud's. And there is Mr. Morehead, the doctor who feels persecuted by Jews and who makes the trip to test his hypothesis, on Florida's Jews, that disease, not health, is "at the core of things." And finally there is Mary Cottle; "neither nanny nor nurse," "this Borgia Madonna" poisons any child she conceives with her malignant genes. Were *The Magic Kingdom* a *Moby-Dick*, staff and kids would form an Anarcharsis Cloots deputation bringing all of their and Elkin's griefs and grievances before the bar, seeking redress.

In Elkin's other novels, characters suffer their maladies, second-rateness, macguffins, jobs, roles (wife, widow, in *Mrs. Ted Bliss*), the whims of a stand-up comedian god who never found his audience. In *The Magic Kingdom* the suffering is less metaphorical, more embodied: the kids are their illnesses, the Seven Dwarfs transmogrified into the Seven Deadly Diseases: Janet Order (tetralogy of Fallot), Noah Cloth (osteosarcoma), Benny Maxine (Gaucher's), Rena Morgan (cystic fibrosis), Charles Mudd-Gaddis (progeria), Tony Word (lymphoblastic leukemia), Lydia Conscience (dysgerminoma: "that's a tumor she's carrying to term"). The kids are prodigious pathologies, pathological prodigies, the Mozarts of disease, parodies of the chosen people: chosen by fate (their genes) and by Eddy (their fearful leader) and his crew, none more so than Benny with his "Yid's disease" and put-on Cockney accent.

Intuitively drawing on carnival's "ocean of grotesque imagery," Elkin is unsparing in the way he presents his characters. In fact, he is doubly unsparing. Not only does he not spare his characters any sufferings and indignities. (Elkin has never been interested in making his characters especially, or at least conventionally, sympathetic, not even when the character resembles Elkin most: geographer Schiff in "Her Sense of Timing.") He doesn't spare the reader either. Elkin the unsparing acts the way Eddy eventually does when he tells Benny what he never told (and never would have told) his son Liam: that he will miss out, especially on sex, and that, yes, sex is indeed all it's cracked up to be. Benny the Jew is the novel's Moses, who, spying on Mary Cottle masturbating, can see the promised land but not enter it (189-190). Just as he does not spare the children, Elkin does not spare the reader, as in this description of

the sluggish ways of the dying, their awful morning catarrhs and constipations, the wheezed wind of their snarled, tangled breathing, their stalled blood and aches and pains like an actual traffic in their bones, all the low-grade fevers of their stiff, bruised sleep. . . . mouths stenchy as Beirut, stomachs floating on a slick film of morning sickness, the torpid hangover of their medications. They groaned. They stumbled listlessly through their rooms or waited, hung in trance above shoes, buttons, expression denied their faces as if they lived in some lulled climate of withdrawn will. (94)

The slings and arrows of outrageous genes and medical malady fuel the "fierce language" of Elkin's wised-up prose: "Because, as the old saying *should* go, as long as you have your health, you have your naivete. I lost the one, I lost the other, and maybe that's what led me toward revenge—a writer's revenge anyway; the revenge . . . of style" (Elkin, *Pieces* 245).

"And this is precisely how Elkin makes a man," notes William Gass, "out of the elements he lives in, the body he is confined to, the world he works in, the language he knows" (viii). Of the four, it is the body that has received the least attention in Elkin

criticism and the one that is preeminent in *The Magic Kingdom*. Elkin's treatment of the body is carnivalesque not only in its grotesque realism but in its destruction of the "hierarchical picture of the body" and transference of all hierarchically arranged aspects to a single, relativizing plane "realized in the human body, which [becomes] the relative center of the cosmos" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 363). "The lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract" and their transference, via grotesque realism, to "the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity," is, Bakhtin contends, "deeply positive" (*Rabelais* 19-20). Unlike Whitman, who chose either to deliberately exclude infirmities (especially his own) from his poetry ("As I sit here") or to include them only in order to transcend them (e.g., "Song of Myself," "The Sleepers"), Elkin includes infirmities in all their materiality. Resisting the tendency that Susan Sontag analyzes so well in *Illness as Metaphor*, "Elkin gives us the real thing: not metaphors, kids" (Apple).

