Hemispheric Imaginations

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Some day one of these stories is going to be mortal, it’s inevitable. Storyteller Strangled By Own Yarn.
— Ronald Sukenick, “The Death of the Novel”
(The Death of the Novel and Other Stories, 49)

Political, social, and cultural situations like that of the post-Vietnam era described in the previous chapter do not necessarily elicit only a literature of traditional realism—the overlapping of modernism and social realism between the two world wars presents an example for divergent paths in reacting to an overwhelming experiential context. As we have seen, Ana Castillo’s Mixquiahuala Letters discussed in Chapter 7 is an experiment in feminist postmodernism. The neorealist novels discussed in the previous chapter are realistic only with significant qualifications, particularly as the adequate representation of the Other is concerned. One way to achieve more adequacy in this respect might be seen in adopting literary modes that have served the self-representation of the Latin American Other and have come to be considered as part of the cultural identity of Latin American nations or regions. The extension of realism into magical realism appears to be an obvious way to achieve such adequacy. The first novel discussed here exemplifies this approach and its problematics. Another reaction to the difficulties of realist representation is to programmatically and explicitly call it into question. Postmodern metafiction does just that, where it is not, as in texts of littérature engagée such as Castillo’s or those by the Native American authors to be discussed in Chapter 10, bound to engage directly with the conditions it may hope to improve.

But where is the border separating committed from uninvolved literature? Among the three novels (by white male authors) to be discussed in this chapter, it is the one that, as it were, enters a supposedly Latin American mode of thinking and writing, magical realism, which is the most removed from the world it refers to and from the problems attached to discursively ap-
proaching the Other. The metafictional novels, on the other hand, deal with recent intercultural conditions by focusing on the question of understanding alterity. In an often-quoted passage from his short story “The Death of the Novel,” Ronald Sukenick has summarized the situation of postmodern literature in the context of radical epistemological skepticism:

Reality doesn’t exist, time doesn’t exist, personality doesn’t exist. God was the omniscient author, but he died; now no one knows the plot, and since our reality lacks the sanction of a creator, there’s no guarantee as to the authenticity of the received version. Time is reduced to presence, the content of a series of discontinuous moments. Time is no longer purposive, and so there is no destiny, only chance. Reality is, simply, our experience, and objectivity is, of course, an illusion. Personality, after passing through a phase of awkward self-consciousness, has become, quite minimally, a mere locus for our experience. In view of these annihilations, it should be no surprise that literature, also, does not exist—how could it? There is only reading and writing, which are things we do, like eating and making love, to pass the time, ways of maintaining a considered boredom in face of the abyss. (Death, 41)

The reality of the Other, therefore, cannot be an aim of adequate representation. However, in a number of fictions, the Other can serve as an obvious example of unrepresentability. As is often the case in postmodern literature, the questioning of the real opens new perspectives on the imaginative construction of the world that might even include commentaries on “real”-life political, economic, and cultural practices.

The question of transcultural perception is particularly tricky where North American hetero-stereotypes appear to correspond to elements of Latin American self-perception, for instance, the Mexican cult of death. An interesting case of such integration of elements of the alien identity discourse is the spread of the so-called magical realism in the body of fiction under discussion. As Vittoria Borsò has demonstrated, the transfer of this term from European art history to Latin American literature has contributed to the stabilization or even to the formation of a regional identity discourse. In our context, the somewhat vague term magical realism refers to the combination of the genre-defining narrative methods of realism and the fantastic, of a mytho-magical with a rational, logocentric worldview, and of an oral tradition with a print culture (Borsò, Mexiko, 13–14). By adopting it, Latin American writers and intellectuals particularly of the “boom” period between 1955 and 1975, a period associated with Gabriel García Márquez and Juan Rulfo, among others, have made it part of a more complex identity presentation. It is characterized by the aspect of heterogeneity, the presence
of otherness in the self, epitomized, for instance, in Octavio Paz’s concept of *otredad* as the shaping feature of Mexican society. This kind of unreconciled *mestizaje* has thus become a central idea of Latin American existence (Borsò, *Mexiko*, 114-40). Although its defining features, its representativeness and applicability have remained highly controversial, it has served as a manifestation of cultural autochthony.\(^1\)

Foreign observers, on the other hand, have ignored the Latin American controversy and have adopted the concept as reliably representative of the world view of their Latin neighbors and hence as an addition to the existing alterity discourse of their own societies. Hence, internationality is claimed for the respective North American fiction on the basis of a hasty acquisition of what is conceived of as genuine—this time not on the level of the externally observable, but on that of a supposed penetration to the deeper layers of cultural identity.\(^2\)

The consequences of such literary endeavors are by no means less problematic than those of earlier ventures into Latin American alterity. One of the most ambitious of these texts is John Updike’s novel *Brazil* (1994). That one of the most renowned contemporary American writers and—after the completion of his *Rabbit* pentalogy, we may feel safe to say so—the outstanding exponent of a neorealist probing into the mind and manners of white middle America, should try his hand at magical realism may have been the result of curiosity, of the desire to test his limits. The reviewer in *Time* characterizes the result: “As a future dead white male, Updike makes mischief with a changing world that unsettles his sensibilities and excites his imagination” (Sheppard 73). In the context of the present discussion, however, the book needs to be seen as more than a literary spree.

