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The World of James Thurber: An Anatomy of Confusion

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THE WORLD OF JAMES THURBER:
AN ANATOMY OF CONFUSION

by

Catherine McGehee Kenney

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
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VITA

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

More than a decade has passed since the death of James Thurber, master prose stylist, critic and creature of the human predicament, and imagination extraordinaire, and yet there remains a relative dearth of informed comment on his work. During his lifetime Thurber enjoyed financial success and was particularly admired by a great number of contemporary writers and critics; he could be called, therefore, a "writer's writer"¹ although unfortunately most of the critical comments of his contemporaries concerning his work are limited to short book reviews and random comments in interviews and conversations. It is an indication of the wide range and fineness of Thurber's craft and vision, however, that some of the best comments on his art to date are from other writers, a mixed group which ranges from T. S. Eliot to John Updike, in addition to Hemingway, Edmund Wilson, Dorothy Parker, Malcolm Cowley, Robert Benchley, W. H. Auden, and others.²

¹Malcolm Cowley, The Literary Situation (New York: The Viking Press, 1954), p. 193; recommends Thurber for other writers.

²Cf. W. H. Auden, "The Icon and the Portrait," Nation, CL (Jan. 13, 1940), p. 48; C. S. Holmes, The Clocks of Columbus (New York: Atheneum, 1972), pp. 136, 148; Edmund Wilson, "Book," New Yorker, XXI (October 27, 1945), pp. 91-94; Dorothy Parker, Introduction to Men, Women, and Dogs (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1943), pp. vii-x.

Thurber himself was understandably gratified by the admiration of many fellow artists but still was plagued by the sparsity of serious critics and the superficiality of other commentators: "The comparatively few who really read me know I'm not just 'zany' and 'whimsical'"³ he often publicly lamented. In a 1960 letter to Dr. James E. Pollard of Ohio State University, Thurber gave a retrospective comment on his artistic intention:

I try to make as perceptive and helpful comment on the human predicament as I can, in fables, fairy tales, stories and essays. I am surprised that so few people see the figure of seriousness in the carpet of my humor and comedy.⁴

T. S. Eliot described that figure in the carpet, however, in a statement which was Thurber's own favorite criticism of his work:

It is a form of humor which is also a way of saying something serious. There is a criticism of life at the bottom of it. It is serious and even sombre. Unlike so much humor, it is not merely a criticism of manners--that is, of the superficial aspects of society at a given moment--but something more profound. His writings and also his illustrations are capable of surviving the immediate environment and time out of which they spring. To some extent, they will be a document of the age they belong to.⁵

Interestingly, it was through a comparison of Eliot and Thurber

³"Thurber, an Old Hand at Humor with Two Hits on Hand," Life, XLVIII (Mar. 14, 1960), p. 108.

⁴Samuel Bernard Baker, James Thurber: The Columbus Years (unpublished M.A. thesis, Ohio State University, 1962, p. 67.

⁵T. S. Eliot, quoted in "Priceless Gift of Laughter," Time, LVIII (July 9, 1951), p. 88; Harvey Breit, "Talk with James Thurber," New York Times Book Review, June 29, 1952, p. 19.

in "James Thurber: The Comic Prufrock" that Peter De Vries pioneered serious Thurber criticism in 1943. In attempting to place Thurber in the continuum of American literature, De Vries related him to Eliot, modern poetry, and serious social commentary of the day, characterizing him as a "jester in Axel's Castle."⁶

Both Eliot and De Vries address themselves to one of the reasons for a scarcity of criticism on Thurber or any writer of comic literature, the notion that anything genuinely humorous cannot also be serious--in many cases, it is deadly serious--and therefore, the prejudice runs, humor and comedy are not worthy of detailed study. It seems an obvious point, but one that many literate people ignore, that a comic vision of the world is perhaps different in mode from more ostensibly "serious" or unfunny forms, but often in fact addresses itself to the same real questions about human life; just as often, it is produced by an artist who is supremely serious about his craft. James Thurber was such an artist, for as he said to New Yorker editor Harold Ross after his unsuccessful eye operations had left him almost totally blind and unable to draw, "If I couldn't write, I couldn't live, but drawing to me is little more than tossing cards in a hat."⁷

⁶Peter De Vries, "James Thurber: The Comic Prufrock," Poetry, LXIII (Dec., 1943), p. 158.

⁷Henry Brandon, "A Conversation with James Thurber," New Republic, May 26, 1958, p. 12.

He was also fond of saying to many interviewers and friends that perhaps blindness was an advantage for a writer which would equip him with a greater power of concentration and less interest in the things of the world. Thurber understood humor both serious and tragicomic: "It's very hard to divorce humor from the other things in life. Humor is the other side of tragedy. Humor is a serious thing." (In this statement as elsewhere in interviews and criticism, Thurber seems to use the terms humor, comedy, and tragedy rather loosely.)

Wylie Sypher, one of the foremost critics of modern comedy, similarly concludes about "Our New Sense of the Comic:"

Perhaps the most important discovery in modern criticism is the perception that comedy and tragedy are somehow akin, or that comedy can tell us many things about our situation even tragedy cannot. At the heart of the nineteenth century Dostoevsky discovered this, and Soren Kierkegaard spoke as a modern man when he wrote that the comic and the tragic touch one another at the absolute point of infinity--at the extremes of human experience, that is.⁸

Another common reaction to Thurber, even among his admirers, is that he was ruled by what Otto Friedrich called, in an otherwise highly favorable study, "the tyranny of trivia."⁹ There is, admittedly, a great attachment to the mundane and minute in Thurber's world, but as Eliot had demonstrated in that apogee of twentieth century complaint, "The Love Song of

⁸Wylie Sypher, Comedy (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1956), pp. 193-94; "James Thurber in Conversation with Alistair Cooke," The Atlantic, CXCVIII (Aug., 1956), p. 39.

⁹Otto Friedrich, "James Thurber: A Critical Study," Discovery, V (Jan. 5, 1955), p. 166; see also Kenneth Burke, "Thurber Perfects Mind Cure," in The Critic as Artist (New York: Liveright, 1972), p. 58.

J. Alfred Prufrock," the proto-typical modern man is besieged by Thurber's special beast in the jungle, not even the heroic tiger awaiting a Henry James character, but only a "kitty cat for a tiger!"¹⁰ The typical Thurber man could be the author of Prufrock's vain wish, "I should have been a pair of ragged claws/Scuttling across the floors of silent seas," although he could in truth only say of his experience [that I] "Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,/I have measured out my life with coffee spoons."¹¹ Triviality is perhaps the scourge of modern man and Thurber but a reflection of our dilemma.¹² In the magnificent "Preface to a Life" of My Life and Hard Times Thurber describes his art as this "type of writing [that] is not a joyous form of self expression but the manifestation of a twitchiness which is at once cosmic and mundane. Authors of such pieces have, nobody knows why, a genius for getting into minor difficulties."¹³

Thurber seems to have had the last word in the

¹⁰ James Thurber, The Beast in Me and Other Animals (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World), 1948, p. 147.

¹¹ T. S. Eliot, The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1952), p. 5.

¹² Perhaps the menace of trivia originated long before the twentieth century preoccupation with it; after all, it was in that transitional work, The Courtier, that Castiglione described the coming "modern" man in terms of games and avocations previously considered generally too insignificant to mention.

¹³ James Thurber, My Life and Hard Times (Bantam paperback edition of 1939 text; New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1971), p. 10.

argument, not only in refuting Friedrich as "an intrepid young literary explorer," but in answering the charge of triviality in general:

I could begin by insisting that Mr. Friedrich has confused my armor with its chink, but this might lead to an intricate and turgid flow of metaphor. It is simpler to say, in another figure, that Trivia Mundi has always been as dear and as necessary to me as her bigger and more glamorous sister, Gloria. They have both long and amicably inhabited a phrase of Coleridge's, "All things both great and small," and I like to think of them taking turns at shooting albatrosses and playing the bassoon.¹⁴

And so Thurber's art is not only serious in intention, as all great Comedy must be, but it describes a world which is large enough and complex enough to admit both the great and the small, even though the myriad elements often produce cacophony and ambiguity. That typical Thurber phrasing, "taking turns at shooting albatrosses and playing the bassoon," is a key to the wide range of moods and subjects encountered in his world. Like Prince Zorn of The 13 Clocks "he had grown weary of rich attire and banquets and tournaments and the available princesses of his own realm, and yearned to find in a far land the maiden of his dreams, singing as he went, learning the life of the lowly, and possibly slaying a dragon here and there."¹⁵

Perceptive criticism of Thurber, favorable or not, has not really burgeoned since the key remarks of De Vries (1943),

¹⁴James Thurber, Lanterns and Lances (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), pp. 75, 76.

¹⁵James Thurber, The 13 Clocks (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950), pp. 24, 25.

Eliot (1951), and Friedrich (1955). There was the first lengthy study of Thurber, begun by Robert Morsberger as a dissertation in 1956 and published in a somewhat revised and amplified text in 1964 as part of the Twayne United States Author's Series. Significant as Dr. Morsberger's study is as the first book on Thurber, he deals primarily with a survey of Thurber's life and work, stressing general tendencies and themes while offering only a few new and incisive critical comments. Morsberger also treats the romantic aspect of Thurber's writing rather simplistically, stressing it as the dominant bent of Thurber's imagination.¹⁶ In general, James Thurber is a book too superficial in treatment to indicate the immense complexity of Thurber's art. Regarding Thurber's view of reality, for instance, no critic can neglect his comment on Fitzgerald, which radically separates humor from romanticism:

I can't remember any humor in old Scott Fitzgerald. Humor would have saved him. It seems to me the great novelists have humor in them, even if it isn't predominant....It seems to me Fitzgerald strangled humor because he was caught in the romantic tradition.¹⁷

No formula or blueprint man, Thurber defies classification into orthodox artistic or philosophic categories; his carpet is woven in an extremely intricate and varied design which is

¹⁶ Robert E. Morsberger, The Predicaments and Perplexities of James Thurber (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 1956); James Thurber (New York: Twayne, 1964), p. 45.

¹⁷ Breit, "Talk with James Thurber," p. 19.

both a delight and a formidable challenge.

Another short book on Thurber written originally as a doctoral dissertation is Stephen Black's James Thurber His Masquerades.¹⁸ This study similarly attempts to reduce Thurber's art to a single tendency, in this case describing Thurber in terms of his use of the comic mask. In so doing, Black must ignore many other aspects of Thurber, especially the sombre classic short stories, such as "The Evening's at Seven" and "The Departure of Imma Inch," as well as refuse to meet the challenge of either The 13 Clocks or The Wonderful O. Black also suggests, but does not prove, a relationship between Thurber and the black humor of the Sixties and the School of the Awful, neglecting to address himself to Thurber's own repeated scathing criticism of contemporary literature during the final decade of his life.¹⁹

Proceeding through the pattern of Thurber criticism, it becomes more and more apparent that no critic has succeeded in capturing the immense and sometimes contradictory variety of Thurber's mind and art. Richard Tobias attempted generally to "assess Thurber's claim as an artist" in The Art of James

¹⁸ Stephen Black, James Thurber His Masquerades (The Hague: Mouton, 1970).

¹⁹Cf. James Thurber, "The Future, If Any, of Comedy or, Where Do We Non-Go from Here?" in Credos and Curios (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 78-93.

Thurber²⁰ but his adherence to classic definitions of comedy and his imposition of the mythos of spring terminology, which is particularly suited to dramatic comedy, somewhat obscure the peculiar flavor of a Thurber scene and miss the richness of Thurber's ambivalent and kaleidoscopic view of reality. Such an approach necessitates the viewing of "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" as a triumphant story²¹ and also fails to deal adequately with the large number of Thurber stories in which neither triumphant nor defeated resolution really occurs. Another major flaw of Tobias's book is his over-emphasis of The Male Animal, which is after all Thurber's only play and a collaborative effort at that. This flaw also results from a too fervid interest in comic dramatic technique.

Other studies, which all tend to fragment our vision of Thurber's world rather than relate its many divergent parts, include Alice Breme Baldwin's unpublished 1970 dissertation, "Congruous Laughter: The Linguistic Form of Humor in James Thurber's Casual Essays,"²² which is limited, as its title indicates, to a very narrow range of Thurber literature, the non-narrative short piece. Within these limits, Dr. Baldwin is concerned mainly with comic timing in phrases and discourse

²⁰ Richard Tobias, The Art of James Thurber (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1969), p. iii.

²¹ Tobias, Art of James Thurber, pp. 86, 87.

²² Alice B. Baldwin, Congruous Laughter: The Linguistic Form of Humor in James Thurber's Casual Essays (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1970).

and in relating Thurber to standard New Yorker prose style. To justify the linguistic emphasis of her study, she states:

Of the 119 essays here considered, 44 make language -- usage, games, pronunciation, discussion -- an important element of topic. Add to these 5 short stories, 8 reminiscences, 12 dramatic essays, 12 fables, and to these the importance of language in the plots of The White Deer, The Thirteen Clocks, and The Wonderful O, and it²³ may be said that language was his most persistent topic.

Obsession with language is indeed consistent throughout Thurber's career, but neither an assessment of that obsession nor an interpretation of its full significance can be made from the essays alone as Baldwin tries to do. In Chapter VII of this study I will attempt to survey the entire range of Thurber's language as well as to integrate it, as it must be, into the larger world view of which it is a part.

Other critics who attempt an overly facile, narrow reading of Thurber are Lili Packman Segal, who notes that "pathedy" is the distinguishing mark of Thurber, a comment which ignores the use of tragicomedy by many other writers; V. R. Albertini, who reiterates the statements of the popular press that the pervasive theme of Thurber is the "domination of the American male by the American female;" and Norris Yates, who suggests, of all things, that sex was his great theme.²⁴

²³Baldwin, Congruous Laughter, pp. 202-03.

²⁴Lili Packman Segal, James Thurber Literary Humorist (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Louisville, 1970), p. 78; V. R. Albertini, "James Thurber and the Short Story," Northwest Missouri State College Studies, XXVIII (August 1, 1964), p. 5; Norris Yates, The American Humorist Conscience of the Twentieth Century (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1964), p. 281.

As with many of the critics previously mentioned, the problem with Yates's concept is that he necessarily excludes the fairy tales, many of the essays, and a great number of the stories by his classification of Thurber; what is sexual, for instance, in that genuine Thurber masterpiece, "The Black Magic of Barney Haller" or in the characteristic piece of Thurberian linguistic confusion, "Here Come the Tigers?"²⁵

The most recent as well as the longest study of Thurber, Charles S. Holmes's The Clocks of Columbus,²⁶ does not aid in tying the long and varied Thurber career into a cohesive whole. Perhaps Professor Holmes did not even desire to unite Thurber's warring elements, for the book is primarily a history of his literary career, leaning heavily on biographical anecdotes and plot summaries, with little critical attention to the works themselves. One reviewer, in fact, used the publication of The Clocks of Columbus as an opportunity to state that Thurber "deserves and hopefully will someday get, a biography and a reading of a major sort."²⁷ Holmes does not assert, however, in the final pages of his study, an interesting point that

²⁵In James Thurber, The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935); The Beast in Me and Other Animals.

²⁶Charles S. Holmes, The Clocks of Columbus/The Literary Career of James Thurber (New York: Atheneum, 1972).

²⁷

John Hollander, "The House That Thurber Built," World, October 24, 1972, pp. 47, 49.

the essential quality of Thurber's imagination is the tension between a strong sense of fact and a strong bias toward fantasy. In his earlier career he searched out and celebrated disorder, illogic, and confusion, feeling that these qualities were desirable counterbalances in a society over-committed to logic and organization. Later, as history changed the world he knew, and as illogic and disorder on an international scale threatened to engulf mankind, he began to champion those things which hold a society together, and his fantasies and his brilliant images of chaos become warnings and distress signals rather than signs of revelry.²⁸

Although Holmes unduly stresses the role of fantasy in Thurber's view of a chaotic world, fantasy (or what I prefer to term his use of illusion and reality) is a part of that world, just as language, the battle of the sexes, and Thurber's overall view of man and society are only elements in his study of the chaos. It is impossible either to separate these elements from each other in looking at Thurber's work as a whole or to impose, as Professor Holmes attempts, a neat pattern of development on Thurber's complex attitude toward the confusions of reality and the appeal of fantasy. Thurber does not really move from being a lover of chaos to a seeker of order; rather, he embraces many contradictory and continually sparring elements which are part of a complex world of his own creation.

The fragmentary and sparse state of Thurber criticism is not paralleled by the widely felt, continuing popular interest in his work, however. Although he was the first to deplore the use of such glib words as "whimsical," "zany," "gentle" and "wacky" to describe his work, or the homespun connotations

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Holmes, Clocks of Columbus, pp. 330-31.

of the common appellation "America's most beloved humorist," the fact is that the Thurber imagination has been able to speak to many people, in very different times and cultures, for almost half a century. His works have been widely read, anthologized and adapted in English and have been translated into many foreign languages, often being used as texts for the study of English abroad.²⁹ His mythology has become a part of the American language and folklore: we speak of "the Thurber dog," "the Thurber woman," "The War Between Men and Women," and of a "Walter Mitty type." The latter probably holds the most assured place in our lexicon and references to Walter Mitty are found throughout the world in conversation and publications. A British physician has even described the Walter Mitty Syndrome in an article in the medical journal, The Lancet. A recognition of the unique nature of Thurber's world is also inherent in the common expression of "feeling or looking like a Thurber cartoon."³⁰

The problem, then, seems to be to delineate the immense and sometimes contradictory Thurber world, marking many of the generally recognized Thurber themes and attitudes along the

²⁹Cf. Edwin T. Bowden, James Thurber A Bibliography (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1968), for a detailed description of Thurber adaptations and collections.

³⁰Tobias, Art of James Thurber, p. 7; Lewis Gannett, "James Thurber: Pre-Intentionalist," New York Herald Tribune Book Review, November 12, 1954, p. 5, enumerates the occurrence of Thurber references and quotations in different countries; De Vries, "The Comic Prufrock," p. 150, describes several experiences in terms of "feeling like a Thurber cartoon."

path, and moving toward a fuller understanding of what it is that gives his world unflinching appeal, distinction and significance. If it is not simply the battle of the sexes, nor his obsession with language, his penchant for minutiae, his attraction to fantasy, nor his use of the methods of dramatic comedy which ultimately defines the boundaries and terrain of Thurber's world, what is it that would both relate all these divergent elements of his art to each other as parts of a larger concept and also place the singular cast of his imagination? A comprehensive, integrated approach is needed to demonstrate the full complexity and range of Thurber's world; through such a comprehensive study of the vastness of Thurber's creation it will be possible to interrelate the separate moods, interests, subjects and beliefs of the man Willard Thorpe called "the most versatile of modern humorists"³¹ into a cohesive whole.

Thurber himself has provided us with the vocabulary for such a study. In a 1936 statement for Max Eastman's Enjoyment of Laughter, Thurber outlined his artistic method:

I think humor is the best that lies closest to the familiar, distressing, even tragic. Humor is a kind of emotional chaos told about calmly and quietly in retrospect. There is always a laugh in the utterly familiar. ³²

³¹Willard Thorpe, "American Humorists," University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 42 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964), p. 40.

³²Max Eastman, The Enjoyment of Laughter (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936). p. 342; [Italics mine.]

This statement indicates the essential tension in Thurber's art, the tension between chaos and the calm, retrospective study of that chaos; it also illustrates how far Thurber's understanding of the comic had moved from the Bergsonian definition of comedy, which holds that there is a lack of emotional content in laughter resulting from "something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is intelligence, pure and simple."³³

As early as 1936, then, Thurber thought that the proper subject for humor was chaos, particularly chaos with an emotional content or effect. It should also be noted here that Bergson was essentially discussing comedy for the theatre; Thurber was primarily interested in humorous or comic prose for newspaper, magazine or book publication.³⁴ For this reason, and because Thurber, like many other twentieth century writers, wrote in more of a mixed mode, often producing a type of tragicomedy, the classic definitions and formulae for older dramatic comedy are often not especially relevant to what he is doing. Also, because Thurber himself preferred the title humorist, but did not clearly distinguish between humor, comedy, and wit, these terms are relatively interchangeable in reference to him.³⁵

³³Henri Bergson, Laughter, in Comedy, ed. Wylie Sypher (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1956), pp.63, 64.

³⁴James Thurber, Thurber on Humor (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, [n.d.]), p. 14.

³⁵Baldwin, Congruous Laughter, pp. 3-5.

Thurber's conception of humor as a study of chaos did not diminish or significantly alter throughout his career. Many of his readers have noticed what he called "the occupation of my mind by a sense of confusion that has never left it."³⁶ His close friend and collaborator E. B. White explained the Thurber imagination in terms of such confusion:

When I first knew him, his mind was unbelievably restless and made him uncomfortable at all hours. Now, almost 25 years later, I can't see that it has relaxed. He still pulls at his hair and trembles all over, as though he were about to sell his first piece. His thoughts have always been a tangle of baseball scores, civil war tactics, Henry James, personal maladjustments, terrier puppies, literary tide rips, ancient myths and modern apprehensions. Through this jungle stalk the unpredictable ghosts of his relatives in Columbus, Ohio.³⁷

What Wolcott Gibbs called Thurber's "sure grasp of confusion" more fully explains Thurber's method and subject matter than most critics have realized. Although no one has pursued this insight into Thurber's world, another perceptive reviewer has briefly noted:

Images of ... confusion ... proliferate in his work, in his work, suggesting that he wrote and drew with a firm professional hand to exorcise a deep uncertainty which was often dangerously close to sheer panic.

John Updike similarly describes much of Thurber's work as the "beautiful evocation of a fluid chaos where humans revolve and collide like glowing planets, lit solely from within,

³⁶James Thurber, The Thurber Album (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), p. 137.

³⁷Holmes, Clocks of Columbus, p. 290.

against a cosmic backdrop of gathering dark."³⁸ It is, therefore, a confusion of both the cosmic and mundane order that Thurber's humor studies; in his world view, we are all perpetually involved in chaos, for we come from the common "womb of confusion."³⁹ Therefore, the body of Thurber's work presents us with the many pieces of a large subject--his great subject--which he calls rather late in his career "the anatomy of confusion."⁴⁰ The seeming paradox of this phrase, typically Thurberian in its ring, is but a more succinct statement of his earlier comment on the nature of the humorous.

This literature is the result of an artistic consciousness that attempts to systematically study the structure of chaos and disorder. The clash of these two concepts--order and disorder, sense and confusion--results in a highly complex world in which the confusion between man and woman, between man and other animals, and between man and his systems and illusions are only elements of that large view of the chaotic human predicament. It is a whole new world for which the words zany, whimsical, or even funny are only faintly accurate.

Although Thurber has given us these key phrases for

³⁸"Obituary," New York Times, November 3, 1961, p. 35; Julian Moynihan, "No Nonsense," New Statesman, LXIV (December 14, 1962), p. 872; John Updike, "Indignations of a Senior Citizen," New York Times Book Review, November 25, 1962, p. 5.

³⁹James Thurber, Thurber's Dogs (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), p. 152.

⁴⁰James Thurber, Thurber Country (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953), p. 103.

understanding his art, no one has dealt with the preponderance of images of confusion in his work; aside from random comments, the significance of the confusion motif in Thurber has been ignored. Despite the extremely common occurrence of the word confuse (in all its forms) in the works of Thurber,⁴¹ and despite his heavy usage of such similar words as chaos, perplexity, mixed up, and bedlam, no critic has attempted to establish the significance of Thurber's attitude toward man's perpetual state of confusion or to explain his many subjects and attitudes as only interrelated parts of the large work, *The Anatomy of Confusion*. The purpose of this study is to explain Thurber's complex attitude toward confusion, to

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Thurber uses the word confusion and other forms of "to confuse" repeatedly in his work; the following references are to given an indication of the frequency of usage: James Thurber, My Life and Hard Times, pp. 12, 24, 31, 33, 38, 45, 56, 104, 112; Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, pp. 54, 113; Let Your Mind Alone! (New York: Universal Library, 1960), pp. 14, 15, 18, 28, 57, 66, 68, 166, 190, 211; My World--And Welcome to It (New York: Harcourt, and Company, 1942), pp. 6, 7, 178, 231, 248, 299; The Thurber Carnival (New York: Dell Publishing, 1964), p. 11; The White Deer (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1963), pp. 31, 45, 64, 72, 91; The Beast in Me and Other Animals, pp. 3, 64, 124, 144; The Thurber Album (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), pp. 48, 137; Thurber Country, pp. 11, 44, 94, 103 (2), 149, 153, 178; Thurber's Dogs, pp. 52, 130, 152; The Wonderful O (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. 58; Lanterns and Lances, pp. 87, 119, 125, 126, 195 (3); The Owl in the Attic and Other Perplexities (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1931), pp. 116, 119, 121, 128 (2), 130, 68. Although this is not a complete list of the use of the word confusion in Thurber, it indicates the amount of usage the word receives. Also, it is only a partial indication of the importance of the concept of confusion, which is often only implied through a description of events or with the use of a synonym for the word confusion; i.e., bedlam, chaos.

demonstrate that several types of confusion are pervasive in his work, and to establish that the body of Thurber's work does in fact present an Anatomy of Confusion.

I will deal with Thurber as a humorist because that is the term he used to describe himself. In judging and interpreting his work, I apply his own definition of humor as chaos recollected in tranquillity because this phrase not only explains Thurber's artistic intentions but in fact is most descriptive of both his subject matter and method. Thurber's artistic conception of the world as a state of chaos is in the comic tradition and much of his writing, especially during the 1930's, simply presents an amused view of the world's bedlam and imperfect human nature. Thurber's humor was always vacillating, however, between comedy, tragedy, and satire. As I use the term here, comedy has two essential characteristics: it deals with the survival of life in an inevitably chaotic world and it affects a reconciliation with or an acceptance of that world. Much of Thurber's work, even in the early period, seems to be edging toward the abyss and the extinction of human civilization, but as The Last Flower (1939) indicates, the regenerative powers of life still remain and the comic vision is intact.

Toward the end of his life, although still viewing human life as a state of confusion, Thurber became less comic because he came to doubt that we will even survive. The sombre essay from his last collection, "The Future, If Any, of Comedy,

or, Where Do We Non-Go from Here?," questions even minimal survival through laughter or acceptance in a world of multiple confusions.⁴² Thurber's tragic sense, that is, his sense of the inevitability of fate, time, extinction, death, and defeat, becomes more pronounced in the later work as he rails against the chaos of this world while he is yet haunted by the suspicion that nothing can be done about the situation. Like a tragic character, the persona of Thurber's final essays seems to desire at least to register his recognition of the Awful and his vain protests against it.

The difference between the early work and the later work is not in kind but in degree, however; Thurber had always demonstrated a great deal of ambivalence about human experience. Sometimes, in My Life and Hard Times, the parodies of Henry James, and The Years with Ross, Thurber is able to present an amused, detached, and comic vision of the confusion of the world. At other times, in The Fables, The Last Flower, and The White Deer, he approaches satire because of his didactic form and the implied possibility of man's improvement. Thurber was far from certain that anything would ever improve man's situation, however, and this ambivalence makes him less of a satirist than a humorist with a tragicomic vision of experience. Even in the Fables and The Last Flower, where correction is suggested, there is an even stronger feeling of the cyclic

⁴²In James Thurber, Credos and Curios, p. 86.

nature of human life and the inevitability of confusion. Paradoxically, the only thing that Thurber consistently asserts is that man's life is a state of confusion and that within the chaos of man on earth everything is subject to change.

The tension in Thurber's world results in part from his ability and desire to ask the essential questions about man's nature and existence and his inability to formulate any answers. In 1939 he rhetorically asked in a philosophical statement for I Believe, "Where are we going, if anywhere, and why?" The essay then systematically denies the orthodox sources of an answer to his question:

Every man is occasionally visited by the suspicion that the planet on which he is riding is not really going anywhere; that the Force which controls its measured eccentricities hasn't got anything special in mind. If he broods upon this somber theme long enough he gets the doleful idea that the laughing children on a merry-go-round or the thin, fine hands of a lady's watch are revolving more purposefully than he is....

According to Thurber, this frightening suspicion does not cause man to find answers to his difficult questions, however; it only intensifies his sense of confusion and predicament:

It will do no good to call up the Times or consult the Britannica. The Answer does not lie in the charts of astronomers or in the equations of mathematicians; it was not indicated by Galileo's swinging lamp or the voices of Joan of Arc; it evaded Socrates and Archimedes and the great men of the Renaissance and it has evaded everybody else from Francis Bacon to John Kieran. The fearful mystery that lies behind all this endless rotation has led Man into curious indulgences and singular practices, among them love, poetry, intoxicants, religion, and philosophy. Philosophy offers the rather cold consolation that perhaps we and our planet do not actually exist; religion presents the contradictory and scarcely more comforting thought that we exist but that we cannot

hope to get anywhere until we cease to exist.⁴³

Thurber offers neither an answer to the metaphysical questions he raises nor a solution for man's dilemma. He questions the existence of God as well as the prospect of the divine destiny of man because of his bitter knowledge of human experience, but his world never becomes truly valueless or bleak. In the Fables, parables, and fairy tales, and in his depictions of nature and animals and his last essays, there remains a longing for order, sense, innocence, and good. On earth, according to Thurber, none of these goals is attainable and he questions whether or not even a divine order exists. His ability to formulate the question is important, however, and one of his fables concludes that "It is better to ask some of the questions than to know all the answers." In his view of man's perpetual state of confusion, perplexity and muddlement are the only results of such necessary questioning but the other side of Thurber asserts: "All men should strive to learn before they die what they are running from, and to, and why?"⁴⁴ Thurber implies that it is important only that man strive for an answer to the impossible questions while realizing the inadequacy of all answers because of man's

⁴³James Thurber, "Statement," in I Believe, ed. Clifton Fadiman (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1939), pp. 295, 299.

⁴⁴James Thurber, Fables for Our Time (New York: Harper and Row, 1940), p. 30; Further Fables for Our Time (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), p. 174. [Italics mine.]

imperfect reason, his fallen nature, and his inevitable confusion. Although Thurber's essential reconciliation with the world seems never to blame either God or man for the self-perpetuating confusion, another force within him seeks at least to make men recognize their situation and longs for a possibility of peace, rest, and order.

Thurber's art, which envisions the world as a state of chaos, is not only his own attempt to affect an order within disorder but an expression of the ambiguities and inherent contradictions of the human condition. Himself endowed with a sense of perplexity and confusion, there are many different Thurbers which incongruously inhabit the same spirit and art: "The writer of humor and comedy is by nature a complicated human being, and the craft he practices is in part a necessary counter-balance to God knows how many different kinds of inner conflicts."⁴⁵ Thurber's great accomplishment is that he was able to transform his own inner conflicts and sense of confusion and his vision of imperfect human nature into an artistic expression of a "twitchiness at once cosmic and mundane."⁴⁶ When he looked into himself, or into a character, or into the world at large, he saw and was able to communicate an essential and seemingly perpetual state of confusion. He never completely gave up striving for an answer, however, and his writing

⁴⁵James Thurber, Credos and Curios, p. 166.

⁴⁶James Thurber, My Life and Hard Times, p. 10.

implies a sense of the possibility of man improving, even if the only improvement would be his awful knowledge of his dismal situation. Thurber, although often grim in his vision of human nature, never completely surrenders, as the contemporary black humorists do, to the decadence, evil, and chaos which he acknowledges. While he doubts the divine destiny of man and the presence of any supernatural order, he would appear to hope for something beyond the sinister scene in his world vision and to demand that men at least strive, although vainly, to understand the inexplicable and to order the chaotic. This is the message of one of his most characteristic and enduring works, The Last Flower, as well as of The White Deer and The Wonderful O.

This study begins with a survey of Thurber's world view, the large conception of "The Macrocosm of Confusion," in which all individuals, groups, and societies function. Thurber's singular pictures of mass hysteria and his special interpretation of the modern waste land are discussed as they demonstrate the comprehensiveness of Thurber's view of the confusion of the world. Although marriage is but an institution within society, a confusion within the confusion, Thurber seems to have felt that the American woman was worthy of detailed study and so she will have a chapter all her own. Watching all the chaos, quietly, in Chapter IV are the beasts, real and unreal, of the Thurber world. They serve to put Thurber's Anatomy of Confusion into perspective as he compares

men with the less complicated animals of planet earth. Chapter V describes Thurber's attitude toward the confusion resulting from two unsuccessful attempts by man to order and understand his experience: the development of scientific theory and the growth of technology. Chapter VI is concerned with the ultimate and inclusive confusion, the confusion of illusion and reality in the limited human mind.

Finally, Chapter VII is an attempt to explain Thurber's conception of language as the only chance for affecting order within disorder or making sense from nonsense. Because I believe that Thurber's enduring value resides largely in his ability to communicate his vision in a remarkable way and in his reverence for language and because Thurber's conception of confusion is often portrayed in pictures of the chaos resulting from linguistic difficulties, this study will conclude with a discussion of Thurber's idea of the powers and limits of language. He believed that only art can bring order out of disorder, make sense from nonsense and confusion: "H. W. Ross, being neither artist nor poet, was not equipped to bring 'grace and measure' out of the chaos of man on earth...."⁴⁷ he wrote in one of his last books. It is therefore fitting that this inquiry into the nature of Thurber's artistic vision of chaos should emphasize the one meager and often failing way out of the confusion which Thurber offers: language and human

⁴⁷ James Thurber, The Years with Ross (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1959), p. 115.

communication. Although this study is primarily concerned with the literary achievement of James Thurber, references to his drawings will be made for purposes of clarification.

In delineating the unique Thurber world in terms of its many confusions, it will be possible to enjoy more fully the richness and complexity of his vision. It is significant that Thurber chose the term "carnival" for the 1945 collection of his work;⁴⁸ like a carnival, his world is filled with games of chance, distorted mirrors, unusual and unbelievable animals, exhilarating and yet frightening rides through the imagination, with an occasional glance at the carousel, the quieter and gentler image of a few well-managed, harmonious moments. It is a world only faintly reminiscent of the ordinary one, completely involving carnival-goers in a new universe. It is a state of mind which is fluid enough to admit all comers, most often being a picture of a people who have only one thing in common, that they are in one place. It is the convergence of the various and vagrant, the frightening and delightful elements of the human scene. Sometimes inside, but usually standing a little removed, is the mind of James Thurber, the artist, anatomizing the confusion.

