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### Misrecognition and the Gaze in Stanley Elkin's *The Magic Kingdom*

The subject of *The Magic Kingdom* appears to be ideal fodder for a sentimental made-for-TV-movie, complete with laughter, tears, and phony pathos: Eddy Bale, a devastated father, who has just lost his only son to a ruinous illness and whose marriage dissolves in the wake of this tragic event, undertakes a quest to give terminally ill children from Britain a wonderful life-affirming experience in Disney World before they die. In an interview with Peter Bailey, Elkin acknowledges the potential dangers of the story, and he explicitly mentions that he wanted to avoid sentimentality in the 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 24). Nevertheless, Elkin mentions that the original impetus of the novel was explicitly a heartfelt reaction to the plight of these children:

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. [...] And as 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? (24)

The genesis of the novel is noteworthy insofar as the “special interest piece” presents these children for the gaze of the public not only as victims of fatal illnesses, but also as innocent and naïve believers in the facile pleasures that Disney World offers. As Lacanian theorist Slavoj Žižek would no doubt point out, “The real object of fascination is not the displayed scene but the gaze of the naïve ‘other’ absorbed, enchanted by it” (*Looking Awry* 114). We adults are far too sophisticated to fall prey to the dippy optimism of Disney's Magic Kingdom, seeing through the cheery fairy tale façade to the rampant commercialism. Nevertheless, the gaze of the children transfixed by Disney World becomes a nostalgic object: “The innocent, naïve gaze of the other that fascinates us in nostalgia is in the last resort always the gaze of a child” (114). The danger of such sentimentality is that it transforms the children patronized by the Make-A-Wish Foundation, for instance, into sublime victims staged for the gaze of the sympathetic public.

*The Magic Kingdom* suggests that the actual beneficiaries of such charitable efforts are the organizers, whose activities deliver them from confronting what Žižek calls “the lack in the big Other,” the inconsistency of the symbolic order, the fact that there is no guarantee that their philanthropic efforts will finally prove meaningful. Žižek defines the big Other as “the symbolic order that regulates social life” (“I Hear You” 96). In his introduction to the work of Žižek, Tony Myers notes that the symbolic order “includes everything from language to the law, taking in all the social structures in between. [...] It is the impersonal framework of society, the arena in which we take our place as part of a community of fellow human beings” (22). “The lack in the big Other” refers to the proposition that the symbolic order is “structured around an impossible/traumatic kernel, around a central lack” (*Sublime* 122). According to Žižek, fantasy serves “as a screen concealing this inconsistency,” and, more importantly, fantasy “constitutes the frame through which we experience the world as consistent and meaningful—the a priori space within which the particular effects of signification take place” (123). The traumatic illnesses of the children, these devastating aberrations from the biological norm, appear as random, inexplicable, and drastically unfair phenomena within the basic contours of Western Judeo-Christian ideology. The diseases of these children, therefore, challenge the coherence of the symbolic order. The sentimental gaze seeks to salvage the coherence of the symbolic order by imbuing the suffering of these victims with a meaning that the novel suggests never quite works. In regard to the sick children, the ultimate aim of the organizers, then, is in some sense deception, a masking of the Real (in the form of trauma, death, and disease) that the novel continually undermines.<sup>1</sup> Benny Maxine, the eldest of the sick children on the trip, sees through the staged event: “I’m fifteen years old, Mr. Bale. Those other kids. Some of them are sicker than I am, but I don’t think it’s hit them yet. What’s what. How they’ve been kissed off by God and medical science both. The nits are actually excited” (53). Eddy Bale disciplines Benny in an effort to maintain the necessary illusion: “Listen, Benny, don’t get the idea you’re here to set anyone straight. There’s no timetable. It ain’t British Rail. Leave them alone with your inside information” (53). The novel exposes and critiques the various strategies of repression that structure the fragile social reality of the children and the adults. Specifically, the children refuse to acquiesce to the sentimental demand that they play the roles of innocent and passive victims for the public gaze, while the adults, specifically, Bale and Mary Cottle, eventually recognize the

ways in which their own needs and desires are implicated in this mission of mercy and compassion.

### **Dismantling the “Dream Holiday”**

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek offers an insightful interpretation of the difference in the representation of children in the films of Charlie Chaplin and the novels of Charles Dickens that illuminates the strategy of *The Magic Kingdom*. Žižek begins by noting that Sergei Eisenstein “exposed as a crucial feature of [Chaplin’s] burlesques a vicious, sadistic, humiliating attitude towards children: in Chaplin’s films, children are not treated with the usual sweetness: they are teased, mocked, laughed at for their failures” (107). He concludes that the “sadistic distance towards children thus implies the symbolic identification with the gaze of the children themselves,” for it is only from that point at which “they appear to us as objects of teasing and mocking, not gentle creatures needing protection” (107). In contrast, Dickens offers an “imaginary identification with [the] poor but happy, close, unspoiled world, free of the cruel struggle for power and money” of the “good common people” (107). Žižek argues that the only position from which this rather admiring and false view of the poor emerges is the “point of view of the corrupted world of power and money” (107). This is not necessarily to say that *The Magic Kingdom* mocks the terminally ill children in the mode of Chaplin, although Benny Maxine certainly displays a vicious streak in trying to win a bet and make Noah Cloth cry by telling a sadistic story of the boy’s death. Rather, the novel dismantles the sentimental image of these children as innocent and otherworldly victims that Eddy Bale mercilessly exploits with the best of intentions in his fundraising efforts among the rich.