The comprehensive title *Brazil* indicates that the novel is intended to convey essential aspects of the country, Brazil during a specific era, that of the military rule from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, but also Brazil “as such.” This is done through the almost parabolic story of Tristão and Isabel, a modern-day version of Tristan and Isolde/Iseult with elements of Romeo and Juliet and other fated lovers added. Tristão, a young black from the *favelas*, son of a prostitute, who makes his living by theft and robbery, and Isabel, the blonde daughter of a wealthy diplomat belonging to the country’s white elite, meet at the stereotypical place where class seems to dissolve into body: the Copacabana beach. Theirs is a love at first sight, ordained by destiny, as they come to realize, absolute and lasting all their lives. It entails emotional fidelity and the readiness to make sacrifices, as demonstrated above all in Isabel’s willingness to give up her class, her race, and eventually (though unsuccessfully) her life for her love(r). Their attachment manifests itself primarily in sexual desire and sexual fulfillment; highly explicit scenes of lovemaking abound. In its absoluteness and exclusiveness, their love must
remain childless. Although both have sex with other people as well, and Isabel will have six children by other men, this is of small importance, and the loss of three of the children causes only temporary pain.

Because the meeting of opposites is the central theme, the plot takes the lovers through starkly realistic and highly fantastic experiences. Their escape from Isabel’s father, who will not permit a more than temporary transgression of class boundaries, is only short-lived. They are separated, but after two years Tristão finds Isabel again, and together they head into the interior, where his lack of success as a gold digger makes her resort to prostitution. When he kills one of her father’s agents, they are forced to flee into the Mato Grosso, where hostile Indians murder their Native servant and steal Isabel’s children. Close to death by starvation, they are rescued by a group of bandeirantes. These slave-hunting conquerors and explorers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries appear to have survived here into modern times. Quite in character, they immediately enslave Tristão; Isabel is made one of the leader’s wives. Things get even more surreal when Isabel enlists the help of her lesbian Indian girlfriend to find a Native medicine man, who eliminates the fundamental cause of the lovers’ separation by making her black and Tristão white. After this reversal of racial affiliation, that of class can be handled with ease. Isabel’s father accepts both of them in their new shape and identity, Tristão has a career as an industrial manager, and for many years they live the lives of the upper bourgeoisie until Tristão visits the site of the story’s beginning, Rio’s beach, and is murdered by a gang of young blacks. In vain Isabel tries to follow him into death, Isolde-like, but at least her merging with her lover has become complete: formerly blue-eyed, she now has Tristão’s dark eyes.

In Hawthorne’s famous definition, the chronotopos of the romance is “a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other” (Hawthorne, Scarlet Letter, 28; cf. Schiff 157). An adequate reading of texts of this genre therefore requires an acceptance of the possibility of an intrusion of the marvelous into the ordinary world, a poetic attitude that writers of the Age of Romanticism and the American Renaissance could still expect of most of their readers. Late twentieth-century readers, however, found it harder to bridge the gap between the real and the maravilloso according to the Latin American literary discourse. The radical “suspension of disbelief” they are willing to perform when dealing with fantasy literature or science fiction, for instance, cannot be taken for granted with respect to other narrative reading material.³ For the literature of realismo magico, the communicative assumption is that Latin Americans, at least certain groups among the population, believe in magic and will see no exclusionary contradiction between a scientific and a marvelous order of reality.
In *Brazil*, this is not the case. Even though Tristão is said to believe in spirits—“He believed in spirits, and in fate” (*Brazil*, 4)—and experiences his first catching sight of Isabel as a stroke of fate, he is nowhere actuated by this belief but behaves according to the exigencies of the moment and the pragmatics of a man of his age, class, and experience. And Isabel is an educated young woman who scoffs at much of what she has been taught by the nuns of her convent school. Thus, their flight into the interior may be a trip into an area of cultural backwardness, but their meeting with the *bandeirantes* in their leather armor is surprising for the lovers and unconvincing for the readers even if they know Euclides da Cunha’s *Os Sertões* (1902), one of Updike’s sources.\(^4\) Even worse is the Indian medicine man’s miraculous transformation of the protagonists’ racial attributes. Thus, it is not the use of a substratum of myth (Tristan and Isolt) or, more generally, of the globally known narrative motif of the origin-related love conflict that endangers the textual coherence, but rather Updike’s effort to outdo da Cunha and others in their representation of the meeting and possible blending of heterogeneous elements as the essence of Brazil. This theme is present from the very beginning of the book: “Black is a shade of brown. So is white, if you look. On Copacabana, the most democratic, crowded, and dangerous of Rio de Janeiro’s beaches, all colors merge into one joyous, sun-stunned flesh-color, coating the sand with a second, living skin” (*Brazil*, 3). The magic beliefs and practices of the aboriginal population and the everyday life of an industrial society, the people out of the seventeenth and those of the twentieth century are brought together in a manner that only partially fulfils the communicational contract of any variety of magical realism. Rather, one gets the impression of Brazil as a gigantic metaphor—of which more needs to be said next.

The tortured metaphoricity of the novel is already evident on the level of style and imagery. Updike’s marvelously precise and detailed realistic descriptions have always used an element of metaphor when it comes to the characters’ impressions and their emotional response to their experiences. In the *Rabbit* books, the resulting mixture of descriptive precision and metaphoric enhancement conveys a sense of what, according to Hemingway’s literary ideal, the real feels like. But in *Brazil*, Updike’s imagery does not achieve the merging of the real and the imaginative as it does in his earlier novels or, for that matter, in the literary tradition from Faulkner to García Márquez that his book seems to log into. Forced metaphors abound; a phrase like “this delicate mild smell, which felt stretched within him like a sleepy cry” (6) might serve as a textbook example of multiple catachresis. Stilted dialogues reminiscent of Hemingway’s notorious failures in his attempts to imitate some kind of archaic Spanish in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and the
many unexplained Portuguese expressions intensify the impression of a confusing and confused exoticism but contribute to the ruin of the narrative style, which, after all, is also meant to convey a sense of rebellious student conversations from 1968 or the atmosphere of an automobile plant. As R. Z. Sheppard put it, “Lyricism mingles with basic Anglo-Saxon in much the way that liberated clergymen in the 1960s flavored their moralism with four-letter words” (73).