⁴⁸James Thurber, The Thurber Carnival (Delta Book printing of 1945 text; New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1964).

CHAPTER II

MAN AND SOCIETY:

THE MACROCOSM OF CONFUSION

'We all inhabit a Lost Atlantis,' Thurber said. 'We drink our old fashioned to the last drop careless of the fact that the world is crumbling around us.'¹

It has not been common to consider James Thurber a "social" writer in the usual sense of that word; in the sense that it is ordinarily applied to the social novelists of the Twentieth Century, like Sinclair Lewis or James Farrell, or even in the sense that we have come to understand the pervasive social commentary of Eliot, Fitzgerald, or Faulkner. This fact is probably the result of, in Thurber's more casual readers, a knowledge of only a few of the more famous short stories, perhaps "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" or the "Catbird Seat," along with a wider, if equally superficial, knowledge of Thurber's cartoons. It is probably also related to a common tendency to consider humorous writing ephemeral and unrelated to the "large issues" or the problems of the world. Thurber wrote many non-humorous pieces but even at

¹Malcolm Cowley, "Salute To Thurber," Saturday Review, XLIV (Nov. 25, 1961), p. 15; Cowley quoting from a letter he received from Thurber in the early 1930's.

his funniest he disproves this misconception. A careful reading of his work demonstrates a pervasive social commentary and criticism which, since it is usually handled with detachment and complexity and not allowed to degenerate into propaganda, provides the reader with both a satisfying aesthetic experience and a better understanding of human nature.

Even many of Thurber's serious critics have ignored the wide view of human life presented in his work. In one of the two sustained studies of Thurber's art, Richard Tobias ignores this aspect of Thurber in an attempt to force conventional definitions of comedy on his writing, saying that generally "the comedy remains pure, an enjoyment of a social malaise that need not be compared to the horrors of the modern world."² I believe that not only does the aesthetic excellence of Thurber's work lie in his ability to deftly cause a subtle moment of recognition that produces insight as well as laughter, but that any critic must consider Thurber not as a comic writer according to any traditional conception of that term, but as a humorist, the term which he used to describe himself and for which he supplied a definition. As we will see, Thurber's definition of humor as a

²Richard C. Tobias, The Art of James Thurber (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1969), p. 48. The other book length study of Thurber's art is Robert Morsberger, James Thurber (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1964). Charles Holmes's Clocks of Columbus (New York: Atheneum, 1972), deals with Thurber's life; Stephen Black, James Thurber: His Masquerades (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1970), is a short story of Thurber's clowns.

quiet recollection and study of chaos is intrinsic to an understanding of his conception of art and his comments on the lot of man on earth.

Robert Morsberger, whose pioneering study James Thurber for the Twayne United States Authors Series admits more of the social criticism inherent in Thurber's work, remains too superficial and general in his treatment of Thurber's themes to clarify Thurber's world view. He also mistakenly assumes that Thurber became interested in social subjects only after the advent of the McCarthy era in the early Fifties.³

No critic has thus far commented in anything but a very tangential way on Thurber's persistent view of man's chaotic state, nor on the thematic ramifications of his definitions of humor and art, nor on the whole body of his work as an anatomy of that confusion which he perceived the world to be. In this chapter I will attempt to focus Thurber's world view, to relate this view to his artistic method, and to survey several of the more important works which deal with aspects of man's social existence from the three decades of his career. Thurber, master anatomist of confusion, took as his great subject the chaotic nature of the human predicament.

From My Life and Hard Times (1933) to Lanterns and Lances (1961) we see and delight in a magnificently rendered

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Morsberger, James Thurber, p. 145.

view of the bedlam and carnival of life, not in ponderous tracts for the times nor thinly veiled propaganda, but in short story, fable, fairy tale, and essay which refrain from preaching and unobtrusively instruct through many layers of meaning. Thurber's social comment, then, can be divided into two types: the work which studies in a general way man as a social animal, that is, man as a member of a group, a class, an institution, or a culture, and the works which deal more directly with specific abuses and horrors within the macrocosm of confusion, the world at large.

Thurber's view that life is a perpetual state of confusion is reflected in his consistent use of all forms of the word "to confuse," as well as the plethora of related words like bedlam, carnival, chaos, perplexity, mix-up, dilemma, and predicament, in his writing.⁴ That his subject matter deals with the confusion of man on earth can be deduced from even a survey of his titles: The Owl in the Attic and Other Perplexities, The Seal in the Bedroom, Alarms and Diversions, The Thurber Carnival, "Aisle Seats in the Mind," "The Pleasure Cruise, and How to Survive It," "What Do You Mean It 'Was' Brillig?" "The Bat Who Got the Hell Out," "The War Between Men and Women," and alas, even "The Collapse of Civilization."

Only in Thurber's world can a seal peer over a

⁴See Chapter I, note 41.

strangely amorphous couple in bed, or, in another drawing, a woman ask a man if she may take his hat as they stand under the recently stuffed and mounted head of another (presumed) visitor. Only in Thurber's world is it a Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze or a picture of society reduced to mayhem (in The Wonderful O) by the omission of a single letter from the alphabet. Only in Thurber's drawings do women have hair on their heads which better resembles exposed nerve endings than a coiffure and only here do the dogs seem to understand and reject the horrific and troubled scene better than any human in it is able to do. After reading Thurber or seeing his drawings, however, as Dorothy Parker so long ago pointed out,⁵ our whole existence is slightly altered: if we never have before, we see a Thurber woman (only too often) or a Thurber dog; we say something "looks like a Thurber cartoon;" we recognize a "Walter Mitty;" and, even more importantly, we no longer regard language, human dignity and reason, or conventional behavior in the same way. Our sense of order and control, Thurber shows us, is only self-deception; beneath our cherished conventions, lie thinly disguised savages. Thurber, therefore, has achieved the ultimate, enduring artistic effect: he has succeeded in creating a new world, a singular and even eccentric vision, which his consummate artistry has rendered understandable and unforgettable.

⁵James Thurber, The Seal in the Bedroom (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1932), unpaginated; in the Introduction by Dorothy Parker.

Thurber has become a part of our awareness.

The distinguishing characteristic of this special world is a pervasive use of the confusion motif. Instances of confusion proliferate in his fiction and drawings and, in many of the essays, the significance of his concept of confusion is directly stated. Such a statement underlies The Years with Ross (1959), one of Thurber's last books which has as its subject New Yorker Editor Harold Ross and Thurber's years with the magazine. Ross always dreamed of the "perfect system," the miracle man to organize the bedlam; to Thurber Ross himself was prototypical confused man:

H. W. Ross, being neither artist nor poet, was not equipped to bring 'grace and measure' out of the chaos of man on earth.... [he was] a mixed-up modern man driven by the well-known compulsion to build with one hand and tear down with the other.⁶

Here, then, is a direct statement to explain the evidence of so many images of confusion in Thurber's writing: life on earth was to Thurber a state of chaos, a scene in which mixed-up human beings attempt to affect order in a perpetually revolving cycle of confusion.

In another very important statement, written for I Believe in 1939, Thurber reflects on human society as "this sorrowful and sinister scene, these menacing and meaningless animals:"

⁶James Thurber, The Years with Ross (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1959), p. 115. Tobias understands the character of Ross in direct opposition to this interpretation, Cf. Art of James Thurber, pp. 154-162.

Every man is occasionally visited by the suspicion that the planet on which he is riding is not really going anywhere; that the Force which controls its measured eccentricities hasn't got anything special in mind.

Man's dilemma is partially the result of his false security in religious, political, philosophic, and scientific systems which attempt, unsuccessfully, to bring order to the chaos and partially the result of man's fallen nature. Adding to the predicament are the limitations of his planet which Thurber frighteningly and accurately describes as "his misfit globe," a place that is

just barely habitable. Its minimum temperatures are too low and its maximum temperatures are too high. Its day is not long enough and its night is too long. The disposition of its water and its earth is distinctly unfortunate.... These factors encourage depression, fear, war, and lack of vitality.

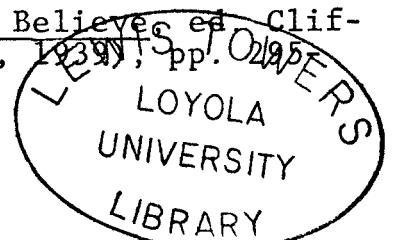
Man's poor habitat is matched by the erratic and confused social groups he has founded:

The survival of almost any species of social animal, no matter how low, has been shown to be dependent on Group Co-operation, which is itself a product of instinct. Man's cooperative processes are jumpy, incomplete, and temporary because they are the product of reasoning and are thus divorced from the sanity which informs all natural laws.⁷

There is perhaps no better explanation of the wildly chaotic scenes in Thurber's cartoons than that they are pictures of co-operative processes which are "jumpy, incomplete, and temporary." They freeze a moment in the confusion. (Cf.

Men, Women, and Dogs: "And this is my father, Mr. Williams--

⁷James Thurber, "Statement," in I Believe, ed. Clifton Fadiman (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1939), pp. 219-220, 300.



home from the wars or something;" "He hates people;" "One of us ought to be a Boswell, taking this all down;" and The Seal in the Bedroom: "Stop me!;" "Will You Be Good Enough to Dance This Outside?;" and "They say he has no weakness."⁸

I quote so much from this little-known essay because not only does it show Thurber's early preoccupation with man as a social animal, but it also includes several revealing statements about his perception of the chaotic human predicament. Furthermore, it demonstrates the essential seriousness of Thurber's mind and art. Here, as in works like The Last Flower, "After the Steppe Cat, What?" and many of the fables, there is what is best described as an anthropological tone in much of Thurber's work: he is concerned with the elements and development of human society, with conventions and traditions exposed, codified, and explained, with the rituals of human life and the necessities for human survival. Sometimes he pushes human society out to the edge of the cliff, where civilization itself collapses, where there remains only one man, one woman, one flower, or where human beings, like the lemmings, drown themselves in a sea of confusion. In Thurber's hands "humor" is a serious thing, even grim. Near the end of his life he stated his serious intention thus:

I try to make as perceptive and helpful comment on the human predicament as I can, in fables, fairy tales,

⁸James Thurber, Men, Women and Dogs (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1943), pp. 79, 153, 47; and The Seal in the Bedroom, unpaginated.

stories and essays. I am surprised that so few people see the figure of seriousness in the carpet of my humor.⁹

The human predicament is perceived by Thurber as a large, all-encompassing macrocosm of chaos in which "we mumble along in our multiple confusion."¹⁰ Because of his sense of the disorder of life, his writing tends to have a melancholy and sometimes frightening tinge. Thurber's large view of confusion includes a rather traditional emphasis on time and mortality as man's inevitable enemy. Finite, imperfect man, as child of confusion and chaos, always has the spectre of dissolution, decay, death, and extinction before him. So many of Thurber's fables and stories involve death, references to time and aging, and remarks about the approaching day of doom that it is possible to say that his melancholy strain results from his perception of human life as a state of confusion, and its corollary, from his sense of the inexorable running out of time. Change, decay, and death are the results of confusion's reign."

Thurber is regarded chiefly as a humorist, however, and his best work, though often not distinctly "humor," produces what E. B. White called "the inaudible, the enduring

⁹James Thurber, "Letter to James Pollard," in Samuel Bernard Baker, "James Thurber: The Columbus Years," (unpublished M.A. thesis, Ohio State University, 1962), p. 67. Baker includes a letter dated June 2, 1960, from Thurber to Dr. Pollard.

¹⁰James Thurber, Credos and Curios (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1962), p. 86.

¹¹See Appendix I, "Thurber's Melancholy Sense of Time," for a full discussion of this matter.

laugh."¹² It is only through an understanding of Thurber's own definitions of humor and art that it is possible to relate his subject matter, his method, and his effect--that special blend of laughter and melancholy--to each other. Thurber's great subject was the anatomy of confusion, his conception of the chaotic human predicament. His definition of humor explains his methodology in dealing with this subject:

I think humor is the best that lies closest to the familiar, to that part of the familiar which is humiliating, distressing, even tragic. Humor is a kind of emotional chaos told about calmly and quietly in retrospect.... that hysterical laugh that people sometimes get in the face of the Awful.¹³

The proper subject of humor, then, is chaos and it is in the nature of human life that the tragic and the humorous lie close together and are often intermingled in experience. This blend of laughter and tears in the face of the Awful, that is, in our recognition of the limitations of human nature and the spectre of our own mortality, results from the confusion in which daily life as well as the universe revolves. In addition to the humorist's recognition of that awful reality, humor becomes a function of man's survival and acceptance; it is "the only solvent of [the] terror and tension" which result from our chaotic state and our awareness

¹²E. B. White, A Subtreasury of American Humor (New York: Modern Library, 1948), xvi.

¹³James Thurber, "Statement," in Max Eastman, Enjoyment of Laughter (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936), pp. 342, 43.

of it. Given our legacy of confusion, only "the recurring sound of congruous laughter"¹⁴ which affects a unity of humor and pathos, a type of order within the confusion, makes experience bearable. Thurber's kaleidoscopic view of the human spectacle thus appropriately finds as its chief mode a kind of tragicomedy which, while presenting a picture of the frightening, confusing, and evil scene, allows the laughter of release and acceptance as a mechanism for survival. It is this coupling of savage disillusionment and realistic hope which gives enduring value and validity to Thurber's best treatment of the human scene, in "Walter Mitty," The Last Flower, Fables for Our Time, each of the fairy tales, and the fine short stories of the Thirties and Forties.

It is interesting that Thurber has thus demonstrated two of the important conclusions of Constance Rourke's classic American Humor (1931), which was written just as Thurber was beginning to publish. Her study is retrospective and therefore she does not even mention Thurber, but based on the thrust of American humor before 1930, she concludes that although "recognition is essential for the play of a profound comedy," it is necessary that it also affect a "reconcilement

¹⁴James Thurber, Lanterns and Lances (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), pp. 142, 143. Thurber here indicates that he uses the terms "humor" and "tragicomedy" interchangeably since his definition of humor involves a combination of laughter and tears. In this paper I will use the terms in that way; I also spell tragicomedy without hyphen as Thurber insisted the word should be spelled.

with life."¹⁵ Thurber's humor does both very well.

The awareness which we often experience in Thurber is of that large view of chaos, the macrocosm of confusion, in which man attempts to form groups, institutions, and systems to somehow organize and order his life. Thurber's literary career, remarkably consistent in its subject matter and viewpoint, falls roughly into three categories which parallel the three decades of his life as a published writer. As we will see, he changes mainly in terms of technique and not themes and, especially toward the end of his life, he becomes less artistically detached from his subject matter. I will approach his treatment of the macrocosm of confusion, of human society, chronologically, following the three periods from 1929-1961, the span of his writing career. Using those works most directly related to man in society, I will deal primarily with the following: A. The First Decade: My Life and Hard Times (1933) and The Last Flower (1939); B. The Second Decade: Fables for Our Time (1940), Men, Women, and Dogs (1943), and The White Deer (1945); and C. The Final Decade: The Wonderful O (1957) and Lanterns and Lances (1960). The subjects of each of these works are "social" in the sense that they picture and comment on group behavior and on the general human predicament.

I will begin with Thurber's quasi-biographical My

¹⁵Constance Rourke, American Humor (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1931), p. 257.

Life and Hard Times, a book in which he sprang, a mere four years after the publication of his first book, Is Sex Necessary?, into maturity in a genuine masterpiece of humor and English prose. There is a double-edged irony in the title, which is superficially a comic play on the trite "life and times of--" phrase. The book, as fictionalized reminiscences of Thurber's boyhood, is a picture of his early life contrapuntally placed against the backdrop of the real hard times America was experiencing in 1933. The title also alludes to the picture of society presented in Dickens's Hard Times. Thurber, of course, rather loudly disavows any interest in social issues as such in the Preface and notably pictures scenes of domestic life throughout the book. How, then, is this work indicative of Thurber's social criticism or world view?

In the magnificent Preface, heavy irony is used in Thurber's statement of purpose to establish a humorous tone and to subtly make clear to the perceptive reader that not only is Thurber aware of, but that he is very interested in, the mayhem of the world outside himself:

He [the author] talks largely about small matters and smally about great affairs. His ears are shut to the ominous rumblings of the dynasties of the world moving to a cloudier chaos than ever before . . . and the confused flow of his relations with six or eight persons and two or three buildings is of greater importance than what goes on in the nation or in the universe. He knows vaguely that the nation is not much good any more; he has read that the universe is growing steadily colder, but he does not believe that any of the three

is in half as bad a shape as he is.¹⁶

The Preface, while protesting too much that this is just a "personal" reminiscence, humorously makes the connection between the universal chaos and the individual's confusion. Thurber in fact admits here that his "type of writing is not a joyous form of self-expression but the manifestation of a twitchiness at once cosmic and mundane." He is not describing himself in a true memoir but has created in the narrator "Thurber" a prototypical confused modern man who senses both the growing chaos outside and his own impending doom. So that the reader will not falsely expect any respite or redemption, we are told that even if man could organize his life "the claw of the sea-puss gets us all in the end."¹⁷ Thurber came to address social problems more directly and by the end of the first decade of his career, in The Last Flower and the Fables, his preoccupation with man as a social animal becomes very obvious.

My Life does provide us with a few vivid instances of the confusion of groups or masses. "The Day the Dam Broke" is one of Thurber's best executed pieces and in it he shows how easily order and reason are overthrown by human nature. The story is based on Thurber's memories of the "Great Run"

¹⁶James Thurber, My Life and Hard Times (Bantam paperbound edition of 1933 text; New York: Bantam Books, 1971), p. 12.

¹⁷James Thurber, My Life and Hard Times, pp. 10, 13.

in 1913 Columbus, Ohio, when the whole city was reduced to bedlam by a combination of irrational screaming and mass idio-
cy; not only did no dam break, but there was no dam.

The fact that we were all as safe as kittens under a cookstove did not, however, assuage in the least the fine despair and the grotesque desperation which seized upon the residents of the East Side when the cry spread like a grass fire that the dam had given way. Some of the most dignified, staid, cynical, and clear-thinking men in town abandoned their wives, stenographers, homes, and offices, and ran east. There are few alarms in the world more terrifying than "The dam has broken!" There are few persons capable of stopping to reason when that clarion cry strikes upon their ears, even persons who live in towns no nearer than five hundred miles to a dam.¹⁸

No one ever knew exactly what started the run, but even the foremost citizens of Columbus ran in wild disarray until the police could break up the riot. Thurber, anatomizing the confusion, distances himself and the reader from the scene through a grossly understated, almost droll recounting of the tale. He also uses a particularly vivid analogy to dramatize his action of recollecting the chaos in quiet and calm:

All the time, the sun shone quietly and there was nowhere any sign of oncoming waters. A visitor in an airplane, looking down on the straggling, agitated masses of people below, would have been hard put to it to divine a reason for the phenomenon. It must have inspired, in such an observer, a peculiar kind of terror, like the sight of the Marie Celeste abandoned at sea, its galley fires peacefully burning, its tranquil decks bright in the sunlight.¹⁹

In one of the last pieces he ever wrote, Thurber didactically re-stated the conviction which is presented with more subtlety

¹⁸James Thurber, My Life and Hard Times, p.42.

¹⁹James Thurber, My Life and Hard Times, p.45.

here: "We are assured...that the normal is a matter of mass behavior, but the normal can never be synonymous with the average, the majority."²⁰ The irrationality of the masses, as well as the tenuous hold any society has on order, was always Thurber's subject.

Although much of My Life takes place inside the Thurber household (even inside Thurber's mind), the family is but a smaller version of the society madly revolving about it. In "The Night the Bed Fell," after presenting in a series of family portraits the most startling array of eccentrics, Thurber describes a night of "general banging and confusion" which resulted from the family's thinking that a bed had fallen on father, who is really peacefully sleeping in the attic. Thurber indicates the all-encompassing nature of his vision of confusion in his droll pictures of perplexed and misguided relatives:

We had visiting us at this time a nervous first cousin of mine named Briggs Beall, who believed that he was likely to cease breathing when he was asleep. It was his feeling that if he were not awakened every hour during the night, he might die of suffocation.... Briggs was not the only member of the family who had his crotchets. Old Aunt Melissa Beall (who could whistle like a man, with two fingers in her mouth) suffered under the premonition that she was destined to die on South High Street, because she had been born on South High Street and married on South High Street. Then there was Aunt Sarah Shoaf, who never went to bed at night without the fear that a burglar was going to get in and blow chloroform under her door through a tube. To avert this calamity --for she was in greater dread of anesthetics than of losing her household goods--she always piled her money, silverware, and other valuables in a neat stack just

²⁰James Thurber, Credos and Curios, p. 89.

outside her bedroom, with a note reading: 'This is all I have. Please take it and do not use your chloroform, as this is all I have.' Aunt Gracie Shoaf also had a burglar phobia, but she met it with more fortitude. She was confident that burglars had been getting into her house every night for forty years. The fact that she never missed anything was to her no proof to the contrary.²¹

These are the people who would run from a non-existent dam. This description is funny not only because Thurber is exposing irrational behavior and ideas but because he repeats the irrational statements of his relatives to show their fears and mistaken impressions. In "The Night the Ghost Got In" we find out that not only does Thurber's mother happen to take a fancy to throwing shoes through their neighbor's window, but that "everybody we know or lived near had some kind of attacks" and in "A Sequence of Servants" an incredible number of odd-ball maids walk through the Thurber household and contribute to the bedlam. The family's difficulties with one maid became, in the classic Thurber tradition, an involved and inexplicable bedlam:

There was, among the immortals, Dora Gedd, a quiet, mousy girl of thirty-two who one night shot at a man in her room, throwing our house into an uproar that was equalled perhaps only by the goings-on the night the ghost got in. Nobody knew how her lover, a morose garage man, got into the house, but everybody for two blocks knew how he got out.... She kept shouting something from Shakespeare after the shooting--I forget just what--and pursued the gentleman downstairs from her attic room. When he got to the second floor he rushed into my father's room. It was this entrance, and not the shot or the shouting, that aroused father, a deep sleeper always. 'Get me out of here!' shouted the victim. This situation rapidly

²¹James Thurber, My Life and Hard Times, p. 18.

developed, from then on, into one of those bewildering involvements for which my family had, I am afraid, a kind of unhappy genius.²²

It is in "University Days" and "Draft Board Nights" that Thurber returns from the family group to society at large. The inanities of college requirements (gym class had to be taken sans glasses and Thurber could not see without his; Ohio State military drills practised Civil War tactics during the First World War) and the bureaucracy of the Draft System have never been better rendered; they are especially effective because they are shown indirectly through fiction and not fronted directly through declamation. In "University Days" Thurber pictures Ohio State students pointlessly marching around because of the essential confusion in both the university and the country:

We drilled with old Springfield rifles and studied the tactics of the Civil War even though the World War was going on at the time. At 11 o'clock each morning thousands of freshmen and sophomores used to deploy over the campus, moodily creeping up on the old chemistry building. It was good training for the kind of warfare that was waged at Shiloh but it had no connection with what was going on in Europe. Some people used to think there was German money behind it, but they didn't dare say so or they would have been thrown in jail as German spies. It was a period of muddy thought and marked, I believe, the decline of higher education in the Middle West.²³

In "Draft Board Nights", through some systematic error, Thurber is continually "drafted" each week during the war,

²²James Thurber, My Life and Hard Times, pp. 52, 68-69.

²³James Thurber, My Life and Hard Times, p. 96.

even though every time he goes for the physical examination he fails because of his poor eyesight. Desiring a little variety (going through as an examinee gets boring) he just moves across the line and becomes an examiner. Nobody, in the magnificent confusion of the Draft System, notices and Thurber routinely passes and fails entrants.²⁴ In the town, in the family, in the school, in the government, in all social groups and institutions, confusion reigns.

In other work during this first period, Thurber describes many instances of man's group or traditional confusions. When he collaborated with E. B. White in 1929 on Is Sex Necessary? he not only contributed some fine parodies of the sex manuals of the Twenties but made some stringent comments on American culture. At least one of the essays, "The Nature of the American Male: A Study in Pedestalism," offers a humorous but provocative version of a part of American history, the development of the sentimental tradition in which women were idealized and sex was distorted into a sacred ritual. According to social historian Thurber, sex properly is for either practical (children) or biological (passion) reasons; it should not be the instigator of the kind of "psycho-physical confusion" which Americans have created:

The phenomenon of the American male's worship of the female, which is not so pronounced now as it was, but is still pretty pronounced, is of fairly recent origin. It developed, in fact, or reached its apex, any-

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James Thurber, My Life and Hard Times, pp. 94, 96, 107.

way, in the early years of the present century. There was nothing like it in the preceding century. Throughout the nineteenth century the American man's amatory instincts had been essentially economic. Marriage was basically a patriotic concern, the idea being to have children for the sake of the commonwealth. This was bad enough, but nevertheless it is far less dangerous to get the commonwealth mixed up with love than to get the infinite mixed up with love.²⁵

Thurber was thus similar to Scott Fitzgerald, who also had isolated the danger of such idealization of the woman; but, unlike Fitzgerald, Thurber was able to completely break from the tradition (Fitzgerald always had a love-hate relationship to his ideal) and to make it the subject of laughter.

In The Owl in the Attic and Other Perplexities (1931)

John Monroe acknowledges the confusion of city life when he asserts the impossibility of following the simple directions of a shipping company to claim his dog in a New York terminal ("You can't go directly to a terminal and get a dog. I've lived long enough to know that.")²⁶ Many of the characters in The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze (1935) seem to be driven to despair and loneliness by the large city. One of them desires to give up human society and find a "Box to Hide In" and another, in "One is a Wanderer," moves up and down the desolate streets before retreating to his rented room. On his way, he sees the derelict, the pathetic, the brutal, and the mercenary people of an American cityscape:

²⁵James Thurber, and E. B. White, Is Sex Necessary? (Delta Book edition of 1929 text; New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1963), pp. 36, 37.

²⁶James Thurber, The Owl in the Attic (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1931), p. 47.

He didn't go through the revolving doors of the hotel, though. He went on past the hotel and over to Broadway. A man asked him for some money. A shabbily dressed woman walked by, muttering. She had what he called the New York mouth, a grim, set mouth, a strained, querulous mouth, a mouth that told of suffering and discontent. He looked in the window of a cane-and-umbrella shop and in the window of a cheap restaurant, a window holding artificial pie and cake, a cup of cold coffee, a plate of artificial vegetables. He got into the shoving and pushing and halting and slow flowing of Broadway. A big cop with a red face was striking his hands together and kidding with a couple of girls whom he had kept from crossing the street against a red light. A thin man in a thin overcoat watched them out of thin, emotionless eyes.²⁷

Thurber also includes in this collection three stories which identify and attack various American myths. In "If Grant Had Been Drinking at Appomattox" he satirizes our hallowed Presidency by portraying a drunken U.S. Grant mistakenly surrendering to General Lee. "The Indian Sign" exposes the ridiculous insularity and arrogance of the children of the Founding Fathers of the Republic. In this story Mr. Pinwither discovers that not only did his wife's family misread documents in order to prove that a great-grandmother had slain nineteen Indians single-handedly, but that, even if the story had been true, the victory would have been meaningless since "the Pequots...had been woefully incompetent fighters."²⁸

It is in "The Greatest Man in the World," however, that Thurber masterfully deflates our sense of tradition, reason, and order the best. Jack "Pal" Smurch, a fantastically

²⁷James Thurber, Middle-Aged Man, pp. 224, 116.

²⁸James Thurber, Middle-Aged Man, pp. 66, 67.

repulsive character, is raised to the apex of national adulation through "hosannas of hysterical praise" following his round-the-world flight. The ultimate irony of the story is that our hero's failings, which include illiteracy, vulgarity, and membership in a family of felons, are beautiful when compared with the savage way in which the press corps and the President of the United States do away with him: since they cannot risk letting the People recognize in Smurch's inadequacy the impossibility of hero-worship, the President has him thrown out of a window. "The Accident" is sadly reported in all the papers and the funeral was "the most elaborate, the finest, the solemnest" in our history. Thurber suggests that our traditions, heroes, myths, and even our "history" are based in profound misconceptions and confusion.²⁹

Let Your Mind Alone! (1937) returns in part to the subjects of Is Sex Necessary? The first section of the book contains parodies and criticisms of the scientific treatises which offer "systems" by which to organize one's life; the problem with such systems is that they are not answers for "the confused world in which we live." In this section, Thurber ridicules the systems offered by the Freudian psychologists to help us deal with machinery; the promises of the success experts for making a "Masterful Adjustment" to life; and the techniques of early intelligence tests. The second

²⁹James Thurber, Middle-Aged Man, pp. 204-214. "The Greatest Man in the World" should be compared to criticism of the American Dream in The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

part of the book consists of short stories and essays which describe the confusions of modern marriage and culture. The particularly important "After the Steppe Cat, What?" paints a frightening picture of Waste Land: "It is a primitive sort of land, flat and treeless, suitable for open warfare, fit for man and his activities in the last stages of civilization." Living in "a time of world decay" it is impossible to stop the encroachment of extinction since "it proceeds by curious, inexorable laws of its own, this ending of a jaded civilization." Eventually the steppe cat and other rodents will munch on the remains of the modern world.³⁰

This bleak vision of modern history is echoed in The 'Last Flower' (1939), which presents Thurber's view of man's nature in all its ambiguity. The Last Flower, although sometimes misconstrued as a children's book, is a parable about the cyclic nature of history, the clash of the destructive and creative forces in man, and the faint possibility that human love, on an individual basis only, is salvific. The story begins with a picture of wasteland, for World War XII had "brought about the collapse of civilization" and destruction of the world. Thurber's drawings show buildings blown apart and wasted landscapes of dead trees and no grass. Human culture declined as "books, paintings, and music disappeared from the earth" and people just sat around, doing nothing.

³⁰James Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone! (Universal Library Paperbound printing from the 1937 edition; New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1960), pp. 18, 226, 225.

There was also no love on earth until one day a girl found the last living thing, a flower; she and a young man then nurture the flower and it grows into a field of flowers. As the landscape becomes fertile again, creative sexuality and love are reborn in the world and civilization is rebuilt. Then, to our horror, soldiers also come back into the world. For emphasis, Thurber drew five pages of armies, unaccompanied by words, which seem to drown out every other reality at this point in the narrative. The cycle of destruction begins again.: "Liberators, under the guidance of God, set fire to the discontent" (the accompanying drawing depicts two demagogues before a mass of faceless, sheepish humanity). War comes again and "this time the destruction was so complete... that nothing at all was in the world except one man and one woman and one flower."³¹

The balance of disillusionment and hope in this book is typical of Thurber's ambivalent and tragicomic view of the human spectacle. We are to assume from the parable that probably another cycle of destruction will eventually grow out of the lonely trio left at the end, but they are also the only source of mankind's small happiness and hope. Perhaps, according to Thurber, if the individual could remain free of group hysteria and mass action the world would be saved. but, ironically, individuals seem to innately try to group

³¹James Thurber, The Last Flower (New York: Harper and Row, 1939), unpaginated.

themselves into civilizations, which become macrocosms of confusion. It is a frightening picture, but laughter, the solvent of terror, is the result of man's ability to see himself as he really is.

The Last Flower not only signals the end of the first period of Thurber's career but is the first evidence of a widening in his forms and technique. From the second decade, I will deal primarily with the works which have a high level of social comment as well as being examples of his two new forms: the fable and the fairy tale. Men, Women, and Dogs (1942) will also be discussed in some detail as the best treatment of society in Thurber's drawings. In Fables for Our Time (1940) Thurber wrote short, Aesopian fables with stated morals at the end. A special Thurber touch is to deny, in the morals, the cliched truisms of Aesopian philosophy. In the fable form Thurber is able to moralize efficiently and humorously because of the aesthetic distance achieved by using an ancient form and by displacing men's qualities in animals. The Fables abound in images of general confusion, war, and death. In "The Hen and the Heavens" a little hen cries "The heavens are falling!" like Aesop's hen, but in Thurber, the heavens actually fall. In two other fables, unwitting beasts (representing, of course, human beings) are killed because they falsely believed in maxims they have been taught. The reworded truisms, ala Thurber: "Early to rise and early to bed makes a male healthy and wealthy and dead" and "There

is no safety in numbers, or anything else." In "The Tiger Who Understood People" a tiger learns advertising techniques from observing men and attempts to re-order the jungle's economy; he is eaten alive. The moral: "If you live as humans do, it will be the end of you."

Political satire is evident in "The Birds and Foxes," in which foxes "liberate" (kill) a peaceful sanctuary of orioles after they "civilize" (eat) all the geese and ducks in the surrounding territory. The moral is direct: "Government of the orioles, by the foxes, and for the foxes, must perish from the earth." A similar tale is the basis for the ironic "Rabbits Who Caused All the Trouble," in which arrogant wolves imprison and eat a colony of rabbits. Speaking in bureaucratic gobbledegook, the wolves say that no investigation of the slaughter is necessary "since they [the rabbits] had been eaten the affair was a purely internal matter." The bleak moral advises "Run, don't walk, to the nearest desert island."³² The reader laughs because he recognizes a common smug governmental amorality in the double-talk.

"The Green Isle in the Sea" offers another Thurber picture of modern Waste Land. Here a kind old gentleman is assaulted by his grandson, tripped by a little girl, robbed of all his valuables, and finally preyed on by the bombers filling an angry sky:

³²James Thurber, Fables for Our Time (New York: Harper and Row, 1940), pp. 71, 22, 13, 9, 53, 69.

When at last the old gentleman staggered into the little park, which had been to him a fountain and a shrine, he saw that half the trees had been killed by a blight, and the other half by a bug. Their leaves were gone and they no longer afforded any protection from the skies, so that the hundred planes which appeared suddenly overhead had an excellent view of the little old gentleman through their bombing-sights.