To put Elkin's achievement here in perspective, consider his "treatment" or "handling" of the body materially rather than metaphorically in relation to the dying Edward Said's critique of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*. What Said objects to is that Frye's lofty as well as sweeping abstractions come at the expense of the material, cultural and historical conditions out of which the specific literary works Frye "anatomizes" were written. Elkin in effect takes materialization one step further: to the physical body itself. But does Elkin do so at the expense of the material historical forces that Said emphasizes by inverting Frye, emphasizing the physical where Frye emphasized the formal? I think not, for in carnivalizing the human body, Elkin is responding to those forces in his own fashion by resisting the modern bourgeois tendency towards increasing privatization and

individuation. Elkin's characters are not so much individual as idiosyncratic, and the excessive and caricaturish way Elkin depicts them recalls Flannery O'Connor's explanation of her own grotesques: "for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures"-- as large and startling as in Rabelais's work, where "life has no individual aspect" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 239). Although Elkin's characters have their individual obsessions and lingo, they tend to lack what most characterizes "the modern": individual psychologies and psychological depth. As such they resist and thus provide an alternative to "the modern image of the individual body," in which, as Bakhtin explains, "sexual life, eating, drinking and defecation have radically changed their meaning: they have been transferred to the private and psychological levels where their connotation becomes narrow and specific, torn away from the direct relation to the life of society and to the cosmic whole" (*Rabelais* 321). And what modern life has "torn away," Elkin restores.

Other aspects of Elkin's writing undergo a similar materialization and work to a similar end. His plots do not develop in any conventional sense, least of all one that contributes to a character's psychological development. Instead they accrete, following wherever Elkin's muse, Serendipity, leads, following the peristaltic rhythm of tension and release, narrative metastasis and remission. In plot as in language and characterization, Elkin's approach is decidedly carnivalesque: "more is more" (and nowhere more so than in the plot Elkin spins in "What's in a Name" in *Pieces of Soap* and the one-hundred page digression in *George Mills* that Elkin wrote to get back at reviewers who had complained about the digressiveness of his earlier novels). Too often Elkin's critics--and Elkin himself--have resisted seeing this carnivalesque abundance as a literary asset and have

instead sought to defend the shapeliness of his unruly prose (e.g., Bailey, *Reading* ix; LeClair 119). Too often Elkin has been praised for his “voice” but again in a way that either downplays or implicitly rejects its materiality: “It is my feeling,” Arthur Salzman notes, “that a study of Elkin’s fiction most profitably begins with its most arresting feature: a richly metaphorical, relentlessly clever, unmistakably poetic voice” (11). Where Salzman and others have understandably but I believe unwisely emphasized the poetry of Elkin’s distinctive voice, I prefer to emphasize its physicality. Elkin’s transformation of the purely verbal into the intensely physical restores his visionary voice—intense, flamboyant, excessive, extravagant, bitter, resentful, celebratory, performative—to its rightful place as part of the grotesque body. Elkin restores language not just to the materiality of the printed word (Barthelme’s “Sentence”) or printed book (Gass’s *Willie Master’s Lonesome Wife*). He restores it to the body, as Rick Moody suggests--“In Stanley Elkin, rhythm (breath) is inspiration enough”--and as Ken Emerson all but acknowledges outright: “If Elkin’s irrepressible bad manners are not for the faint of heart, his highly mannered sentences are not for the faint of breath.” It is in the context of *The Magic Kingdom*’s relationship to the human body that Elkin’s metafictional playfulness takes on added urgency: the three-page long paragraph (12-15), the five-page parenthesis (27-31), the two-page long sentence on Tony Word’s disease, the extravagant use of dashes (125-126), the lists and litanies (of what “they” did to Liam, of Eddy’s disappointments, of what Eddy could not know, of the rides the children go on, of the seven pages of “or thats”). There are the comic routines in *The Magic Kingdom*, that, even as they recall Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and Robert Coover’s “The Hat Act,” are linked to the characters’ physical existences in ways that Beckett’s existential tramps and

Coover's metafictional magician are not. Elkin's "richly metaphorical language" underscores this point: the metaphors are so outrageous and so outrageously mixed that they resist becoming transcendental signifieds. They do not offer us, as John Clayton says Richard Brautigan's own richly metaphorical language does, "imaginative magic as a liberation from decay" (qtd. in Klinkowitz 22). Rather, they constantly remind us of carnival's surplus of physicality, what the novel calls "the heavy saliency of things" (180): Rena blotting her copious discharges, "Her fingers, quick as a pickpocket's, moved across her body like a loom" (171); Janet Order with her "jigsaw heart" "like faulty wiring or badly tied shoes" or "like one of those spectacularly deformed vegetables one sometimes sees on Fair days: a potato in the shape of a white bread, say, or a cluster of Siamese-joined grapes" (71, 69, 42).