What makes things worse is that the sphere of imagination and sense impressions evoked by this sort of metaphoric language and stylistic mix is often combined with a cloyingly sentimental sententiousness, as in “he had remained chaste in his soul, that spiritual organ where his life cried out for its eternal shape” (Brazil, 85). Frequently, such sentences articulate elements of social discourses whose origin and function remain unclear, as in “The female need to surrender always troubled his warrior spirit” (7). Does this patriarchal phrase serve to characterize a certain macho group of people in Brazil, or is it intended to carry a more universal message? Although many such sentences may be attributed to the limited perspective of the focalizing characters whose figural point of view is usually applied, there are not infrequently authorial intrusions like the one just quoted that seem to indicate a complicity of the author’s narrating voice with his characters.

This handling of point of view is part and parcel of the power of narrative disposal claimed by the author. Different from most inter-American novels by US authors, there are no active American characters; the only one even mentioned is an elderly tourist lady whom Tristão had robbed before he met Isabel. Her ring bears the inscription “DAR,” Daughters of the American Revolution, but Tristão and Isabel, who receives it as his first present, read the letters as dar, “to give” (5, 8). As a gift that will finally wind up in the hands of the Indian medicine man, it symbolizes not intercultural communication, but distance, incomprehension, and constant reencoding. It epitomizes the absence of North American views and institutions in this novel. The problem of alterity perception is thus simply brushed aside. The author unhesitatingly enters the minds and feelings of his Brazilian characters and claims the competence to evaluate and comment upon any, even the most exotic, phenomenon.

What, then, can Updike have had in mind when he handled the Other and the question of the limits of any alterity discourse so cavalierly? Although the book often resembles the assemblage of clichés characteristic of much popular US fiction on Latin America, its supposed status is indicated in the author’s afterword, where he discloses his international, intertextual indebtedness to, among others, da Cunha’s Os Sertões, Claude Lévi-Strauss’s Tristes Tropiques (1955, but relating impressions of the 1930s and 1940s),
Gilberto Freyre’s Casa-Grande e Senzala (1933), and Theodore Roosevelt’s expedition report Through a Brazilian Wilderness (1914). An English translation of Joseph Bédier’s Le roman de Tristan et Iseult (1900) “gave me my tone and basic situation. And I took courage and local color from the truly Brazilian fiction of Joachim Machado de Assis, Graciliano Ramos, Clarice Lispector, Rubem Fonseca, Ana Miranda, Jorge Amado, and Nélida Piñon” (Brazil, 263). A truly impressive list.

Bédier must have shown the author ways of retelling the medieval story material in a modern, more ambiguously psychologizing manner, of combining the high and the low, although Updike went far beyond him and pushed the tension between the ideal of an almost religiously conceived romantic love and physical lust to an extreme. Updike had written an admiring but also critical review of Bédier’s Love Declared in which he sees Bédier’s enterprise as an example of the, for him, typically French invention of “the Tristanian technique of containing Man’s biological rage” (Updike, Assorted, 197). In a sense, Brazil is his answer as it demonstrates the attainability of the adored, after all. The other texts offer models of describing exotic nature and landscapes, but also people. They can be quite contradictory; whereas da Cunha is highly critical of the “intermingling of races highly diverse” (84), Freyre sees Brazilian culture as a fortunate blending of racial, but especially cultural, elements from the three major early groups of population: Portuguese, African slaves, and Indians. Where Freyre celebrates harmony, da Cunha elaborates on the economic, social, and cultural tensions between the advanced coastal area and the primitive backcountry in the Northeast. What they and other texts mentioned have in common, however, is the notion that the essence of a country like Brazil can indeed be captured, that there are (more or less deep) structures of the social and cultural order, a structuralist notion making Lévi-Strauss relevant beyond his ethnographic descriptions of Brazilian indigenous cultures.

Tristes Tropiques would have been interesting for Updike also because of Lévi-Strauss’s epistemological concept of a “super rationalism” permitting the integration of the empirical into the rational without loss of the sensual qualities of the former. The transfer of insights from one field to another (say, love to sociology or vice versa) and the discovery of the basic potential (and, to a certain extent, the risks) of the meeting of ethnic, gender-related, social, economic, cultural, stylistic, and other opposites seem to be two fundamental principles at work in this novel. In this respect, Updike’s claim is universal and his text is intercultural in a variety of aspects, notably in its narrative motif of love overcoming all obstacles and in its moral and philosophical message of the need to transcend borders. He has safeguarded his venture by positioning it in the context of literary and scholarly discourses.
The Postmodern Response

propagating or exemplifying a crossing of boundaries. Most of his intertexts, if they deal with Brazil at all, refer to conditions having existed many decades before the time of the novel, which is set “years ago, when the military was in power in far-off Brasília" (Brazil, 3), that is, during the same period before 1985 as in Wylie’s utopian The Sign of Dawn. But whereas Wylie’s novel imaginatively transcends the historical moment, Brazil more or less ignores it, as the “far-off” indicates. Although the novel presents a political debate among Isabel’s fellow students, they serve only to indicate the kind of political correctness that was considered chic among the young elite around 1968. Cultural essentials are seen as transcending the epochs. In this frame of reference, Brazil can indeed be regarded as a timeless metaphor for the reconciliation of opposites. It clearly functions as a screen on which the author projects aspects of race and gender that are equally pertinent for US society, but which he might have found difficult to handle on such abstract, fairyland terms in an American setting.