Moral: The world is so full of a number of things, I am sure we should all be as happy as kings, and you know how happy kings are.³³

There is no refuge, no respite for "human beings born of war" in the last stages of a crumbling civilization.³⁴

"The Owl Who Was God" recalls the satire in "The Greatest Man in the World." Here an owl is mistaken to be God by the gullible animals who hear in his "To wit" and "To Woo" statements of profundity. In a mass of confusion, they walk into the path of an on-coming truck (which they had all seen, save the daylight-blinded owl):

'There's danger ahead,' said the secretary bird.
'To wit?' said the owl. The secretary bird told him.
'Aren't you afraid?' he asked. 'Who?' said the owl calmly, for he could not see the truck. 'He's God!' cried all the creatures again, and they were still crying 'He's God!' when the truck hit them and ran them down. Some of the animals were merely injured, but most of them, including the owl, were killed.

Moral: You can fool too many of the people too much of the time.³⁵

³³James Thurber, Fables, p. 43.

³⁴James Thurber, "Book Review," in The Critic as Artist (New York: Liveright, 1972), p. 305.

³⁵Thurber, Fables, p. 36.

Thurber is purposefully ambiguous in the characterization here so that the owl is similar to political demagogue, social hero, and religious authority. Systems, leaders, sayings, and traditions fail.

Men, Women, and Dogs (1943), the finest collection of Thurber drawings, is very difficult to discuss because, as Dorothy Parker so long ago said, "a Thurber must be seen to be believed--there is no use trying to tell the plot of it."³⁶ Many Thurber drawings seem to be graphic representations of dreams or parts of dreams; a great number produce laughter but defy any interpretation. I will attempt to summarize how they picture the macrocosm of confusion in terms of the American middle-class living room, cocktail party, and marriage.

There is an element of horror in many Thurber drawings and almost none of them in which people appear are without a deep sense of disillusionment. All Thurber people are ugly. His women are terrible; his men, imperceptibly better. There is a feeling of life's facade breaking before our eyes, with the savageness and disorder of human nature surfacing through the thin layers of respectability and calm which we expect. The drawings are not depressing, however, but offer a sense of relief in laughter. An audible laugh is more common in confronting a Thurber drawing than in reading his more subtle and polished prose.

³⁶Thurber, Seal in the Bedroom, Introduction.

But a Thurber cartoon is an indispensable anodyne for our anxieties. In Men, Women, and Dogs we see confusion arising out of remarkably commonplace scenes: in a drawing of a middle-aged group playing ping-pong, a woman suddenly disrobes and asks, "Do you people mind if I take off some of these hot clothes?," in a restaurant, a man strangles a woman companion as a waiter admonishes, "Here! Here! There's a place for that, sir!;" and in a hospital room, a doctor impetuously accosts a woman patient with "You're not my patient, you're my meat, Mrs. Quist!" Only at a Thurber cocktail party, peopled with his pathetic people, would an introduction go: "This Miss Jones, Doctor--I want you to cheer her up. She's been through hell recently" or would a plump, middle-aged nudie play the piano while two men whisper "I'd feel a great deal easier if her husband hadn't gone to bed." How her husband's embarrassed presence would help, we never know. There is no reason to bother asking how these things happened, what brought about this bedlam; Thurber pictures it as though there is nothing else possible for a group of human beings, as though it is in eccentricity that human beings are ordinary. What is to be done with the lady on the bookcase, a live, but shelved, former wife who peers down on her equally dowdy replacement and a horrified visitor? or about the drawing of "the room where my husband lost his mind," with the spare, primitive furnishings and the tiny, esoteric symbols drawn on the walls? or the respectable couple who, when

confronted with a man standing on a woman's back who is at the same time balancing a lamp on her head, desperately hopes that "there may be some very simple explanation."³⁷ Thurber has in each one of these managed to freeze a moment of perfectly normal madness as part of his anatomy of confusion. In his depiction of human beings committing eccentric, frightening, beastly acts as though nothing were odd about their behavior or themselves, he has exposed the commonality of absurdity and disorder.

The series of drawings entitled "The War Between Men and Women," which will be discussed further in the next chapter, is a picture of a confusion within the confusion. Interestingly, in this series, Thurber does not deal (as he does in the short stories) with individual couples at war. The war in the drawings is a class war, with all the women of a society against all of the men. The holocaust begins at that most revealing and barbaric of modern rituals, the cocktail party, and continues on to the everyday battleground for sustenance, the grocery. Anyone who has survived a supermarket on a Saturday morning enjoys the shock of recognition at seeing Thurber's version of "The Fight in the Grocery." Out into the beautiful American landscape, the men and women entrench themselves in the pastoral setting of suburban, respectable Connecticut for the "Zero Hour." Society's basic unit, the

³⁷James Thurber, Men, Women, and Dogs, pp. 143, 30, 39, 44, 58, 119, 67.

family, has failed and its demise is brought about within the context of our affluence and routines.³⁸

Finally, in The White Deer (1945) Thurber displaces the modern waste land and world of confusion in a fairy tale for adults.³⁹ As in The Fables he achieves a great deal of artistic distance here by embracing an old form which, in his hands, indirectly comments on human experience in the modern world. The White Deer opens in a fallow period, a waste land:

Three times in the middle of the century in which they lived, the King and his two older sons had depleted their kingdom of wild life, and around three times they had been forced to wait around the castle, restlessly stringing their bows....

King Clode, father of the story's hero Prince Jorn, insistently complains about his upside down, illusory world: "in such confusion and caprice who knows his hound dog from his niece?" and alternately wails the cry of the vaguely aware but helpless modern man, "surrounded by these dodderers and dolts, I blow my horn in waste land, so to speak." The story concerns a white deer, turned into a lovely young girl by sorcery, who promises to marry the son of Clode, either

³⁸James Thurber, Men, Women, and Dogs, pp. 189-205.

³⁹James Thurber, The White Deer (Harbrace Paperbound Library edition of 1945 text; New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963). The highly sophisticated language and style of this book marks it as a "fairy tale" for adults and not children. Mrs. James Thurber confirms that of all his fairy tales, Thurber intended only The Great Quillow to be equally suited to children and adults; Interview with Catherine Kenney, December 2, 1973.

either Gallow, Thag, or Jorn, who can succeed in a perilous task appointed him. A wood's wizard, the disguised brother of the Princess who was once a deer, plays with time, illusion, and reality so that all three sons arrive successfully at the castle at the same hour. Thus, the one who wins the lady's hand is the one who will be willing to love her after she proclaims herself to be a deer turned into a lady. Only young Prince Jorn, the poet, can accept the reality of this, and their marriage ends the book.⁴⁰

Into this fairly conventional fairy tale framework Thurber interweaves a pervasive imagery of modern wasteland which constantly, but unobtrusively, reminds the reader of his own society. The story begins in waste and infertility, following the slaughter of all the animals of the Magical Forest by Jorn's aggressive, violent brothers. Like the beginning of The Last Flower, human beings have destroyed their own habitat and have nothing left to do but sit around in their indolence. King Clode, in attempting to run his kingdom and find out the heritage of the deer-woman, is surrounded by a gallery of woefully incompetent specialists and bureaucrats: here we have a Royal Recorder who thinks that since the Princess does not know her name, he can just make up any name for her equally well and give her an identity; a man named Paz, who as the Royal Astronomer, uses rose-colored lens in his telescope and tells Clode only the "new of bright

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James Thurber, The White Deer, pp. 5, 45, 111.

sun and stars;" and a Royal Physician who is so sick himself that he never gets out of bed and spends his time alternately comforting himself and groaning (he is both doctor and patient) and taking his own temperature. A good doctor, he does not allow himself, as patient, to read the thermometer. Naturally, none of these advisers are able to help bring order or even sense or understanding to the confusion of Clode's domain because of their own inner confusions.

The tale has three truth-tellers: the white deer (who is really Princess Rosanore), who tells the truth to the Princes about her lineage; Prince Jorn, who asserts that even in "this false flux of fact and form" which has everyone else mixed up he knows "what's true is true;" and especially Tocko, the nearly blind Royal Clockmaker, who had been fired as Royal Astronomer when "his constant reports that everything was going out alarmed King Clode" and who now spends his time writing prophesies on sundials such as, "After this brief light, the unending dark."⁴¹ Thurber's artistic role must be identified with both Prince Jorn's ability as poet, to make sense out of the nonsense of the Magical Forest and with the aging, blinded Tocko, who, based on his experience as an observer of the universe, predicts the impending doom. The man who perceives the face of the Awful is banished from the centers of power so that the masses of people can deceive

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James Thurber, The White Deer, pp. 25, 32-33, 15, 26.

themselves and mumble on along in multiple confusion.

Thurber not only criticizes modern life in the sections dealing with Clode's confused kingdom, however. In the narratives about the quests of each brother we see allegorical characters representing modern abuses and banalities. Prince Thag rides through a surrealistic landscape, including along his way a trip through the Valley of Euphoria, where men cry "Carpe Diem" to him in an attempt to slow him on his journey. He continues on, only to find that The Blue Boar, one of his society's great legendary beasts, is an easy conquest since it is asleep when he reaches it. Our pretensions about honor are exposed when such a victory becomes meaningless. Prince Gallow goes through what could be called the jungle of modern slogans and advertising:

The trees were hung with signs and legends....
 "Lost Babes Found." "Giants Killed While You Wait."
 "7 League Boots Now 6.98." "Let Us Awaken Your Sleeping Beauty."
 "We put you in an Urn, Men Put You on a Pedestal." "Consult Panting and Young." "Seek Grailo, Even Better Than the True Grail."

In this "Forest of Willbe" is pictured the vacuity of the promises of our culture. This feeling of the emptiness of life prefigures the quester's realization that his enemy and his quest meaningless. He has been sent to win the sword from the Seven-Headed Dragon of Dragore who, he finds, is but a combination of carnival attraction and cultural-religious myth:

"Look, brother," said the man. "Twelve emeralds get you seven balls. You throw the balls at the Seven-Headed Dragon of Dragore in that striped tent yonder--

the greatest mechanical wonder of the age, meaningless but marvelous.

After Gallow finds out how easy it is to hit each of the heads of the Dragon and get the sword he leaves and his disenchantment is only intensified because "as he did so, a small tired man appeared, walked to an iron chest, opened it, took out one of a hundred identical swords and placed it between the paws of the mechanical dragon." A sense of disillusionment with the rituals, systems, and pretensions of society is at the base of The White Deer. All is confusion and caprice and only the poet Jorn is able to "win" the prize. Thurber's confidence in the powers of the artist were also limited, however. In the epilogue we are indirectly reminded that Nagrom Yaf (Morgan le Fay) still awaits Jorn and Rosanore in the forest, qualifying our sense of triumph and order in the marriage which ends the book.⁴² Like the cycles portrayed in The Last Flower, The White Deer promises only a chance that human love will stave off confusion, deceit, and destruction.

During the Forties Thurber wrote two other fairy tales, Many Moons (1943) and The Great Quillow (1944). Helen Thurber has suggested that the writing of the first story was therapeutic⁴³ and there is a quality of seeking answers to

⁴²James Thurber, The White Deer, pp. 57, 63, 115.

⁴³Helen Thurber, Interview with Catherine Kenney, December 2, 1973. Mrs. Thurber said that although Thurber had planned the story as early as 1920 (a sketch of it appeared in a letter to one of Thurber's brothers), he wrote

frightening and unanswerable questions about all the fairy tales. Thurber had experienced a major nervous breakdown in the summer of 1941 following the onset of his blindness and had written most of Many Moons in the afternoon before his final collapse. The book seems to be his attempt to discover the real reality within the confusion of little Princess Lenore's kingdom. At the beginning of the story the Princess falls ill of a "surfeit of raspberry tarts" and tells her father that only getting the moon for her will make her well again. Like King Clode, Lenore's father is surrounded by "a great many wise men who always got for him anything he wanted" but who could not solve this problem of getting the moon for him. They each have officious lists of what they have done ("I have given you seven league boots, the golden touch, and a cloak of invisibility," one says) but they cannot get the moon. It is the Court Jester who, like Prince Jorn the singer-poet, is able to tell the King how to end this blight on his land: "The moon must be just as large and as far away as each person thinks it is." Princess Lenore, who thinks the moon is a gold circle the size of her thumb, gets her moon--a small gold disc to wear around her neck. She accepts it as her moon, even when she sees the real moon rise in the sky, because she knows the cycles of nature: "when the Royal Gardener cuts the flowers in the garden, other flowers

most of it, without the ending, the day before his breakdown, at Martha's Vineyard. The manuscript was left in a summer house there until someone discovered it the following summer.

come to take their place." She and the jester have penetrated the mystery of life in a way that the Royal Councils cannot: they know that there are endless permutations of reality and that all that is certain is change.⁴⁴

In The Great Quillow the giant Hunder wreaks havoc on an unwitting town where the town council is a group of back-slapping, unintelligent men unable to fight back. Here, it is Quillow (the quill in his name identifies him with a writer) who becomes a teller of tales to the giant and forces him to drown himself in the sea through a clever repetition of brand new myths.⁴⁵

Other work in the middle period includes The Male Animal, a play written in 1940 by Thurber and Elliot Nugent. It is interesting that in the play, Tommy Turner, "the male animal," is not a political animal in the strict sense of the word. It is not until he is forced to take a stand against the narrow-minded board of trustees that this English professor becomes anything but vaguely interested in politics. When the board tells him that he cannot read a letter by Van-zetti to his class, a letter which he had wanted to read only for its fine expression of emotion and not its content, he sees that it will be necessary for him to take what is

⁴⁴James Thurber, Many Moons (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1943)m unpaginated.

⁴⁵James Thurber, The Great Quillow (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1944).

essentially a political position against the enemies of freedom.⁴⁶ Thurber himself, always interested in human freedom and the general study of man in society, became more specific and direct in his reactions to the abuse of power and the crumbling of society around him as he witnessed the horrors of the modern world.

Two collections of essays and stories, My World--and Welcome to It (1942) and The Beast in Me (1948), do not deal generally with confusion in society. In the first collection, Thurber's most famous story, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," is ostensibly about the confusion within a man's mind and marriage, but it also implicitly exposes the alination of modern man within his society, the banalities of our cultural heroes, and perhaps the impossibility of human society at all. In the same collection, "The Preoccupation of Mr. Peffifoss" attacks the telephone company's unending complication of modern life. The character is Rudwooll. Y. Peffifoss, a telephone company executive who could hardly have been better-named, that Thurber imagines to be in charge of going through the telephone book, finding easily remembered numbers and substituting hard ones for them in order "to get back at the world for what he conceives it has done to him." In a similar vein, "The Vengeance of 3902090" depicts the status of modern man as only a number in a state registry. Thurber

⁴⁶ James Thurber and Elliot Nugent, The Male Animal (New York: Random House, 1940), passim.

imagines that "a Goebbels of red tape" sits around in the statehouse thinking of ways to harass 3902090. The government, an institution which was planned to simplify and organize men's lives, only becomes a giant perpetuator of confusion. In "Footnote on the Future" Thurber disclaims any hope that even though "man, in spite of his sins, stands a fair chance of lasting another twelve thousand years" he will improve for "in the history of mankind the increase of no kind of power has, so far as I can find out, ever moved naturally and inevitably in the direction of the benign." Similarly, in "Interview with a Lemming," a sketch which prefigures the key fables in Further Fables for Our Time (1956), a wise lemming says "I have made a life-long study of the self-styled higher animal...and a singularly dreary, dolorous and distasteful store of information it is." When the human scientist says to the lemming that the only thing he does not understand about lemming nature is why they rush to the sea to drown themselves, the lemming replies, "how curious... the one thing I don't understand is why you human beings don't."⁴⁷

The Beast in Me and Other Animals (1948) offers scenes of chaotic cocktail parties where no one knows what anyone else is talking about (in "The Ordeal of Mr. Matthews" and "The Waters of the Moon") and a funny criticism of

⁴⁷James Thurber, My World--and Welcome to It (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1942), pp. 72, 41, 114-115, 83.

journalistic and political jargon in "The Dewey Dewey Fog," an essay about the year 1948, "the Presidential Year of the Confused Identities...the Presidential Year of the Dewey Dewey Fog." The collection also includes a long section of essays on "Soapland," the wasteland of modern (1948) radio drama. Thurber not only deploras the artistic inadequacy of the "soaps," but the thrust of his criticism is that, as they have popularized banalities and engendered widely-felt myths, they have lowered the level of American awareness and caused society to mimic art.⁴⁸

During the last decade of his life, Thurber managed to publish more books than ever before. After 1951 he was for all practical purposes blind and could no longer draw, read, or write in the usual sense of that term.⁴⁹ Within the context of these handicaps and his weakening health, his final achievements are astounding. In The Wonderful O (1957) he created not only one of his most original works, but included in it the culmination of all his previous thoughts on human society as a state of perpetual confusion. Although the book retains the ritualized language and characters of a fairy tale, the plot (unlike the story in the White Deer and The 13 Clocks) is a chapter in human history as only Thurber could have written it.

⁴⁸James Thurber, The Beast in Me and Other Animals (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1948), pp. 85, 208, 220.

⁴⁹Charles Holmes, The Clocks of Columbus, Chapter 13.

The story begins, as the other tales and The Last Flower do, in a blight: the peaceful but rather sheepish people of the island Ooroo have been whipped into submission by pirates named Black and Littlejack. The more sinister of these tyrants, Black, has an irrational hatred of the letter "O;" therefore, the letter is banned on Ooroo, which becomes R, and all things with O's in their names are destroyed. There is pandemonium as the armies take the town apart and smash books, pianos, violins, doors, houses, anything with an o in it. When Black realizes that the people can still have zithers, guitars, bugles, and harps, he declares: "Much good they'll get from these...or any others. I haven't finished with the O's in compositions." Society reels in a vicious, ever-widening circle of confusion when such an arbitrary and tyrannical law exists. The people slip around, accepting their fate, and attempting to do without the things destroyed and to speak without o's. A lawyer named, appropriately, Hyde even suggests the desirability of tyranny: "Hail to Black and Littlejack who will liberate us all from licorice and horehound."⁵⁰ How ridiculous this sounds, until the reader's mind inevitably connects Hyde's rhetoric to the statements that we have heard about war and deprivations of all kinds. When this connection is made, the inaudible laughter of recognition occurs.

Black likes Hyde and appoints him "Chief Clarifier,"

⁵⁰James Thurber, The Wonderful O, pp. 12, 17.

asking "the more chaotic the clarification the better."

Finally, the poet Andreus becomes so disgruntled with the confusion (he and his dog are both "pets" now) that he leads an insurrection at the urging of Andrea, a beautiful maiden:

'We live in peril and in danger,' Andreus told the people, 'and in a little time may have left few things that we can say. Already there is little we can play. I have a piece that I shall read. It indicates the quandary we're in.' And then he read it:

'They are swing chas. What is slid? What is left that's slace? We are begne and webegne. Life is bring and brish. Even schling is flish.⁵¹

This is a statement from the same Thurber who spoke of the world's confusion in "The Day the Dam Broke," The Last Flower, and The White Deer. The emphasis here is on the necessity for human language to be preserved as a possible means, however slight and imperfect, for order and understanding within the macrocosm of confusion. It is a type of confusion that only Thurber could have invisioned and its full significance is discussed in the final chapter of this dissertation, "The Language of Confusion." What is significant about the social comment of this book is the fact that it demonstrates the ease with which freedom and order are destroyed. It also suggests, like The Last Flower, that the only hope for society is in the individual isolated from the group; it is "the clock that strikes in conscience" which alerts Andreus.⁵² The poet here, as in The White Deer,

⁵¹James Thurber, The Wonderful O, pp. 17, 20, 28-29.

⁵²James Thurber, The Wonderful O, p. 64.

demonstrates that it is the province of art to bring sense out of nonsense, order to disorder. It is a poet who saves Ooroo and in The Wonderful O the state of language and communication is paralleled to the state of the society. Only in the fairy tales does Thurber depict human love as satisfying, and even when he does, Nagrom Yaf is lurking, ready to wreak havoc on the lovers. Both the possibilities of art and creative human love are tenuous, fragile, and limited, but they are what Thurber offers us.

By the time Lanterns and Lances was published in 1960 Thurber had become, as the title indicates, more interested in frontally attacking human folly than he had been earlier in his career. From the almost Olympian detachment of My Life and Hard Times, The Last Flower, and The Fables, he moves toward more direct statements of his themes. His subject is still the anatomy of confusion, but he writes essays and "conversation pieces" instead of short stories. Mrs. Thurber has said that, although her husband did not really become more interested in the social or political ramifications of literature as he became older, toward the end of his life he approached literature as a kind of "last resort" for the horrors of the modern world.⁵³ Perhaps as he aged and became blind and ill it became harder for Thurber to live with the realization he had always had of man's imperfection and the cosmic chaos.

⁵³Helen Thurber, Interview with Catherine Kenney, December 2, 1973.

He was able to retain artistic detachment in The 13 Clocks (1950), a fairy tale which by its form and its marvelously alliterative and onomatopoeic language distances its world. In this work, an evil and tyrannical Duke reigns in terror over a frightened people. He is surrounded by spies and advisors like King Clode's, but his are worse and more fantastic. Like any other dictator, he has his own men executed when they do not please him and some of his spies are double agents.⁵⁴ A book of limited social comment, it is much more a traditional fairy tale than The Wonderful O.

Thurber's next book, The Thurber Album (1952) is probably his least representative work. It is a series of almost reverent, heavily-researched essays about his family and other Ohioans. I believe that Thurber became too identified with his subject in this book to make it either humorous or a truly interesting and satisfying book. It is a lament that "group civilization" (and we know what that means) has come to the Ohio country he had known as a boy and a set of praises for the eccentric individuals who had preceded the era of Progress.⁵⁵ In Thurber Country (1953) he returns to a fictional rendering of the chaotic scene and the book is generally superior to the work in the Album. In "File and Forget"

⁵⁴James Thurber, The 13 Clocks (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950).

⁵⁵James Thurber, The Thurber Album (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), p. 70.

a series of letters demonstrating the incredible inanity of modern business and the illiteracy of the average American, Thurber exposes "a conspiracy of confusion" to make his life miserable by a book publishing firm. Each exchange of letters concerning a mistaken order gets more and more confused and incomprehensible. In other essays in the collection he criticizes the "Network Look" which Americans have developed as a result of incessant television viewing and the loneliness of cocktail parties. Thurber could always laugh at the confusions of the world, and in "A Final Note on Chanda Bell" we delight in his relish at describing her "great, dark house in the East Sixties [which] was, to the very last, bedlam and carnival." In this, his best Jamesian parody, the confused narrator "Thurber," a critic of Chanda Bell's works, receives the ultimate rebuke which any critic fears: "You have found the figure, Thurber," she told me one afternoon, "but have you found the carpet?" And it is in "The Case Book of James Thurber" that Thurber offers a few cases of singular confusion to future researchers, saying that "the anatomy of confusion is a large subject, and I have no intention of writing the standard treatise on it, but I offer to whoever does, the most singular of all my cases." When one reads this statement in the context of all of Thurber's work, with a knowledge of all the confusions with which he has dealt before Thurber Country, it is apparent that Thurber is here describing what he has actually already done; he has already presented us

with the elements of an anatomy of confusion.⁵⁶

In Further Fables for Our Time (1956), Thurber heavily emphasizes social issues as the first collection of Fables had done. The opening and closing fables are the story of the beginning and end of life of man on earth. In the final fable, "The Shore and the Sea," a group of lemmings run in a mad dash for the ocean and drown themselves in a sea of confusion. Much like the Columbus citizens in "The Day the Dam Broke," they are excited to the irrational running by misunderstood shouting, "until there were almost as many different alarms as there were fugitives." Only one lemming, who did not succumb to the madness, is left at the end. Resembling human critic Thurber, he "shook his head sorrowfully, tore up what he had written through the years about his species, and started his studies again." The moral is: "All men should strive to learn before they die what they are running from, and to, and why." Even if this world is unending chaos, there is a shred of hope in being able to understand or see it as it really is. Also in this collection, there is satire of the political system in "The Trial of the Old Watchdog," a tale about the trial of an innocent collie by a jury of foxes and of American culture as a victim of advertising and commercialism in "The Grizzly and the Gadgets." In this fable a bear is harassed by the "conveniences" and gimmicks

⁵⁶James Thurber, Thurber Country (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953), pp. 83, 37, 152, 156, 103.

of his home to the point of destroying the place and running off to parts unknown. The re-worded Thoreau quotation in the moral appropriately relates Thurber to our greatest hater of technology: "Nowadays most men lead lives of noisy desperation."⁵⁷

In his last completed book, Lanterns and Lances (1960), Thurber includes many essays that sometimes bitterly attack the confusions of the world. In "Conversation Piece: Connecticut" his alter ego says that "everybody is crazy...owing to a fallout of finely powdered fruitcake over the planet." This madness is evidenced by America's "babble box," the radio, by the grossness of Hollywood and its advertising, and by the increasing formlessness of American expression and art. In "The Case for Comedy" Thurber laments the dying out of American humor in the Fifties because its death has led to a consequent dehumanization of people. Thurber believed in the necessity for laughter as a survival tool, as a means of dealing with the bedlam and perhaps even of surmounting it. Comedy provides us with an awareness of reality, even if part of that reality is our inability to do anything about the state of things. In this essay Thurber relates the decline of humor to the acceptance of the facile answers of both the political right and the left by the majority of people. Humor, in its complexity and its disregard for axioms or

⁵⁷James Thurber, Further Fables for Our Time (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), pp. 174, 99, 94.

proscriptions, cannot survive in such an atmosphere of political fear and oppression. One of the bleakest of Thurber's pieces, "The Last Clock," is about the demise of human society on earth. The world is destroyed by a clock-ogre who eats all the clocks, thereby preventing any activity, since without time man is lost. All the people summoned to end the ravages of this ogre are unable to help because they are overly specialized, and no one has prepared to treat clock-ogres. Time itself does not really die, however, and eventually the sands of waste land cover the remains of human existence.⁵⁸

This is the bleak landscape pictured earlier in "After the Steppe Cat, What?" and the work that Thurber did after Lanterns, which was collected posthumously by Helen Thurber in Credos and Curios (1962), includes much unrelieved bitterness. In "Look Out for the Thing" Thurber describes the effects of McCarthyism on America:

The Thing's worst effect is upon the rational mind of Man. It enlarges his credulity by magnifying peril, exaggerating fear, and inventing danger. Busy as a bowerbird, it will build for man, free of charge, a new wing for his skepticisms, a left wing, or a right wing, so poorly lighted and so full of shadows that Man cannot tell mouse from monster, friend from foe, or truth from tommyrot....A may stand for the awful word "Acquitted," and now Man, in his abject confusion, is likely to point out exonerated patriots on the street and whisper, "There goes the accused."⁵⁹

In several of the pieces in Credos Thurber recalls nightmares

⁵⁸James Thurber, Lanterns and Lances, pp. 154, 164, 113, 140, 58.

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James Thurber, Credos and Curios, p. 76.

horrific as those described in "The Whip-Poor-Will." It should be said, regarding Thurber's final pieces, that after his major stroke in 1961 which led to his death a month later from pneumonia, it was obvious that his moods had been severely affected by a series of minor strokes during the last year of his life.⁶⁰ It is probably best to take as Thurber's final, comprehensive statement about his humor and subject matter his injunction in the preface to Lanterns and Lances to "not look back in anger, or forward in fear, but around in awareness."⁶¹ Perception is the goal and the domain of the anatomist of confusion.

From a survey of Thurber's career it is apparent that his work is filled with images of confusion. His persistent treatment of the bedlam and carnival of human life is the basis for his definition of humor as a kind of chaos recollected in tranquillity. "Humor makes its own balances and patterns out of the disorganization of life around it...."⁶² Although Thurber came to approach all of his subjects more directly toward the end of his life, his perception of man's dilemma did not fundamentally alter. Is the characteristic Thurber view of man's perpetual state of confusion negative or positive, hopeful or despairing?

⁶⁰ Charles Holmes, Clocks of Columbus, p. 329.

⁶¹ James Thurber, Lanterns and Lances, xv.

⁶² James Thurber, Lanterns and Lances, p. 42.

His attitude toward confusion is that, since it flows from the very nature of things, it must be accepted; that acceptance Thurber found through recognition and laughter. Thurber, because of his humanity, could immensely enjoy moments and types of confusion; this is what interested him in characters like Chanda Bell, the mother in My Life and Hard Times, and the people in his drawings. He found the concept of confusion interesting enough to make it the basis of most of his many stories, fables, tales and essays. Confusion was, to Thurber, concomitant to life, and he essentially believed that menacing as humanity is, "it is more dangerous to straight-arm life than to embrace it."⁶³ If he did not feel change or improvement in man's state was possible, given his definitions of human nature and life on earth, he stressed, like Henry James before him, the importance of perception. In anatomizing the confusion, his art brings a kind of order to the chaos.

Thurber's depictions of man in society run from the generalized pictures of group chaos in My Life and Hard Times to specific attacks on the horrors of war, tyranny, the telephone company, the media and the bomb. There is a pervasive social comment in his distrust of human reason, conventions, and group behavior. In the family, in the government, in the neighborhood, at the cocktail party, and in the cosmos, confusion reigns. His different subjects, the war between

⁶³James Thurber, Further Fables, p. 31.

men and women, the powers and limits of language, the failure of scientism, and the innocence of the "lower" animals, are all aspects of his large study of confusion, smaller confusions within the macrocosm of confusion.

I believe Thurber's treatment of confusion to be a much more valid and integrated approach to his art than any previous study of his work has attempted. Although Thurber has not received the critical attention he deserves, even those studies which exist take a very limited view of his art. Richard Tobias ignored Thurber's special definition of humor and was content to force a conventional comic interpretation on every Thurber story. As we have seen, triumph, fertility, and rebirth (traditional elements of the comic ending which Tobias stresses) are applicable only to a few of Thurber's fairy tales, and even there they are curiously qualified. Robert Morsberger offers what is essentially a good introduction to Thurber's themes and characters, but he does not deal with the dominant image of confusion in his work nor with Thurber's special definitions of art and humor. Charles Holmes, whose Clocks of Columbus is essentially biographical, does not attempt to state Thurber's world view at all. No one has yet shown the the significance of what Woolcott Gibbs called Thurber's "sure grasp of confusion" and no study has integrated all of Thurber's themes--the bedlam of the world, the battle of the sexes, the failure of modern science, the superiority of the "lower" animals, the Thurber's obsession

with language and communication--into a cohesive whole. It is my belief that each of these are pieces of a large work, the Anatomy of Confusion. The original subject matter of this dissertation is Thurber's anatomy of confusion; the original approach of this study is to discuss Thurber's anatomy of confusion in terms of his definitions of humor and art.

Inside the macrocosm of confusion there exist many smaller confusions. As Amy Lighter says to Charles Grantham in "The Beast in the Dingle," there is "a predicament within a predicament--the predicament of you and me."⁶⁴ Let us now descend into the confusion between men and women.

⁶⁴James Thurber, Beast in Me, p. 138.

CHAPTER III

MAN AND WOMAN:

CONFUSION DISTILLED

I am more interested in Thurber's Theory of Elaine Vital, the female life force, than in Bergson's theory of Elan Vital, the masculine life force, which it seems to me is all he isolated. Elaine Vital, if properly directed--that is, let alone--may become the hope of the future.

--Lanterns and Lances

Thurber's attitude toward women and their relationship to men has perhaps been the most misunderstood aspect of his mind and work. The above quotation clearly states Thurber's final concept of woman's strength and creative powers, but it hardly describes the general idea of a "Thurber woman." In order to understand how Thurber got from little Mrs. Monroe to Elaine Vital, with sidetrips through fairy land, this chapter will chronologically survey the images of women in representative works from the three periods of his career.

In the early period, Thurber generally wrote short stories about men and women and did almost all of his drawings. Typified by the series of drawings entitled "The War Between Men and Women," this period extends roughly into the early Forties, with its fictional apogee in "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" and "The Catbird Seat." The middle and

transitional phase of Thurber's treatment of women overlaps the early period somewhat but can be said to begin around the time of The Last Flower (1939). This marks a new development in Thurber's attitudes but not a fundamental change. By the time the final period becomes distinct, in the Fifties, Thurber's expository statements about women seem at first glance incongruous from the man who created Ulgine Barrows and Mrs. Monroe. The bases for Thurber's final conception of Women and their relationship to men are evidenced all along, however, and it is important to note the process by which he moved from a dislike and fear of the strong woman to his final belief that her strength could be a positive power in the world.

In this chapter I will outline the phases of Thurber's conception of women, establish the significance of the War Between Men and Women as a predicament within The Predicament of general confusion, and summarize Thurber's hypothesis (we are never assured) that perhaps love and the creative powers of the female would someday lead man out of his existence of confusion, war, destruction and death.

Although anyone familiar with Thurber's drawings has developed some theory about his view of men and women, there is probably no other area in which he has been less understood. The popular view has been to regard Thurber as a rabid misogynist. This view often arises from people's inattention to the general ugliness of all the people in a

Thurber cartoon. Not only are the women hideous but they have horrible mates. For reasons discussed in Chapter IV, only the Thurber dogs and pictures of wild life and flowers could be called genuinely attractive.

The general audience has not been the only group to misunderstand Thurber's view of women, marriage, and sex. In The Clocks of Columbus Charles Holmes relies almost completely on the image of women in the cartoons to make his point that Thurber had an unrelenting hostility toward women, a conclusion which must ignore the statements of the later essays and stories altogether. Richard Tobias does not really address the problem of women in Thurber, since he distinguishes characters, regardless of sex, on the basis of what he defines as their comic roles in the short stories.¹ Although the Thurber woman is prominent and pervasive in Thurber's art, no one has attempted a judgment on Thurber's entire treatment of women--on women as characters and subjects of the cartoons and stories as well as subjects of the essays-- nor on the significance of the War Between Men and Women as a part of the Thurber's world view of multiple confusions.

If Thurber thought of the world as a state of chaos and imperfection, he chose to study one aspect of that confusion and failure more than any other, the battle of the sexes.

¹Charles S. Holmes, The Clocks of Columbus (New York: Atheneum, 1972), p. 131; and Richard Tobias, The Art of James Thurber (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1969), *passim*.