This point about the power of the image is brought to a comic full stop at the end of his meeting with the Queen of England, who recognizes and deftly manipulates this game of appearances staged for the gaze of the big Other. Bale passionately informs the Queen of poor Liam’s victimization in which the treatment of his illness left him even worse off than before the therapy: “They beat my kid up, Your Royal Highness. With the best will in the world they worked him over. They took off his hair with their toxins and gave his liver third-degree burns. They softened his bones like modeling clay and grew little ulcers in his gut. They turned his blood into dishwater. They caused him such pain, Monarch” (16). Bale explains his mistake regarding his handling of Liam’s terminal illness to the Queen: rather than wear out his body and

spirit in the debilitating treatments, “[w]e should have burned him out on his life” (17). Consequently, Bale suggests these poor victims should be given a “dream holiday” to Disney World as a magnificent send-off. The Queen assents, writes a check for a mere fifty pounds, and instructs Bale to do the following: “Don’t cash it. [. . .] Show it round. The money ought to come pouring in. When you have what you think you need you may send the check back. You needn’t deliver it personally. Just put it in the post” (22). She cynically, but quite correctly, recognizes her role within the philanthropic machinery of England. Her symbolic gesture staged for the gaze of the big Other, her royal sanction of this charitable cause, will ensure its success without actually donating a single pound.

The dismantling of the image of the children as innocent victims begins almost immediately upon their arrival at Disney World through the actions of Benny Maxine.<sup>2</sup> At the first breakfast, Benny taunts Goofy in an effort to make him speak and break the strict rules of the Magic Kingdom: “What’s this then, *quills*? Call yourself a dog? You’re a bleedin’ porcupine” (101). Challenging the guidelines for the interaction between the characters and the park-goers, Benny refuses to partake in the willing suspension of disbelief and attacks the image of these cartoon characters staged to fascinate the gaze of the innocent and naïve children. Moreover, he assumes an active role as *provocateur*, as opposed to the passive role of spectator that defines the subject-position of the visitors to the theme park. This refusal to play the game provokes anxiety in both the characters in the novel and the reader: “The true object of anxiety is the other no longer prepared to play the role of victim [...] The good other dwells in the anonymous passive universality of a victim—the moment we encounter an actual/active other, there is always something with which to reproach him: being patriarchal, fanatical, intolerant” (Žižek, *Metastases* 215). Throughout the novel, Benny engages in activities that cross the boundaries of decorum and taste; he clearly derives a great deal of satisfaction from pushing other people’s buttons. He rejects the role imposed upon him as the passive victim, and only assumes that role in order to exploit the leeway granted to the terminally ill. He is above all a desiring subject, perhaps uneducated about the intricacies of sexuality, as his conversation with Bale concerning the allure of the female body suggests, but nevertheless, he is the most alive in his dying. Nedra Carp, the former nanny acting as a chaperone on the trip, believes he is a corrupting influence on the other children, particularly considering his emerging adolescent libido.<sup>3</sup> Her accusation confirms the fantasy image of the children/other as victim that supports

this social reality. They must be passive, and they must not desire. At least, they must not have adult desires.

Ironically, Disney World, the theme park imagineered to fascinate and capture the desire of children everywhere, fails to fascinate these kids in the ways it was designed to do. The novel presents a very different Magic Kingdom than the one we are accustomed to seeing. For the terminal kids brought to Disney World, the resort hotel offers more adventure than Adventureland. Out of their comfort zones of managed care, they are liberated to do what kids who have been isolated for too long long to do, namely experience everyday life, from the simple exchanges of consumerism in the case of Noah Cloth to the first awkward inklings of romance with Rena Morgan. The fantasy of normalcy haunts these kids who are deprived of the prospect of adulthood by their rare and fatal diseases and the therapies these necessitate. Therefore, the interstitial spaces of normalcy in this theme park fascinate the kids more than the actual attractions or rides.

Moreover, the attractions that are staged for the gaze of innocent children have a disastrous effect, most notably upon Charles Mudd-Gaddis. The promise of a “dream holiday” in Disney World is immediately undercut by his disoriented reaction to the Haunted Mansion. His bewildered and hysterical response evokes Frederic Jameson’s description of schizophrenia as the characteristic subjective mode of postmodernism. Following Jacques Lacan’s definition of this form of psychosis, Jameson argues that schizophrenia represents “a breakdown in the signifying chain” (26) that causes a profound temporal disruption that interferes with the ability of the subject to organize his/her past, present, and future: “With the breakdown of the signifying chain, therefore, the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time” (27). Later in the novel, Elkin mines the social, spatial, and temporal confusion of Mudd-Gaddis for gentle comedy, for instance, when he mistakes the hallways of the hotel for those of a ship: “The stabilizers these days, you’d hardly suspect there’s a sea under you. [ . . . ] Not like the East India Company days. Not like the tubs H.M. sent us out in to encounter the Spanish Armada” (186-7). However, Mudd-Gaddis’s disorientation at the Haunted Mansion is neither comic, nor a giddy celebration of the “slide down the surface of things,” to quote U2’s evocation of the postmodern condition in “Even Better Than the Real Thing,” but rather a terrifying experience:

He is not in remission now, not enjoying a lucid moment, is uncertain, for that matter, where he is, and has the sense only that he's somewhere underground, riding along a narrow-gauge track in a coal mine, perhaps, or being pulled on a sled, though he's not cold, through the six-months' midnight of the Arctic Circle. He is not in remission, does not enjoy the crystal clarifications of only twenty minutes before—though he remembers all that clearly enough, in perfect detail, in fact, not a single thing slipped or blurred, not one, even the at once humiliating and infuriating business of the wig as clear to him as if it happened years ago—and recalls the day he was seven years old. (116-17)

The Mansion is indeed a haunted territory for the prematurely aging and memory damaged Mudd-Gaddis, but for unintended reasons. The elaborately staged simulation of death with its ghosts, specters, and spirits, of course, is a fantasy that masks or gentrifies the true nullity and terrifying abyss of death. The Haunted Mansion lurks somewhere between what Baudrillard calls the second and third phases of the order of simulacra; it either “masks and denatures a profound reality” or “masks the *absence* of a profound reality” (6). Unable to maintain this fantasy frame because of his unstable grasp on social reality, Mudd-Gaddis tumbles into terror, becoming “inconsolable” (118).

Significantly, the episode begins with a remark by Mudd-Gaddis that touches upon their mortality and sets the stage for the entire episode. As Tony Word, Benny Maxine, Noah Cloth, and Charles discuss the selection process for this journey to the Magic Kingdom, principally the process of establishing whether or not the children were compatible, Charles caustically remarks: “We're compatible. We're children who die” (113). When Noah and Tony break down into tears, Charles suddenly throws a tantrum regarding the color of his wig, claiming that he originally had brown hair, not yellow. His reaction foregrounds the attempts made to mask his premature aging, the wig serving as a pathetic cover of his own mortality. Yet the question remains for whom this wig really serves to perform this function. For his caregivers, presumably his parents, the wig masks his fatal decline. In other words, they feel that false appearances are necessary to protect their son from the truth of his own condition. His innocence and naivete must be protected from the evidence of his own imminent death. Yet Charles remains, in his moments of lucidity, profoundly aware of his status. The façade of the wig is a complete sham. Like the emperor's new clothes, the wig testifies to the complicity of all those around Charles in the maintenance of necessary appearances. However, if Charles is not necessarily the beneficiary of this fundamental deception, then who is? Žižek suggests that it is the big Other whose ignorance must be maintained:

The fundamental pact uniting the actors of the social game is thus that the *Other must not know all*. This nonknowledge of the Other opens up a certain distance that, so to speak, gives us breathing space, i.e., that allows us to confer upon our actions a supplementary meaning beyond the one that is socially acknowledged. For this very reason, the social game (the rules of etiquette, etc.) in the very stupidity of its ritual, is never simply superficial. We can indulge in our secret wars only as long as the Other does not take cognizance of them, for at the moment the Other can no longer ignore them, the social bond dissolves itself. A catastrophe ensues, similar to the one instigated by the child's observation that the emperor is naked. (*Looking Awry* 72-3)

True to the formulation expressed here by Žižek, Charles's outburst dissolves the social bond of the entire group. His inconsolable response to the Haunted Mansion provokes anxiety in all involved, from the park attendants who call for an emergency evacuation of Charles to the children, but especially Mary Cottle, who disappears from the group and checks into her own secret hotel room to relieve her tension through masturbation.

The terrifying lesson of the experience is not lost on Benny Maxine, Noah Cloth, or Tony Word. The Haunted Mansion is neither escapist fun nor cathartic release, but a confrontation with their deepest fears. Within the dream-like fantasy of the Haunted Mansion, they encounter the real of their desire, their fear of death manifested in the horrible and disembodied cries of the simulated dead: "All about them they can hear the wails of the dead, insistent and hopeless as the demands of beggars. It's this note, the noise of desperate petition, that causes the children more trouble than the conventional props of death: the bats, the coffins set out like furniture. They're still upset" (115). Nevertheless, they see behind the elaborate lie staged for the benefit of their gaze: "Just look at this place. [ . . . ] I bet there's no such thing as ghosts" (118). While this response may be chalked up to false bravado in the face of something fearful that they cannot own up to in the company of their peers, the stagecraft is too readily apparent for them to suspend their disbelief and surrender to the fantasy of the afterlife on display:

Inside, they stand, could be, along the building's stitching, shabby as a kitchen in a posh restaurant, as anything backstage or where workers gather to punch out the time clocks. They can hear a babble of recordings, just make out the winding, canted, interlocking paths, vaguely like baggage carousels [*sic*] in airports, of other tour groups, the black, open trains that carry them. They can see periodic flashes of special effects like a kind of heat lightning, like phosphorescent bursts of insects. Afterimage burns along their retinas like wick: the laser bombardments, the fireball theatrics of warfare, all the burnt-out guttering torches and candles and tapers of haunted radiance. (114-15)

Despite his use of the expression “Hell” in his pronouncement after the Haunted Mansion, “Dying blokes like us ain’t got a snowball’s chance in Hell,” Benny Maxine confirms the absence of Heaven or Hell for Noah Cloth and Tony Word, maintaining that Hell is “just an expression” (118), a conclusion that leaves them desolate and in tears. In short, the fiction structuring their social reality is so obviously a fiction and so excessive that the experience, witnessing the machinery and props used to endow death with meaning, shatters their belief.

Two rather touching moments articulate the reversal Elkin undertakes in order to dismantle the image of these children as innocent victims, as well as deliver them from the passive position of objects of the gaze (as medical cases and curiosities, as well as the general public scrutiny under which they suffer because of their anomalous appearances) to active, desiring subjects. The most precipitous instance of the reversal of the gaze occurs when Benny Maxine and Charles Mudd-Gaddis sneak into Mary Cottle’s secret hotel room and witness her strip, lie down on the bed, and masturbate, while they hide “behind the arras” (187). Neither of the voyeurs is exactly sure what they witness, and their misrecognition of the scene leads to some comic conclusions. Charles remarks that perhaps it was “World-class, champion speed sleep” (190). Benny is closer to the mark, although even he misses the full scope of this onanistic primal scene; instead, he rapturously dwells on her ass, “*the darning eggs, those elliptical hollows, those two discrete shadows, those twin burns, those stinking stains inside the fold of each buttock*” (191, italics his). Needless to say, they are profoundly affected, and the experience imbues the room with a libidinal charge that will lure the children there later (as well as Colin Bible for his illicit rendezvous with Matthew Gale). Poor Charles barely remembers the scopophilic event later, but his damaged memory returns to the image in that room: “Pleasure was in it. He’d been a sort of witness. Shared the witness. [...] A display or performance. All right, some secret display or performance which had given him, them, himself and the child pleasure” (212).

The desire of the children emerges forcefully when Colin Bible supervises a boat trip on the lake past Discovery Island to Shipwreck Marsh. These names are conveniently loaded for Elkin to suggest where desire will end up with these terminally ill children, awakened, but probably never consummated. Nevertheless, this discovery of desire finds a fitting image as the children sunbathe naked, the boys on one side of the island chaperoned by Colin, while the girls and Mary do the same on the other side:



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. [...]

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)

Their education in desire initiated, the children gaze across the island.

### **Eddy Bale and the Symbolic Mandate**

While *The Magic Kingdom* takes pains to dissolve the innocent and naïve gaze of the terminally ill children on whose behalf this whole journey to Disney World is undertaken, the novel also attempts to dispel the sentimentality from the adult side of the gaze. The motives of the adults involved are not nearly so philanthropic or charitable as appearances might indicate, but are bound up in their own desires. Following the excruciating and drawn-out death of his son, Liam, Bale refuses to relinquish the symbolic mandate he assumed as a ruthless fundraiser and champion of terminally ill children. His dedication partakes in what Elkin calls the “physics of obsession” (“Interview with Tom LeClair” 113) that drive many of his fictional characters, the quest that may be “irrational,” but that is ultimately “sane” (118). Žižek articulates the libidinal economy of the obsessional as “frenzied activity” whose aim is

[t]o avoid some uncommon catastrophe that would take place if his activity were to stop; his frenetic activity is based on the ultimatum, “If I don’t do this (the compulsive ritual), some unspeakably horrible X will take place.” In Lacanian terms, this X can be specified as the barred Other, i.e., the lack in the Other, the inconsistency of the symbolic order [...] We must be active all the time so that it does not come to light that “the Other does not exist” (Lacan). (*Looking Awry* 35)

The catastrophe that must be averted is initially the death of his son, but extends to the death of other children, as Elkin himself contends: “But Eddy Bale has sustained a real loss and suffered heavy casualties. He gets this mad idea that no other children must die. Of course they’re gonna die” (Bailey 24).

Bale’s obsessive activity is a way of repressing his son’s death, and his situation recalls the well-known dream of the burning child analyzed by both Freud and Lacan.<sup>4</sup> Freud describes the dream in the following way:

A father had been watching beside his child's sick-bed for days and nights on end. After the child had died, he went into the next room to lie down, but left the door open so that he could see from his bedroom into the room in which his child's body was laid out, with tall candles standing round it. An old man had been engaged to keep watch over it, and sat beside the body murmuring prayers. After a few hours' sleep, the father had a dream that *his child was standing beside his bed, caught him by the arm and whispered to him reproachfully: 'Father, don't you see I'm burning?'* He woke up, noticed a bright glare of light from the next room, hurried into it and found the old watchman had dropped off to sleep and that the wrappings and one of the arms of his beloved child's dead body had been burned by a lighted candle that had fallen on them. (qtd. in Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* 44-5)