However, there is a more skeptical counter-theme. Whether Updike intends the love story as an exemplification of the boundary-transcending qualities of Brazil or the country as a symbolic background for the workings of perfect love, the result is less than ideal. As Isabel realizes, “a price for the intensity of their love was sterility” (236). The ideal remains without offspring and hence, possibly, without future. Even in Brazil it can survive only with the help of magic, and it cannot retain its perfection. When Isabel is incapable of Isolde’s Liebestod, she comes to see that “[t]he spirit is strong, but blind matter is stronger” (260). The novel also brings together, but does not reconcile, “Brazilian romanticism” (260) and the reality principle. The lovers exchange their racial affiliation, but they cannot eliminate the racial differences that make them attractive for each other but also separate them. The result of the racial mix in Brazilian society in general is shown to be less than perfect. Gender as well as other social relations are based on asymmetrical power distribution, and the lower classes, for instance the servants, but also women in general appear to be almost naturally submissive, even to the point of their ready acceptance of corporeal punishment.

Here, the love theme rapidly becomes submerged in a European and North American discourse of superiority that is also at work in Updike’s description of the country. Brazil is characterized by an untamable nature, extreme class contrasts (hardly anyone but representatives of the extremes comes into view), a sexually highly permissive society that is shaped by sexism nonetheless, and a population often living in chaotic or anarchic conditions and interacting with barely restrained brutality. The country still harbors really “primitive” or even “savage” groups (in conventional, superiority-discursive terms), and in keeping with racist clichés, the supposed main qualities of
the three major ethnic groups are revealed above all else in their physical behavior and body awareness, which for the protagonists change with their racial affiliation. Notwithstanding contemporary notions about the discursive nature of human attributes, race and gender seem to be derived solely from the body, the biological traits. Tristão may symbolize the future overcoming of *négritude* and the heritage of slavery: “We are seeing the end of slaves and masters in Brazil, and I, who have little competence, can help here, having been both” (238). But this is plausible only on the basis of the generalizations both of the Euro-American alterity discourse and of the Brazilian identity discourse: in this novel both seem to merge without major problems. For instance, Freyre’s preconceptions about “higher” and “lower” cultures and about racial qualities crop up with hardly a trace of authorial detachment:

Salomão heard a grim undertone as the young husband [Tristão, recently turned white] pronounced these insistences, but ascribed it to the well-known melancholy of the Portuguese race; no less an authority than Gilberto Freyre assures us that, had not the early colonizers imported Africans to cheer up their settlements, the whole Brazilian enterprise might have withered of sheer gloom. (*Brazil*, 229)

Seen in this light, the Brazilian metropolis is an aberration, because the world of business buries the country’s “true life, the life of ecstasy and the spirits” (54). “The true Brazilian, they jubilantly agreed among themselves, is an incorrigible romantic—impetuous, impractical, pleasure-loving, and yet idealistic, gallant, and vital” (65). True, Updike also shows us the other side, the work-ethic world of São Paulo, but in either case he subscribes to essentialist notions of the other culture, some of which he may have found in the “truly Brazilian fiction” he mentions in his afterword, but the “truly” is never questioned.

In his “A Special Message” for the readers of the exclusive Franklin Mint Edition of *Brazil*, Updike defends himself against his critics:

We can catch at a truth from a distance as well as up close; I refuse to disown my Brazil as unrealistic. A country’s sense of itself is an activating part of its reality, and this sense derives in part from outsiders. Because others have romanticized and sexualized Brazil, Brazil is saturated in romanticism and sexuality. Sex, between masters and slaves, conquerors and indigenes, has shaped its identity as an image of the world that is coming, one world of many mixed colors. (qtd. in Ristoff 64)

It may be that the novel results from Updike’s obsession with skin and skin color, and one can argue that it is “ultimately about America, not [. . .]
Brazil. More specifically, [it is] about the struggle in America for identity: personal as well as national,” that is, worked out by “oppositions—black and white, male and female, rich and poor, American and foreign—that may confuse or alter identity” (Schiff 157). If so, it is all the more deplorable that Brazil should remain outside of “America,” just as in James A. Schiff’s undifferentiating sentence. It remains totally accessible and available as an exotic pole of alterity, including a real maravilloso whose miraculous side is reaffirmed in the face of an insurmountable reality when, in the last lines of the novel, the now “dark-eyed widow” (Brazil, 260; my emphasis) returns home, to whatever kind of future life she may have.

Some readers may have wished that Brazil were a parody of exoticist fiction, of magical realism, of the love romance. Many phrases and passages are extreme enough to qualify as parodistic exaggerations, but the seriousness of numerous other parts and of the basic themes disproves such a reading. Nor can Brazil be seen as an exposure of stereotypical notions in the manner of Walter Abish’s How German Is It. Yet there are such books about Latin America, and Daniel Curley’s novel Mummy, published in 1987, is a case in point. Not surprisingly, it has found only a comparatively small audience; there is no Penguin edition, as in the case of Brazil. The book explodes current and former clichés about Mexico, magical realism included, and this is hardly a popular enterprise. At the same time, the novel self-reflectively undermines the literary forms of representation supporting such stereotypical discursiveness.

Mummy swims against the stream of convention by relating the odyssey of a certain Marc Williams not to but from Mexico, back into the United States. Williams has just served a seven-year sentence in a Mexican prison because he tried to drive his dead mother’s car across the American border, not knowing that it was packed with drugs. His mother, officially an antique dealer in Mexico but actually a dope pusher, was buried in Guanajuato, where her body like many other corpses underwent a process of natural mummification. Because nobody claimed it, it was put on public display. Williams robs the mummy (in both senses of the word), hides it in the imitation of a knight’s armor that he fixes on top of his car, and then tries to make his way back to his starting point Alpha, Illinois, in order to bury his mother in her hometown. He is pursued but sometimes also protected by police and drug agents of both countries, as well as by members of the drug mafia, but never learns who tries to find him and for what reason. When he finally manages to reach the United States in an ancient landing craft named Styx, a kind of Flying Dutchman vessel, he is joined by a young woman of mysterious background called Alice Jo, who claims the mummy for herself.
The United States turns out to be no less chaotic than Mexico. Identities remain fluid on both sides of the border. Alice Jo changes hers, for instance, by the use of body paint that transforms her into a black woman. When, at the end, a fan blows away the little mummy dust that is left, Alice Jo suggests a new measure of escape from their pursuers: “We become Chinese and open a restaurant” (Mummy, 241).8