In his dissection of this war, he expressed the very distillate of confusion, a predicament within the predicament, a region in which man's failures and limitations become at once more apparent and magnified. Although a truce is never declared, Thurber comes more and more to see the creative possibilities for the misspent energies of men and women and even suggests woman as a partial answer to the problem, as a vital force to bring life and order into man's cycles of death and confusion. In order to explain Thurber's view of women and marriage I will discuss the three general phases of his treatment of the subject chronologically, stressing work most typical of each: A. The Horror of Sex:Men and Women in the Early Stories; B. Qualified Happiness in Another World:Men and Women in the Fairy Tales; and C. Creative Possibilities: The Image of Woman Inside the Chaos in the Later Essays.

Thurber did most of his drawings during the Thirties and early Forties, when the encroachment of blindness severely curtailed his reading or drawing. Since the most general conception of "the Thurber Woman" is drawn from a knowledge of his cartoons, I will begin with a few remarks about women in the two collections of drawings, The Seal in the Bedroom and Men, Women, and Dogs. It should be stressed that Thurber's cartoons were done in extreme haste and with almost no planning. Mrs. Thurber substantiates Thurber's claims that he did not take his drawing seriously and often used it as a source of self-entertainment. He could do fifty drawings in

one evening and more often than not gave most of the cartoons away to friends.² Therefore, the complexity and subtlety of the prose studies of marriage are in marked contrast to the almost primitive and spontaneous portrayal of the same subjects in the drawings.

The women in Thurber's cartoons are distinguished by their determination, vitality, movement, and forcefulness, even more than by their dowdiness, homeliness, or size. Thurber often indicates their dominance and forcefulness by using wildly arched, determined brow lines and exaggerated snarls which almost overwhelm the entire face. His women sometimes even wear hats which resemble weapons, as though they must always be ready for the next skirmish with a Thurber man. (Cf. "I come from haunts of coot and hern!," "She's reading some novel that's breaking her heart, but we don't know where she hides it," and "ooooo, guesties!," in Men, Women, and Dogs.) The women seem always to be either in motion or to be idling, with their motors running, waiting to charge out again. They are in marked contrast to the men, who seem bewildered, sedentary, and assaulted by the world around them. Although almost no Thurber man has a hair on his head, the Thurber woman's hair is perhaps her dominant feature (one would hardly call it her crowning glory, however): it is as wild and restless looking as her actions and often, if

²Mrs. James Thurber, Interview with Catherine Kenney, December 2, 1973.

such a thing is possible, resembles what the reader imagines exposed and stimulated nerve endings would like. Often naked, or in clothes that barely suggest cover, these women display an undisguised, if unappealing, buxom sensuality. In comparison with them, the men seem almost de-sexualized although their sexual roles remain distinct from the female. The Thurber man wears the uniform of the middle-aged, middle-class, middle-brow: the illfitting and nondescript suit, the bow tie, and often, the pince-nez. Sometimes adorned with a mustache, the Thurber man has no other hair on his body, a detail which suggests his lack of sensuality. The women are generally forceful, if banal; dynamic, if vulgar. Unlike the men, they seem willing to attempt to meet the world on their own terms: they throw a bowling ball; they carry shotguns to bed, prepared for the insurrection they are sure is coming; they overpower everything, including and especially the men, on the scene.³ In this sense, they are apt forerunners of Elaine Vital, that mythical future woman that Thurber was later to envision.

No discussion of Thurber's women would be complete without remarks on "The Race of Life," "The War Between Men and Women," and the famous untitled drawing, that has come to be known as "Home," in which a house becomes a woman's face in front of the astonished eyes of her husband as he

³James Thurber, Men, Women, and Dogs (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1943), pp. 3, 113, and cf. the drawings of many aggressive, active women, passim.

returns from the office. In the earliest of these, "The Race of Life," Thurber presents the life story of a family, a man, woman, and child, as they go through the perils of this life and approach a vision of heaven at the end. The woman begins the journey and although the man catches up with her for awhile in a drawing called "Neck and Neck," he falls continually behind her in the race. She is, in fact, "The Pacemaker," and even in "Spring Dance," a drawing suggesting a maytime fertility dance, she is the aggressor and leader. She eventually carries the man part of the way and protects him from "The Menace," as well as acting as the sentinel in "On Guard," while her slower and weaker partner sleeps. At the end, she is still full of vitality and is excited about the vision of "The Goal" (Heaven) while the man seems incapable of reaching it in his fatigue and dismay. This series of drawings is remarkably without the feeling of hostility and aggression in so many of Thurber's drawings of men and women. For Thurber people, this couple is fairly attractive (their little son, like all Thurber children, is unbelievably wretched). There is even a picture entitled "Sunset," in which the man and woman sit arm in arm, like lovers, on the beach. From this early series alone, Thurber's respect for woman's resiliency and courage is apparent.⁴

In the more famous "The War Between Men and Women"

⁴James Thurber, "The Race of Life," in The Seal in the Bedroom (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1932), unpaginated.

from Men, Women, and Dogs, Thurber portrays a class war between the sexes: this is not the insidious war of nerves fought out by individual couples in the short stories, but a picture of general bedlam. In it, Thurber has given a name to, and a series of images for, a battle which we must only assume has always raged. The war, which is started by a man throwing a drink in a woman's face at a cocktail party, rages through the grocery, various fields, past Mrs. Pritchard's Leap (which a woman valiantly takes while the dismayed man looks on) and finally ends in "Surrender," where the women's general appears to be surrendering her club to the men. The meaning of this final drawing has been generally misunderstood, because there is a suggestion in the determination of the woman's arched eyebrow, that she is about to club the unwitting fool on the head. (See Men, Women, and Dogs, p. 205). There is certainly no reason to believe that this is anything but a segment in an on-going war. Thurber shows in these pages the massive confusion underlying the cold war which men and women fight everyday: the actual bedlam here is but an image for the usually unspoken aggression and lack of understanding between the sexes. Since Thurber always depicts men and women so antithetical to each other in nature and intention, it is understandable that he conceived their relationship to each other to always be a state of confusion; usually it is a state of extreme hostility.

Finally, in "Home," Thurber has drawn an image of a

dream (or nightmare) in which the facade of an ordinary, comfortable American home becomes the terrifying and aggressive face of a woman before the eyes of the shrivelled figure of her husband. (See Men, Women, and Dogs, p. 118). The woman seems to grow out of the structure of the building and is turning toward the man, her arms outstretched in an engulfing and menacing swathe which seems about to swallow up the tiny male figure before her. There is not even any joy in her impending victory; she only seems grimly determined to overpower her man. In this drawing Thurber has represented not only the problem of the dominance of the American male by the female but also the total identification of woman with her home. Both of these are causes of the war between men and women. This woman, lying in wait for her prey, has no other identity than that which her husband perceives: she is a house-woman, an identity which gives neither of them any joy.⁵

It is in the short stories of this early period, however, that Thurber deals with his study of the confusion between men and women in all its complexity. The first Thurber couple, introduced in the "Mr. and Mrs. Monroe" stories in The Owl in the Attic (1931), established the pattern of misunderstanding which plagues so many Thurber couples. Al-

⁵James Thurber, "The War Between Men and Women," in Men, Women, and Dogs, pp. 189-205; and "Home," untitled drawing in Men, Women and Dogs, p. 118.

Although many people have commented in a general way about the Thurber couple as a strong woman dominating a weaker man, it is even more a deep sense of the gulf between the two sexes, of the lack of understanding and communication between them, which informs the typical Thurber marriage. This basic misunderstanding is partially the result of the posturing of the man; John Monroe pretends to be fearless, imperturbable, and sophisticated to both his wife and, in his mind, to himself. Monroe, eager to fulfill the American image of tough guy and protector, pitifully tries to kill a bat, clear customs, and face imaginary burglars, as a part of the involved game which he and his wife play. They both know that he is nothing ("Mr. Monroe didn't really have any character") but they seem content to lead their sterile and hypocritical existence as a matter of habit. John Monroe has been so enervated by the bombshell ironically called "little Mrs. Monroe" that he is even incapable of carrying out an unsupervised but planned tryst while his wife is out of town ("Little Mrs. Monroe was away, unavoidably away, terrifyingly away.") This prototypical Thurber husband must have his wife supervising and directing, even in his sexual daydreams and infidelities. In addition, he cannot take charge of a move, operate a shower, find a dog at a terminal, or face a night alone in the house.⁶ He is a confused modern man who, uproariously, attempts to

⁶James Thurber, The Owl in the Attic (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1931), pp. 19, 22, 64, 35.

live as if his heroic daydreams and his self-concept were realities.

The reader senses through the Monroe stories that not only are these people funny and sad because of John's reliance on his stronger partner, but because only the forms and limitations of marriage remain in a tired atmosphere distinguished by a lack of desire or pleasure. Morsberger correctly compares John Monroe to the other impotent males in the fiction of the early half of this century, especially to Jake Barnes of The Sun Also Rises. Even more important however, is how this situation becomes humorous in Thurber's stories. In "Notes on the Comic" Auden remarked that marriage, in itself not a comic institution, "becomes comic if social emotion is the only motive for a marriage, so that the essential motives for marriage, sexual intercourse, procreation, and personal affection, are lacking."⁷ In the Monroe stories and the cartoons, as well as in the very familiar relationship in "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," sex and personal affection are not only lacking but hard to imagine as either past or future possibilities. When children occasionally appear in the drawings (none of the fictional couples have been blessed with issue) one wonders how they ever managed to get there. Thurber was later to stress the importance of sexual motives and pleasure as a necessary part of

⁷Robert Morsberger, James Thurber (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1964), p. 68; and W. H. Auden, The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 377.

the relationship between men and women in The Last Flower; here, he is interested in describing what he perceives to be the present situation of sterility and boredom.

Mrs. Monroe, although as unappealing as her husband, is capable of doing most of the things that John cannot do, including outwitting his would-be mistress with "her charming directness." She can also outwit John at every turn: she notices in him the difficulty that every Thurber man seems to have with anything mechanical ("You see he has never really taken a successful shower in his life") and always speaks of, or to, him in the superior and slightly arch tone of a mother speaking to a vaguely naughty child. The influence of Henry James on Thurber's style is especially evident in these early stories, but it is also probable that Thurber's concept of the war between men and women, a war usually fought underneath the facade of politeness in a battle of nerves and personalities, came in part from his extensive knowledge of the unfortunate mis-matched couples in James.⁸ In "The Imperturbable Spirit" Thurber adroitly uses the parenthetical qualification and controlling metaphor typical of the master:

⁸Cf. Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1956). p. 356; Isabel Archer's musings about her unhappy marriage to Gilbert Osmond climax in a statement which could describe the typical Thurber couple: "They were strangely married, at all events, and it was a horrible life."

Little Mrs. Monroe, burdened with coats and bundles, rosy, lovely, at length appeared. Mr. Monroe's heart leapt up, but at the same time he set himself as if to receive a service in tennis. He remembered (oh, keenly) as he stepped toward her, how she was wont to regard him as a person likely to 'go to pieces' over trifles. Well, she would find him a changed man. He kissed her warmly, but withal in such a strangely masterful manner, that she was at first a little surprised--a tennis player taken aback by a sudden change in the tactics of an old, old opponent. In three minutes of backcourt rallying she figured out he had been reading something, but she said nothing. She let his lobs go unkilld.

A minute later, while his partner is still only warming up, Monroe falls apart in the customs line, "dropping, figuratively, his racquet."⁹ Here, as in "The Race of Life," woman prevails. It is possible that if these individuals could stop rallying around a tennis court, playing at life and marriage, verbally fencing their way through jungles of misunderstanding, they would be able to end the confusion, at least the confusion within the bounds of their domestic life. As it is, however, they are its elementary unit and conquest.

The Monroe stories were written during the last part of Thurber's unhappy first marriage. By the time of The Middle-aged Man on the Flying Trapeze (1935) his separation was final and divorce was imminent. "One is a Wanderer," one of the finest stories in this collection, depicts the bleakness of the end of a marriage which, if anything, is worse than the silent warfare of the Monroe's. In an atmosphere of fatigue and aging, Mr. Kirk, the wanderer, has

⁹James Thurber, The Owl in the Attic (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1931), pp. 29, 31, 13-14.

nothing to do with his evening but walk the lonely streets of New York, drinking, trying to forget, singing, "Bye, Bye Blackbird" to himself, and "trying to be happy." The decision whether to get married again is difficult and frightening in a marriage-centered culture: "You just shut up and get married, you just get married and shut up. Everybody knows that. It is practically the simplest thing in the world...." Another story in the same collection pictures a couple who did just shut up and get married, in the ironic "Mr. Preble Gets Rid of His Wife." Mr. Preble, "a plump, middle-aged lawyer in Scarsdale," plays an involved game with his wife because he wants to get out of his marriage but neither knows how nor has a wife who would let him if he did. Mr. Preble admits to his domineering wife that he wants to "get rid of you so I can marry my stenographer;" from what we know of Mr. Preble's character, such an action is so unlikely that the game-playing atmosphere is only increased by his direct statement of his "intentions." His unflustered wife, guessing his motives when he suggests that they "go down in the cellar to look around," goes freely with him downstairs where they pretend that he is going to bury her. Her coolness angers him: "You spoil it by taking that attitude." At the end of the story, she sends him out to find a murder weapon in the street, but screams after him to shut the front door--the Thurber woman, often a mother-image, controls every scene. It is because of her supreme self-confidence and ego that she is able to face any threat from her

husband as a joke and a game.¹⁰ What a sad, illusory, and funny world these characters inhabit. They seem to glide about, only vaguely aware of their game-partners, lost in the confusion of themselves and their world.

Two particularly fine short stories about marriages in decline were published in Let Your Mind Alone! two years later: "The Breaking Up of the Winships" and "A Couple of Hamburgers." In this first story, for the first time, Thurber describes a marriage of two people who seem equally responsible for what happens to them. They are notably attractive and likeable characters in comparison to the Monroes and the Prebles. Because they are both culpable in creating the trouble that breaks them up and because their demise grows out of a seemingly ordinary order of events, the power of the story in presenting the tenuous hold each of us has on his life, his patterns of living, is intensified. Perhaps as much as any other story, "The Breaking Up of the Winships" typifies the everyday war between men and women, a war in which there is genuinely no "right side," a war in which a trivial, apparently inconsequential misunderstanding can become a gigantic and overpowering confusion. Thurber was at his best in describing the extraordinary confusions resulting from ordinary events and this story is one of the finest examples of Thurberian confusion.

¹⁰James Thurber, The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935), pp. 221, 84.

This story's Jamesian narrator tells how the happy marriage of the Winships deteriorated: "The trouble that broke up the Gordon Winships seemed to me, at first, as minor a problem as frost on a windowpane. Another day, a touch of sun, and it would be gone." Remarkably, the trouble "started innocently enough, amiably even, with laughter from both of them, laughter that froze finally as the clock ran on and their words came out sharp and flat and stinging." In this comfortable, polite atmosphere of a fine restaurant, their argument begins when Gordon Winship accuses Marcia of getting herself "into a sweat" because of her admiration for Greta Garbo. The narrator informs us that "Gordon hates (or used to) exaggeration, and he respects (or once did) detachment." Ironically, the ensuing battle between Gordon and Marcia grows as their detachment crumbles and exaggeration soars. Marcia, inebriated by the liquor and infuriated by his remarks about her being "in a sweat," asks Gordon who he would consider a greater actor than Garbo; he replies with the incredible, nonsensical answer: Donald Duck. This is really all they needed and as the argument soars and "her sentences were becoming long and wavy," Gordon only keeps saying "Pooh!" to everything she says. Like so many Thurber couples, these two people, secure in their own idiosyncrasies, only talk at each other, when real communication could possibly end the confusion between them. Their initial argument is humorous because we are able, through the eyes of a truly detached narrator, to see a couple speaking at absolute counter-

purposes to each other. He allows us to laugh at the nonsensical miniature confusion that they have created before we become interested in the effects of this argument.

As the story goes on, however, Thurber employs battle imagery ("she had recourse to her eyes as weapons") to enhance the feeling of aggression in the situation. When they leave the restaurant separately, "their resentment swelling, their sense of values blurring," the reader already guesses that it is unlikely that these wounds will heal. At a party a few days later, they almost declare a truce, but fate causes Marcia to overhear Gordon (quite innocently) telling their story to another woman. She construes this as his attempt to humiliate her and the debacle is complete:

I think that in another moment Gordon might have brought her over, and put his arm around her, and admitted his 'defeat'--he was feeling pretty fine. But when he caught her eye, she gazed through him, freezingly, and his heart went down. And then his anger rose.

With the greatest of all resentments, "the resentment of the misunderstood husband," Gordon's view of the trouble matches Marcia's sense of the contest as "a part and parcel of her integrity as a woman."¹¹ At the end, bitter and alienated, they remain estranged and essentially two very different people, a man and a woman, between whom an unbreachable gap exists. Thurber has thus treated humorously but seriously

¹¹James Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone! (Universal Paperbound printing of the 1937 edition; New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1960), pp. 83, 87, 89.

the sad and frightening destruction of a relationship by misunderstanding, arrogance, and a string of unhappy chances. As the story is given us, the break-up is the inevitable resolution of a sequence of events from normal life. These events, trivial and meaningless, are played out against the background of time running out and the felt encroachment of age. The story relies, for its ultimate effect, on our knowledge that all couples do argue, that people do become very irrational when they argue, that drinking only adds to the irrationality, that people often misconstrue situations and comments according to their own preconceived ideas, and that wounds of such bitterness and hostility often never heal. Neither person here is despicable or overdrawn, really. In fact, the most unsettling thing about the story is the fact that even two such people, in such an ordinary circumstance, can watch their lives fall apart before them and, in the confusion between men and women, they are overwhelmed and lost.

In "A Couple of Hamburgers" a less attractive married couple drive down the road, arguing and needling each other, as the narrator constantly reminds the reader of the passage of time. Unnamed, they seem to be any middle-aged, embittered, petty man and wife. She enjoys irritating him with remarks about the comparative quality of "dog-wagons" that sit at an angle to the road, or are not "cute," or are run by a man with a nickname; he enjoys humming, whistling, and finally singing all the songs that she most hates. Like

most of Thurber's pictures of marriage, this story is a report from the war zone, not, as the Winship's story had been, a retelling of the history of final defeat. The people in "A Couple of Hamburgers" are between the beginning of a marriage and its seemingly inevitable failure; as we watch them in a cold war of nervous attrition, the power of Thurber's ability to make us feel the charged atmosphere of frustration and hostility is unexcelled:

He finished his hamburgers and his coffee slowly. It was terrible coffee. Then he went out to the car and got in and drove off, slowly humming 'Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?' After a mile or so, 'Well,' he said, 'what was the matter with the Elite Diner, milady?' 'Didn't you see the cloth the man was wiping the counter with?' she demanded. 'Ugh!' She shuddered. 'I didn't happen to want to eat any of the counter,' he said. He laughed at that comeback. 'You didn't even notice it,' she said. 'You never notice anything. It was filthy.' 'I noticed they had some damn fine coffee in there,' he said. 'It was swell.' He knew she loved good coffee. He began to hum his tune again; then he whistled it; then he began to sing it. She did not show her annoyance, but she knew that he knew she was annoyed. 'Will you be kind enough to tell me what time it is?' she asked. 'Big bad wolf, big bad wolf--five minutes o' five--tum-dee-doo-dee-dum-m-m.' She settled back in her seat and took a cigarette from her case and tapped it on the case. 'I'll wait till we get home,' she said. 'If you'll be kind enough to speed up a little.' He drove on at the same speed. After a time he gave up the 'Big Bad Wolf' and there was a deep silence for two miles. Then suddenly he began to sing, very loudly, H-A-double-R-I-G-A-N spells Harr-i-gan--' She gritted her teeth. She hated that worse than any of his songs except 'Barney Google.'¹² He would go on to 'Barney Google' pretty soon, she knew.

Like John Monroe and his wife, and later like the Mittys, these people do not really communicate with each other at all, but talk at each in phrases calculated to intensify the

¹²James Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone! pp. 112-117.

conflict, typifying the war and confusion between the sexes.

Two important essays in Let Your Mind Alone! deal with the subject of women. In "The Case Against Women" Thurber humorously lists his reasons for being a woman-hater because a woman has asked him, "Why do you hate women, Mr. Thurber?" Although Thurber always abhorred being asked if he really hated women, the challenge of such an unabashed malapropist encouraged him to think of all the possible objections to women. A typical reason given is that "in almost every case where there is a sign reading 'Please have exact change ready,' a woman never has anything smaller than a ten-dollar bill." This, Thurber interprets as an example of what causes all the confusion between men and women and in the world at large: "The episode gives him [a man] the feeling that some monstrous triviality is threatening the whole structure of civilization. It is difficult to analyze this feeling, but there it is."¹³ Thurber always emphasized the great difference between men and women and the impossibility of one sex to understand the other.

"Woman Go On Forever" first isolates the theory which explains so many of Thurber's drawings and the later work:

Socially, economically, physically, and intellectually,
Man is slowly going, I am reliably told, to hell. His
world is blowing over; his day is done.....

¹³ James Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone!, pp. 95, 98. Mrs. Thurber recalls that this was probably Thurber's least favorite question from interviewers.

Each expert, in his fashion, has analyzed the decline of mankind and most have prescribed remedies for the patient. But none of them, I believe, has detected the fact that although Man, as he is now traveling, is headed for extinction, Woman is not going with him. It is, I think, high time to abandon the loose generic term, "Man," for it is no longer logically inclusive or scientifically exact. There is Man and there is Woman, and Woman is going her own way.¹⁴

That is to say that the paths of man and women, always different, are becoming even more divergent as time passes. Tobias misinterprets this essay, saying that the woman here fulfills the ancient comic role of imposter, which the man (or New King) must slay.¹⁵ Thurber means, in fact, just the opposite of that statement and in my discussion of the third phase of Thurber's treatment of the subject of women I will connect the early statement above to his final theory of the female life force. What is significant is that here, while Thurber was still producing most of the aggressive frumps in the cartoons, he already was refining his attitude toward women into a complex statement. When he writes "Man's day is indeed done; the epoch of women is upon us," he is not, as Morsberger suggests, simply lamenting the end of male dominance.¹⁶ He was beginning, in fact, to elaborate on his constant idea of the biological and emotional superiority of the female:

¹⁴James Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone! p. 230.

¹⁵Richard Tobias, Art of Thurber, p. 232, misinterprets Thurber's meaning.

¹⁶Robert Morsberger, James Thurber, p. 70.

It is easy to discern in the male physiognomy the symptoms of that extinction which threatens his sex: an air of uncertainty, an expression of futility, a general absence of 'hold,' which are inescapable.

There is about the female, on the other hand, a hint of survival, a threat of perpetuation, a general 'Here I am and here I always will be'....the female unquestionably has her eyes on an objective; you can feel the solid, sharp edges of her purpose.

The confusion between men and women is essentially the result of the clash between two such dissimilar types. Since Woman has such an instinct for survival, however, she becomes identified for Thurber with the powers that may continually rebuild Man's destruction and may even one day end the confusion in the world. Thurber does not intimate this creative role for Woman until much later; here, he is content to concentrate on the present confusion arising out of the differences between men and women and to admit that, even though he has made this "discovery," he does not know what good it could possibly do him, since he is a male.¹⁷

"The Unicorn in the Garden," in the 1940 collection of Fables, draws at once Thurber's grimmest and funniest picture of marriage and the gap between men and women. Appreciation of this fable, which depends so much on prose rhythm and the juxtaposition of the husband's and wife's attitudes in the context of their dialogue, is impossible without several readings. (A comment on the fable's style is included in Appendix II.) Briefly, the fable tells the story of a rather shy man who sees a unicorn in his garden one morning.

¹⁷James Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone!, p. 230.

When the man tells his wife about his vision, she crushes his happiness by saying that "the unicorn is a mythical beast" (which, of course, is true) and by promising to have him thrown into the booby-hatch. When she calls the police and a psychiatrist to come take her husband away, she is caught in her own trap: they take her off to an institution, thinking that any woman who would even say that her husband had seen a unicorn must be crazy. The husband, when questioned by the police, says that of course he did not see a unicorn, because the "unicorn is a mythical beast."

In this fable, it would appear that the unicorn represents the powers of the imagination and that the husband, while still able to be imaginative and see the beauty in the universe, is consciously aware of the fact that he is metaphorically describing an experience when he tells his wife that there is a unicorn in his garden. After she tells him that the beast is mythical (she is unable to recognize myth as a part of reality) the husband finds that the unicorn has left his garden; she has killed his dream or illusion. At this point, the husband goes out into the garden and falls asleep among the roses. The action from this point on makes sense only if we recognize that, without indicating it in any way other than telling us that the man has fallen asleep, Thurber means the arrest of the wife and the husband's living happily ever-after as a dream that the husband has among the roses. Like Walter Mitty, only in his dreams can this man win out over his stronger, more realistic mate.

When understood as a dream, the violence against the wife (she is put in a straight-jacket and taken away, cursing and screaming, to an institution despite the fact that she is, by all indications, sane) is wish fulfillment. The man has thus transformed, in his dream, his wife's threat to put him in the booby-hatch into a fully-orchestrated, if improbable, sequence of events. The dream quality of this fable is enhanced by its un-Thurberian last statement: "The husband lived happily ever after."¹⁸ Given their own natures and the seemingly unending sexual conflict, it is doubtful that any of the men or women in Thurber's early stories could live happily ever after.

"The Secret Life of Walter Mitty." from My World--and Welcome to It (1942), is essentially the picture of a man attempting, again through his dreams, to escape from his impossible life. Mitty, while actually driving and parking a car, buying puppy biscuits, and waiting for his wife, becomes, in his dreams, an airplane pilot, a famous surgeon, a star courtroom witness, and a courageous victim of the firing squad. He becomes (as John Monroe had earlier attempted to become) all those things which the American male is taught he should be but which Thurber's men could never be in real life. Into "the remote, intimate airways of his mind" Mitty retreats from the boredom and impotence of his existence, especially from Mrs. Mitty. At only one point in the entire

¹⁸James Thurber, Fables for Our Time (New York: Harper and Row, 1940), pp. 65-66.

story, which covers an afternoon's time, does he really say anything to his wife which means anything. In an exchange emblematic of the gulf between men and women, Walter attempts to communicate with his wife:

Something struck his shoulder. 'I've been looking all over this hotel for you,' said Mrs. Mitty. 'Why do you have to hide in this old chair? How did you expect me to find you?' 'Things close in,' said Walter Mitty vaguely. 'What?' Mrs. Mitty said. 'Did you get the what's-its-name? The puppy biscuit? What's in that box?' 'Overshoes,' said Mitty. 'Couldn't you have put them on in the store?' 'I was thinking,' said Walter Mitty. 'Does it ever occur to you that I am sometimes thinking?' She looked at him. 'I'm going to take your temperature when I get you home,' she said.¹⁹

Their one chance for real communication (and life) is thrown away and we leave them as we found them.

There is no physical description of either character in the story, which is part of the reason that Walter Mitty and his wife, the archetypal Thurber woman of the early period, are so perfectly representative of a whole cultural type: the ineffectual little guy married to a domineering, denegrating wife. Walter Mitty's real life remains unknown to the reader; he seems, like so many Thurber men, vaguely middle-class, middle-aged, inoffensive, and sedentary. His wife, who would appear to have no subconscious, is the voice of practicality, like the wife in "The Unicorn in the Garden:" she tells Walter to wear his gloves and buy overshoes since he is not a young man any more.

¹⁹James Thurber, My World--And Welcome to It (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1942), p. 80.

The reader's sympathy is immediately with Mitty since the story begins and ends in his mind; he seems so vulnerable and attractive because not only do his wife and the world close in on him and crush him with such ease, but because the reader also knows his most secret thoughts and dreams. The humor of the story arises out of several confusions: the unspoken but real war between Mr. and Mrs. Mitty, the confusion within Mitty's mind (his mixed-up identities) and the language of confusion spoken by the characters in his dreams. (See Chapter VI for a discussion of the language in Mitty's dreams.) Mitty is both a funny and a sad character because of the immense disparity between his life in the real world (the material world of Waterbury, Mrs. Mitty, and problems with an automobile) and the world as he would like it to be --the world of his daydreams. The immense popularity of this story and the universal recognition of its character must be because, in his compelling description of the daydream, Thurber has captured and partially explained a universal experience.

At the end of the story Mitty imagines himself being killed by a firing squad in a chill, foreboding scene that appropriately closes the curtain on our knowledge of Mitty's death-in-life existence. Tobias suggests that at the end of "Walter Mitty" the reader feels a sense of comic triumph and release like the celebration of life which ended ancient comedies. This interpretation seems particularly inappropriate in regard to "Walter Mitty;" Thurber hardly would have

chosen a death sequence (even in a dream) to end this marvelously constructed story if he had wanted to leave that impression with the reader. Rather, there is a feeling at the end of the story that Mitty does not have any life, that as time slips past him, he remains uninvolved with life, waiting in a hotel lobby or standing in the rain, waiting. We know that shortly Mrs. Mitty will burst out of the drugstore and capture Walter for the drive home.²⁰ In the painfully alienated and confused existence of these two hopelessly separate people, the only interpersonal exchange is a collision. One cannot imagine any day in the Mitty's life being, in any real sense, different than this one.

Thurber also included in My World--and Welcome To It a humorous essay on "Courtship Through the Ages," the history of how the Monroes and the Mittys got where they are today. In the essay Thurber traces the sex life of many different types of animals, including Homo sapiens, and concludes that "it is a bright and melancholy story, the age-old desire of the male for the female, and the age-old desire of the female to be amused and entertained." It is so typical of Thurber's careful balance of the opposites of laughter and tears that he would characterize the disparity between men and women as both "bright and melancholy." This disparity between the goals and interests of men and women leads to the mating

²⁰James Thurber, My World--And Welcome to It, pp. 72-81; and Richard Tobias, Art of James Thurber, pp. 85-88.

rituals, games, and diversions, which are both funny and sad:

We all know, I think, that Nature gave man whiskers and a mustache with the quaint idea in mind that these would prove attractive to the female. We all know that, far from attracting her, whiskers and mustaches only made her nervous and gloomy, so that man had to go in for somersaults, tilting with lances, and performing feats of parlor magic to win her attention; he also had to bring her candy, flowers, and the furs of animals. It is common knowledge that in spite of all these 'love displays' the male is constantly being turned down, insulted, or thrown out of the house.²¹

Courtship through the ages, as interpreted by the noted anthropologist James Thurber, is a story of self-perpetuating mistakes, disappointments, and confusion.

By the time Thurber published the retrospective collection, The Thurber Carnival in 1945, his work had ranged out from the essays and stories of the early period into the fable, parable, and fairy tale. About this time, and associated with the writing of the fairy tales, he came to concentrate less on the horrors of marriage in our world and to be concerned with the possibilities for marriage in the other worlds of fairy land and the future. As he was turning to the vision of qualified happiness between men and women in the fairy tales, however, Thurber wrote "The Catbird Seat," a story which was published for the first time in the Carnival. This story, with its incredibly repulsive woman and Thurber's undisguised hostility toward her, is a fitting place to end this discussion of Thurber's early treatment of women.

²¹James Thurber, My World--And Welcome To It, p. 15.

Mrs. Ulgine Barrows deserves to be "rubbed-out" for her "willful, blatant, and persistent attempts to destroy the efficiency and system of F & S" She had come, Mr. Martin deduced, to F & S because of some "monstrous magic" she had worked on the company's president. "A week later he had introduced her into F & S as his special adviser. On that day confusion got its foot in the door." Mr. Martin rationalizes that it is this threat to his system and his sense of order that he despises in Mrs. Barrows and that, by referring to her murder as a "rubbing-out" he can ignore the brutality of his act "because it suggested nothing more than the correction of an error." It also makes the murder sound like a game to both Martin and the reader. As the narrator tells of Martin's mental planning of the murder, however, the insistent references are to Mrs. Barrow's personality and sex: "The faults of the woman as a woman kept chattering on in his mind like an unruly witness." It is especially her shrill repetition of such clichés as "are you sitting in the catbird seat?" that drives him to destroy her. Because Thurber chose such a trivial set of irritations as the basis for Martin's hatred of Mrs. Barrows, the murder scheme remains humorous, like a game. The essential reason (even more than to protect his sacred filing cabinets from her confusion) that Martin plans to murder her is that she has the faults which he finds impossible to bear in a woman: she is banal, loud, and "her braying laugh rang out like the report of a shotgun."

Here, finally, the little Thurber man is to kill his oppressive opponent; but when Mr. Martin gets to Mrs. Barrows's apartment and realizes that his murder plan "was all too grossly improbable," he decides, like the husband in "The Unicorn in the Garden," to let the woman destroy herself. By convincing the gullible Mrs. Barrows that he is a heroin addict who plans to kill Mr. Fitweiler (which is even more grossly improbable than for him to be a murderer of Mrs. Barrows), he forces her to tell the grossly improbable story to the people at F & S. They, of course, know that she is quite mad, since Mr. Martin could never do anything improper. She is, in the supreme confusion which arises out of this little tale, banned from F & S. Mr. Martin simply goes back to his files, "wearing a look of studious concentration." He has therefore succeeded in rubbing out Mrs. Barrows as completely as is necessary.

Thurber manages to have the reader side with neither Martin nor Barrows; this emphasizes the faults of both sides and keeps it from becoming the horror story it could so easily be. If the story's focus is on Mr. Martin and his thoughts most of the time, and even if most of his objections to Mrs. Barrows also make her an unattractive character to the reader, there is nothing attractive about Mr. Martin, either: he is a prim perfectionist who never does anything outside of his routines, who has never smoked a cigarette or taken a drink, who even finishes reading his evening paper at the same time each night. The worst thing about him,

however, is the fact that even though he thinks himself infallible and fancies that he has planned the perfect murder, he has only deluded himself into thinking that he has control and order: when he goes to Mrs. Barrows's apartment to murder her, he goes without any weapon because he "had counted on finding one there."²² Perpetrator of this grossest of all improbabilities, Mr. Martin, the pride of F & S organization, is not the methodical and exacting man he thinks himself to be; he, like Mitty, has fallen for the melodrama of the movies and pulp fiction. One also guesses that "his system," which he fantasizes he is protecting from the Barrows confusion, is an illusion itself. Infinitely less appealing than Walter Mitty, Mr. Martin attempts actions which usually remain in the dreams of Thurber men.