As Žižek notes, the standard interpretation of the dream is that the father constructs a wish-fulfilling dream of seeing his son alive again to prolong his sleep from an external irritation, the light and smell from the burning child. When the irritation becomes too strong, the father wakes up. The Lacanian interpretation of this dream involves a startling take on the mechanism of his waking; the father encounters something more disturbing in the dream with his child than the reality of the fire in the next room:

But the thing that he encounters in the dream, the reality of his desire, the Lacanian Real—in our case, the reality of the child's reproach to his father, 'Can't you see I'm burning?', implying the father's fundamental guilt—is more terrifying than the so-called external reality itself, and that is why he awakens: to escape the Real of his desire, which announces itself in the terrifying dream. He escapes into so-called reality to be able to continue to sleep, to maintain his blindness, to elude waking into the real of his desire. (45)

Bale's quest to raise money and take the group of ailing children to Disney World, then, represents an attempt to keep "dreaming" and avoid confronting the "real of his desire."

During the flight from London to Florida, Bale dreams about his dead son, and the comparison to the famous dream of the burning child becomes almost inescapable. At the end of a sequence of dreams of the group heading to Florida in which the dreams of the children intermingle, Bale envisions talking to Liam about the "Dream Holiday." He feels the need to justify the excursion, and this fact testifies to his guilt over his handling of his son's illness: "I'm trying to make it up to them, you see. For being so sick, I mean. For having these catastrophic diseases. For having to die before their time, you understand. Well if *you* don't understand, who would?" (87). While Liam doesn't speak in the dream, his "accusation" is clearly implied in Bale's ardent denials that the "Dream Holiday" is Liam's "memorial": "It isn't as if this trip were your memorial or anything. Of course not. What, are you kidding? A clambake in Florida? A

binge on the roundabout? A spree at the fun fair? Your *memorial*? [...] It's shocked I am you should think so, well and truly shocked. Come on, Liam, you know better!" (87). The fact that Bale "paces the room. Dilligently avoiding eye contact" (87) certainly betrays his bad faith, the denial of the truth about his rationale for the trip. His justification of the quest concludes with the following address to his son: "Hush, Liam. Hush, son. Because if you really are dead—not that I think you are, you understand, not for a minute—but just in the event, on the outside chance, I don't want to hear about it. I won't hear about it. Nor will I listen to a word about bold cures and new breakthroughs. Not if you're dead. I won't" (88). Deeply invested in the repression of his son's death, Bale, unlike the father of Freud's burning child dream, refuses to wake and remains tied to his wish-fulfilling dream. The accusation in the dream that touches on the real of his desire is denied.

The most telling clue to this repression involves the climax of the novel when Bale finally reads the letter from his wife announcing her departure after nearly a year: "So why had he waited almost a year to open that letter she'd left for him the day she'd gone off in the taxi, the letter he had assumed now, assumed at the time, would explain everything?" (298). Elkin couches this question within a unique metaphor of eating habits. Bale notes that Liam "inherited" his habit of "eating around," that is, of not saving the best for last: "As a kid he hadn't dutifully done his vegetables in order to get to the meat, or eaten all his meat up in order to tuck away the dessert" (297). Tellingly, Ginny "ate in accordance with secret and, within terms of the discipline, totally arbitrary principles of her own," namely that "she had eaten her food alphabetically, or along the points of the compass" (298). Thus, Bale reveals that waiting to open the letter represents a departure from his usual routine of no routine. There is a reason for his waiting, although he tells himself that it involves the fact that "he already knew why she'd left. [...] Liam was simply too good. We should never have been able to recover from his loss" (298-9). Only after his second loss, the death of Rena Morgan, the repetition of his first loss of Liam, can Eddy read his wife's letter.

Following the death of Liam, Ginny acknowledges the fundamental breakdown of their symbolic universe, the termination of her symbolic mandate. Thus, she escapes by promptly running off with the first available alternative, Tony the Tobacconist. She recognizes the futility of Eddy's obsessional activity, and she cannot abide the loss of dignity accompanying their complicity in the commodification of their son's illness and suffering, the desperate measures

undertaken to finance his health care, such as selling sensational exclusives to the tabloids. Her outrage over this aspect of their lives emerges in the first part of her letter to Eddy announcing that she's leaving him:

It ain't all been dainties and plum puddings, has it, Eddy, our crusade? Passing the hat, doing our buskers' shuffle up and down the kingdom's avenues? For press and for public passing the hat, passing the hankie, touching it to the collective eye, the collective nose. God, Eddy, how we Hyde Park-cornered them with our despair, with our need and our noise. Our cause! Cause and affect! Anyway, our hats in our hands, our hearts on our sleeves, and our knees on the ground. Beggars! *Beggars, Ed!* Always for Liam, of course, never ourselves, or *if* for ourselves, then for the abstract motherhood and fatherhood in us, or if for Liam, then for some soiled and abstract childhood in him, some sentimental fiction of good order, natural birthright, the ought-to-be. (302)