Elkin depicts Disney World differently. In fact, he hardly describes it at all. He shows no more interest in Disney World in *The Magic Kingdom* than he did when he visited there with his children to research the novel but ended up spending most of his time and money boating on the small lake behind their hotel (Dougherty, "Conversation"). Reserving grotesque realism for his characters, Elkin does not depict Disney World realistically; in the novel realism is associated with artificial substitutes for the human: the bowel- and bloodless wax figures in Madame Tussaud's and equally lifelike but lifeless animatrons at Disney World. Nor does Elkin depict Disney World, as Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco do, in terms of the hyperreal or as the Disney Corporation's planners, or "imagineers," do in terms of "Disney realism, sort of Utopian in nature, where we carefully program out all the negative, unwanted elements and program in the positive elements" (qtd. in Murphet 118). Elkin's Disney World—Elkin's Magic

Kingdom--is less a place in its own right than the site of most of the novel's "juxtapositions ... misalliances, all the thrilling, discrepant mysteries and asymmetries of disrupt geometry" (19-20). It is "a small world" (also the title of David Lodge's most carnivalesque novel), a place with its own logic ("magic") where everything and everyone come together and where "everything has a reasonable explanation" (as the novel repeatedly/excessively claims). In Elkin's novel, the vastness of the real Disney World becomes strangely finite—the exhausted kids soon exhaust its riches; the meta-theme park cannot match either Elkin's inexhaustible prose or the inexorable course of the kids' indefatigable diseases. Elkin's carnivalized Disney World devolves to a mise-en-abyme of small worlds, which includes the Magic Kingdom that Lydia Conscience and Janet Order alternately occupy in their overlapping dreams during the flight over; Room 822 which serves as Mary Cottle's hidey hole, trysting place for Colin Bible and Matthew Gale (and later Eddy Bale and Mary Cottle), and especially Discovery Island, where Mary Cottle and Colin Bible take the children:

Separated by perhaps a hundred feet, the two groups lie about on hummocks of earth and rock at skewed, awry angles. Tony Word and Lydia Conscience lie in nests of their own clothes. It is really too great a distance to distinguish features, to make out the still only incipient shapes and chevrons of genitalia. They stare across the distance that separates them and have, each and collectively, a gorgeous impression of flesh. They are skinny-dipping in the air and leer across space in wonder and agape.

"That's enough, Rena. Put your clothes on. You don't want to burn."

"Five more minutes. Please, Miss Cottle? Just five more minutes.

Please?"

"All right," she says and the boys get five more minutes to study her indistinct pinkness, the girls to note the fragile pallor of the boys.

And it was wondrous in the negligible humidity how they gawked across the perfect air, how, stunned by the helices and all the parabolas of grace, they gasped, they sighed, these short-timers who even at their young age could not buy insurance at any price, not even if the premiums were paid in the rare rich elements, in pearls clustered as grapes, in buckets of bullion, in trellises of

diamonds, how, glad to be alive, they stared at each other and caught their breath. (257)

The parade scene, thirty pages earlier (220-229), provides an even better illustration of the Bakhtinian view of carnival as “a pageant without footlights.” Too long to be quoted here in its entirety and, like so much of Elkin’s fiction, resistant to brief quotation, this scene, with its emphasis on “imperfection everywhere,” does double duty. It enables Colin to secure the children’s releases for Madame Tussaud’s, and it serves as a counterpoint to the Discovery Island scene quoted above. Raised in a cold climate, the children are suddenly exposed to relatively unclothed adult bodies, mainly glimpsed, sometimes lingered over but always grotesque: “a couple with the lined, bloated, and satisfied heads of midgets,” “wens ... sprinkled across their faces like a kind of loose change of flesh”; “a pot-bellied, slack-breasted man, his wife with bad skin, scarred, pitted as scrotum”; “an angry woman” with “black, thick eyebrows the color and shape of leeches above eyes set so deep in her skull they seemed separated from her face, hidden as eyes behind a mask or holes cut from portraits in horror films” and “a set of tiny lips like a botched bookkeeping or clumsy work in a child’s coloring book”; the pretty young woman “with dowager’s hump”; the “man in shorts, the enlarged veins on his legs like wax dripping down Chianti bottles in Italian restaurants”; the “woman with oily skin and pores like a sort of gooseflesh, visible as the apertures of chickens where their pinfeathers have been plucked”; on and on for four more pages of “peculiar” and “mismatched couples,” of “lamb turning to mutton,” “fright fish,” and “blood puddles.” Indebted to Diane Arbus’s photographs (Dougherty, “Conversation”), the parade recalls a similar scene in Nathanael West’s *Day of the Locust* in which Tod Hackett observes the Midwesterners who have come to Hollywood to see the stars but who, Tod believes, have