Although published seven years earlier, in many ways Mummy seems like a response to Brazil, right down to the exchange of racial affiliation. This burlesque text is a postmodern answer to attempts to create “world literature” by combining the descriptive elements of the current alterity discourse with supposedly universal themes and the cultural concept as well as the literary technique of magical realism. Curley toys with the thematic material. The difficulty of getting rid of one’s mother fixation is turned into obvious and hilarious symbolism. Almost all components of the North American discourse on the Latin American Other are called up and deconstructed by parody or by superimposing other, for instance literary, discourses. Indeed, the book indicates right from the beginning that there can be no access to the realities of self and Other that is not discursively mediated. Identity depends not on character and experience but on semiotics, as the changing and at the same time noncharacterizing names of the protagonist indicate. Marc (that is, the sign) Williams carries a family name derived from a Christian name and travels with forged papers carrying the names John Doe and Richard Roe.9 Ironically, the narrator often uses these “non-names” for the protagonist, who also appears in the various roles he plays in order to deceive his pursuers: “Someone was being very resourceful, but it was hard to tell who—Roe or Doe or the gangster or the pilgrim or the tourist or the expatriate or even the drunken American novelist” (65), a metafictional reference pointing at the author himself, whose level of reality is thereby made to merge with that—or those—of the main text. The textualization of “facts” is made particularly evident when Williams’s theft of the mummy from the Guanajuato museum is immediately turned into a popular myth that in turn has the sequel of “a cult [that] had begun to spring up on the spot” (25).

The arbitrariness of language is a constant aspect, as when Williams is trying to buy a car and the old man selling it comments that it belongs to his grandmother, who

“[…] couldn’t even drive it on Sunday because, pobrecita, she lives next to the cathedral.”

“What a pity,” Williams said. […]

“Sí, qué lástima,” the little old man said in English. […] “Let me tell you, it is a Buick Electra—”
“A Buick Electra,” Williams said as if really impressed, although to tell the truth he didn’t know a Buick Electra from a Toyota Orestes.

“To be sure,” the man said. “And it’s loaded: PS, PB, PW, A/C, AM/FM 8 tr cass, mint cond, 40 mpg—”

“40 mpg?” Williams said.

“Hwy,” the man said. “Blk/blk lthr int, mag wheels—” (11)

The question in which language the conversation is supposed to take place—often simply skipped in inter-American texts—is here solved in the sense of a bilingualism turned upside-down. Product names are parodically traced back to the (ancient Greek) cultural heritage, and product qualities appear in the series of abbreviations typical for newspaper ads.

The same relativization applies to place—“Everything that wasn’t street was shop and everything that wasn’t shop was street” (10)—and of course to personal identity:

Williams stepped into the butcher shop. The little old man was not to be seen. There was one customer and the butcher, who was whaling away with a heavy cleaver at his block. Thwack [. . .]. “Señor,” the customer said in the voice of the old man. “Señor, you are punctual.” Thwack. Williams looked at him. He was twice the size of the old man and half the age. Thwack. He was wearing a T-shirt from South Dakota State University, black pants like a waiter’s, and truck-tire sandals. Thwack. [. . .]

“Shall we go?” the man said, now in the voice of the man whose clothes he was wearing. Thwack. (12–13)

The sound of the cleaver appears to be the only reliable acoustic element of the scene. Otherwise, the coordinates of reality perception are fluid. And this is not simply due to the alien environment but applies to reality per se, which is seen as a construction, poststructuralist fashion. However, though we are accustomed to such semantic and phenomenological instability from postmodern texts in general, here the added difficulty of approaching the cultural Other creates a constant uncertainty about whether the instability results from an intercultural or an ontological problem. The discourse of alterity becomes indistinguishable from any discourse. Race, gender, age, and other qualities appear to be fluid, and thus the question of identity applies to anybody on any side of any divide.

As one name refers to others, narrative incidents, motifs, and so on refer to other books. The novel is replete with intertextual references to myths and literary texts from classical antiquity to the present. The quixotic side of Williams’s quest is indicated by the name given to the suit of armor: “Don Q.” Allusions to Dante refer not only to the Inferno but also to Malcolm
Lowry’s *Under the Volcano*, which in turn has the *Divina Commedia* as a pre-text. Williams’s radical “on-the-road” existence reminds readers of the title and concept of Jack Kerouac’s novel. When the protagonist sees his imminent death at the hands of angry *indios*, one of whom greets him with “Buenas tardes,” “he deduced that it was already past noon and that the last meal he wasn’t going to eat was lunch” (41), an echo of many such logically twisted conclusions in Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*.

The cliché of the ready availability of Latin American women is alluded to in a manner that calls into question any need for more complex intercultural communication: whenever Williams is hungry, he opens his hood, and there will always be a woman offering food and sex. Fittingly, the discourse of magical realism is associated with indigenes: Williams stays with a village priest whose Otomi Indian housekeeper is an old witch who changes into a young nymphomaniac every night. At the end of this episode, witch and priest take him to a pyramid built of old car wheels in order to sacrifice him and his car to the gods; the revival of ancient Indian cults has been a staple element in fiction on Mexico since Lawrence’s *The Plumed Serpent.* Williams escapes the obsidian knife because the witch takes “Don Q” for Quetzalcoatl or Cortés, respectively—these and most other elements of “reality” are interchangeable because they are, first of all, elements of a virtually arbitrary discursive tradition.