In the early stories, then, Thurber concentrated on the unending confusion between men and women in the modern world and especially studied marriages in decline. His work is never marked by a distaste for sex and sensuality itself, like so much of Eliot's early poetry, however. In fact what seems lost in the relationships of the Monroes, the Mittys, and the Prebles is the personal affection and procreative sexuality Auden spoke of as necessary elements in keeping marriage from becoming "comic." Similarly, in Is Sex Necessary?, (1929) Thurber had noted that Pedestalism (the

²²James Thurber, The Thurber Carnival (Delta Book printing from the 1945 text; New York: Dell Publishing, 1964), pp. 10, 11, 9, 10, 13, 17, 13.

unnatural reverence for women) had replaced both the economic and amatory instincts as the basic reason for American marriage. Marriage and courtship became a game²³ and the ensuing feelings of rivalry and tension led to the war between men and women. Because men and women were so different and because they had retained the forms of marriage without passion or children, Thurber concluded that love itself had become "that pleasant confusion which we know exists."²⁴ Love is often a less than pleasant confusion in Thurber's depictions of men and women in the period roughly from Is Sex Necessary? to "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," but he always concentrated on the chaotic state of the relationship between men and women. Since he believed humor to be a kind of emotional chaos recollected in tranquillity, the tension and warfare between the sexes was a particularly good subject for his humor. And even though he often dealt with bitterness, aggression, and defeat as a part of the relationship between men and women, he retained, in his special blend of laughter and tears, the conviction that such a scene was both "bright and melancholy."

With The Last Flower (1939) Thurber begins to create men and women, in this parable and in the fairy tales, who approach some kind of happiness with each other. Since the

²³James Thurber, Is Sex Necessary? (Delta Book edition of 1929 text; New York: Dell Publishing, 1963), pp. 36, 38.

²⁴James Thurber, Is Sex Necessary?, p. 185.

women in these transitional works remain strong, however, the period does not signal an abrupt change in his conception of women. Even in the early "Race of Life" and "Women Go On Forever" he had emphasized the sensuality, resiliency, and strength of woman and over the years he came to regard her strength as a cause for hope and not fear. Walter Mitty is intimidated by Mrs. Mitty but Princess Rosanore in The White Deer not only helps Prince Jorn but causes an end, momentarily, of the waste land and confusion in his kingdom. Ultimately, Thurber came to suggest that possibly the female life force would be able to affect such a change in the future world; at least, she would be here to continually refurbish earth after man's destructive cycles.

The Last Flower was subtitled a "Parable in Pictures" and described the world after World War XII. I will discuss it here as a transitional work between the horrors of modern marriage described in the early short stories and the qualified happiness shown in Thurber's only treatment of good marriages, the men and women of the fairy tales. Of the five tales, The White Deer (1945) and The 13 Clocks (1950) will be discussed in some detail.

The Last Flower begins after World War XII has destroyed the entire world and brought about the collapse of civilization. This is the familiar Thurber landscape of a world languishing in death, destruction, and extinction. It is the graphic representation of the abyss toward which the people and groups in the early works had always been edging.

It is a world in which "human beings just sat around, doing nothing" and where "boys and girls grew up to stare at each other blankly, for love had passed from the earth." It was, in fact, the hell which the impotency and emptiness of the Monroes and the Mittys had foreshadowed.

Miraculously, out of this rubble and indolence a young girl comes who notices the last flower in the world. This last flower, which symbolizes the remnant of natural fertility, is dying and she is unable to get anyone in the world to pay attention to it except one young man. They nurture the flower together and, with the aid of the bees who spread the flower's seeds, the flower grows into a field of flowers; waste land has been replaced by fertile mother earth. While the natural landscape comes alive again, the young girl also begins to take an interest in how she looks and the young man discovers that "touching the girl was pleasurable.... Love was reborn into the world." This young couple then begin the cycle of civilization all over again and their children people the earth. As the number of people on earth multiply, not only do groups and towns arise, but so do soldiers. Eventually, at the end of The Last Flower, the militaristic instincts of man have again destroyed everything but one man, one woman, and one flower.²⁵

This is the story of the indefatigable creative

²⁵James Thurber, The Last Flower (New York: Harper and Row, 1939), unpaginated.

powers of the woman which had been foreshadowed in "The Race of Life" and the statements about woman's biological superiority in "Women Go On Forever." It is a young girl who finds the flower; no one else will see it and she works to convince a young man to help her protect what is essentially the world's last hope for life and continuance. When they again achieve a fertile landscape, human sexuality is reborn in the world as a source for both pleasure and procreation. In this book's frank acceptance of man's sensuality, it becomes apparent that not only did Thurber not despise women or sex, but that his earlier women, satirized as they are for their banality, ignorance, and brashness, and awesome power, are in their obvious sensuality only distant forerunners of Elaine Vital, the female life force that he was to describe in the final essays. Woman in The Last Flower is the source of life, joy, and pleasure. Eventually, the men become soldiers and "liberators" who destroy the world which she has nurtured; at the end all that is left is the trio of man, woman, and flower, and an eternity of cyclic rebirth and death is suggested.

Although the biographical aspect of Thurber's work is outside the scope of this study, it is difficult not to imagine that his second marriage did not have a great deal to do with his general change of emphasis from the early humorous depiction of men dominated by women to a serious statement about the desirability of woman's strength. After

an unhappy first marriage and several trying separations and divorce Thurber married again in 1935. This second marriage to a strong and impressive woman, Helen Wismer, was notably successful and happy from the beginning and Thurber must have come to believe that, although he always considered men and women quite different and therefore a source of perplexity for each other, all marriages were not the nightmares which he pictured with such force in many of his stories. Thurber liked to recall that Harold Ross had initially been opposed to his second marriage since he was afraid that a happy marriage would ruin Thurber's career as a student of the American sexual battlefield.²⁶ It is indicative of the extent to which all his stories are creations of his artistic imagination and not strictly autobiographical that "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," "The Catbird Seat," and "The Case Against Women" were all written after his re-marriage. Although he never stopped satirizing the failures of modern women and marriage, he came to be more interested in a description of the ideal woman and marriage, a character and situation which occurs only in qualified form in the fairy tales.

There are no important women in either Many Moons or The Great Quillow. Although the little Princess Lenore is the main character of Many Moons it is a role which seems to have little to do with her sex. It is in The White Deer that

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James Thurber, The Years With Ross (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1959), p. 189.

Thurber pictures his first completely attractive woman, Princess Rosanore, who is suspected of being a deer turned into a lady. Her love is Prince Jorn, the poet, who "sang that love, not might, would untie the magic knot" and although they both seem to believe in the powers of romantic love, both Rosanore and Jorn are actually the realists in the story. It is the decision of the lovely but strong Princess to tell the truth about her lineage to the Princes, a decision which she knows may cause them all to hate her and thus turn her back into a deer forever: "The Princess rose, straight and fine and fearless, and spoke in her low and lovely voice" to tell Thag, Gallow, and Jorn about the sorcery worked on her. Bravely she had asked "the right to tell my Prince, before he claims my heart and hand, this sorry tale." And it is only Jorn, who has learned on his journey that "the peril and the labor...lie not in dreadful monsters or in mighty deeds, but in the keeping of the heart a man has won"²⁷ who is able to accept the reality of what the Princess is; only Jorn loves her after she tells each Prince that she is in fact a deer.²⁸ He voices the hope of marriage as an answer: "What you have been, you are not, and what you are, you will forever be." His ideal woman, "as wise as she is

²⁷ James Thurber, The White Deer (Harbrace Paperbound Edition of 1945 text; New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1963), pp. 98, 95, 86.

²⁸ James Thurber, The White Deer, p. 101; Stephen Black, James Thurber: His Masquerades (Hague: Mouton, 1970), p. 109, wrongly assumes that Jorn has thus accepted the necessity of illusions; it appears to me to be just the opposite.

love," has matched his endurance, valor, and honesty and as they dance together Tocko the clockmaker, who should be identified with Thurber, recites lines which suggest that perhaps true love will triumph over the confusion and time in the world: "As slow as time, as long as love: the rose, the fountain, and the dove." Only in this tale and in The 13 Clocks does Thurber use the traditional comic ending of a marriage feast. The feeling of triumph is curiously qualified in the epilogue to each story, however. At the end of The White Deer Thurber suggests that the witch Nagrom Yaf (Morgan le Fay of the Arthurian romances) is still out in the woods, ready to destroy happiness and love whenever she can.²⁹ The key phrase describing Rosanore is "as wise as she is lovely" and the details of her actions in the book stress her intelligence and honesty even more than her beauty.

Five years later in The 13 Clocks Thurber again wrote the story of the marriage of a poet and a lovely lady. Here, the Princess Saralinda is imprisoned by an evil Duke until her twenty-first birthday when, according to a witch's spell, the Duke can marry her. As a part of his spell he must allow suitors to attempt terrible tasks for her hand; no one, until Prince Zorn of Zorna, is successful. Zorn succeeds with the help of both the Golux (light) and Saralinda's rose (love); he therefore achieves his goal through the use of both his head and his heart. Saralinda is again described in terms

²⁹James Thurber, The White Deer, pp. 101, 111, 113, 115.

of life and vitality: "she was warm in every wind and weather" and resembled the rose. Perhaps no other woman in all of Thurber's work less resembles the popular conception of "the Thurber woman" from the early stories and cartoons than Saralinda:

The Princess Saralinda was tall, with freesias in her dark hair, and she wore serenity brightly like the rainbow. It was not easy to tell her mouth from the rose, or her brow from the white lilac. Her voice was faraway music, and her eyes were candles burning on a tranquil night...and the Duke...held up the palms of his gloves, as if she were a fire at which to warm his hands.

Even in this most romantic of all Thurber's fairy tales, with its emphasis on the powers of love and its conventional description of a beautiful, ideal woman, the Golux advises Zorn and Saralinda on their wedding day to "keep warm, ride close together. Remember laughter. You'll need it even in the blessed isles of Ever After." Since Thurber believed that both laughter and a sense of humor derived from our knowledge of the chaotic and finite nature of life, this advice qualifies the vision of happiness at the end of this story as the epilogue had qualified the ending of The White Deer. In his final description of their ride out to Yarrow and their new life, Thurber characteristically hesitates to completely affirm the power of love while still voicing his persistent hope that it is possible:

The two white horses snorted snowy mist in the cool green glade that led down to the harbor. A fair wind stood for Yarrow and, looking far to sea, the Princess Saralinda thought she saw, as people often think they see, on clear and windless days, the distant shining shores of Ever After. Your guess is quite as good as mine (there are a lot of things that shine) but I have

always thought she did, and I will always think so.³⁰

Like the fragile hope for rebirth at the end of The Last Flower, Thurber here suggests that although absolute happiness and love are not possible we must attempt to love and to see the distant shores of Ever After receding beyond the horizon. In this coupling of the ideal and the starkly real, Thurber continually causes the reader to connect the fairy land of these stories with the imperfect modern world.

The last of the fairy tales, The Wonderful O, was written in 1957 and Thurber no longer used the conventional story line of the fairy tale nor the conventional, idealized maiden as its heroine. Rather, in this last period of his life when he was already stating in the essays that women must take over for the human species to survive, he tells the story of two people, a man and a woman, who are treated as equals. Their names, Andreus and Andrea, indicate that though their different sexes remain distinct there is also a deliberate identification of the two characters. Since this story is not a love story but a book about the necessity for freedom and human communication, I will not discuss it in detail here. What is important is that there is almost no sense of competition between the sexes in The Wonderful O: Andreus and Andrea cooperate to find the answer to overthrow the tyranny of Black and Littlejack and the book ends, not

³⁰ James Thurber, The 13 Clocks (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950), pp. 17, 32, 40, 118.

with the wedding bells of The White Deer, but with the ringing of a freedom bell. It is the woman, Andrea, who finds the book of magic that tells the people of Ooroo the legend of the curse which has befallen them and it is also Andrea who bravely tells the people to speak again in O words:

'Be not afraid to speak with O's,' said Andrea at last. 'We cannot live or speak without hope, and hope without its O is nothing, and even nothing is less than nothing when it is nothing. Hope contains the longest O of all. We mustn't lose it.'³¹

In these tales, women are continually connected with hope, the future, life, and rebirth. In The Last Flower, a young girl finds the flower which leads to the rebirth of love and human civilization; in The White Deer, the Princess Rosanore's honesty and courage allow the love she feels for Prince Jorn to momentarily end the waste land and confusion in his kingdom; in The 13 Clocks, Saralinda's rose, a symbol of love, helps Zorn get through the forbidding forest between Haggas Hill and his final goal. In The Wonderful O, finally, a woman is directly responsible for the establishment of human values and the bringing of order out of chaos. Since Thurber only pictured such women and happy marriages in the fairy tales, it could be argued that he thought such a thing impossible among real human beings, but the fact that he even postulated it in the fairy tales and in The Last Flower is evidence of his hope that it could be. He reserved that possibility for the far future and fairy land; the familiar Thurber woman and

³¹James Thurber, The Wonderful O (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), pp. 31, 32.

marriage is a description of life in the modern world and it is generally a living hell.

In the later essays Thurber was to stress more the vitality, strength, and creativity of women as a positive force in the world. Although he still enjoyed satirizing such irritations as "the charmingly tainted idiom" of a young Mrs. Malaprop in *Lanterns and Lances*,³² the emphasis was more on the good characteristics of women. Two of the most successful pieces in The Thurber Album (1952) are about the strong-willed, vibrant women who had shaped Thurber's early life: his mother and Aunt Margery Albright. In "Lavender with a Difference" Thurber describes his mother, certainly the dominant character in the Thurber household, very much like the character of the mother in My Life and Hard Times. She was a personality so strong that she dominated any group she was in and Thurber relishes her independence and power. He recalls with delight that she had a "gift of confusion" which enabled her both to create and enjoy chaos; if no one else, including Thurber's quiet father, could happily ride out the waves of bedlam, she could.

Thurber writes of the time that she dressed up as an old woman and took him and a cousin to "buy" a house in the neighborhood which had been on the market for some time. After duping the man of the house with her story about being

³²James Thurber, Lanterns and Lances (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 61.

a millionaire's widow who wanted to buy his house, Mary Thurber left with a promise to send a check for the house the next day. Such practical jokes were everyday happenings in the Thurber family and Thurber remembers "all of a sudden the three of us were out in the street again--my mother who had been my grandmother, her cousin who had been my mother, and me. I feel that this twisted hour marked the occupation of my mind by a sense of confusion that has never left it."³³ Thurber was always both awed and delighted, afraid and intrigued by, his continual sense of confusion.

"Daguerreotype of a Lady" is the picture of Margery Albright, a strong old woman out of Thurber's childhood. She was "an active woman who got things done" in a "time of stout-hearted and self-reliant women." Thurber's obvious affection for this woman is based mainly in her close attunement to nature and instinct and her pragmatism: she knew how to deliver a baby and cure almost any disease, and she knew how to both cultivate a garden and die with dignity. It is interesting in regard to his earlier pictures of hen-pecked husbands that here Thurber so thoroughly enjoys the dominant female: "Margery Albright was a woman's woman, who put little faith in the integrity and reliability of the average male."³⁴ Although he had once felt that men were oppressed by women and

³³ James Thurber, The Thurber Album (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), pp. 140, 137.

³⁴ James Thurber, The Thurber Album (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), pp. 140, 137, 86, 96, 102.

and had used this as a subject for laughter, Thurber had always basically shared Aunt Margery's skepticism about the male. Mrs. Albright was always associated in Thurber's memory with her garden, a symbol for her vitality and creativity. It is probable that memories of these two women helped Thurber form his very early impressions of feminine strength, which were demonstrated even in the Thirties in "The Race of Life" and "Women Go On Forever."

Thurber clearly expressed his belief in woman's strength frequently in his last collections. He began Alarms and Diversions (1957) with "The Ladies of Orlon," an essay about the future superiority of woman: "She is now definitely here to stay, whereas the decline of the male, even the actual decadence of the insecure sex, has been observed by alarmed scientists." Thurber, who may still be a bit alarmed but not frightened, believes this to be a good thing and although the conflicts between men and women, caused by their very different natures and goals, may "come down, in the end, to a highly dramatic sex crisis," the world will be the better for it:

Nature and I have long felt that the hope of mankind is womankind, that the physically creative sex must eventually dominate the physically destructive sex if we are to survive on this planet. The simplest things last the longest, the microbe outlives the mastodon, and the female's simple gift of creativity happily lacks the ornaments and handicaps of male artifice, pretension, power, and balderdash.³⁵

³⁵ James Thurber, Alarms and Diversions (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), pp. 4, 3, 2.

This is a theme that he was to repeat over and over in the last years of his life. In the vision he had of the unending confusion of man on earth, Thurber continually tried to find a way out, an end to disorder, and woman was one of the possibilities he saw. The opening fable of Further Fables for Our Time (1956), "The Sea and the Shore," tells the story of life coming out of the sea just after the beginning of time. It is the female "gibbous creature" who goes on land first; she tries to get the male to stay with her because she senses that their destiny is on the land but he exclaims: "You're always seeing things that never were.... You're always wanting things that aren't yet." He retreats to the sea until "a couple of eons later, the male, unable to get along alone, reappeared one day upon the shore." The female has by then lost her amorphous figure and become "almost shapely," a description that only Thurber could think of. When the male started to turn back to the sea "a mindless urge deep inside him took on the frail flicker of desire." He then finally screams "wait for baby!" to the obstinate female "who seemed certain to reach the greening undergrowth in another two thousand years." The moral is clear and reflective of all Thurber couples, sad or happy: "Let us ponder this basic fact about the human: Ahead of every man, not behind him, is a woman."

In this initial fable Thurber represents the dawn of civilization as the result of a female's dogged natural instincts. In the collection's final fable, "The Shore and the

Sea," he represents the collapse of civilization as a mad rush for the sea which is instigated by a male lemming's irrational cries. As in The Last Flower, the suggestion is that human life will forever follow this cyclic pattern of birth, death, and re-birth.³⁶ The woman is the prime force in re-birth and the male is associated with destruction:

I have grown a little tired of the capitalization of Man, his easy assumption of a dignity more apparent than real, and his faith in a high destiny for which he is not fitted by his long and bloody history. The most frightening study of mankind is Man. I think he has failed to run the world, and that Woman must take over if the species is to survive.³⁷

This destructive tendency of the male starts, according to Thurber, in childhood, as though it is an innate flaw. In an essay in Lanterns and Lances published in 1960 he wrote "little boys are too much for me at my age, for it is they who have taken over the American home, physically. They are in charge of running everything, usually into the ground." The female child, too often a "product of a confined and constrained infantile creativity," should be allowed free reign to develop in her fashion, which is toward a life-giving function; for this reason Thurber stated his life-long interest in the dominant woman thus:

³⁶James Thurber, Further Fables for Our Time (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), pp. 2, 3, 172-4.

³⁷James Thurber, Interview with Harvey Breit, "Mr. Thurber Observes a Serene Birthday," New York Times Magazine (Dec. 4, 1949), p. 79.

I am more interested in Thurber's Theory of Elaine Vital, the female life force, than in Bergson's theory of Elan Vital, the masculine life force.... Elaine Vital, if properly directed--that is, let alone--may become the hope of the future.³⁸

It is always only a perhaps, a possibility, for Thurber that anything would end the confusion and destruction which is Man's legacy. He offers the creative powers of the female as one possibility for the survival of the race.

It is therefore obvious on reading the entire body of Thurber's work that Holmes's statements about Thurber's trenchant hostility toward women are based on too narrow a reading of his work. In the last chapter of The Clocks of Columbus, Holmes selects the following Thurber quotation as proof of the common conception of Thurber's misogyny:

It became obvious to me from the time I was a little boy that the American woman was in charge.... I think it's one of the weaknesses of America, the great dominance of the American woman. Not because of that fact in itself, but because she is, as a Chinese woman of distinction said to me some twenty years ago, the least interested in national and international affairs and the most ignorant.³⁹

What Holmes fails to see is that Thurber, certainly never a rabid or naive feminist, was very well aware of both the ignorance and the potential of women. That he was dismayed by a high level of ignorance and banality among women is apparent from the drawings but there is also an implicit indication that he felt disgust about an undeveloped potential. Thurber knew very well that such potential and power could be used

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James Thurber, Lanterns and Lances, pp. 20, 19.

³⁹ Charles Holmes, The Clocks of Columbus, p. 316.

only for dominance and irritation in a Mrs. Mitty, an Ulguine Barrows, or any of the assorted insipid females described in his stories who came crying to him at parties with their "Hello, Mr. Thurbergs" and their incredibly mixed metaphors. He knew that marriage could be hell and he portrayed the bloody battleground as well, in his compressed short pieces, as any novelist.

In his sense of the irreconcilable differences between men and women, however, he saw not only the basis for an ongoing cold war between the sexes but for, perhaps, the eventual survival of the race if woman's dominance were to be channelled toward creative goals; that is, if she would give up the triviality of her silent war and her involved games with men. It is a long way from Mrs. Monroe to Elaine Vital or even to the Princesses in the fairy tales. Both Elaine and Princess Rosanore remain mythical women, women in the faraway worlds of fairy land and the distant future. Thurber gives us a glimpse of hope for an end to the war between men and women and to the universal confusion which it typifies only in the fairy tales and the final essays. In his descriptions of men and women today, in our time, in our country, the relationship is consistently one of a confusion distilled to its elementary and most horrible level.

The one exception to this general statement is in the "conversation pieces" written late in Thurber's career. These are really Socratic dialogues, halfway between story and essay, in which Thurber and another character discuss general subjects

relating to the collapse of civilization. When his wife appears in this piece she is the voice of sense, temperance, and practicality. Occasionally, as in "The Lady from the Land," she has the last word in a witty remark which seems to penetrate to the heart of the confusion with humor and good sense.⁴⁰

The consistent qualities of the Thurber woman, from beginning to end, are strength, power, and vitality; most also display a certain alliance with natural or sensuous things. In any Thurber cartoon or short story, then, you see the distant ancestor, unrefined, misdirected and sometimes barely recognizable, of Elaine Vital, and of the young girl in The Last Flower, and the equally strong and wise, but lovely, ladies in the fairy tales. In his work Thurber emphasized the imperfect woman and marriage because, within the context of man's present confusion, these are what exist. When he looked into the future, like the Shaw of Back to Methuselah, he saw the possibility that all this female energy and vitality could be put to better use as a means to bring life and order to a chaotic and destructive universe.⁴¹

Thurber himself summarized both the horrors and the glories involved in his conception of women:

⁴⁰ James Thurber, Credos and Curios (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 52.

⁴¹ Cf. George Bernard Shaw, Back to Methuselah (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1961), pp. 313-315.

Somebody has said that Woman's place is in the wrong. That's fine. What the wrong needs is a woman's presence and a woman's touch. She is far better equipped than men to set it right. The condescending male, in his pride of strength, likes to think of the female as being 'soft, soft as snow,' but just wait till he gets hit by the snowball. Almost any century now Woman may lose her patience with black politics and red war and let fly. I wish I could be on earth then to witness the saving of our self-destructive species by its greatest creative force. If I have sometimes seemed to make fun of Woman, I assure you it has only been for the purpose of egging her on.⁴²

Perhaps his "egging her on" has been more widely recognized but the complete Thurber woman is all the things described above.

The really horrible women--Ulgine Barrows, Mrs. Mitty --are horrible because in a confusion of sexual roles they have assumed the traits which Thurber also deplored in men; they are hostile, aggressive, and often full of hatred. They are destroyers in man's long history of destruction. Thurber never really relented in his vision of an unending chaos but, in his desire to find a way out of the confusion, he suggested that the immense power of woman could at least keep the cycle of life going and that, even if she could not end the confusion, she would at least inevitably rebuild after the just as inevitable war and destruction.

⁴²James Thurber, Thurber on Humor (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, n.d.), p.10.

CHAPTER IV

MAN AND OTHER BEASTS:

CONFUSION IN PERSPECTIVE

The dog has got more fun out of Man than Man has got out of the dog, for the clearly demonstrable reason that Man is the more laughable of the two animals. The dog has long been bemused by the singular activities and the curious practices of men, cocking his head inquiringly to one side, intently watching and listening to the strangest goings-on in the world.

--Thurber's Dogs

The world James Thurber created in his prose and drawings is a picture of general bedlam. As an anatomist of the confusion of the world, he distanced himself from his subject matter through the use of a humorous method which was based in the quiet recollection of chaos. Such recollection requires detachment from the subject itself and provides the writer with an opportunity to dissect and examine the elements of the chaotic scene. As Thurber stood a little outside the chaos, the student of life's carnival, he was able to see, and focus for others, the macrocosm of confusion, as well as the many smaller confusions which glide like erratic planets through the universal chaos. Distanced as he was from the human spectacle, he was able to see the confusion in perspective and, with the exception of his final years, was able to maintain a high level of artistic detachment.

From this vantage point he saw that man was, in

comparison to the other beasts of planet earth, the very center of confusion. When animals appear in Thurber's work, therefore, they impart not only a feeling of innocence, nobility, and calm, but they also enable the reader to see Thurber's great study of confusion in perspective. Often, the dogs in the drawings seem themselves to be quietly but intently perceiving the chaos around them.

Despite the great popularity of the Thurber dog and the frequency of animals in Thurber's work, very little has been written about the significance of animals in his world. Robert Morsberger made a few general statements about Thurber's extensive menagerie in his study, but he concludes rather superficially that "his animals appear wholly for their unaffected charm." Charles Holmes mentions the different animals that appear in various works and rightly notices that "Thurber's dogs are his contact with peace and innocence," but unfortunately Richard Tobias chooses "The Dog that Bit People" as his basis for concluding that Thurber used dogs to show human faults displaced in another animal.¹ Not only is Muggs the one really detestable dog in Thurber, but Thurber used animals with human qualities only in the fables, as a careful reading of his work will demonstrate.

No one has properly elaborated on the large significance of all the animals which fill Thurber's pages. In

¹Morsberger, James Thurber, p. 89; Holmes, Clocks of Columbus, p. 140; and Tobias, Art of James Thurber, p. 46.

fact, the plethora of animals in his work has probably been the main cause of his being wrongly regarded as "elfin," "zany," and "whimsical," the words he most disliked in his reviews. This is especially unfortunate because his use of animals was a counter-balance to Man is a consistent device to focus his serious and often grim world view. In this chapter I will summarize Thurber's attitude toward dogs and other animals and explain Thurber's feelings about the superiority of the "lower" animals as a way to put his anatomy of confusion into perspective. I will also survey the imaginary animals Thurber created and his use of animals in the fables. Since the Thurber dog is the best known, and probably the most important member of his menagerie, I will begin with a discussion of representative pieces from Thurber's Dogs (1955), a collection in which he published most of his stories and essays about the species.

In the Introduction to this book Thurber lists the woes that have befallen the noble dog, most of which could be described as man's arrogant attempts to make a dog over into his image. To Thurber's dismay, the dog has been leashed and clipped, bred, shown, and fed in a manner suited to man but not dog. The dog has been amused by all this, however: "The list of his woes could be continued indefinitely. But he also had his fun, for he has been privileged to live with and study at close range the only creature with

reason, the most unreasonable of creatures."² All of Thurber's beasts--the dogs in the cartoons, the imaginary animals in "The New Natural History," the wood duck over the busy highway, and the dolphins in the later essays are included in Thurber's world to emphasize the unreasonableness of man and his dilemmas.

Their presence among the chaos makes our knowledge of Man's failures both more poignant and more acceptable: it becomes more poignant because man, in his rampant imperfection, is even unfavorably compared with species which he has liked to consider inferior to himself, but it also becomes more easy to accept because there is a sense of relief and perception provided by the presence of the innocent, rather uncomplicated animals. One of the reasons that a trip through the Thurber carnival is not depressing, even though it is often disquieting, is that, along with his abiding sense of humor arising from his perception of man's predicament, Thurber included these totally appealing creatures. Somehow, the people of Thurber's world are easier to face with these less alarming creatures nearby.

References to dogs appear throughout Thurber's stories and essays and they are ubiquitous in the drawings. There is the story of "The Dog That Bit People" and the memory of "Canines in the Cellar" out of Thurber's Columbus boyhood. The Mittys, presumably, have a dog, as do the

²James Thurber, Thurber's Dogs, p. 9.

Monroes and even (or especially) poor Emma Inch. There are the remarkable obituaries for Rex and Medve and Thurber's first short story, "Josephine Has Her Day," was about a dog. He later was to even do serious research into the subject and report his findings in essays like "Lo, the Gentle Bloodhound." Thurber was not interested in the dog simply as a subject of investigation or as a literary device, however; he admitted to having owned over fifty-five dogs in his life³ and to having loved all of them, with the notable exception of Muggs, the dog that bit people. Thurber's dogs are the product of his close attention to, and keen appreciation for, the species for over sixty years.

In "A Preface to Dogs," an essay published originally in The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, Thurber says that he has been seriously studying the family life of dogs for years in order to test the old axiom that dogs lead saner lives than people. He has concluded from his observations that they do, primarily because of the "lack of sentimentality" associated with a dog's actions. A mother dog, for instance, does not worry about her puppies the way that a human mother worries about her children, and she does not even want the father dog around. She takes care of the puppies for only six weeks after their birth, but even in that time she is superior to the human mother because "she does all these things...without that loud and elaborate show of

³James Thurber, Thurber's Dogs, p. 77.

solicitude and alarm which a woman displays in rendering some exaggerated service to her child." Dogs are saner also because they know when and how to leave without fanfare: "Avoidance of farewells, which are always stuffy and sometimes painful, is another thing in which it seems to me dogs have better sense than people."⁴ All of these comments are particularly perceptive about the behavior of dogs and it is obvious that Thurber, while being very funny, is also deadly serious about this subject.

From these rather superficial observations of animal behavior, he went on to enumerate the deeper qualities of the dog which surpass man's character. In "Christabel," an essay written originally for the Bermudian in 1950, Thurber specifically defends the poodle as "the most charming of species, including the human...they happily lack Man's aggression, irritability, quick temper, and wild aim." The poodle is incapable, therefore, of war, destruction, or hostility and as such is outside the creation of man's confusion. Perhaps equally important, she is able to escape confusion for another reason: she is a "humorist," Thurber says, and not the clown that so many people try to make her, as her sensible behavior at a dog show demonstrates: "The poodle instantly began to howl...to express disapproval of the judge, the bedlam, and the whole distressing spectacle." Like Thurber, the poodle sees the insanity of the human

⁴James Thurber, Thurber's Dogs, pp. 29, 32.

spectacle and she is therefore a "humorist," according to Thurber's definition, because she is able to stand back and see the madness of human rituals and society and at least howl in disapproval.

The poodle is so separated from the bedlam, in fact, that all she is interested in is that her life remain as quiet, calm, and uncomplicated as possible. Untouched by the foolish addiction to gadgets which plagues men, she "doesn't like unnecessary sounds; she likes quiet and tranquillity." She wisely refuses the complications of man's world and will settle for a lifetime of good meals and liberty.⁵ Anyone who will admit the truth about men and dogs, Thurber says, knows that "Man is troubled by what might be called the Dog Wish, a strange and involved compulsion to be as happy and carefree as a dog."⁶

Thurber always suggests that man is by his very nature the prey of confusion and complication. Therefore, he is not really suggesting, as many of the Romantics had done, that Man would be better if he could return to the innocence of his childhood or the innocence of nature. The seemingly complete and essential difference between men and animals is reflected in a very early poem which Thurber wrote during his adolescence as a tribute to two deceased

⁵James Thurber, Thurber's Dogs, pp. 226, 227, 229, 235.

⁶James Thurber, Thurber's Dogs, p. 205.

dogs, "To Scottie and Rex:"

The two best dogs that have ever been
 Steadfast and true through thick and thin,
Innocent of human crime and sin,
 Some canine paradise has let them in.⁷

Although, on reading this poem, a reader who has delighted in Thurber's magnificent prose style has to be thankful that he did not decide to become a poet, it is interesting to see how early and consistent Thurber's view of the relationship between men and animals was. His first dogs were "innocent of human crime and sin" and he always depicted the dog as a creature untouched by man's innate imperfections, frailties, and confusion. Thurber's most comprehensive statement on the dog is the moving "Memorial," a tribute to his first poodle, which was originally published in My World --and Welcome To It. Anyone wishing to understand Thurber's attitude toward animals and his affection for them must read this short, compressed essay. He states here his essential conviction that dogs are saner than people because they are "hand in glove with natural phenomena" and that the dog is perplexed by the whole chaotic human scene:

She tried patiently at all times to understand Man's way of life: the rolling of his wheels; the raising of his voice; the ringing of his bells; his way of searching out with lights the dark protecting corners of the night; his habit of building his beds inside walls, high above the nurturing earth.

⁷James Thurber, "To Scottie and Rex," in Samuel Bernard Baker, "James Thurber: The Columbus Years" (unpublished M.A. thesis, Ohio State University, 1962), p. 23.

Thurber's distrust of what is commonly known as "progress," of modern technology and the complications of civilization, is here integrated, as it must be, with his admiration and affection for the dog, an animal who not only gets along very well without such sophistication, but who actually rebels against it.

The dog also rebels against any forestalling of the natural events of birth, living, and dying. When his poodle had known she was about to die, she accepted her fate better than her master could: "her dark intelligent eyes seemed to be trying to tell me, [this] is simply closing of full circle, this is the flower that grows out of Beginning; this--not to make it too hard for you friend--is as natural as eating the raspberries and raising the puppies and riding into the rain." Perhaps one day, Thurber half-seriously postulates, the poodles will take over the world and try to make some sense out of it, to smooth out the unnecessary complexities of human society:

The poodle I knew seemed sometimes about to bridge the mysterious and conceivably narrow gap that separates instinct from reason....There were times when she seemed to come close to a pitying comprehension of the whole troubled scene and what lies behind it. If poodles, who walk so easily upon their hind legs, ever do learn the little tricks of speech and reason, I should not be surprised if they made a better job of it than Man, who would seem to be surely but not slowly slipping back to all fours.⁸

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James Thurber, Thurber's Dogs, pp. 222, 221, 224, 223.