Ginny acknowledges the inconsistency of the symbolic order, that reality doesn't adhere to "some sentimental fiction of good order." She launches a tirade against the "natural birthright" of motherhood, rejecting its naturalness and emphasizing its traumatic elements:

I couldn't get used to his crankiness, couldn't get used to him—because motherhood's not natural, Eddy, it's *not*, whatever they say; how could anything that dangerous, difficult, and strange be natural? How can spending all that time with something, all right, *someone*, but someone who doesn't speak your language yet and who doesn't have enough of his own to tell you his name or say his address, be natural? And how can it be natural to be at the constant beck and call of anything, all right, *anyone*, anyone who lives within those barbarous parameters of shit and hunger and sleep and all the rest of the time, *all* the rest of the time, on bliss and on grief like a dancer up on point? *Natural?* How can it even be *good* for you? (307)

Her rejection of motherhood is a rejection of her symbolic mandate.

Ginny's letter builds toward an accusation that accounts for her departure in a way that exposes Eddy's wishful thinking. She argues that his obsessive fundraising quest to support Liam's medical care ultimately became more important to him than Liam himself:

Over the heads of the doctors, of the interns and specialists, over the heads of the experts and scientists and the National Health, over the heads of the odds-makers, over the heads of the nobs and the honorables, of the chairmen of boards, of the media, of the movers and shakers, over the heads of the very public that pitched in with its pounds and its pennies to stretch out his life, at last taking it over the head of God and—what I can't forget and will never forgive—over the head finally of Liam himself. Who wanted to die. (308)

She confronts him with the "real of his desire," the fact that he allowed his own debilitating need to act when confronted with Liam's illness overwhelm his compassion for his son and wife. His own desire blinded him to the needs of his family.

## Mary Cottle and “Subjective Destitution”

The novel ends with Eddy Bale and Mary Cottle finally having sex, yet the act is distinctly bittersweet, more a leap into the abyss than a romantic interlude. The novel delivers the goods, so to speak, but it is an unsettling moment. The death of Rena Morgan, of course, precipitates their passionate encounter, imbuing it with sadness. Sex provides solace for the lovers, but it is more an act of abandonment, relinquishing the sacrifices that constitute their symbolic mandates. Mary risks becoming pregnant with monsters: “*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, lemures, gorgons, cyclopes, Calibans, God’s ugly, punished customers [...]” (316). The novel thus refuses to conclude with a sentimental ending, an unambiguous moment of hope in unadulterated romantic compensation for the trials and tribulations of the protagonists. There are no guarantees. They are working without a net.

The true dimensions of this act only emerge through a consideration of Mary’s reproductive history. After “a couple of miscarriages, a pair of abortions,” Mary receives her medical diagnosis: her “glory garden’s all sweetness and light,” but she has “little polluted eggies” (105). She stuns the doctor by rejecting her medical options of a hysterectomy or a tubal ligation, and her doctor spells out her condition to her in cruel terms that will haunt her for the rest of the book: “You carry chemistries so rancid you could poison wells. I do assure you, Miss Cottle, any child you have the misfortune to bear could have you up on charges. You can only bear monsters. Your kids would be kraken, children chimeras, and basilisk babes. Mummy to wyvern, to snark, and to sphinx. Generations of vipers, Miss Cottle” (105). Unwilling to tamper with her body through these medical procedures, Mary sacrifices men and sexual relations. On the one hand, this sacrifice holds open the possibility of procreation in a sort of fetishistic disavowal: “I know very well that I cannot have children because they will be born with severe birth defects, and so I renounce sexual relations with men, but nevertheless, I will act in a way that does not foreclose the chance of procreating.” On the other hand, her sacrifice transposes what is an impossibility into a choice, thereby fundamentally repressing the Real (in the Lacanian sense) and traumatic dimension of her misfiring reproductive system.

Moreover, her renunciation of men masks the impossibility of the sexual relationship, or as Lacan claims, the fact that “there is no sexual relationship.” The rationale for her sacrifice betrays a dimension beyond her own poisoned biology: “Men lied. [...] She hated subterfuge, she hated being courted. The burdensome, elaborate, social choreographies embarrassed and depressed her. Gifts, flowers, love letters, telephone calls taken in bed late at night, home from a date, even the engagement ring her fiancé had given her” (106). To put it another way, her damaged reproductive system provides her with the necessary excuse to renounce sexual relations with men. Her sacrifice ennobles her existence, providing it with a purpose and meaning. This sacrifice is her symbolic mandate, her response to the enigmatic question posed by the big Other: “*Che vuoi?*” or “What does the Other want of me?” (Žižek, *Enjoy* 56). More importantly, her sacrifice delivers her from confronting “the lack in the big Other,” the inconsistency of the symbolic order:

In its most fundamental dimension, sacrifice is a “gift of reconciliation” to the Other, destined to appease its desire. Sacrifice conceals the abyss of the Other’s desire, more precisely, it conceals the Other’s lack, inconsistency, “inexistence,” that transpires in this desire. *Sacrifice is a guarantee that “the Other exists”*: that there is an Other who can be appeased by means of the sacrifice. The trick of the sacrifice consists therefore in what the speech-act theorists would call its “pragmatic presupposition”: *by the very act of sacrifice, we (presup)pose the existence of its addressee* that guarantees the consistency and meaningfulness of our experience [...] (56, italics his)

The inconsistency of her reproductive system, healthy organs, but damaged ova, provokes a crisis in Mary concerning what the Other wants of her. Her sacrifice of sexual intercourse is staged for the gaze of this Other, effectively positing it through her act.