In this respect, many of the fantastically humorous facets of the novel refer to serious problems; the effect is often disconcertingly two-sided. And so are any comments about so-called essential features of a given culture. Instead of the traditional refuge south of the border, Williams finds a veritable industry of persecution, but the United States is just as bad. It is presented as the playground of social absurdities with which we have become familiar from the texts of the New Journalism and from the post-postmodern novel. Before his first attempt to cross the US border, Williams imagines “that his first Howard Johnson’s ice cream cone would give him terminal la turista” (49). The American customs officer has the “intense blue [. . .] eyes of a machine gunner” (54). In an ultimate inversion of cultural discourses, even the Mexican prison is seen as having its “comforting rigors [. . .]. He had never experienced an American prison. It might be worse. It might be beautifully worse where they had laws” (56). The familiar appears as alien, but as the novel unfolds, even the strangest occurrences evoke feelings of familiarity because all of them, and thus all reality, belong to the same discursive “order”: “The country was as blank as anyone could wish. It looked like Mexico” (147). Anything can happen here, too, including a confrontation with his dead mother. The features distinguishing the United States from Latin America are of no real importance; if anything, Williams’s home
country, and particularly the corn-growing Midwest, is more threatening and more distant than Mexico:

He was in the middle of nowhere as surely as he had ever been among the cactus and mesquite and rocks and the forsaken beds of dry rivers. Now only the sheriff’s men stopped to speak to him, to ask him hard questions, to search his car, to rattle the Don’s visor. They refused to believe that a car with Mexican registration could be free of marijuana. [. . .] No woman ever stepped out of a corn field to offer him a freshly cooked ear, a biscuit, or the smallest slice of the fatted calf. Sometimes he heard a voice among the corn, a woman singing because she was alone and hidden. He toyed with the latch of his hood but never popped it. Disappointment would have been too hard to bear here, for the truth was that wherever he was, he was home. (226)

The parody of the quest tradition, the negation of any North American superiority concerning order, rationality, and humane behavior all tend to explode the discourses of identity and alterity alike. However, deconstruction is more than just an intellectual pastime. The traditional elements of the discourses of alterity and identity concerning nation, culture, gender, and race are brought into focus one after the other and are exposed as adequate not for any given reality, but only for the discourse as such. However, given the relatedness of discourse and power structure, none of this is harmless. And thus, the parody of the quest and other literary patterns is used for counter-discursive purposes; obviously, it cannot crystallize into a new and better structure. The book does not offer a model for dealing with alterity but only for dealing with such models. If Updike’s *Brazil* is a tour de force, so is *Mummy*, but Curley creates a new variety of Mexico fiction or, rather, metafiction, which, in its allegiance to international postmodernism, uncovers the facile handling of the epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic aspects of intercultural representation in most literature about Latin American alterity. However, as Arun P. Mukherjee has warned us in his essay “Whose Post-Colonialism and Whose Postmodernism?”, the subversion of conventions that takes place in postmodern texts cannot be seen as a generally acceptable form of liberation; postmodernism and postcolonialism may be at odds for those not sharing the privileges of Euro-American mainstream culture. And this culture is the place both of Updike’s archetypal and basically modernist novel and Curley’s demythicizing postmodern text. Ideally, then, self-questioning should be a reciprocal effort.

WALTER ABISH EMPHASIZES SUCH reciprocity in his novel *Eclipse Fever* (1993). Whereas *Mummy* is primarily redirectional by its inversion of the south-of-the-border pattern, *Eclipse Fever* is bidirectional. Its claim, how-
ever, is not a higher, metadiscursive and transnational truth, but to put any truth claim in doubt. In an often deceptive manner, Abish turns self-questioning into questioning per se. From the beginning of his career, the defamiliarization of the familiar has been the prime object of his fiction. The highly artificial structure of *Alphabetical Africa* (1974) demonstrated the incompatibility of the order of the linguistic sign and “reality,” and in a parallel move, the colonizing as well as the reductive aspects of a Western discourse applied to an alien world, as Klaus Milich has shown. The self-restriction of using only words beginning with the letter *a* in Chapter 1, those beginning with *a* or *b* in Chapter 2, and so on, so that the pronoun *I* is available only from Chapter 9 on, *she* only in Chapter 19, and *you* only in Chapter 25, the next to last before the process is reversed after Chapter 26, reveals how language creates reality. It does so just like maps, dictionaries, and names that were means of appropriating by deauthenticating, emptying, and then semiotically and conceptually refilling the “white” spaces of the African continent and thus clearing the way for the military, political, and economic appropriation by the colonial powers (Milich 195).11

Abish’s *How German Is It—Wie Deutsch Ist Es* (1980) and *Eclipse Fever* (1993) are much less obviously not only metafictional but metasemiotic and, hence, metadiscursive texts. This has resulted in misreadings, as early reviews indicate, and “the realistic mode” Thomas Peyser attests to them turns out to be a trap (Peyser 245). To say, as does the *Oxford Companion to American Literature*, sixth edition, that *Eclipse Fever* “is a meditation on the cultural and societal malaise of Mexico and other third world countries” (Hart and Leininger 4) is to miss the very point of the book, which is not so much about Mexico as about “the everyday in a foreign setting,” and “the foreign as a means of examining the familiar” (Abish, “An Interview with Walter Abish” by van Delden, 381, 38412). Indeed, it might have been another country serving this purpose; initially, Abish had Italy in mind. As in the case of *How German Is It*, Abish visited the country he wrote about only after finishing the novel: “I was afraid that a visit might destroy the Mexico of my imagination” (385). But this imaginary Mexico is one designed to question any cliché notions the readers may bring to the novel because of their acquaintance with travel and history books or with the fiction of other writers:

> I wanted to reject what many writers seem to allude to as Mexico’s transformative emotive power. Reading Lawrence or Lowry, one is made to feel that the characters are destined to undergo a cathartic conversion. There is something sanctimonious about the way the turbulent social events are portrayed—the way the country is used as a divining rod to establish good and evil. As a result non-Mexican writers have become the conveyers of a Mexican mystique. (382)
Characteristically, Bonny, the almost seventeen-year-old US American runaway and one of Eclipse Fever’s two most prominent characters, does not grow more mature by the initiatory sex and crime experiences she has in Mexico, as do the protagonists of so many inter-American fictions. Under shock, she regresses, and at the end of the novel she has the mind of a seven-year-old. Bonny has always considered herself to be her writer father Jurud’s muse and source of information about the reality he fails to see; she has regarded herself as a “book waiting to be written by . . .” (Abish, Eclipse 51; ellipsis in original), which is why her letters to Jurud “omitted nothing” (43). According to Abish’s self-analysis, her regression therefore denotes “a desexualization and the destruction of the imagination, the spirit, the muse” (“An Interview,” 389). And, referring to the meaning of the title: “A serious reading of the novel must take into consideration that it is the muse, the source of our inspiration, that is being eclipsed” (388). But this might serve to mobilize the reader’s own imagination, perhaps to inspire her or him.

The other prominent character, the Mexican critic Alejandro, also gets into great trouble near the end when he is arrested by the “Department for the Prevention of Delinquency” (Eclipse, 330) and is interrogated and beaten. In Abish’s reading of this episode, “Alejandro survives his ordeal because he is protected by his influential father-in-law. I guess that could be interpreted to mean that criticism will outlast the muse by virtue of its connections to authority and power” (“An Interview,” 389). That is, the novel is very much about intellectual and writerly command, fictional narratives being superseded by metatexts.

Eclipse Fever is a multi-stranded novel. There is Alejandro, the critic, who takes his wife Mercedes to the airport of Mexico City. She will travel from there to New England, where she is to accept a teaching position, although her real intention is to join her lover, the Jewish American writer Jurud, whose works she has translated into Spanish. Real intention? Much of what takes place between Mercedes and Jurud is the product of her husband’s jealous imagination. In the end, she will return to Alejandro, with much between them un(re)solved. There is Preston Hollier, a wealthy American entrepreneur and collector of pre-Columbian artifacts, who travels to Mexico in order to pursue his plan to sink an elevator shaft into the great Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacán so that it will be more easily accessible to elderly Americans for whom he plans to build a resort nearby. His wife Rita has an affair with Francisco, Alejandro’s literary friend. As we have seen, there is Jurud’s sixteen-year-old daughter Bonny, who cannot stand the presence of Mercedes in her father’s household and runs away, eventually to Mexico in the company of a gay Mexican smuggler of pre-Columbian objects. Bonny gets into all kinds of sex-and-violence scrapes, only to be found battered and
traumatized but alive on the pyramid of Tajín. Her title-giving plan to watch a solar eclipse in Yucatán falls flat because the place to see it from turns out to be Baja California, and thus, suffering from la turista, she has to watch it in her hotel room on CNN. A central event in the mythical world of ancient Mexico is thus reduced to its media representation. There is a crime story involving some of these and some other characters; that is, the novel has plot elements of a conventional thriller with a (partly) Latin American setting, including murders, stolen art treasures, erotic entanglements, thieves, rapists, killers, brutal police officers, a shady American entrepreneur, and corrupt Mexican politicians. Although many characters and plotlines converge, “the traditional sense of closure is replaced by what one of the last chapter titles calls ‘an unfolding sense of unending’” (Peyser 258), mocking Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending* and its central argument about our hunger for conclusions. Ihab Hassan has neatly summed up the thematic levels on which the novel can be read:

The book may be read as an international thriller (two murders), a geo-political fiction (Yanqui economic imperialism), a study of cultural contrasts (Mexico and America), a Proustian interrogation of sex, class, and society (on both sides of the border), a meditation on power, both public and personal (chingar, the constant Mexican jostling for superiority), a reflection on human obsessions (with homes, places, memories, iterative patterns), a quest for identity (of Bonny, the runaway American teenager; of Alejandro, the Mexican literary critic; and of the American and Mexican nations), a hidden portrait of the artist as fabulator (Abish himself), and a metaphysical novel about the yawning absence at the heart of reality (the titular eclipse). (Hassan 627)

As in a Pynchon novel, there is the sense of conspiratorial activities that might explain everything, but hardly anything is ever explained. Sense remains elusive. Like “Switzerland” for the protagonist of *How German Is It* (52), “Mexico” is a catchword evoking a series of stereotypical images, including of course the pre-Columbian past, pyramids, human sacrifices, and the supposed treachery of Malinche. What seems to be at stake is the way people (and this means us Americans at least as much as Mexicans) deal with personal crises, with the betrayals of their own lives, with the temptations of sex, money, and power. What is really at stake is the way they make sense of their experiences or fail to do so. theirs is the familiar world defamiliarized and thus made conscious by projecting it upon the screen of an alien society and by technical devices we know from other Abish texts as well. As in *How German Is It*, the collaging of widely known stereotypical signs (Schöpp 249), the many left-out pieces of information, the gaps in plot and characterization, and Abish’s characteristic use of inserted questions
jostling the reader out of a fictional illusion make us reconsider what we think we know.