A dog is superior to men in every quality but speech and reason, and Thurber thought that even in those two areas men had imperfect skills; it was therefore fitting that to Thurber the dog represented a more perfectly attuned, virtuous animal than man.

The picture of Thurber's poodle in the preceding quotation, a picture of a dog coming close to a "pitying comprehension of the whole troubled scene," could be a description of the function that the Thurber dog, a genuinely Thurberian humorist, fulfills in the drawings. Although the drawings of the Thurber dog are probably the most universally recognizable part of Thurber's work, Thurber's admirers and commentators have failed to see the full significance of his continual use of the figure.

The Thurber dog is a hound dog, not an accurate depiction of any breed, but a combination with the stubby legs of a basset and the ponderous head and ears of a bloodhound. Thurber admitted that the legs came out so short because he originally had drawn the dogs on crowded note pads. The dog itself started as a gimmick and a doodle but eventually assumed symbolic significance:

I've always loved that dog.... Although at first he was a device, I gradually worked him in as a sound creature in a crazy world.... If I have [by comparison] run down the human species, it was not altogether unintentional.⁹

⁹James Thurber, Interview with Harvey Breit (New York Times Magazine, Dec. 4, 1949), p. 79.

To see that Thurber meant the dog to be symbolic of a "sound creature in a crazy world" all one must do is study the cartoons which include both people and the dog. For example, in a drawing from Let Your Mind Alone! simply entitled "Cocktail Party--1937," the dog appears, sleeping, content, and inviolate, in the foreground of a wildly animated room full of people in various stages of inebriation.¹⁰ The dog seems to be a tranquil island just slightly removed from the frenetic crowd. The Thurber dog also often appears to be perplexed, shocked, or just disgusted by the behavior of human beings: in the drawing of a woman ridiculously saying into a telephone, "Well, if I called the wrong number, why did you answer the phone?" both her husband and the dog react with dismay at her illogic. As another woman asks, "Who is this Hitler and what does he want?," her dog just seems disgusted with her ignorance, and in a picture of the writer himself, frantically working with discarded notes all over the floor, the dog appears only to be amused by the vanity of human wishes and the insanity of human routines.¹¹ The dog, in fact, seems to have all the sense, sanity, and calm that the Thurber people so completely lack. Thurber's depiction of men and animals is humorous because of man's traditional belief that his world is ordered, sane, and directed, whereas he assumes that the "brutes" live in chaos. When

¹⁰James Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone!, p. 84.

¹¹James Thurber, Men, Women, & Dogs, pp. 105, 96, 176.

Thurber reverses these roles and conceptions, he is very funny while also effectively enunciating a serious belief.

Thurber also drew many pictures with only dogs in them. These drawings are particularly charming because here there is no overt comparison with the "brute," Man. In The Seal in the Bedroom Thurber included two series of drawings, "The Hound and the Bug," and "The Hound and the Hare," which show the dog's lack of aggression and his practicality. In each of these, the hound is initially interested in pursuing a bug or a rabbit, but after unsuccessfully attempting to get at them, he calmly gives up and goes back to sleep. By implication, a man would continue on the futile path and probably kill himself trying to get his prey.¹² The dog is, in fact, the only character in Thurber who seems to act with Huck Finn common sense, which in itself only emphasizes Thurber's distrust of human nature.

Perhaps the best Thurber dogs are the drawings of an individual dog curled up on the foot of a page or at the end of a story; they seem, in their innocence and disregard for the wild human spectacle, a fitting counter-balance to the confusion and melancholy in the pages surrounding them. The most effective of these is the famous drawing of a dog opening his front door to see if it is snowing outside: with the bewildered and disappointed look of an innocent in a savage world, he stares up to the stormy heavens and seems to wonder

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James Thurber, The Seal in the Bedroom, unpaginated.

"Why?"¹³

The comparison between men and dogs is often implicit in the drawings but Thurber directly compared the animal kingdom to humanity many times in the essays and in The Male Animal, a 1940 play which he co-authored with Elliot Nugent.

In this play, a forgetful, reticent, and scholarly young husband named Tommy Turner decides that he must fight for the wife he loves only after he realizes that the "lower" animals do not sit by and let another animal take over their mates and their homes. Tommy says that "all animals are the same, including the human being. We are male animals, too" and therefore man must do as other animals do: "all male animals fight for the female, from the land crab to the bird of paradise. They don't just sit and talk. They act." After Tommy decides to act like a male animal he easily wins his wife back.¹⁴

Although the idea is somewhat exaggerated in this play, Thurber had written in 1939 in a serious vein that "it may be that the finer mysteries of life and death can be comprehended only through pure instinct."¹⁵ The animals are closer to the fundamentals of living and do not make the tragic mistakes that human beings make because they are

¹³James Thurber, Men, Women, and Dogs; p. 36; this drawing was re-used several times, notably on the title page of The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze (1935).

¹⁴James Thurber and Elliot Nugent, The Male Animal, pp. 129, 131.

¹⁵James Thurber, "Statement" in I Believe, p. 296.

solely directed by instinct.

Thurber was especially interested in denying the common human conviction that the other animals are inferior to man. As a humorist, Thurber was constantly interested in deflating human pride and destroying our smugness, a function which is happily achieved in his comparisons of men and animals:

They say that man is born to the belief that he is superior to the lower animals, and that critical intelligence comes when he realizes that he is more similar than dissimilar. Extending this theory, it has occurred to me that Man's arrogance arises from a false feeling of transcendancy and that he will not get anywhere until he realizes, in all humility, that he is just another of God's creatures, less kindly than the dog, possessed of less dignity than the swan, and incapable of becoming as magnificent an angel as the black panther.¹⁶

There is great opportunity for humor in this subject, since, in unfavorably comparing men to animals, Thurber is denying the reader's expectations. We expect, because it is axiomatic, for undomesticated animals to be considered brutish and wild, and therefore there is an element of shock or surprise in what Thurber says. The Thurber dog is surprising because we do not expect his wisdom, calm, and nobility even in a commonly loved and accepted domesticated animal. Thurber never really sentimentalizes his animals, like Disney's films do, nor does he make his animals into people, like Aesop's fables and many children's books do, except in his own fables. In the fables, Thurber continues in a long beast fable tradition which began in early English with

¹⁶James Thurber, Interview with Harvey Breit, p. 78.

poems like "The Owl and the Nightingale" and Chaucer's "Parlement of Foules." These early poems have animal characters which, like the animals of Aesop, behave, speak, and think like human beings. Outside of his fables, Thurber's menagerie contains real animals even though he may exaggerate the more admirable animal qualities.

Thurber wrote two very funny essays for Lanterns and Lances which demonstrate how serious and how funny the subject could be. In "The Trouble with Man is Man," Thurber states that "man has gone long enough, or even too long, without being man enough to face the simple truth that the trouble with Man is Man." Specifically, "Man has come to blame his faults and flaws on the other creatures in this least possible of all worlds." From these premises, Thurber proceeds to a literal interpretation of common figures of speech for both a humorous effect and a serious statement:

The human being says that the beast in him has been aroused, whe what he actually means is that the human being in him has been aroused. A person is not pigeon-toed, either, but person-toed, and what the lady has are not crow's-feet but woman's wrinkles. It is our species, and not any other, that goes out on wildcat strikes, plays the badger game, weeps crocodile tears, sets up kangaroo courts.

Thurber is amused to realize that when a man works hard he works like a beaver but "why this should make him dog-tired instead of beaver-tired I don't know." Always fascinated by words, clichés, and the literal interpretation of metaphors, Thurber combines his interest in language and his theme:

The English and American vocabularies have been vastly enlarged and, I suppose, enriched by the multitudinous figures of speech that slander and libel the lower animals, but the result has been the further inflation of the already inflated human ego by easy denegration of the other species.¹⁷

All of Thurber's work is a systematic assault on that inflated human ego. The greatest pride of men, their powers of reason and their apparent organization, he not only shows to be severely flawed and unhelpful, but he accomplishes this in part by a steady and disconcerting respect for the lower animals on earth.

"Here Come the Dolphins" expands on Thurber's early hypothesis that perhaps the poodles should take over the world. He had been glad to learn of the experiments with dolphins which have shown the high level of sensitivity and intelligence of the animal:

It neither alarms nor surprises me that Nature, whose patience with our self-destructive species is given out, may have decided to make us, if not extinct, at least a secondary power among the mammals of this improbable planet.....
I mourn the swift mortality of Man that will prevent him from reading The Decline and Fall of Man by Professor B. N. Dolphin. What I am saying, of course, will be called satire or nonsense. Professor Dolphin can deal with that when the time comes.

Like the apocalyptic vision in "After the Steppe Cat, What?" and The Last Flower, this essay foretells the demise of man and his civilization not only because of the superior virtue and self-preservation qualities of the other animals, but especially because of Man's own self-destructive tendencies.

¹⁷James Thurber, Lanterns and Lances, pp. 204, 206, 207.

In his truly brutish aggression, Man will kill off his own species while he destroys his world; something like the dolphin will have to take over and make sense out of this nonsensical globe.

Man's savage nature is evidenced even in his supposedly refined rituals and palate; whereas the lowly penguin is content to eat plankton.

Man, being Man, doesn't care much for submissive victuals, but loves to beat the hell out of some of his main dishes, and has devised a dozen weapons with which to kill them The penguin and the dolphin, beholding the dismaying spectacle of human beings at table, will surely exclaim, when they learn English, 'What foods these mortals eat!'¹⁸

The comparison between men and animals becomes so complete in the two collections of Fables (1940, 1956) that man is totally identified with the animals in the stories. With the exception of three of the fables, when animals appear in Thurber's fables they are representatives of human behavior and the comment of the fable is on human, not animal, actions. Thurber thus used the fable form conventionally and Morsberger is incorrect in considering the beasts in the fables as examples of "animal" behavior and faults.¹⁹

In three of Thurber's fables, however, human beings do appear in deliberate contrast to other animals. In these fables, the animals fulfill ordinary or common animal roles and are not, like most of the fable's animals, equatable to

¹⁸James Thurber, Lanterns and Lances, pp. 149-50, 152.

¹⁹Morsberger, James Thurber, pp. 87-89.

the human being. In the first of these, "The Tiger Who Understood People," a tiger that has been held in captivity escapes and returns to the jungle. He had learned man's ways in the zoo, however, and makes the mistake of trying to implement human methods to life in the jungle. He tries to use the techniques of modern advertising and business in order not to work: he plans a prize fight and expects that every animal will bring him a killed boar as the admission fee. This way, he assumes, he will not have to kill his own food and can just sit around and be a supervising tiger. He makes the human mistake of over-advertising the fight, however, and the wiser animals realize that they are being swindled. Therefore, no animal shows up for the fight, there is no boar to eat, and the tiger and his leopard assistant fight each other in a hungry rage until they are overtaken by wild boars and killed. The moral stresses the illogic of human society in implicit comparison to the order of nature: "If you live as humans do, it will be the end of you."²⁰ Within the fable form, the implication is that since men are just animals, too, human ways are destined to destroy mankind as they would destroy a tiger in the jungle.

Thurber always stressed the essential kinship of all animals and deplored the fact that man works to over-complicate his life while the animals retain a measure of sanity and simplicity. The opening fable of Further Fables for Our

²⁰ James Thurber, Fables for Our Time, pp. 9, 10.

Time tells the history of man in terms of a common modern hypothesis about the origin of all life in the sea. In this fable, a "pair of gibbous creatures" are washed up on the shore and over a period of two thousand years with the inspiration of the female gibbous creature "flobber" toward the "greening undergrowth" and the establishment of human civilization. The moral lets us know that these are the ancestors of Man: "Let us ponder this basic fact about the human: Ahead of every man, not behind him, is a woman."²¹ Thurber's acceptance of human evolution only intensifies his denial of man's traditionally inflated self-concept as less an animal than a god-like man.

Even man's pride about being the animal to survive and prevail throughout history is challenged in "The Human Being and the Dinosaur." This fable pictures an ancient meeting between man and a dinosaur "ages ago in a wasteland of time and a wilderness of space," when man gloated over his impending victory and the dinosaur's coming extinction. The dinosaur accepts his fate and foretells man's shameful future in his statement that "there are worse things than being extinct...and one of them is being you." The human being then smugly enumerates all of the reasons that the dinosaur is his inferior:

'You cannot even commit murder,' he said, 'for murder requires a mind.... You and your ilk are incapable of devising increasingly effective methods of destroying your own species and, at the same time, increasingly

²¹James Thurber, Further Fables for Our Time, pp. 1-3.

miraculous methods of keeping it extant.... In your highest state of evolution you could not develop the brain cells to prove innocent men guilty, even after their acquittal.

The dinosaurs die soon afterwards "but with a curious smile of satisfaction, or something of the sort, on their ephemeral faces." The sharp moral, as ironic as the human being's indictment of the dinosaur, is "The noblest study of mankind is Man, says Man."²²

Since Thurber considered the human being as just one of God's creatures among all the animals of the earth and in many ways inferior to some of the "lower" animals, he was particularly critical of man's aggression against the other animals and our common disregard for the natural and necessary alliance between man and his habitat and fellow animals. The dolphins will be horrified because of the barbaric carnivorous eating habits of man; the human being's arrogance about his own transcendancy makes him at once laughable and unlikeable. Often, Thurber pictures a wasted landscape which human beings have made through destruction of their civilization and species. This is the setting of The Last Flower, The White Deer, "After the Steppe Cat, What?" "Here Come the Dolphins," and "Footnote on the Future." Usually man's self destruction is mirrored in his hostility toward other creatures; if all animals, including Homo sapiens, are just animals, then Man's destruction of himself is

²²James Thurber, Further Fables for Our Time, pp. 65-69.

equatable with his destruction of any other species.

In The Last Flower Man has not only destroyed human civilization but he has killed the entire earth, except for one flower. Emblematic of mankind's degradation, "the dogs deserted their fallen masters" in disillusionment and disgust. After love is reborn in the world, the noble dogs come out of their exile and enjoy the revitalized world.²³ The dog is thus above and separate from Man's bloody and seemingly unending battles. Similarly, The White Deer begins in a wasteland caused by the aggression of two of King Clode's sons, who "had depleted their kingdom of wild life." Conversely, Prince Jorn, the poet, who sings "that love, not might, would untie the magic knot," did not really fight with them but "was careful to loose his arrows and cast his lances clear of whatever quarry the royal family might be pursuing."²⁴

Aggression against the natural order is identified with Thurber's greatest villain, the wicked Duke of The 13 Clocks. The reader is aware of the Duke's extreme cruelty and dehumanized nature from the beginning, where we are told that he likes "to tear the wings from nightingales" and "was fond of peering into nests and lairs in search of birds and animals to maul." After this initial description, the reader is prepared for the Duke's cruelty to all of the people

²³James Thurber, The Last Flower, unpaginated.

²⁴James Thurber, The White Deer, pp. 5, 4.

in the story and cheers when Hark finally says to him at the end of the story: "Ah, shut up.... You are the most aggressive villain in the world."²⁵ The Duke is constantly described as less than human and his separation from a love for and an understanding of nature symbolizes his inhumanity.

Not only is Man's aggression against other animals and his natural habitat deplored, but even the very fact of the spoiled frontier and wilderness is lamented. In "The Wood Duck" a wild duck incongruously becomes attached to a roadside stand on "the concrete New Milford road, which is black in the center with the dropped oil of a million cars." In this decadent scene the bird is hit by a car and thought dead by the narrator, who is struck by the "quick incongruous ending of a wild fowl's life in the middle of a concrete highway." The bird does not die but only flies back to the woods to gather strength and returns, ironically, to the stand. At the end of the story the reader feels a profound sense of regret that the bird is doomed by some quirk to suffer from civilized, mechanized man.²⁶ Although most critics of Thurber or the New Yorker Group easily assume that he represents what is loosely called an "urban outlook,"²⁷

²⁵James Thurber, The 13 Clocks, pp. 17, 18, 110.

²⁶James Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone!, pp. 235, 239.

²⁷Alice Baldwin, "Congruous Laughter," p. 273; this is also one of the basic conclusions of Walter Blair, Horse Sense in American Humor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), *passim*.

it is apparent from a close look at his attitudes toward men, animals, and nature that he has much in common with the unlikely, eccentric Thoreau as a defender of the sanctity of all life and as a critic of the rapid menacing encroachment of a mechanized civilization. Both writers often combine their distrust of the mechanical with their feeling of kinship with nature.

Perhaps the classic example of Thurber's belief in the similarity of all creatures is the title of his 1948 collection of essays, stories, and drawings, The Beast in Me and Other Animals. In this book he separates his material, as he had done in Men, Women, and Dogs, according to species, with the confusion among men and women occupying a space before the section concerning "Less Alarming Creatures." These less alarming creatures appear in "A Gallery of Real Creatures," a series of drawings based on one of Thurber's favorite books, Lydekker's Natural History.²⁸ Even when drawing real creatures, there is a Thurber touch in his choices: The Tasmanian devil, the duck-billed Platypus, Bosmon's Potato, and the Ethiopian Aardvark. Thurber's sheer delight in nature's invention is reflected in this series of drawings which are, in contrast to almost all his other work, carefully executed representations of reality.

In this same collection, Thurber, the well-known

²⁸James Thurber, The Beast in Me and Other Animals, pp. x, 151.

naturalist, also includes "A New Natural History," in which he creates a number of animals which nature regrettably forgot. Almost all of them are results of Thurber's interest in word-play and literalism, so that we have pictures of "A trochee encountering a spondee," a "female shriek rising out of the verbiage to attack a female swoon," and the plighted and unplighted troths.²⁹ Like the Thurber dog, a non-existent breed that has become universally recognizable, this gallery creates a new reality, a whole new "natural" order, and its very existence in the midst of this collection puts the predicaments of Charles Grantham and Amy Lighter, of the confused addicts of "Soapland" and the lady chaoticist, and of the confusing journals of the day, into perspective. There is a sanity, a tranquillity, and an undiluted pleasure about the animal world--even the imagined animal world--which offsets and relieves the human spectacle. In fact, in Thurber's self-deprecatory Introduction to the book he says:

Take the imaginary animals in this book, for example. No labor of ingenuity could fit them into a continuable pattern. They emerged from the shameless breeding ground of the idle mind and they are obviously not going anywhere in particular. Faced with this fact, the author tries the desperate expedient of pulling the bestiary out of his pages only to discover to his dismay that it serves as the legendary thread that stubbornly unravels the whole.³⁰

The animals, quietly playing counter-balance to the men and

²⁹James Thurber, The Beast in Me and Other Animals, pp. 151, 157, 167.

³⁰James Thurber, The Beast in Me and Other Animals, p. ix.

women and their dilemmas, affect a unity within not only the collection of short pieces but within the Thurber vision of confusion.

Thurber, in his thirty year career of anatomizing the confusion of the world, chose to soften and qualify his viewpoint with the dog, "a sound creature in a crazy world," whose very presence adds a perspective from which to view the bedlam and carnival of human life. In order to define and focus on Man's nature and imperfections Thurber continually chose to compare him to "lesser," even extinct, animals: the dinosaur, the poodle, the wild animals of the jungle and the receding American frontier, the dolphin. In his galleries of real and unreal animals he contrasted the joy and beauty of other animals to the rather dismaying human scene. The frequent appearance of all these animals serves to intensify and yet relieve, focus and yet distance the reader's awful knowledge of the confusion among human beings. It is apparent, then, that Thurber's continual and frequent use of animals cannot be easily dismissed as merely nonsensical fun or "elf in" charm; it is a serious and consistent device to put the world's confusion into perspective.

CHAPTER V

MAN, SCIENCE, AND TECHNOLOGY:

CONFUSION EXTENDED

I have arrived at what I call Thurber's Law, which is scientists don't really know anything about anything.

With the disappearance of the gas mantle and the advent of the short circuit, Man's tranquillity began to be threatened by everything he put his hand on.
--Let Your Mind Alone!

Because Thurber understood the natural state of man to be confusion, he naturally chose as specific topics within his Anatomy of Confusion social disorder, war, sexual conflict, destruction, and the imperfect state of human communication. All of these are results of Man's confusion and many appear superficially to be well-ordered: government and social groups seem to organize not disorganize people; marriage is designed to unify people not make them more alienated; language is an arbitrary system designed to make common communication possible but it too often only focuses the essential disparity between people and their ideas. Another subject which fascinated Thurber was the failure of modern science and technology, both of which appear systematic and orderly, to bring any kind of sense or order to the human environment.

Thurber's denial of the ability of science to affect

an order within the chaotic human predicament is especially significant since science is usually considered to be precise and exacting. Scientists often envision themselves as objective reporters who deal only with the absolute and the factual. Even if they admit that they have never arrived at the Truth, they are usually confident that they are approaching the answers in the most careful and orderly fashion. Science, in fact, is often loosely defined as "an organized body of knowledge." When Thurber overturns this notion and accuses scientists themselves of contributing in a major way to the confusion, he has a great subject for laughter as well as a great criticism of an important aspect of modern society. He has questioned our almost reverential acceptance of scientific theory and promises. Like our faith in social groups, axioms, mores, and marriage, science has offered us a false promise to bring order to the chaos and sense out of our nonsensical existence. It is a travesty of order, Thurber says.

Thurber did not deal with the pure sciences but was especially interested in the effects of clinical or applied science, including modern technology, on the masses: what do psychology, medicine, biology, sociology, and the myriad mechanical devices cluttering up our world do for the human beings trapped in the confusion? Thurber answers in a complex statement which can be summarized in terms of two implicit conclusions of his work: he denies the possibility of

any of these "systemless systems" to organize Man's life or make it more understandable or bearable, and furthermore, he even assigns a great deal of the blame for Man's current perplexing and complicated predicament to science and technology. This chapter is an attempt to explain Thurber's criticism of both science and technology as a part of his general Anatomy of Confusion.

Because Thurber wrote two collections of essays refuting scientific theory and parodying scientific treatises (Is Sex Necessary? and Let Your Mind Alone!), most of his critics and reviewers have made a cursory mention of his interest in the failure of science. Machinery is also quite obviously a source of harassment for the "little Thurber man," and therefore most of the criticisms of Thurber's work mention this as one of his subjects. Morsberger briefly mentions the menace of the machine and Tobias notices what he calls Thurber's "comedy of the two cultures."¹ It is true that Thurber was reacting against the promises of science, scientism, and technology, but his motivation was not simply, as Tobias would suggest, to rebut an ideological position which he found unsound or unpalatable; it was his discovery, in the confidence and supposed organization of science, of a prime source for the confusion of the modern world. He saw, in the results of modern science and technology, Man's

¹Morsberger, James Thurber, pp. 22, 23; Tobias, Art of James Thurber, p. 170.

confusion extended.

Scientific theory, he argued, was not only as marked by muddy and confused thinking as men's other efforts, but was a profound failure in its efforts to organize our knowledge or make sense of our existence. It became not a cure but a placebo for man's confused state. Thurber's refutation of scientists is based, I believe, in his essential doubts about the ability of man to deduce "facts" from his constantly revolving experience with any certitude. Science seeks not only to organize disorganized human experience but to generalize, from observable data, about phenomena. In Thurber's world, generalizations and certitude are constantly overturned as reality undergoes endless permutations; every experience is therefore different and transformed by the limited, egocentric human mind which perceives it. Thurber's questioning of the powers of science is therefore basic to his world view of multiple confusions: in science he saw a false assumption about the ability of human reason to understand and explain experience. (Cf. Chapter VI, "Illusion and Reality: Endless Permutations," for a discussion of Thurber's conception of the ultimate confusion, the confusion within the limited human consciousness.)

Thurber, therefore, was not simply attacking the obvious inanities of scientism, which wrongly seeks scientific answers to what are essentially metaphysical questions, but was refuting the basic assumptions of scientific theory: the ability to make generalizations, assign causes, or arrive

at any certainty. It is completely understandable that as a humorist he would have chosen to expose the fertile territory of scientific smugness and jargon to ridicule. In the section of this chapter following my discussion of Thurber's criticism of science, I will also attempt to explain briefly his rejection of other "systemless systems," especially philosophy, as answers for man's dilemma. Thurber understood life as a kind of inexplicable mystery, a monumentally involved, even ambiguous confusion. According to the anatomist of confusion, any attempt to explain life in a neat pattern or to order it crumbles in the face of experience.

Technology, a step-child of applied science which had promised to simplify man's work, speed up his existence, and free him from the bondage of time, has only further extended his confusion, Thurber says. The machine, ostensibly a system to aid man, has become a material exemplar of his inner confusion while adding to the universal bedlam surrounding him. In an attempt to demonstrate the essential integration of all of Thurber's themes, I will establish in this chapter Thurber's criticism of science and technology as an important part of his Anatomy of Confusion by an analysis of the works which expose the failures of these two major extensions of confusion. I will begin with the work which parodies or criticizes science and follow with a discussion of the gadgets, machines, and contraptions in Thurber's world. Two of his collections, Is Sex Necessary? and Let Your

Mind Alone!, best demonstrate his rejection of science and they will be discussed in some detail first.

Thurber's first book, Is Sex Necessary?, which he wrote in 1929 with E. B. White, attacks the seemingly easy answers which psychology, sociology, and medicine offer man for his sexual problems. A spoof of the popular sex manuals of the Twenties and of psychological case studies generally, the book is a sustained parody of scientific analysis and jargon. The authors use the trappings of scientific literature: technical vocabulary, copious abstruse footnotes, case histories, citation of authorities, and an involved glossary. By purposefully reducing such tools to nonsense, they comment on the validity of the whole scientific method and its conclusions.

In the Preface Thurber combines the approaches of sociology and psychology in a mock explanation of Man's sexual history. In it he not only attacks the overcomplication of scientific writing but makes his own point about the essentially inexplicable and complex nature of sex and human life, subjects which the facile scientist pretends are simple and easily explained:

When Man first came into being, he did not think that the female was extraordinary. He did not think that anything was extraordinary. The world was unattractive physically, and a little dull. There was no vegetation, and without vegetation there can be no fancy. Then trees came into existence. It was trees that first made Man begin to brood. In pondering their leafy intricacies he got his first crude concept of beauty. He used to tear great branches out of trees and take them to his cave woman. 'Here,' he would say to her, 'lie on

these.' The man then reclined in a corner of the cave and watched the woman's hair mingle with the leaves, and her eyes shine through them, until he fell asleep. His dreams were troubled. Woman came into his dreams as a tree, then a tree came into his dreams as a woman. He also got her eyes, shining through the leaves, all mixed up with the moon. Out of this curious and lamentable confusion grew the tendency in Man's mind to identify Woman with the phenomena of the burgeoning earth and the mysteries of the illimitable heavens. As time went on Man rather enjoyed cultivating this idea. It was something to think about. It wasn't much, but it was something. Thus was the subconscious born, with all its strange mixture of fact and symbol.

The humor of this section succeeds for several reasons. Primarily, Thurber is already demonstrating here what he would later define as the role of humor: he has perceived the confusion within men's minds (the confusion about whether women or nature should be worshipped) and as a humorist he is standing back from the chaos, reporting in a droll voice about the ravages of man's perplexity and disorder. In a more general way, the section is funny because Thurber is balancing the outrageous with the ordinary fact. His deliberately exaggerated reading of man's dreams is balanced by our knowledge that psychologists do depend on the subconscious and the dreams of an individual for partial interpretation of behavior and attitudes. Furthermore, the final sentence, which expresses the mingling of fact and symbol in the mind, is not only appropriate to what has gone on before it in the paragraph, but is a statement which is literally true. Thurber juxtaposes the serious ("In pondering their leafy intricacies he got his first crude concept of beauty") with the ridiculous ("He used to tear great branches out of trees and

take them home to his cave woman. 'Here,' he would say to her, 'lie on these.' The man then...watched the woman's hair mingle with the leaves.... Woman came into his dreams as a tree...."). Therefore, the parody does not become nonsensical but entices the reader on with just enough fact and seriousness to support the humor.

The Thurber illustrations for the book are mock clinical diagrams and examples. He includes several "unconscious drawings" (drawings supposedly made by the unconscious patient) and drawings of various aspects of sexual behavior and types. Here we have mock-scientific illustrations of "Early Woman" (as ugly and as primitive as only Thurber could have imagined her); figures representing "Sex Substitutes" (in which Dr. Thurber demonstrates the sublimation involved in the American hobbies of bowling, craps, and six-day bicycle racing); and portraits of various types of female neurotics ("The Quiet Type," "The Buttonhole Twister Type"). One of these drawings, an illustration of the grim household in which the sex substitute "fudge-making" has completely taken over, is accompanied by a paragraph full of scientific jargon offering an explanation for female behavior:

The new outdoors type of American man, with all his strength and impetuosity, was not easily to be put off. But the female, equipped with a Defense far superior in polymorphous ingenuities to the rather simple Attack of the male, was prepared. She developed and perfected the Diversion Subterfuge. Its purpose was to put Man in his place. Its first manifestation was fudge-making.

Most of the case histories report the lack of success that patients have in dealing with their neuroses even (or

perhaps especially) after seeking professional help. One senses a feeling of much ado about nothing in these histories, a feeling that the patient would have been better off if he had gone anywhere but to the similarly confused psychologists for a solution to his problem. One man who is successful in solving his sexual problems is saved by "sheer accident" rather than by his doctor's help, and even though he is cured, he marries and after all his effort "the marriage was of average success."²

In "A Discussion of Feminine Types" Thurber parodies the scientific habit of enumerating classifications for everything and denies the validity of any such system of classification:

Successfully to deal with a woman, a man must know what type she is. There have been several methods of classification, none of which I hold thoroughly satisfactory, neither the glandular categories--the gonoid, thyroid, etc.,--nor the astrological--Sagittarius, Virgo, Pisces, and so on.

By the incongruous juxtaposition of metabolic functions and astrological classifications Thurber implies the nonsensical nature of all such classifications. The "and so on" only intensifies the reader's feeling that the scientific author does not know exactly where he is going or the elements of what he is doing. Implicitly, the connection between this nonsense and the nonsense among real scientists is made in the mind of the reader.

² James Thurber, Is Sex Necessary?, pp. xxvi, 40, 57, 58, 79.

The vagaries of scientific reporting are also parodied in Thurber's use of "data." In the fashion of a statistician, he reports that "Sex is by no means everything. It varies, as a matter of fact, from only as high as 78 per cent of everything to as low as 3.10 per cent. The norm, in a sane, healthy person, should be between 18 and 24 per cent."³ Possibly the funniest and most effective part of the entire book, however, is the involved Glossary which was done by Thurber. His definitions not only reduce scientific language to absurdity but also underscore the impossibility of explaining human behavior with such jargon and terminology. A few of the gems are:

Begonia-ism:	Tendency of the male to raise small, plotted plants, and not go out.
Erotic:	Of or pertaining to sex, usually in a pretty far-fetched manner.
Looseness of Systematization:	The going to pieces of a husband.
Narcissism:	Attempt to be self-sufficient, with overtones.
Neuro-Vegetative Reflexes:	A male's, particularly a husband's, quick, unpremeditated reactions to stewed vegetables, and to certain salads.

Coupled with these are the totally nonsensical definitions like "Fuller's Retort: A remark made by a Paterson, N.J., girl one night in Paterson, N.J."⁴ As with the other elements

³ James Thurber, Is Sex Necessary?, p. 140.

⁴ James Thurber, Is Sex Necessary?, pp. 183, 184, 185.

of the parody, the reader laughs at all this because it is just enough like real definitions to appear at once reliable and ridiculous. Thurber thus demonstrates the wide knowledge of scientific thinking and vocabulary which qualifies him to be one of its best critics. Is Sex Necessary? is an attempt to generally deny the much-proclaimed sensibility and organization of the scientific approach to human problems.

In Let Your Mind Alone! (1937), as the title indicates, Thurber returned to his warfare against the modern psychologists and sociologists who would explain man's condition with formulae. He is no longer involved with pseudo-explanations of sexual behavior but is primarily interested here in the "success manuals" written during the Thirties by a legion of psychologists.⁵ Thurber was always enraged by the commercialized how-to-make-your-life-perfect approaches of many modern psychologists, and Let Your Mind Alone! is his greatest effort to debunk this false promise. The book is a collection of essays which are directly critical of scientific thinking, rather than a parody, as Is Sex Necessary? had been. It is his vehement reaction to the popular manuals and courses offered by "success experts" who attempted, in vain Thurber shows, to organize man's life, make sense out of his experience, and give him direction. Let Your Mind Alone! could be described as Thurber against the Dale Carnegie

⁵Most of the second half of this collection is comprised of short stories which are not discussed in this chapter as they do not relate to Thurber's criticism of science.

Syndrome.

The collection's first essay, "Pythagoras and the Ladder," demonstrates Thurber's sense of the great damage done by the exponents of easy answers and successful living. He notes, as an aside, the profound irony that "it was in none other than the black, memorable year of 1929 that the indefatigable Professor Walter B. Pitkin rose up with the announcement that 'for the first time in the career of mankind happiness is coming within the reach of millions of people.'" It was particularly brutal for a man to offer this vision of the Good Life just around the corner as people were filing for bankruptcy and the nation's economy itself was crumbling.

The essay proceeds to show that it was just as brutal on an individual level for a psychologist like James L. Mursell to offer the theorem of Pythagoras as a sensible way to roof a house. Thurber quotes from Chapter VI of Mursell's Streamline Your Mind, which suggests that if a man should want to roof his own house without a ladder he might use the theorem of Pythagoras to figure the amount of roofing he needs. "There is a curious tendency on the part of the How-to-Live men to make things hard," Thurber says, and this is a prime example of their abstruse manner of thinking:

I think this places Dr. James L. Mursell for you; at any rate it does for me: he is the man who would use the theorem of Pythagoras in place of a ladder. I keep wondering what would have happened...if he had remembered the theorem of Pythagoras the way many people do: the sum of the square of the two sides of a right-

angled triangle is equal to twice the sum of the hypotenuse.⁶

By implication, because of man's imperfect mind, formulas, systems, and definitions are not only unhelpful to him in solving his problems but add to his confusion.