really come to die and who, feeling cheated, seethe with resentment. Although Tod is determined to paint them with respect, his and West's dismay, even disgust, is apparent and quite distinct from what Elkin feels and what his novel conveys. "I don't necessarily find beauty in popular culture," Elkin has said. "What I do find is immense energy" (LeClair 115), and it is this energy, and the immense life force it represents, that Elkin conveys so effectively and affectingly. As a result, his treatment of popular culture and its discontents differs not only from West's but from the seven dwarfs' "wanting to be on the leading edge of the trash phenomenon" in Barthelme's *Snow White*, Coover's Emile Durkheim-inspired anthropological approach to America and Americans in *The Public Burning*, and Don DeLillo's Jesuit-inflected fiction of dis- or misplaced spiritual yearning in a thoroughly materialist postmodern consumer culture. Although depicted in materialist terms, Elkin's magic kingdom is not carnival in its modern debased form, cut off from its roots in authentic folk culture. Rather, it is the place where his characters can spend their money and themselves liberally: spending not for vast returns as in Whitman but for the moment. Thus Benny's life-and-death gambling and Noah Cloth's first--and last—shopping spree: extravagant acts which parallel Elkin's own extravagant, in-for-a-penny-in-for-a-pound prose. As Elkin told Scott Sanders, "I'm attached to the extreme.... I approve of plenty. I dig cornucopia," including his characters' "heroic extravagance" (131-132, 137, 142) which Geoffrey Wolff rightly ascribes to Elkin himself: "Stanley Elkin, all appetite, wanted more," the yearning words of Saul Bellow's Eugene Henderson ("I want, I want") made incarnate in the blighted flesh of Elkin's characters.

As in Rabelais, who like Elkin also wrote against the conventional wisdom (the physician taking on the priests), appetite and excess stand in opposition to death but in

the context of the full acceptance of death as a part of life, of death, which must be resisted but must never be denied. The denial of death is a fact of life in Disney-style corporate realism, despite the fact that Disney World itself has become “a sort of Death’s Invitational,” “a sort of Mecca for [dying] children, a kind of reverse Lourdes” (182) .

And not just a fact of life at Disney. Following the accidental death in 2004 of an employee who had been run over by a float during a parade at Disney World, just like the one described in *The Magic Kingdom* (218-219), at least one television news show reported, with no apparent irony, that the company had not “release[d] the name of *the character*” (emphasis added). Less a simple verbal gaff than a sign of the unreal times, a further development in the American way of death, this news item should make us wary of assenting too quickly and uncritically to the view that *The Magic Kingdom* is “more about Eros than Thanatos,” that “there is more obsession with life in Elkin’s Kingdom than with the end” (Koch). Rena chooses love and therefore dies because she cannot have the former without the latter. The “rage” over his imminent death which fuels Noah’s short painful life also fuels Elkin’s long, painfully funny novel, but this rage accepts death as a fact of life. That is why his ex-wife, Ginny, cannot forgive Eddy for taking their son’s case over Liam’s head, for not allowing Liam to die. In fact, it is Eddy’s continuing unwillingness to accept Liam’s death that leads him to organize the Disney trip (88). Rena’s death at trip’s end recalls in admittedly diminished form the “cheerful deaths” in Rabelais. As Bakhtin explains, “The ‘cheerful death’ of Rabelais not only coincides with a high value placed on life and with a high responsibility to fight to the end for this life—but it is in itself an expression of this high valuation, an expression of the life force that eventually triumphs over death” (*Dialogic* 198). Death in Rabelais, and

in Elkin, “is devoid of all tragic and terrifying overtones” (*Rabelais* 407) and is devoid too of any extra-material justifications. That “Death is physics, not metaphysics” is an abstract and baldly stated idea in *Boswell* (Elkin’s least favorite novel), but a literally and grotesquely embodied fact in *The Magic Kingdom*. (Elkin liked to speak in similar terms of “the physics of personality” and “the physics of obsession” [LeClair 113]).

Fittingly, this novel filled with carnivalesque decrowning doubles presents itself as the decrowning double of metaphysical novels such as Thomas Mann’s *Magic Mountain*. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Elkin reacted so strongly and dismissively to John Gardner’s quasi-metaphysical notion of moral fiction, finding in “the joke of powerlessness” (LeClair 115) justification enough for the revenge of style in his carnivalesque fiction. Not even the “yes” with which the menstruating Molly Bloom ends her soliloquy in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* could possibly be sufficiently life-affirming to serve as Mary Cottle’s and *The Magic Kingdom*’s final word. Only the insistent, defiant, and grotesquely comical “now” is powerful enough for a passage that is as much blessing as curse, spoken in her mind and acted out with her body as she and Eddy copulate and conceive.