The interaction of language not so much as a means of realistic representation, but of titillating, hilarious stylistic indirection with stereotypical notions shaping people’s view of reality is nicely demonstrated in a sex scene involving Mexican Francisco and WASP Rita:

When he inserted the rigid upward-curving expansion of his concupiscence into that cunningly designed aperture at the juncture of her ever so white legs, so that the extent of their coupling positions was limited only by their imagination—when he repeatedly, moistly, with her active participation, as the mind clocked the rapid acceleration of the pleasurable to and fro, thrust himself forward, into her, into that often, on school toilet partitions, graphically replicated, iconically loaded opening [. . .], didn’t Francisco, simultaneously, also enter that to him still elusive, paradisiacal American world in which she, a former cheerleader, had once been nurtured? Didn’t she, as well, provide him with unlimited access to her convictions, to her identity, not excluding her sense of individual worth, which back in the U.S.A. well may have included (who could say?) the Buick and Pontiac in the suburban driveway. (Eclipse, 106–7)

Sex, like intercultural exchange, depends on the images produced by the mind, be they graffiti or cultural stereotypes. But who is thinking, imagining here? The paragraph ends with the following questions: “But how could he possibly appreciate the cherished values that unite Americans, rich and poor, black, Hispanic, and white alike? How could he, given his innate ambivalence, his forceful Latin passion, appreciate the American virtues that conditioned her?” (107). Is this Francisco ruminating? The author commenting? The implied reader reacting? And which of them are aware of how cliché-like these phrases are? Interpersonal as well as intercultural understanding is an exercise in preconceived notions: “Though he had no way of knowing what she was thinking, he was able to categorize her thoughts, her musings, as part of the American perfection, that unattainable, antiseptic perfection. You make me feel so Mexican, he admitted” (112).

Reconsidering, trying to decipher and communicate but also to conceal meaning is the principal activity not only of the narrator or author, but also of the characters, many of whom are intellectuals, artists, and writers. Take the critic, Alejandro, whose self-perception is rather limited. He hardly remembers anything from his childhood, for instance. In Abish’s words, “In the novel, the critic is the prime interpreter, the analyzer, the questioner even as he goes out of his way to overlook everything that is injurious to the functioning of the self” (“An Interview,” 384). This reading can be applied
to the novel as a whole. Criticism can be seen as an exertion of power. As Alejandro puts it, “I equate criticism with energy. It’s an assertion. A form of domination” (Eclipse, 176), but Abish insists that this statement, too, has to be qualified as resulting from a need rather than to be taken at face value (“An Interview,” 386). The critical or other probing into the minds and matters of persons and texts—an invasion, as it were—and on the other hand the refusal to get involved when involvement would be essential (as when Alejandro stays aloof when a thief tries to escape with a stolen codex) are shown to be characteristic ways of interaction between individuals and societies.

Equally typical are deception and self-deception. Like Alejandro, Mexico appears blind to the nastier aspects of its past (cf. “An Interview,” 382). Thus, Abish is not at all squeamish about criticizing aspects of the other country. But again, the alien is used to remind readers of what they are too familiar with even to notice: their own society’s dealing with its history. US presence in Mexico is felt to be mostly exploitative. Similar to Alphabetical Africa and different from How German Is It, the discourse about the Other the text inscribes into and thus, in a manner, constructs in order to deconstruct it, is one of power, of superiority. The American industrialist and owner of “Eden Enterprises” Preston Hollier collects illegally acquired pre-Columbian art and would like to “penetrate” and then commodify the Pyramid of the Sun. And yet, as in the case of the Mexicans, Abish is far from simply criticizing what may appear as negative. Instead of solely denouncing the North American role in Latin America, he makes this interesting comment:

It seems entirely appropriate that a large American enterprise in Mexico should be named Eden. I imagine that if the Garden of Eden were to exist today, it would be run by an institution. In the novel, the name Eden is intended to ironically evoke the story of Adam and Eve with its disquieting justification for God’s action. It’s an amazing piece of writing. From a writerly point of view it is necessary to see Eden as something created not for the habitation of Adam and Eve but only for the sake of their expulsion. (“An Interview,” 385)

Whatever the moral justification may be, people can serve others by pushing them out of their respective imaginary paradises, by disillusioning them, by making them aware of their own desires, their own flaws, but also their own resources. Francisco, the lover of Preston’s wife Rita, has this to say about her husband: “Preston [. . .] has provided us with a kind of fantasy of the future we can accept. [Rita:] He doesn’t have a clue about the Mexican psyche. [Francisco:] Who does?” (Eclipse, 110).

Not surprisingly, literature is the only way of properly dealing with real-
ity. Yet we are made to witness a violent quarrel between Mexican writers about the discourses governing Mexican literature and their perception of US writing:

[Francisco:] In Mexico we aren’t free to produce a paragraph that’s devoid of our constricted Mexican symbolic content [. . .].

Fuentes, for example, is free to locate his novels wherever he chooses, Alejandro [. . .] said.

Wherever he chooses? Francisco expressed amazement. Our ceaseless contemplation of conquests, colonization, revolution, mass executions, betrayals, sieges, and the omnipresence of death, this loathsome celebration of death, dictates what we write, and foremost what we think.

Bullshit, Alejandro said. Utter, total bullshit.

[Raúl:] How not to envy that innate optimism of the writers to our north . . .?

[. . .]
Alejandro objected, Hardly the same . . .

[. . .] Unconvinced, Francisco leaned back, lighting a cigar. All the same, Jurud’s virtuosity is the measure of an all-too-accessible world unfettered by the interlocking jungles, pyramids, peasants, and torments of our spirits. (172–73)

Intercultural cross-fertilization in an age of constant, palimpsestic overwriting of national identity discourses under the impact of ideas from abroad does not depend on factual information that can only be elusive, anyway, but on a mutual stimulation of the imagination. Thus, the characters’ discussions about the respective virtues and characteristics of US American and Latin American literature are not meant as authorial judgments but as stimuli for a reconsideration of imaginative representations, of signification and its discontents. By calling into question not only the nature of representation of reality, but also the very dichotomies governing the discourses of self and Other, Abish has raised American self-questioning to the level of a universal reflection upon the power and the impotency of the cultural imagination.

As we will see in the next chapter, this questioning can also be directed at the core of national and cultural identity discourse formations, the foundational narratives where they involve the idea of the Other. Epistemological despair cannot be the final answer to the moral burdens of the past.