Her retreat from men does not mean a renunciation of sexual pleasure, however, for she becomes in her own words a “fastidious whack-off artist” (107). Masturbation becomes her sole consolation: “Only orgasm calmed her, lined up her iron filings—this is how she thought of it, as tiny, piercing shrapnel—of her scattered spirit like a powerful magnet, restored her, and, wonderfully, could hold her for hours” (109). Of course, her renunciation of sexual intercourse fuels her obsession with masturbation as an outlet for every stress and strain, so it becomes her total and complete preoccupation. Her obsession will inadvertently set the stage for the ensuing tragedy of the novel.

In finally surrendering to the amorous advances of Bale, Mary sacrifices her sacrifice, the renunciation that structures her very existence, from her self-imposed distance from others to her

own pleasure in masturbation. Žižek calls this act “subjective destitution,” and describes its troubling dimensions in the following way:

This “withdrawal” of the subject from the Other is what Lacan calls “subjective destitution”: not an act of sacrifice (which always implies the Other as its addressee) but an act of abandonment which sacrifices the very sacrifice. The freedom thus attained is a point at which we find ourselves not only without the other *qua* our neighbor, but without support in the Other itself—as such, it is unbearably suffocating, the very opposite of relief, of “liberation.” (*Enjoy* 59)

Her abandonment of her sacrifice, then, is accompanied by the “return of the repressed,” the fear of giving birth to monsters. Her sacrifice enables her to repress effectively what she experiences as the lack in herself, the monstrous and traumatic possibility that lurks inside her reproductive system, the secret of who she is, what is “in her more than herself.” The sacrifice of the sacrifice does not bring with it freedom, but the “suffocating” burden of the responsibility for her damaged reproductive system. Her abandonment is sexual in nature, but one that paradoxically assumes the responsibility for the risk of becoming pregnant: “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*” (317, italics his).<sup>5</sup> The sexual act signals a sacrifice of the sacrifice of sorts for Bale, as well. He abandons his quest, the misdirected memorial to his lost son, and plunges knowingly and willingly into unprotected sex with Mary.

### **Against Sentimentality**

The dismantling of the image of the terminally ill children as victims does not mitigate the seriousness, horror, or dread accompanying the children’s diseases. The novel immerses the reader in the Real, in the Lacanian sense of biological processes and bodily functions.<sup>6</sup> The climactic death scene of Rena Morgan is terrifying, more so because the action is rendered from the point of view of the actor Lamar Kenny playing Mickey Mouse, who misrecognizes the true scope of what is happening, viewing her desperate behavior as a “subtle” performance:

Then he saw that something had changed. She’d run out of props, the long furl of handkerchiefs she’d managed to conceal—so that what she did passed beyond the realm of entertainment and entered art—hiding this one here, that one there, all the while making discreet, even delicate passes at her nose—*because she actually used them*, the Mouse saw—had all been filled and returned to their hiding places, all the while

continuing to maintain by misdirection and the feints of her grand and flighty fidget the complicated illusion that nothing was there. (Which by now, of course, nothing was.) What she did took the trained actor's breath away [...] Mickey Mouse [...] turned back to the girl on the bed. Who had gone into her labored breathing, the hacksaw rasps of her sawn and strangled weather. It was, essentially, the same big, terrifying finish she'd used on him in the elevator. (291-2)

The dramatic irony heightens the sense of tragedy. Kenny, a perfect example of the professional actor as narcissist, interprets everything through his own performance-obsessed filter, never for once entertaining the notion that Rena's act is real. However, in the *Magic Kingdom*, the boundary between reality and make-believe is deliberately blurred, so his mistake has a plausible context. The novel contests the image of these children as victims with all its concomitant ideological baggage, but this scene nevertheless asserts that the children are children, not little adults (despite the representation of Charles Mudd-Gaddis, which encourages precisely such a misreading).