Then, at what instinctively she felt was exactly the propitious biological moment, she reached out and seized him, she reached out and brought him to her. She raised him on top of her and guided him into her body. She wrapped her legs about his buttocks and alternately squeezed, released, and squeezed, pressing his body deeper inside her own with each contraction, rocking him, inching him along her clitoris, easing him through the zones of her flesh and up the boneless scaffold of her sex, thinking, who’d not lain with men in years, who’d held them off with their activating poisons, the white agency of her soiled, provoked chemistry, all the radical synergistics of their deadly, complice, conspired force, who’d used mechanics, gadgets, gravity, vibrators, even her moistened fingers like so many machines, who’d explored her own almost articulated nerve endings till she knew them like the strings that raised and lowered the joints of puppets, thinking Now! Now! *Now!* Thinking of monstrosities, freaks ogres, and demons, conjuring werewolves, vampires, harpies, and hellhounds, conjecturing maneaters,

eyesores, humpbacks, and clubfoots. Thinking *Now now now now now* and inviting all cock-eyed, crook-backed, tortuous bandy deformity out of the bottle, calling forth fiends, calling forth bogies, rabid, raw-head bloody bones. *Now*, she thinks, *now!* And positions herself to take Bale's semen, to mix it with her own ruined and injured eggs and juices to make a troll, a goblin, broken imps and lurching oafs, felons of a nightmare blood, fallen pediatric angels, lemurs, gorgons, Cyclopes, Calibans, God's ugly, punished customers, his obscene and frail and lubberly, his gargoyle, flyblown hideosities and blemished, poky mutants, all his throwbacks, all his scurf, his doomed, disfigured invalids, his human slums and eldritch seconds, the poor relation and the second-best, watered, bungled being, flied ointment, weak link, chipped rift, crack and fault and snag and flaw, his maimed, his handicapped, his disabled, his crippled, his afflicted, delicate cathexies with their provisional, fragile makeshift tolerances. Invoking the sapped, the unsound, the impaired, the unfit. Invoking the milksop, the doormat, the played-out and burnt-out, the used-up, the null and the void. Adjuring their spirits in the names of Maud-Gaddis, of Tony Word and Lydia Conscience, of Janet Order and Benny Maxine, of Noah Cloth spending his money like a drunken sailor, and Rena Morgan, spent. On behalf of dead Liam and her own unnamed stillborn kids. Thinking, Not gone a week and we've lost one. Thinking, Now, now, goddamn it, *now!* And accepting infection from him, contagion, the septic climate of their noxious genes. Dreaming of complications down the road, of bad bouts and thick medical histories, of wasting neurological diseases, of blood and pulmonary scourges, of blows to the glands and organs, pathogens climbing the digestive tract, invading the heart and bone marrow, erupting the skin and clouding the cough.

Now, now, now, now, now, now, now, she thinks, and calls upon the famous misfits, upon centaurs and satyrs and chimeras, upon dragons and griffins and hydras and wyverns. Upon the basilisk, the salamander, and the infrequent unicorn.

And upon, at last, a lame and tainted Mickey Mouse. (316-317)

David Dougherty has rightly called the ending of *The Magic Kingdom's*

Discovery Island chapter "one of the most beautiful paragraphs Elkin ... had written"

(95). There is, in fact, nothing quite like it anywhere else in Elkin. Yet the writing there is no match for the fierce and furiously funny beauty of the novel's final two pages, just quoted, where Elkin offers us a vision of the sublime, or more specifically the comic sublime. Here, more than anywhere else in Elkin's work, or anyone else's work for that matter, the comic sublime echoes with the raucous carnival laughter that transforms the terrifying into the grotesque, carnival hell into cornucopia as "the monster death [as well

as the monstrously human Mary Cottle] becomes pregnant” (Rabelais 91). Reversing several centuries of decline of the carnivalesque through Swift, Sterne, Voltaire, Dickens and the Twentieth Century comic and psychological novel that Bakhtin lamented and denying himself and his readers what Jean-Francois Lyotard calls “the solace of good forms,” Elkin restores the full force of Rabelaisian laughter in a wholly and raucously successful effort to reconnect the human “with the gross realities of life” (*Dialogic* 232).

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