"Destructive Forces in Life" attacks the promise of the possibilities for "Masterful Adjustment" that many of the psychology books offer. Thurber says that he has selected his subject entirely at random, a subtle criticism of the supposedly exact method of selection claimed by scientists. This essay denies the possibility of either masterful adjustment to life or of a perfectly disciplined mind because of the nature of man and his world:

The undisciplined mind runs far short of having its purposes thwarted, its plans distorted, its whole scheme and system wrenched out of line. The undisciplined mind, in short, is far better adapted to the confused world in which we live today than the streamlined mind.⁷

Perhaps the crucial statement of Thurber's anti-scientism, this essay expresses his belief in the impossibility of either adjustment to life or real organization of our experience. In a different context. Otto Friedrich concluded:

"Thurber's view of life in the age of terror and confusion is based on the premises of The Last Flower: there can be no real adjustment to life on the edge of a cliff."⁸

⁶James Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone!, pp. 3, 8, 9.

⁷James Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone!, pp. 11, 18.

⁸Otto Friedrich, "James Thurber: A Critical Study," Discovery, No. 5 (Jan., 1955), p. 167.

Since Thurber's men and women are usually depicted acting out the last stages of civilization on the edge of a cliff, any kind of adjustment to such a precarious existence is impossible.

The facile promises of self-discipline and imposed order crumble in the face of universal confusion. "Anodynes for Anxieties" continues on this subject in reducing David Seabury's "How to Worry Successfully" to the full level of its absurdity. Dr. Seabury had suggested as a cure for worry that random association of any possible idea with your source of worry would lead to a solution for your problem. Thurber suggests that not only will this method not cure worry, but that this is in fact the way that those paragons of reason and students of causation, the Marx brothers, constructed their dialogue. He recalls the famous scene in which Groucho says to Chico that the missing picture is in the house next door and Chico replies that there is not any house next door. Groucho, true to Dr. Seabury's directions, then suggests: "Then we'll build one!" in an absurd attempt to justify his initial statement. His proposal to build a house so that he can find a picture in it is logical if random association will solve a problem.

In the same essay Thurber also attacks Mrs. Dorothea Brande's advice that a man who forgets things should write himself innumerable reminder notes. This idea reminds Thurber, quite appropriately, of "one of those elaborate Rube

Goldberg contraptions taking up a whole room and involving bicycles, shotguns, parrots, and little colored boys, all set up for the purpose of eliminating the bother of, let us say, setting an alarm clock."⁹ As our attempts to simplify and order our lives progress, the complication and confusion only multiplies. This collection as a whole denies the possibility of any real anodyne for our anxieties except a sense of humor which will laugh in the face of our predicament.

Let Your Mind Alone! is a strong rejection of the insanely complicated, extravagant, and unsuccessful attempts by men to order their lives and solve their problems. In "Sample Intelligence Test" Thurber finds the quintessence of confusion: "the fuzziness that creeps into the thought processes of those inspirationalists who seek to clarify the human scene reaches an interesting point in Chapter XIV of 'How to Develop Your Personality' by Sadie Myers Shellow, Ph.D." It is science's vain attempts to clarify the ambiguous human scene that Thurber criticizes and he is indignant that the publication of a dollar edition of Dr. Shellow's book "puts the confusion in Chapter XIV within the reach of everyone." He proceeds to take apart her system for personality development" which he describes in a typically ambiguous phrase as "so mixed up that it becomes almost magnificent." Magnificent is hardly the word the reader would expect after "mixed up," but Thurber was always both attracted to and

⁹James Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone!, pp. 42, 44.

critical of confusion. In his methodical taking apart of Shellow's "paradise of errors," Thurber underlines the fundamental incapacities of "the wonderland of psychology" to make life sensible or easier to deal with. His use of the words "paradise" and "magnificent" is not only ironic, but demonstrates Thurber's own ambiguous response to confusion which admits both fascination and horror. Dr. Shellow, unfortunately for her but marvelously for Thurber's readers, had constructed a rather primitive intelligence test, replete with grammatical and logical errors which Thurber masterfully dissects to its rickety skeleton. The essay is Thurber at his funniest and most serious. Notice, for example, Thurber's humorous but scathing attack on two very serious mistakes made by Dr. Shellow: the grammatical absurdity of her statements and, even worse, her consummate trust that she has made herself perfectly clear:

In Chapter I, first paragraph, Dr. Shellow gives the dictionary definition of 'personality' as follows: 'The sum traits necessary to describe what is to be a person.' Unless I have gone crazy reading all these books, I think I have, that sentence defines personality as the sum total of traits necessary to describe an unborn child. If Dr. Shellow's error here is typographical, it looms especially large in a book containing a chapter that tells how to acquire reading skill and gives tests for efficiency in reading.¹⁰

In "An Outline of Scientists" Thurber voices the theme of the entire book as "Thurber's Law:" "Scientists don't really know anything about anything." This flagrant

¹⁰ James Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone!, pp. 67, 68.

generalization was caused by his horror at reading a particularly insensitive article on bloodhounds (first cousins of the wise Thurber dog) by a scientist who concluded that bloodhounds repel people because they are "terrible to look at and terrible to encounter." Thurber needed very little encouragement to deny all scientific theories and data and this callous remark leads him to feel that

all scientists are the same man. Could it be possible that I had isolated here, as under a microscope, the true nature of the scientist?... I have never liked or trusted scientists very much, and I think now that I know why: they are afraid of bloodhounds.... This must be the reason that most of them withdraw from the world and devote themselves to the study of the inanimate and the impalpable.¹¹

The scientists lack the wide view, the deep understanding of life that the artist has. Thurber has, as under a microscope, methodically taken apart the anatomy of confusion but since his study is of the pulsating human scene, he retains a sense of humanity that the scientist lacks. It is the essential separation from human values and experience that Thurber perceives to be the scientist's greatest flaw. Although Thurber did seriously question the powers of human reason, it is apparent from the above quotation that Walter Blair's statements about Thurber's revelling in insanity and the rejection of common sense are exaggerated.¹² Thurber is in fact championing the supremacy of meaningful individual experience and observation in comparison to abstract reasoning.

¹¹ James Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone!, pp. 159-162.

¹² Walter Blair, Horse Sense in American Humor, pp. 289-293.

Thurber quite seriously believed that science was an inadequate way for man to solve either the great problems of his world or the trivial difficulties of everyday life. In "Women Go on Forever" he laments that scientists have not discovered the fact of female survival and supremacy because "with their eyes on the average, they fail to discern the significant." The significant is what art is involved with, and in "After the Steppe Cat, What?" Thurber suggests that it will be a poet and not a scientist who will be able "to detect these minute portents of the approaching end" of man's time on earth.¹³ Like the comparison of the insane scientists and advisors in The White Deer and Many Moons to the superior sensibility of the tales' hero-poets, Thurber here suggests that only the poet can perceive the truth, the large awareness, and make sense from our nonsensical globe. Science is especially open to attack because it flagrantly and smugly pretends to be able to affect an order while only adding to the confusion.

Science, in its peculiarly narrow vision, bases its naive optimism on little real knowledge of human experience. The writer is aware of the real problems and ambiguities of human nature, however. Thurber writes his own "Footnote on the Future" (My World--and Welcome to It, 1942) in which he criticizes the easy optimism of "the scientists, who look beyond the little menaces of the mundane moment, [and] are

¹³James Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone!, p. 231.

quite naturally, cheerful." Thurber knew so well that human history is composed of many mundane moments and felt that humor and art in general had to deal with the problems and realities of everyday life. He particularly rejects the happy announcement by some scientists that because someday man will begin to use all of his brain cells, this will necessarily lead him to a happier, more virtuous life:

In the history of mankind the increase of no kind of power has, so far as I can find out, ever moved naturally and inevitably in the direction of the benign. It has, as a matter of fact, almost always tended in the direction of the malignant; don't ask me why, it just has. This tendency it seems to me, would be especially true of the power of the mind, since it is that very power which is behind all the deviltry Man is now up to and always has been up to.¹⁴

This argument isolates the crux of Thurber's difference from the scientist: all of his criticism of science is an attempt to question the usually unquestioned powers of reason which man assumes are a positive force in his life. Thurber suggests that man's cerebral processes have lead him, not only into confusion, but into brutalities which the "lower" animals, driven by instinct, could not commit. In Let Your Mind Alone! he had perhaps exaggerated this idea in the statement that "sixty minutes of thinking of any kind is bound to lead to confusion and unhappiness"¹⁵ but his systematic debunking of the apparently reasonable behavior which

¹⁴James Thurber, My World--and Welcome to It, pp. 111, 115-116.

¹⁵James Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone!, p. 28.

derives from the human mind is quite convincing of this seemingly ridiculous assumption. His questioning of the powers of human reason is only offensive until we see the examples of supposedly rational human behavior that he exposes. He is so effective in anatomizing the confusion that our old conceptions and values are essentially shaken. The psychologists immortalized in Let Your Mind Alone! stumble, with their imperfect minds, from one confusion to another, creating a paradise of errors.

It is interesting that for all his rejection of scientific thinking, Thurber displays some of the best traits of the scientific, as well as the educated, mind: he was an expert researcher, he was capable of extremely close observation of natural phenomena and equally astute conclusions from his observations (cf. his remarks on animal behavior), and he often uses fairly technical terms in reference to animals or in his other observations on the natural world. He had insatiable curiosity and could draw with a keen eye for detail and scientific accuracy, as "A Gallery of Real Creatures"¹⁶ shows. His lifelong interest in the natural world and the evolution of man connects him with the highest goals of science, which are to define and explain man and his universe. He seemed particularly interested in the different explanations of man's beginnings and history and his work is scattered with rather sophisticated references to the

¹⁶ In James Thurber, The Beast in Me, pp. 173-188.

theories of anthropology and natural science regarding man's history, nature, society, and physical properties.¹⁷

Thurber keenly felt, however, the ultimate inadequacy of science to answer the real questions of man's existence (Who are we? Where are we going? What has brought us to this predicament in which we find ourselves?) and therefore understood it to be the function of the poet or artist to interpret all the disorganized information concerning the life of man on earth. To this end, he even re-wrote a portion of biology himself, in his "New Natural History," a collection of drawings of animals which exist only in Thurber's imagination.¹⁸ Science, as such, he saw as a dismal failure in its efforts to affect an order within man's perpetual state of confusion. Science lacks the organizing vision, the synthesizing understanding which can make sense out of our chaotic experience. This organizing vision Thurber partially achieves through his humorous method of quietly recollecting chaos and through his particularly exact prose. He delegates such a vision to characters who are either humorists (the Thurber dogs and the narrators of many of the essays and stories) or poets (the heroes of the fairy tales).

17

Cf. James Thurber, "Statement," in I Believe, pp. 295-300; "The Sea and the Shore," and "The Human Being and the Dinosaur," in Further Fables for Our Time; The Beast in Me; and "After the Steppe Cat, What?," in Let Your Mind Alone!

18

James Thurber, Beast in Me and Other Animals, pp. 151-169.

Thurber came to be less interested in science as an object of laughter and criticism in the last two decades of his life and broadened his commentary into a kind of satire of "systemless systems." These systems are directly related to his criticism of scientific thinking, however, because underlying his objections to both are a strong feeling that man's life, as an infinite mystery and enigma, is always prey to complexity, confusion, and complication, regardless of what methods he uses to alleviate the confusion. Thurber displays an especially important distrust of human reason as a solution for the problem. As Thurber had argued in his defense of dogs and other animals, reason has not done as much for man as instinct has done for his fellow creatures; a dog or a dolphin could not and would not devise elaborate methods for worrying, remembering, or adjusting to life. The implication seems to be that the lower animals are naturally adjusted to life and that man's adjustment is always tentative, incomplete, and faulty. Only through laughter and art can a partial understanding and acceptance of life be affected.

The White Deer (1945) is probably the representative piece which exemplifies Thurber's conception of "systemless systems." Although King Clode constantly begs for help from his advisors (many of them scientists) to make sense out of "this false flux of fact and form" he is surrounded by a troop of "dodderers and dolts" who make it impossible to understand anything: "In such confusion and caprice who

knows his hound dog from his niece?" he wails.¹⁹ It is obvious from a comparison of Clode's mannerisms and dialogue with the description of Harold Ross in The Years with Ross (1959) that Thurber based this character partially on the first editor of The New Yorker. Both Ross and Clode display a strong desire to organize the bedlam but are unsuccessful doing so.²⁰

Clode is surrounded by a remarkable array of short-sighted and sick specialists. There is the Royal Physician, so sick that he stays in bed and ministers to the only patient he can take care of, himself, and the "castle wizard who, in trying to remove his own head and replace it, had succeeded only in straining his neck so that he had taken to his bed." We also meet the Royal Recorder who can speak only in legalistic riddles, as his argument with the King over which tale of magic to believe shows:

'I merely wish to state, avow, affirm, asseverate, maintain, confess, proclaim, protest, announce, vouchsafe, and say that there are precisely ten such tales in all, and each and every one duplicates, substantiates, corroborates, and proves each and every other.

In the Epilogue of the story Thurber underscores his criticism of such non-communicating jargon by stating that "a dusty yellow scroll" had been found to tell that wicked Nagrom Yaf

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James Thurber, The White Deer, pp. 15, 45.

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Cf. James Thurber, The Years with Ross, pp. 7, 8, and The White Deer, pp. 45, 92, 44, 111. Mrs. Thurber mentions this as a very important element in Thurber's conception of The White Deer; Interview with Catherine Kenney, Dec. 2, 1973.

(Morgan le Fay) had been destroyed by Jorn's love for Rosanore, thus suggesting that Clode's kingdom of confusion had a new order. Characteristically, Thurber qualifies this conventional comic ending by saying "I find no cause to doubt the scroll, for it is signed and sealed, and witnessed, and attested." The White Deer thus stresses, as much as any other Thurber work, the inevitability of confusion ambiguously combined with hope.

The funniest of all these insane specialists of Clode's court is the Astronomer Paz, who "has invented rose-colored lenses for his telescope so even the palest moon and coldest star turn red and deep, and it is thus reported to the King."²¹ Not only is the scientist unable to make sense out of the confusion and caprice of Clode's wasteland, but he is capable of the perverted and distorted perception which haunts everyone else. Clode's kingdom, a miniature of Thurber's universal confusion, reels in organized misunderstanding and chaos.

Thurber had hilariously manipulated another such systemless system in "The Civil War Phone Number Association" (in The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze). As the success experts in Let Your Mind Alone! and the King's advisors in The White Deer had been unable to help men solve the confusion of his world, so does a vacuous suggestion from Rudy Vallee for improving man's memory only complicate matters.

²¹James Thurber, The White Deer, pp. 32, 92, 115, 25.

Mr. Vallee, it seems, had suggested that people associate "various things with the date of the Civil War (telephone numbers, for instance)" as a memory device. Thurber sees in this idiocy a gateway to bedlam, not an organizing principle for one's life. He visualizes himself attempting to remember numbers in the Vallee manner: "I would phone 9861 and then 6198 and in the end go completely to pieces and try all the permutations until I had run the entire gamut of numbers in the Algonquin exchange, from 1689, the lowest, to 9861, the highest."²² Although exaggerated, this comment is genuinely funny because everyone has experienced the confusion resulting from an almost remembered number or fact. Thurber devastatingly proves what an ineffectual effort to streamline your mind, adjust to life, and order your experience each one of these "solutions" offers.

Although it would appear that Thurber has a certain amount of confidence in literature as a means to understanding or coping with life, this confidence does not include philosophy. In "The Imperturbable Spirit" (The Owl in the Attic, 1931) Mr. Monroe gets into a high state of confusion from reading philosophy, which Thurber apparently considers a most unsuccessful system:

When he got home he took a bath, put on clean linen and another suit, and sank into a great chair to read some more in the book on God, morals, and so on. In the course of this he looked up three words in a

²²James Thurber, The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, pp. 101-102.

dictionary, 'eschatological,' 'maleficent,' and 'teleology.' He read the definition of the last word twice, frowned, and let it go. Despite the fact that the outlook for mankind was far from bright in the particular chapter he was reading, Mr. Monroe began to feel pretty much the master of his fate. Non-fiction, of a philosophical nature, always affected him that way, regardless of its content.

It is the illusion of mastery which John gets from reading this book that causes him to act ridiculously and think himself an "imperturbable spirit" although he is only little ineffectual John Monroe.²³ He has been beguiled by another systemless system and the result is even greater confusion in himself and his marriage.

Thirty years later in Lanterns and Lances Thurber returned to the subject of the inadequacy of philosophy as an aid to living. In "Midnight at Tim's Place" the narrator "Thurber" recalls meeting a young couple in a local bar and hearing an incredible story over innumerable drinks. The young man, Warren Kirkfield, had just returned from a profoundly disillusioning experience with his old philosophy professor, "the greatest symbol of security in my life, the man who could pull me back from the doors of Hell." The old professor had always provided trite little bits of philosophy and inspiration to his students:

'Everybody, in college and afterward, turned to Dr. Pensinger for inspiration and consolation,' her husband went on. 'He had, and still has, some piece of unique philosophy for each special case. 'You can keep a stiff upper lip, and smile, too,' and 'Don't let that chip on your shoulder be your only reason for walking

²³ James Thurber, The Owl in the Attic, pp. 11, 12.

erect.' We always left Dr. Pensinger's study with a high heart and renewed hope.'

Kirkfield had gone to see this man when he felt he was having a nervous breakdown and the man offered the same old sayings and the same reassuring smile. The experience was not only unhelpful but terrifying, however, because it seemed that his professor was crazy himself; he was sitting alone in his study, wearing two hats:

'Two hats,' Kirkfield repeated. 'They were both gray felt hats, one on top of the other. The terrifying thing was that he didn't say anything about them. He just sat there with two hats on, trying to cheer me up.'

'I always say you can have too much philosophy,' Mrs. Kirkfield said. 'It isn't good for you. It's disorganizing. Everybody's got to wake up sometime feeling that everything is terrible, because it is.'²⁴

This paragon of reason and fountain of inspiration thus crumbled before his student's eyes. His system itself is "disorganizing," only an example of man's inner confusion. Even if it is disquieting, Thurber's work attempts to awaken us to the realization "that everything is terrible, because it is." Thurber's rejection of philosophers is a consistent, if minor, theme in his work. As early as 1939, he had written of the "curious indulgences," including religion and philosophy, which man has contrived to help him understand himself.²⁵ In his last collection of fables, Thurber defined a philosopher as "one who seeks a magnificent explanation for his insignificance."²⁶ Thurber tended to regard all systems

²⁴James Thurber, Lanterns and Lances, p. 14.

²⁵James Thurber, "Statement," in I Believe, p. 295.

²⁶James Thurber, Further Fables for Our Time, p. 103.

--religious, social, cultural, political, or philosophic--as elaborate mix-ups. According to Thurber, a man who really looks at the complexity and confusion of human existence will simply realize "that everything is terrible, because it is."

"The Last Clock," also in Lanterns, presents Thurber's fears of over-specialization, intellectual arrogance, and scientism at their most devastating level. In this fable, time is running out for man because a clock-ogre is destroying all the clocks and no one, none of the hundreds of bureaucrats or specialists or leaders, can save civilization:

Three weeks to the day after the ogre had eaten the last clock, he fell ill and took to his bed, and ogress sent for the chief diagnostician of the Medical Academy, a diagnostician familiar with so many areas that totality had become to him only a part of wholeness. 'The trouble is,' said the chief diagnostician, 'we don't know what the trouble is. Nobody has ever eaten all the clocks before, so it is impossible to tell whether the patient has clockitis, clockosis, clockoma, or clocktheria. We are also faced with the possibility that there may be no such diseases. The patient may have one of the minor ailments, if there are any, such as clockets, clockles, clocking cough, ticking pox, or clumps. We shall have to develop area men who will find out about such areas, if such areas exist, which, until we find out that they do, we must assume do not.'²⁷

Although grim, this description of modern society is also funny because the doubletalk and rationalizations offered by these imbeciles are only exaggerations of the language we hear everyday. Especially when read aloud, the mock-medical phraseology in this passage is superbly funny because it parodies so well the tangle of scientific suffixes which

²⁷ James Thurber, Lanterns and Lances, p. 53.

doctors often smugly use and with which they confuse the rest of us: -itis, -osis, -oma, and -eria, are common medical endings. The parody is even funnier because some of the coinages here (clockoma--glaucoma; clumps--mumps; ticking pox--chicken pox) actually are puns of well-known disease names.

The fable ends with the death of human civilization as a result of the inability of anyone, especially our highly specialized specialists, to do anything about the growing confusion. Nothing better exemplifies Thurber's ambivalence between comedy, tragedy, and satire than this fable, which vacillates between humorous acceptance of the horrors of the modern world and outrage at them. It should also be remembered that Thurber wrote The Wonderful O and The Years with Ross just before the composition of this gloomy fable. Whereas The Wonderful O (1957) suggests the improvability of man and his ability to transcend chaos, The Years with Ross (1959) seems simply to accept the chaotic spectacle. Thurber was always torn between indicting men's follies and accepting such folly as the legacy of mankind. As an artist, he retains a high level of humanity because of this very indecision; his vacillation between acceptance, attack, outrage, amusement, and fear in the face of the Awful reality which he saw so well typifies, I believe, the enigmatic nature of human existence.

"The Last Clock" provides a grimly humorous view of the fate of an over-specialized, self-deluding society, but

in The Years with Ross Thurber maintained a truly amused perception of the inability of man (in the character of Ross) to achieve one of his greatest goals, to end the confusion around him:

From the beginning Ross cherished his dream of a Central Desk at which an infallible omniscience would sit, a dedicated genius, out of Technology by Mysticism, effortlessly controlling and coordinating editorial personnel, contributors, office boys, cranks and other visitors, manuscripts, proofs, cartoons, captions, covers, fiction, poetry, and facts, and bringing forth each Thursday a magazine at once funny, journalistically sound, and flawless. This dehumanized figure, disguised as a man, was a goal only in the sense that the mechanical rabbit of a whippet track is a quarry. Ross's mind was always filled with dreams of precision and efficiency beyond attainment, but exciting to contemplate.²⁸

Ross vainly dreamed, as so many of Thurber's characters do, of a miracle system which would somehow come "out of technology by mysticism," a phrase which perfectly describes an American myth as only Thurber could have expressed it. Like our vain hope that science could provide the Answer, we have hoped that technology would organize the confusion.

The mechanical and the scientific were not connected in Thurber's mind only because modern technology is an outgrowth of scientific investigations; they were intrinsically connected because, like the theories of psychologists and biologists and the mazes of philosophy and legalistic jargon, our technological advances appear to offer a system, an order, an aid for organizing man's chaotic predicament while all they really do is multiply the complications. The

²⁸James Thurber, The Years with Ross, pp. 7, 8.

technological revolution, historians tell us, freed man from trivial work, gave him time for enjoyment and leisure, provided him with an easier way to deal with the involved business of living. Not so, says Thurber, and anyone who has confronted any of the myriad gadgets and devices cluttering our world would agree that, although Thurber may exaggerate in his total revulsion from the mechanical, the axioms about our technological paradise which he rejects are pitifully inadequate.

Thurber's humorous treatment of the confusion between man and the machine is at least partially a gimmick or conventional device. Morsberger mentions Thurber's similarity to Robert Benchley in that "both authors are victimized by inanimate things and ruined by tremendous trifles."²⁹ Benchley, a model humorist for Thurber, probably provided some direct influence on Thurber's comedy of the mechanical, especially in the early period when Thurber was just beginning and Benchley was established as a leading humorist. The menace of the machine occupies a significant place in much comedy and humor, however, and Thurber's writings about the machine can as well be compared to Chaplin's vision in Modern Times and Rube Goldberg's cartoons as to Benchley's essays.

²⁹ Morsberger, James Thurber, p. 22; this same point was made earlier by Walter Blair in Horse Sense in American Humor.

The dramatization of the fear of the mechanical is not just a literary device or convention in Thurber's work, however. Mrs. Thurber has said that this is one aspect of the Thurber man which was based in autobiographical fact. Thurber himself was in fact intimidated by anything mechanical.³⁰ It is fortunate that as a humorist he was able to convert his own fears and unfortunate experiences into an effective and universalized artistic situation. Although not everyone has difficulty driving a car or changing a typewriter ribbon, frustrating experiences at the mercy of a gadget or a machine have happened to everyone. Thurber's comedy allows us the distance from which to stand and enjoy the sight of such frustration coming to others.

Although Thurber's use of machinery and the mechanical as prime harassers of modern man is frequent and obvious, there has been very little comment on this subject. His critics have been content to mention that the little Thurber man is as menaced by the machine as he is by the Thurber woman.³¹ I would think that, in addition to any biographical reasons or literary influences, Thurber chose to dramatize the trouble caused by modern technology as a part of his *Anatomy of Confusion* because of the growth of technology, which had promised so much, has in fact

³⁰ Mrs. James Thurber, Interview with Catherine Kenney, Dec. 2, 1973.

³¹ Cf. Morsberger, James Thurber, pp. 22-23.

complicated man's life more than ever before. A look at representative pieces dealing with the machine will demonstrate that Thurber's perception of man's mechanized existence is but another aspect of his great theme that man's predicament, on both the cosmic and mundane levels, is chaos. The machine, to Thurber, is only a material extension of that confusion.

"The Car We Had to Push" (My Life and Hard Times, 1933) presents the many problems with the mechanical that various members of Thurber's fictionalized family had. The car they had to push was an eight year old Reo which they could not start without pushing:

My father used to get sick at his stomach pushing the car, and very often was unable to go to work. He had never liked the machine, even when it was good, sharing my ignorance and suspicion of all automobiles of twenty years ago and longer.

The car was his father's enemy and the enemy was usually victorious. Thurber compares some of the family's last experiences with the car to the memories of earthquakes which many autobiographers mention; the analogy is appropriate since the confusion resulting from both is about equal.

All of the characters in the story are confused by the mechanical.

My mother, for instance, thought--or, rather, knew--that it was dangerous to drive an automobile without gasoline: it fried the valves, or something. 'Now don't you dare drive all over town without gasoline!' she would say to us when we started off. Gasoline, oil, and water were much the same to her, a fact that made her life both confusing and perilous.

His mother's lack of understanding about the car makes her life more confusing but that is not the only problem she has.

She thought that the Victrola might blow up one day because she could only suppose that it was propelled by some new-fangled and untested apparatus which was likely to let go at any minute, making us all the victims and martyrs of the wild eyed Edison's experiments.

She was also afraid of the telephone (only during storms) but lest the reader judge her too harshly, the narrator informs us that "she came naturally by her confused and groundless fears, for her own mother lived the latter years of her life in the horrible suspicion that electricity was dripping invisibly all over the house." Like Harold Ross's dream of a technology out of mysticism, these confused people assign a large, almost god-like power to the perplexing machines around them. Thurber's characters are always harassed by an existence beyond their understanding and no element of their lives is more incomprehensible to them than the machine and the mechanized.

The car is the special enemy, possibly because of its relative sophistication, its size, its power, and the fact that it has a great deal of control over the people inside it. Although Thurber shared his father's great distrust of the car, the narrator of the story recalls with relish the time that the Thurber boys had duped their father into believing that the Reo was falling apart by attaching a package of kitchen utensils under the car, to be dropped at a particular serene moment:

This was a little scheme of Roy's to frighten father, who had always expected the car might explode. It worked perfectly. That was twenty-five years ago, but it is one of the few things in my life I would like to

live over again if I could.... Roy twitched the string in the middle of a lovely afternoon on Bryden Road near Eighteenth Street. Father had closed his eyes and, with his hat off, was enjoying a cool breeze. The clatter on the asphalt was tremendously effective: knives, forks, can-openers, pie pans, pot lids...fell, beautifully together, in a lingering clamant crash. 'Stop the car!' shouted father. 'I can't,' Roy said. 'The engine fell out.' 'God Almighty!' said father, who knew what that meant, or knew what it sounded as if it might mean.³²

The father, so confused as to the real nature of a car, is fooled by Roy's absurd statements. His car is a mystical experience to him and as such he has neither control over it nor an understanding of it.

The Thurber man of the Thirties is typified by his trouble with machines and almost always his trouble is specifically with an automobile. John Monroe's would-be mistress loses interest in him when his wife tells her that John has trouble with any kind of machinery.³³ Two stories in The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze similarly connect the husband's mastery of an automobile with his potential for dominance in his marriage. If a man could handle the vagaries and mysteries of a car, perhaps he could even manage a Thurber woman.

"Mr. Pendly and the Poindexter" is about a man who had not driven a car for five years, ever since "his mistook a pond for a new concrete road and turned off onto it." Since that experience of profound confusion he had feared

³²James Thurber, My Life and Hard Times, pp. 28, 31, 33, 31.

³³

James Thurber, The Owl in the Attic, p. 30.

that all was illusion: "You can't drive toward a body of water thinking it's made of concrete without having your grip on yourself permanently loosened." His wife, like Mrs. Monroe, is coolly superior and capable of masterfully handling an automobile. This story is about their going to purchase a Poindexter, an event which Mrs. Pendly handles with as much ease as driving the car. Her husband is pitifully out of place: "Mr. Pendly had the same feeling in the presence of mechanics that, as a child, he had had during church sermons: he felt that he was at the mercy of malignant powers beyond his understanding." Thurber again compares metaphysical confusion (religion) to man's confusion about the mechanical.

Mr. Pendly is woefully ignorant about cars and is unable to think of any pertinent questions to ask the salesman. When the salesman is unable to open the trunk of the Poindexter, however, Mr. Pendly practices trying to open it while the salesman and Mrs. Pendly are looking at another car. When he finally opens it, he receives, instead of congratulations, the ultimate slam: neither the salesman nor Mrs. Pendly pays any attention to his little victory over the car. This cool indifference leads Mr. Pendly into a dream like Walter Mitty's. He imagines miraculously fixing a car which none of the burly mechanics in the showroom had been able to repair and receiving wild adulation for doing

the impossible.³⁴

In "Smashup" Tommy Trinway actually conquers the automobile as well as his wife. Another man who had always been afraid to drive, he is forced to drive when his wife sprains her wrist. Not only in the car frightening, but driving it into the city is described like an encounter with a terrifying machine:

The Bronx loomed up before him, like an ether nightmare he had had as a boy. Only there had been, that time, finally oblivion, and here now were unending shouts and banging, and the roaring of elevated trains overhead, and a snarl of broad, ugly streets curving off in every direction, and big, sweaty women pushing baby carriages, and scowling men in shirt sleeves jabbering, and trucks rumbling and pounding by, and taxis rushing around him, and lights turning red and green under their iron hoods, and policemen making formidable gestures with their huge hands.

By some stroke of fate, Tommy just misses hitting an "L" pillar and a pedestrian and, after being congratulated by nearby taxi drivers and policemen, he feels a new superiority and freedom. He has achieved, if inadvertently, what Penderly and Mitty only imagine. When he and his wife return to their hotel, he asks for separate rooms; his master of the mechanical menace enables him to assert himself as a man, but such a victory is rare in Thurber.³⁵

One of Thurber's finest essays, "Sex ex Machina" (in Let Your Mind Alone!) combines his distrust of science and

³⁴James Thurber, The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, p. 56.

³⁵James Thurber, The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, pp. 193-200.

his hatred of the mechanical. Here he rejects the popularized Freudian interpretation of a sexual significance in man's fear of machines:

'No man (to go on) who has wrestled with a self-adjusting card table can ever be quite the man he once was. If he arrives at the state where he hesitates, wavers, and jumps at every mechanical device he encounters, it is not, I submit, because he recognizes the enticements of sex in the device, but only because he recognizes the menace of the machine as such.

.....
The experience has left its mark. Everybody, from the day of the jumping card table to the day of the screaming klaxon, has had similar shocks. You can see the result, entirely unsuperinduced by sex, in the strained faces and muttering lips of people who pass you on the streets of great, highly mechanized cities. There goes a man who picked up one of those trick matchboxes that whir in your hands; there goes a woman who tried to change a fuse without turning off the current; and yonder toddles an ancient who cranked an old Reo with the spark advanced. Every person carries in his consciousness the old scar, or the fresh wound, of some harrowing misadventure with a contraption of some sort.

Instead of the Freudian analysis, Thurber says that we have a "dread heritage of arrogance, shock, and terror arising out of the nature of mechanical contrivances per se." It is the normal, not the neurotic, in us that perceives a real enemy when we see one. Machines that "whir and whine and whiz" have only added to man's general perplexity and confusion and have stolen the last vestiges of serenity and calm: "with the disappearance of the gas mantle and the advent of the short circuit, man's tranquillity began to be threatened by everything he put his hand on."³⁶ Thurber's picture of human society is never really tranquil, however,

³⁶ James Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone!, pp. 57-65.

and the confusion instigated by people's minds and misconceptions ("The Day the Dam Broke," "The Night the Bed Fell," and "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty") is only added to, and represented in, their subsequent confusion about the mechanical.

Thurber's most famous story, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," is based in a refinement of the situation and technique of "Mr. Pendly and the Poindexter." Walter Mitty, who has trouble even parking a car, putting chains on it, or dealing with Mrs. Mitty, dreams of heroic action which generally involves his miraculous mastery of machinery. He dreams (while he is being badgered by Mrs. Mitty to drive slower) that he is commander of a fighter plane "through the worst storm in twenty years of Navy flying" or (while he is actually attempting to park the car) that he is able, through the wildly melodramatic use of a fountain pen, to repair a complicated anesthetizing machine during an operation on a world-famous banker. Mitty's mastery of the mechanical, or anything else, is accomplished only in his dreams, however, and the language of his dreams lets the reader know how confused and bewildered this man really is. His essential inability to penetrate the nature of the mechanical is reflected in his generalized imagining of "ta-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa" for, variously, the sound of ailing cylinders of an airplane, a malfunctioning anesthetizer, and new flame-throwers on the battle front. This is the construct of a man who only very vaguely comprehends the mechanical and, in

re-using the same phrasing, Thurber's portrayal of the generalized nature of the daydream experience is more realistic. Mitty's incorrect usage of technical medical and military terms only adds to our impression of his confusion.³⁷ Walter Mitty can only dream of a conquest of the technological world and even in his dreams he belies his confusion about it.