What is wrong with sentimentality? In this specific case, the novel suggests that sentimentality misrecognizes the objects of its fascinated gaze. It relies upon a fantasy construction of the suffering children as innocent, passive, and non-desiring subjects. Sentimentality does not function by eliminating death from the equation -- that is not the nature of its repression -- but rather it places the suffering of the innocent on display as a moral lesson. This representation of suffering as inherently meaningful posits a consistent big Other, a move that Elkin rejects by insisting on the fact that our lives are unsupported by the big Other. In *The Magic Kingdom*, the suffering of the fatally ill children is inescapable, but the novel refuses to sentimentalize this pain and anguish or draw some cheery conclusion about the resilience of the human spirit. In this regard, Elkin echoes Theodor Adorno, who makes a similar point in his rejection of a particular cliché of Holocaust literature:

One characteristic of such literature is virtually ever-present: it shows us humanity blossoming in so-called extreme situations, and in fact precisely there, and at times this becomes a dreary metaphysics that affirms the horror, which has been justified as a "boundary situation," by virtue of the notion that the authenticity of the human being is manifested there. (88-9)

The "extreme situation" of the death of Rena Morgan is not without pathos. Her final moment alone with Benny Maxine holding her hand in Mary Cottle's secret room represents her first and only taste of what could possibly have been love given time, and he acts with an unexpected



degree of tenderness and solicitude. Nevertheless, the true blossoming of humanity in the novel occurs in those transcendent moments of the everyday denied to these children due to the nature of their diseases.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the best example of this undermining occurs when Colin Bible takes the children to the Main Street parade to watch not the event, but the spectators, who collectively exhibit the “soured flesh” and “bitched and bollixed bodies” (228-9) that accompany the “normal” process of aging. The children were “unaccustomed, that is, to the actual shapes of people and simply did not know that what they saw was just the ordinary let-hung-out wear and tear of years, of meals, of good times and comforts and all the body’s thoughtless kindnesses to itself” (228). An act of estrangement occurs here as the result of the reversal of the gaze: the children, the “freakish” objects of the medical gaze, are encouraged to gaze upon the spectators in their everyday defectiveness, decay, and advancing decrepitude, and, thus, confront the Real (in the Lacanian sense). In this way, Colin dismantles the fantasy of maturity for the children, enabling them to see that the adulthood they will probably miss due to their illnesses is not so different from their current state of disease.

<sup>2</sup> From Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulations and Simulacra* to Umberto Eco’s *Travels in Hyperreality*, Disney World has figured as one of the privileged objects of analysis of postmodernism. Therefore, Elkin’s *The Magic Kingdom* inevitably tempts critics (at least this one) to launch into some theoretical elaboration of the novel’s postmodern features. However, I believe that would be a mistake in this case, one which replicates the central preoccupation of the novel with misrecognition. The first example of the lure of the postmodern reading occurs when the group visits the Hall of Presidents. The animatronic presidents of the past are simulacra, evoking Baudrillard and provoking anxiety in Colin Bible, whose boyfriend works in the now obviously outdated Madame Tussaud’s Wax Museum. The second example of the lure of the postmodern reading occurs when the group visits the Haunted Mansion. The episode offers a genuine postmodern moment filled with more simulacra and the experience of schizophrenia.

<sup>3</sup> Nedra Carp represents an exemplary case regarding the way in which the symbolic mandate resolves the question of what the big Other wants of the subject. (See the discussion of Eddy Bale and the symbolic mandate below.) Lost within the complicated network of step-relations of her family as a result of several deaths and remarriages, Nedra identifies with her sole care-providers, nannies. When her fragile alliance with her half-brother Gregory dissolves, she subscribes whole-heartedly to a sentimental, Mary Poppins-like fantasy of her calling, her subject-position as a surrogate caregiver. The important thing to note is the way in which her symbolic mandate, her profession of nanny, represents a response to her own traumatic losses and feelings of abandonment. She seeks to provide to others what was denied to herself as a child.

<sup>4</sup> A preliminary Lacanian approach to *The Magic Kingdom* might be tempted to see parallels to Antigone in Bale’s efforts to do justice to the memory of his son by taking terminally ill children to Disney World. In this possible reading, then, like Antigone, Bale acts ethically and refuses to give “ground relative to [his] desire” (Lacan 319). However, as I hope becomes clear from this analysis, Bale’s actions are predicated upon the repression of his son’s death, so that his quest is more for himself than for his son. By performing the banned funeral rites for her brother,

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Antigone suspends her own position within the community, making her *persona non grata* in Thebes. By contrast, Bale's symbolic mandate integrates him within the symbolic order.

<sup>5</sup> The allusion to James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Molly Bloom's famous soliloquy ("Yes yes yes yes yes") signals the fascination with feminine *jouissance*. Mary's thoughts run to monsters as they copulate, and this signals an attempt to represent the mixture of pleasure and terror that defines *jouissance*.

<sup>6</sup> This procedure is amplified later in "Her Sense of Timing," the first novella in *Van Gogh's Room at Arles* (1993), in which the protagonist is an aging political geography professor battling multiple sclerosis, much like Elkin himself.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Wilde notes that this "confirmation of the ordinary" recurs in Elkin's fiction, but is difficult "to reconcile" with his "stylistic extravagance" (65). However, as Fredric Jameson notes regarding modernism, its valorization of formal innovation and individual style is "reactive," a "symptom" (16) of commodity production and a mass culture that relies on repetition. Perhaps the same could be said of Elkin writing in the postmodern period. The absolute predominance of commodification and the stultifying uniformity of mass culture (listen to the radio or watch the latest CGI-saturated movie) precipitate a plunge into an excessive and idiosyncratic individual style. Thomas Pynchon perhaps represents yet another example of this reactive postmodernism that turns to an excessive style.

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