"The Lady in a Trap" (Thurber Country, 1953) pictures a bewildered, hungry husband attacking the mysteries of kitchen equipment in his wife's absence; even the simple process of eating becomes a gigantic predicament:

Entering the kitchen, he is instantly surprised by its strangeness...He wanders into the pantry and sees a lot of drawers and cupboard doors.... The next door opens up to reveal two hundred plates, including the Spode set, and green glass ones for salad. Next he finds himself palely wandering among big, useless platters and formidable tureens. He decides he is up too high and he opens a couple of cupboard doors flush with the floor, and gets tangled up with the things you make onion soup and shirred eggs in, and a lot of iron, copper, and aluminum objects, in a recess that becomes deeper and darker, at the end of which he unearths a waffle iron.

.....

He knows he cannot work the Silex, so he gives up the idea of making coffee and thinks of opening a can of peaches. Before he can find a can of peaches, he has placed seventeen cans of other things on the floor. Now comes the problem of opening the peaches, and he goes through the drawers looking for a can opener. He can't find one and remembers vaguely having heard something about an electric can opener. He looks around the walls and spots the Mixmaster, but something keeps him from trying to open the can of peaches by putting it in the Mixmaster and starting the thing. He is suddenly no longer hungry.³⁸

³⁷James Thurber, My World--and Welcome to It, pp. 72-82. Cf. Chapter VII, "The Language of Confusion," for a discussion of Mitty's mistaken terminology.

³⁸James Thurber, Thurber Country, pp. 79, 80.

The kitchen is described like a labyrinthine journey in which formidable enemies are faced. The narrator's knowledge of the mechanical is as vague as Walter Mitty's but he seems more conscious of his ignorance and confusion. He has given up even dreaming of conquest over the Mixmaster, but at least he has the good sense not to try to use it. Again, the mechanical is described as a mysterious experience, frightening man as a kind of incomprehensible deity.

In "The Grizzly and the Gadgets" (Further Fables, 1956) Thurber satirizes America's love of mechanical gimmicks and the general over-complication of our way of life. In this fable a male grizzly bear comes home during the Christmas holiday after several weeks absence and finds a door knocker which plays "Silent Night," a light switch which releases the odor of pine cones, and a castle-designed cigarette box which has to have its drawbridge opened with a hidden key. "Enraged, infuriated, beside himself, seeing red and thinking black, the grizzly bear began taking the living room apart" until he had destroyed all the gadgets, gimmicks, and artifacts of a Twentieth Century American home. He then flees this madness with the most attractive female bear around and is never heard from again. In the moral Thurber appropriately re-phrases the words of that great hater of technology and advocate of simplicity, Thoreau: "Nowadays most men lead lives of noisy desperation."³⁹ In "The Grizzly

³⁹James Thurber, Further Fables for Our Time, pp. 89-94.

and the Gadgets" the enemy is not so much a mysterious, perplexing technology but the very triviality and confusion which its bastard offsprings instigate in men's lives.

Thurber came to write less about the menace of the machine in the late Forties and through the Fifties. Although he had always believed man's confusion to reside ultimately within man himself (as My Life, the Fables, and "Walter Mitty" show) his emphasis later turned away from the external manifestations of confusion like the machine and more toward a study of the individual's confusion. This change of emphasis is perhaps partially due to the fact that during this time Thurber became almost totally blind and therefore the actual challenge of the automobile and other gadgets was not a part of his everyday life. Just as surely, it is probably that he felt he had covered the subject completely in the stories and essays of the earlier period. His shift of emphasis is announced in his mock epigraph for The Beast in Me and Other Animals in 1948:

'There is the tiger that lurks in motor cars, crouches in sealed envelopes and prowls between the doorbell and the phone, ready to pounce upon the dreamer by day, the reveler by night, or any man at any hour; but I am concerned with the beast inside, the beast that haunts the moonlit margins of the mind, never clearly seen, never wholly lost to view, never leaving, in its wanderings, pawprints sharp enough to follow, or strange and promising enough, it well may be, to lure the wary hunter from the surer spoor of bigger game.'⁴⁰

⁴⁰ James Thurber, The Beast in Me, epigram.

He is saying that the beast in the motor car or the beast in the unexpected reminder of our own mortality is not so important to him now as the beast within the person, the beast in the mind.

Richard Tobias sees in The Beast in Me an opposite move toward an interest in "social" beasts; he reads the epigraph literally as meaning "the beast inside" to be the drawings of beasts in the collection.⁴¹ Thurber's rhythmic and alliterative language makes me feel, however, that a metaphorical interpretation is in order since the collection coincides with a marked decrease in studies of the menace of the machine.

Thurber's reaction against science, technology, and other "systemless systems" is not just a partisan statement in the battle of the two cultures, nor a fashionable stance for a humorist in the early part of this century to take, nor even an expression of his own personal distaste for the subjects, although it is partially all of these things. More important than any of these statements, however, Thurber saw in the perplexing, frightening, and complicating machine a material exemplar of man's state of confusion. He similarly explored the morass of scientific thinking as another confusion within the universal chaos. Both of these aspects of modern society have offered overly facile answers for human problems and have promised progress, comfort, ease, and order.

⁴¹ Tobias, Art of James Thurber, pp. 84, 95.

Thurber finds rich comedy in their often dismal failures to make sense out of our existence or to bring order to the disorder of human life. He perceived them to be, in fact, only major extensions of the general confusion and as an important part of his *Anatomy of Confusion* he isolated these two elements for special criticism.

Although he often studied the harassment of man by his perplexing environment, Thurber had always been interested in the confusion within man, man who is ultimately the source of all confusion. There is one other major area of confusion which Thurber studied: the confusion between illusion and reality which occurs in the perception of the individual. As he had described this change of emphasis in the epigraph to *The Beast in Me*, we will turn now from the external manifestations of man's confusion to the beast in the moonlit marges of the mind.

CHAPTER VI

ILLUSION AND REALITY:

ENDLESS PERMUTATIONS

Human dignity, the humorist believes, is not only silly but a little sad. So are dreams and conventions and illusions. The fine brave fragile stuff that men live by. They look so swell, and go to pieces so easily.

--Enjoyment of Laughter

These things happen in a world of endless permutations.

--Let Your Mind Alone!

The world of Thurber's creation is distinguished by images of confusion and in previous chapters I have concentrated on the external manifestations of confusion: social disorder, mass hysteria, marital tension, and the organized disorder of modern science and technology. Thurber's concept of human life as a state of confusion caused him to define humor broadly as "a kind of emotional chaos recollected in tranquillity." Very often this emotional chaos affects the actions of an individual or group and those actions have been the basis of the preceding chapters. I wish to turn now to the origin of all confusion, to the emotional and intellectual aspects of man's confusion which reside within the moonlit margins of the mind. This is the ultimate and inclusive confusion which Thurber studies in his great *Anatomy of Confusion*: the confusion within the individual's perception of the world, the confusion of illusion and reality.

Thurber's tragicomic vision of the world often consists in recording the endless permutations which reality undergoes. His work is the record of man's illusions, dreams, and expectations going to pieces before his eyes. Tragicomedy, essentially a bi-focal vision of experience,¹ is a natural form for a writer who considers reality to be an ever-shifting, elusive entity. In Thurber, life is seen as through a kaleidoscope, with reality constantly shifting and changing before our eyes, the ultimate expression of confusion.

The terms illusion and reality are perhaps nebulous but, simply stated for my purposes here, I will consider reality to be that which exists outside the mind; the material or actual world. Illusion is that which exists within the mind; ideas, dreams, expectations, and conceptions. Within these definitions, illusion will include the perception of reality or all that is known of reality by a human intelligence in any given instance. It is important to stress that perception is included in this conception of illusion because it will be demonstrated that Thurber directly relates the multiplicity of individual consciousnesses to the occurrence of endless transformations of reality; reality itself, or what we know of it, is transformed by each eye which perceives it.

¹Francis Downing, "Thurber," Commonweal, XLI (Mar. 9, 1945), p. 518.

The preponderance of dreams and fantasies in Thurber's work has lead many of his critics to identify his use of fantasy with the Romantic conception of the imagination. Both Morsberger and Tobias regard his rejection of scientism as an outgrowth of his preference for the imaginative understanding of the Romantic over the prosaic factual point of view.² This is an accurate judgement, not only regarding many of Thurber's early works which stress the superiority of daydreaming, reverie, and fantasy over a literal and mundane reading of experience, but also in view of Thurber's Wordsworthian definition of humor as "emotional chaos recollected in tranquillity."³ Holmes qualifies this common concept of Thurber's use of the imagination by saying that the distinguishing quality of Thurber's mind is "the tension between a strong sense of fact and a strong bias toward fantasy."⁴ All of these critics are partially correct but I think that the breadth of Thurber's concern with illusion and reality goes beyond his emphasis on the need for fantasy or his belief in the powers of the imagination and that the significance of his conception of illusion and reality extends far beyond the fairy tales and the stories with dream sequences .

²Morsberger, James Thurber, pp. 44-66; and Tobias, Art of James Thurber, pp. 131-33.

³Wordsworth defined poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity;" in "Preface, : to Lyrical Ballads, in Walter J. Bate, Criticism: The Major Texts (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1952), p. 344.

⁴Holmes, Clocks of Columbus, p. 330.

Although Thurber did have a Romantic strain which occasionally surfaces in his early work and in the fairy tales, a more important and persistent literary influence was Henry James.⁵ I will attempt to demonstrate in this discussion that Thurber's use of illusion and reality is closer to the Jamesian idea of perception than to the Romantic tradition. Beyond his considering the imaginative understanding of life superior to a factual one, Thurber's work is generally involved with presenting proof of James's statement that "humanity is immense, and reality has a myriad of forms."⁶

Whereas Thurber's work would seem to support Shelley's assertion that "a story of particular facts is as a mirror which obscures and distorts that which should be beautiful; poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted,"⁷ it would more importantly appear to suggest, along with the work of Henry James, that all individual perceptions, all mirrors, are in a sense distortions. They are distorted because they are selective, limited, and individual, as James describes:

⁵Cf. "Introduction," Owl in the Attic; E. B. White seems to have been the first to notice Thurber's similarity to Henry James in his humorous introduction to this book. Mrs. Thurber confirms the extent and seriousness of Thurber's life-long interest in Henry James; Interview with Catherine Kenney, Dec. 2, 1973.

⁶Henry James, The Future of the Novel, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), p. 12.

⁷Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," in Walter J. Bate, Criticism: The Major Texts, p. 431.

The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million--a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still piercable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. They are but windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight on life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other.

The consciousness of the artist, then, perceives the immense and moving field of reality as through a field glass, an image which describes not only the Jamesian artistic vision but the aesthetic distance from which Thurber, the humorist, views the world. James was primarily interested in studying the development of consciousness in characters capable of approaching, though never reaching, "an immense sensibility."⁸ The Jamesian artistic sensibility is superimposed above the other centers of consciousness but in Thurber such a consciousness resides only in the artist himself. Thurber's goal in his humor is to develop such a wider awareness, a finer perception, in his reader. According to Thurber, humor is based in the hysterical laugh experienced in our recognition of the Awful; that recognition alone is the sign of a developing awareness. Paradoxically, in both James and Thurber, a wider awareness of reality only intensifies the reader's perception of the ambiguities in experience.

⁸Henry James, Future of the Novel, pp. 50, 12.

Thurber's view of the human comedy is achieved, like James's, through a field glass, from a distance, necessarily selective and removed, but the vision receives the special Thurberian touch in that in Thurber's world reality is also filtered as through a kaleidoscope, a kaleidoscope which is ever shifting the vision at the slightest provocation. In Thurber these endless permutations of reality perceived through the kaleidoscope become humorous because often the sudden shifts in vision result in conventional comic effects: incongruity, denial of expectations, shock, or even fear. As human experience is filtered through the Thurber kaleidoscope, nothing is quite what it had appeared to be, all is ambiguity, flux, and confusion. The experience inside the Thurber carnival becomes paradoxically frightening and exhilarating, funny and sad, clearer and more muddled.

Kenneth MacLean has noted that Thurber's work is distinguished by "the revolving imagination [that] is constantly changing life, building it up anew. It is the seat of irony, where something is always turning into something else, death into life, the suddenly impossible into the suddenly possible. When Peter DeVries established serious Thurber criticism in 1942 in "James Thurber: The Comic Prufrock," he similarly concluded that "reality in Thurber undergoes filtering and transmutations as curious and abrupt [as in Eliot] ." ⁹

⁹Kenneth MacLean, "Imagination of James Thurber," Canadian Forum, XXXIII (Dec., 1953), p. 201; De Vries, "James Thurber: The Comic Prufrock," p. 156.

The myriad permutations of reality--or more properly, the infinite number of perceptions of reality--is the very essence of Thurberian confusion. This constantly changing life, the kaleidoscopic view of the human spectacle, is what I wish to study in this chapter. This can be accomplished by looking at representative works in which the clash of illusion and reality, of expectation and experience, is most important.

Three major aspects of Thurber's use of illusion and reality will be discussed. The myriad forms which reality takes not only cause confusion in the world but are the essential expression of confusion. First, Thurber's large number of characters who are either ignorant of themselves, who are "fundamentally absentminded" in Bergsonian terms, or who have purposefully deluded themselves about reality will be discussed as comically unconscious people. This type of separation from reality is especially important as a key to understanding the bedlam in My Life and Hard Times and the confusion in the two collections of fables. The first section of this chapter will deal, therefore, with the Absentminded and the Deluded in Thurber. Secondly, Thurber's wider view of the ambiguities of reality will be discussed as a means for understanding his general world view and especially fairy tales and the stories which deal explicitly with dreams. In Thurber's own terms, this second section will deal with the distinction between the factual and the possible in human experience and perception. Finally, the chapter will relate

Thurber's intense and overriding interest in language to his conception of an ever-revolving, changing reality.

The absentminded and the deluded fill Thurber's pages as they do many writers of comedy and humor. In Laughter Henri Bergson concludes that "a comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself. The comic person is unconscious." This type of character, radically separated from even any muddled perception of reality, possesses what Bergson terms a "fundamental absentmindedness" which enables him to ignore both himself and the world about him, inelastically and unprofitably moving through his experience.¹⁰ Often Thurber's characters seem to have an elaborate system by which they encourage and intensify this fundamental absentmindedness so that they become not only ignorant or unconscious but actually deluded about themselves and their world. These characters are especially prominent in My Life and Hard Times and the Fables.

My Life and Hard Times is based on Thurber's reminiscences of a youth filled with mistaken impressions, delusions, false expectations, and misnomers. It includes stories about "The Night the Bed Fell," in which a bed does not fall, and "The Day the Dam Broke," in which there is no dam, and "The Night the Ghost Got In," in which, presumably, there is no ghost. Everyone in this book seems supremely confused about

¹⁰Henry Bergson, "Laughter," in Comedy, ed. Wylie Sypher, pp. 71, 77.

what is going on around them, and in "A Note at the End," even the narrator "Thurber" asserts that "until a man can quit talking loudly to himself in order to shout down the memories of blunderings and gropings, he is in no shape for the painstaking examination of distress and the careful ordering of events so necessary to a calm and balanced exposition of what, exactly, was the matter."¹¹ In order to understand exactly what is the matter in My Life, I will examine in detail "The Night the Bed Fell," the first story in the collection, as a prime example of Thurberian confusion resulting from the mixed-up minds of the participants.

"The Night the Bed Fell" is the story of, not the night a bed fell on Thurber's father, but the night that everyone thought a bed had fallen. His father liked to sleep in the attic, it seems, "to be away where he could think," and on the night in question he had gone upstairs to sleep. He did this disregarding the objections of Thurber's mother, who "opposed the notion strongly because, she said, the old wooden bed up there was unsafe: it was wobbly and the heavy headboard would crash down on father's head in case the bed fell, and kill him." From his mother's initial mistaken expectation--that his father would be killed in the bed--flows an ever-widening, incomprehensible rush of confusion. What actually happened, the narrator coolly assures us twenty years after the bedlam, was that Thurber's own cot collapsed and

¹¹ James Thurber, My Life and Hard Times, p. 112.

he rolled under it. His mother, however, "came to the immediate conclusion that her worst dread was realized: the big wooden bed upstairs had fallen on father." She then awakened everyone in the house with her unfounded but assured screams of "Let's go to your poor father!" and they all rushed to the attic, where father is soundly sleeping, in a wild flood of "banging and confusion."¹²

The narrator begins this story with the slight apology that it "is admittedly a somewhat incredible tale," followed by the justification that "still, it did take place." The story itself is somewhat incredible but the tale is exceptionally believable as Thurber presents it because of his heavy reliance on pointed references to levels of consciousness, false expectations, and misconceptions in the minds of the participants. The reader even has a false expectation, since from the title of the story he would expect a lively but straight-forward tale; he would expect a story about how a bed had fallen one night in Thurber's boyhood. The story begins with this false expectation on the part of the reader and follows with a series of family portraits which establish the eccentricity and absentmindedness of the entire Thurber clan:

We had visiting us at this time a nervous first cousin of mine named Briggs Beall, who believed that he was likely to cease breathing when he was asleep. It was his feeling that if he were not awakened every hour during the night, he might die of suffocation.

¹²James Thurber, My Life and Hard Times, pp. 17, 23.

Not present in the household on this evening, but described here in order to prepare the reader for the bedlam to follow, were the likes of Aunt Melissa Beall, who "suffered under the premonition that she was destined to die on South High Street," and Sarah Shoaf, "who never went to bed at night without the fear that a burglar was going to get in and blow chloroform under her door through a tube." Aunt Gracie Shoaf "also had a burglar phobia...she was confident that burglars had been getting into her house every night for forty years."¹³ (I italicize words relating to perception or ideas.)

These vignettes all occur before the narrative begins and the narrator, like an oral voice telling a tale, remarks that he is "straying from the remarkable incidents that took place the night the bed fell on father." At this point the reader still expects (falsely) to hear a tale about a bed falling and therefore is under the impression that these caricatures, while entertaining, are extraneous to the story itself. However, after the story begins the narrator admits that "it was my mother who, in recalling the scene later, first referred to it as 'the night the bed fell on your father.'" The reader begins at this point to sense the fundamental and universal confusion in the Thurber household and in the Thurber world. The narrative that ensues is simply an orchestration of the confusion which results from misconceptions

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James Thurber, My Life and Hard Times, pp. 18, 20; italics mine.

and expectations similar to those "crotchets" of Thurber's aunts which were pictured first.

Drolly, the understated narrator says that his cot was of that type that could collapse at any time and that "this is, in fact, precisely what happened, about two o'clock in the morning" of the "night the bed fell on your father." Since only the narrator and the reader are aware of what exactly was going on, we are able to stand back and fully enjoy the pandemonium resulting from the very ordinary occurrence of an army cot collapsing on a little boy. It is important to note that, from the beginning of the story and through all of the events, everyone in the story has a mistaken idea of what is going on. Thurber continually reminds us of the personal idiosyncrasies which prevent any character in the action from seeing what is actually happening.

The story is told by a narrator who was present the night the bed fell (by the person who was actually under the cot, in fact). Therefore, his memory of the events is in itself a filter and a distortion of reality. His point of view is the closest thing to an understanding of "reality," however, even though paradoxically he admits that he was unconscious at the beginning of all the activity. When the clamor began, he says, "I did not wake up, only reached the edge of consciousness and went back," thereby admitting severe limitations on even his view of the events. As the members of the household are awakened, Thurber stresses the misconceptions

of each; I again italicize key words which relate the individual's perception of the events. His mother "came to the immediate conclusion that her worst dread was realized: the big wooden bed upstairs had fallen on father." Her shouting makes brother Herman think she is "for no apparent reason, hysterical," and cousin Briggs, who had been afraid that he would die in his sleep, "came to the quick conclusion that he was suffocating and that we were all trying to "bring him out." The narrator himself was "conscious of what was going on, in a vague way, but did not yet realize that I was under my bed instead of on it....Foggy with sleep, I now suspected, in my turn, that the whole uproar was being made in a frantic endeavor to extricate me from what must be an unheard-of and perilous situation.... I think I had the nightmarish belief that I was entombed in a mine."¹⁴ The confusion of this night is possible, therefore, only because of the confusion inherent in the people's minds. Specifically, the confusion is the result of the disparity between their mistaken expectations and impressions and actuality. The banging, shouting, and running (all irrational) are only external manifestations of inner confusion. What Thurber has related here so well is the basic tendency of human beings to relate outer experience, values, and problems only to their individual and eccentric fears, emotions, and ideas. Thus, since Mother thought and

¹⁴James Thurber, My Life and Hard Times, pp. 21, 23, 24, 26.

in a sense willed the bed to fall on Father, any sound became to her the sound of the bed falling on father; the other members of the household similarly assume that their own special fears or suspicions have been realized in the commotion.

Father himself is as confused as the rest of them, for when he heard their battering on his attic door he promptly "decided that the house was on fire. 'I'm coming, I'm coming!' he wailed in a slow, sleepy voice--it took him many minutes to regain consciousness." Mother, trapped in her idiosyncrasy, "still believing he was caught under the bed, detected in his 'I'm coming!' the mournful, resigned note of one who is preparing to meet his maker." It is not until all of these confused and misguided people converge on the attic and find father perfectly all right that the confusion is squelched momentarily. When Father opens the door and sees all of the family standing before him in wild anticipation of his death, he echoes the question in the minds of both the reader and the narrator: "What in the name of God is going on here?"

Who could have told him? The fact that the incident was always referred to as "the night the bed fell" shows how stubborn and inelastic people's misconceptions and perceptions can be. Thurber's mother is still completely unaware of reality at the end of the story. In the ultimate irony the narrator repeats her final irrational statement about the

incident: "'I'm glad,' said mother, who always looked on the bright side of things, 'that your grandfather wasn't here.'" As soon as the reader recalls that not only did nothing happen but that it was in fact the grandfather's absence from his attic room which lead to the bedlam (since only when grandfather was away could father sleep there), the story ends, as it began, in an impression of mental confusion.

The narrator "Thurber" grew up, however, and became a mature artistic consciousness so that "the situation was finally put together like a gigantic jigsaw puzzle." Only the artist is able to make sense out of the nonsensical human experience. The resulting Gestalt is the story as we have it, the synthesis of discordant and conflicting points of view clarified by the superior sensibility of the humorist who, in his quiet recollection of the chaos, is able at least to approximate saying what, exactly, was the matter.

All of the other stories in My Life and Hard Times describe the confusion resulting from false expectations, mistaken impressions, and mental perplexity. In "The Car We Had to Push" Thurber's mild-mannered father is "convinced" that the engine fell out of their old car because he does not really understand the car at all. Similarly, his mother "knew" that it was dangerous to drive the car without gasoline and "had an idea" that the Victrola would soon blow up because both were to her mysterious contraptions with wills of their own. When the old car finally fell apart the grandfather "gathered, from all the talk and excitement and

weeping, that somebody had died. Nor did he let go of this delusion." The Thurber boys "knew" that there was a ghost in their house because Herman had "always half-suspected that something would 'get him' in the night" and this expectation "raised such a hullabaloo of misunderstanding" that the event was always referred to as "The Night the Ghost Got In." In "University Days" Thurber isolates the total idiosyncrasy of perception. Although in botany class he could never see anything under a microscope, his professor asserted that this "was the result of my not having adjusted the microscope properly, so he would readjust it for me, or rather, for himself. And I would look again and see milk." Thurber's total inability, as an individual consciousness, to see any material reality under the scrutiny of the lens is symbolized in his own "adjustment" of the microscope. When he finally gets the lens focused on something he can see clearly, the professor realizes to his dismay that "you've fixed the lens so that it reflects your eye!"¹⁵ To mother, the noise of a cot collapsing becomes the calamity she had expected; to father, the sound of kitchen utensils falling on pavement becomes the sound of an engine falling out of a car; to Thurber, the slide of a plant cross-section becomes a vision only of himself.

"The Day the Dam Broke" is but a different version

¹⁵ James Thurber, My Life and Hard Times, pp. 33, 34, 51, 50, 89, 90.

of "The Night the Bed Fell." In "The Day the Dam Broke" the confusion has moved outside the Thurber household and encompasses most of the city of Columbus, but both pieces tell the story of general bedlam resulting from people's mental confusion about an event. The reactions to "the flood" which never materializes "were based upon a profound misconception," not the least of which was the fact that everyone forgot that day, in all the wild running from a "flood," that Columbus, Ohio, is "no nearer than five hundred miles to a dam." More muddled than even the confusion in the Thurber household, nobody, including the mature narrator Thurber, ever knew exactly what caused the commotion the afternoon of the Great Run. "Suddenly somebody began to run" one bright afternoon and the town fell into mass hysteria, with each confused person irrationally reacting to the flood of people on the streets of Columbus according to his own view of the situation and his own expectations. When the bedlam reaches a crowded theatre, "a woman who always expected to be burned up in a theatre" shouts "'Fire!'" and only adds to the confusion; Dr. Mallory, a sound citizen whose statements always carried conviction because of his reasonable nature, screams "'It's got us!'" when he mistakenly interprets the whishing sound of a little boy on roller skates behind him to be the feared flood waters. A bewildered Thurber screams "'What is it?'" at a woman running ahead of him and she articulates the incomprehensibility of the whole affair: "'Don't ask me,

ask God!"¹⁶

All of these characters, participants in the bedlam and confusion, are not only absentminded or unconscious of themselves, but are also deluded about the world around them. Their expectations and conceptions are so misdirected and inelastic that they seem victims of some "trivial mental tic"¹⁷ which can lead to an over-powering universal confusion with the slightest, even an unnoticed, provocation. The seeds of universal and perpetual confusion are carried in their personalities, minds, and humanity. The timeless humor of My Life and Hard Times resides in the kaleidoscopic vision of reality in which unconscious or absentminded individuals are perpetually misguided and surprised.

Thurber continued this interest in delineating the demise of expectations and illusions in Fables for Our Time (1940). It could be said that the Fables operate through the use of series of expectations with denials or surprises following the expectations and the face of reality constantly shifting before the reader's eyes. The great irony and ambiguity of the Fables results especially from their morals because the reader expects some well-worn or even trite bit

¹⁶James Thurber, My Life and Hard Times, pp. 38, 39, 42, 45, 47.

¹⁷James Thurber, My Life and Hard Times, p. 64; Thurber uses this term in a different context here, referring to his linguistic confusion on the night he had tried in vain to remember the name "Perth Amboy," but the term seems appropriate to all the quirks in characters in My Life.

of philosophy as the conclusion to a fable. Instead, in his fables Thurber accomplishes in humorously re-worded morals a complete overthrow of conventional thinking or clichés. The morals of these fables are made strangely familiar by a use of deliberate garblings of famous phrases or puns. I will discuss two of the finest fables in this collection in some detail to demonstrate Thurber's kaleidoscopic view of reality.

"The Green Isle in the Sea" is the story of an old man who goes to his favorite place, a park nearby his home, after being robbed and mauled several times. The park, the reader assumes, is a kind of last resort for the kindly old gentleman. In the park, however, he becomes the target for a sky full of ominous bombers overhead. The moral of this grim little story is "The world is so full of a number of things, I am sure we should all be happy as kings, and you know how happy kings are."¹⁸ The narrative progresses much more complexly than this outline suggests, however, and I want to show how the fable's great artistic tension and power result from Thurber's offering the reader a picture of the endless permutations of reality by slowly revealing what is actually happening to this man. By the end of this ironic and shocking tale neither the character of the old gentleman nor the sensibility of the reader sees anything as he had seen it before.

¹⁸ James Thurber, Fables for Our Time, p. 43.

First, the reader is impressed by the exotically peaceful title, "The Green Isle in the Sea." Like the reader of "The Night the Bed Fell," his high expectations are soon to be dispelled. The highly ironic first sentence of the fable only intensifies the original impression, however: "One sweet morning in the Year of Our Lord, Nineteen hundred and thirty-nine, a little old gentleman got up and threw wide the windows of his bedroom, letting in the living sun." This is the beginning of a fairy tale, an incantation of the golden age. The careful Thurber vocabulary, which can always evoke a high number of sensations from a few well chosen words, includes "sweet," "Lord," "gentleman," and "living" to deliberately promise so much that is about to be systematically and increasingly denied throughout the fable. First, the mood is broken when a black widow spider "slashed at him" and misses the old man only slightly. This is a foreboding image, but easily dismissed, since after all the spider missed him. The little old man then goes down to "a splendid breakfast." Just as the word "splendid" encourages hope in the reader again, the man's grandson pulls his chair out from under him. This cruel and nonsensical act is re-qualified as the earlier episode with the spider had been because "the old man's hip was strained but it was fortunately not broken." The word "fortunately" is especially ironic in the context of what happens in the fable, because had the old man broken his hip earlier in the day he would not have been "fortunate" enough to be

killed later.

As the old gentleman's morning progresses we find that not only our expectations are being overturned but the man's illusions are crumbling before his eyes as well. When he leaves the breakfast table he goes "toward a little park with many trees, which was to him a green isle in the sea." What the park has been to him, what he has perceived it to be, and what it is transformed into is the major irony of the fable. As he approaches his green isle in the sea we again expect, perhaps only wistfully hope, that some respite from the world's harassment of the old man will be found here. Near the park he is tripped by a "gaily-colored hoop sent rolling at him...by a grim little girl" and later is robbed of all his valuables including "a gold ring his mother had given him when he was a boy." The incongruity and irony of human experience is underscored by the fact that it is a "gaily-colored" hoop which nearly kills him and that it is a "grim" little girl. These are two adjectives which one would not expect, the first shocking because it couples a pleasant, vital image with an instrument of assault, and the second at least incongruous because it unorthodoxically describes a little girl as "grim." When the gold ring is finally wrenched from the old man, the clash of the reader's expectations and hopes with the brutal reality of the man's experience is so great that a feeling of hideous defeat and outrage is experienced. This is, after all, a "sweet" morning; these things happen in "the Year of

Our Lord" and under a "living" sun to a nice old gentleman. If there were one thing about the old man or his surroundings which would either explain or justify his experience on this morning the intense energy of the fable would be diminished.

The reader, teased along by the ironic voice of the narrator, by his own desire for justice, and by his previous experience with other fables and the literature of the Happy Ending generally, continues hoping for refuge or even retaliation, but the final vision of the fable is unrelieved in its savage denial of all illusions:

When at last the old gentle man staggered into the little park, which had been to him a fountain and a shrine, he saw that half the trees had been killed by a blight, and the other half by a bug. Their leaves were gone and they no longer afforded any protection from the skies, so that the hundred planes which appeared suddenly overhead had an excellent view of the little old gentleman through their bombing sites.¹⁹

No matter what else has happened before, the reader is not prepared for this last glimpse of the Awful; there is something so inconceivable and horrible about the now cosmic harassment of this little innocent old man that one's breath is taken away in the final image. In the space of a few tight paragraphs Thurber has accomplished a description of the horror of recognition as powerful as John Marcher's final discovery of his beast in the jungle or Isabel Archer's muddled introspection.

Until the first sentence of the last paragraph which

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James Thurber, Fables for Our Time, p. 43.

is quoted above, the reader still has some hope that all will be well for this bewildered but appealing man. The words "at last" suggest a refuge to the reader, as do the words "fountain" and "shrine." The little old man sees, when the reader sees, what the artistic sensibility has seen from the beginning: the apocalyptic vision of the waste land in which even a kind old gentleman cannot survive. In Joycean terms, and in the spirit of Joyce' meaning, the reader and the old man experience an epiphany simultaneously in the conclusion of this fable. The gentleman's illusions about himself and his existence, symbolized in his pathetic misconception of the park as a "fountain and a shrine," are devastated as our hopes for him and the unwitting humanity he represents are devastated.

Nothing is what it has appeared to be and even the moral of the fable surprises us with its characteristic re-qualifying last phrase which changes the entire meaning of the sentence: "The world is so full of a number of things, I am sure that we should all be happy as kings," it innocently promises, but follows this with the ultimate qualification and devastation, "and you know how happy kings are." (The reader must remember that this fable was written at the end of the 1930's when being a king was not particularly happy.) Reality, presented in a series of contradictory revelations, has shifted before our eyes so many times that by the end of the fable the "living" sun has become the glaring light by

which the little man is seen by the preying bombers in the sky above him. This fable is so successful because, as the reader's illusions (or expectations) about what will happen are overturned, the gentleman's illusions about his park, "the green isle in the sea," are savagely unmasked. The park is not a fountain and a shrine but a waste land and the bright, fragile dreams of peace and sustenance in the man's mind are replaced by the material bombers and leafless trees surrounding him. The clash of illusion, or the mind's version of experience, and reality, or the material world, could not be greater.

Thurber's most famous fable, "The Unicorn in the Garden," also operates through a juxtaposition of illusion and reality. Like "The Green Isle in the Sea" this fable begins in a halcyon setting with the almost exotic beauty of the first line: "Once upon a sunny morning a man who sat in a breakfast nook looked up to see a white unicorn with a golden horn quietly cropping the roses in the garden." The husband tells his wife about the unicorn and she replies with what the reader knows is a factually true statement, that "the unicorn is a mythical beast." But the fable does not justify her realism, since even though it is she who calls the police to carry away her "crazy" husband, she ends up being the one they take away to a mental institution for being crazy. The imagination wins out.

Thurber manages to retain a high amount of tension

throughout this fable by making the reader immediately identify with the quiet husband's reverence for beauty, reverie, and myth, while at the same time encouraging the reader to expect the wife to triumph. When the husband first tells his wife about the unicorn, her response is jarring to the reader only because of the tone of her reply compared to the husband's quiet civility: "She opened one unfriendly eye and looked at him. 'The unicorn is a mythical beast,' she said." The reader is still seeing double, sympathizing with the husband while having to admit the truth of the wife's statement, until the husband repeats the story of the unicorn to his wife later. This time, without justification, she threatens him: "'You are a booby,' she said, 'and I am going to have you put in the booby-hatch.'" Uncalled for as this threat is, the reader's feeling of suspense is then focused on whether or not this nice but perhaps eccentric man will be put in a booby-hatch for just seeing a beautiful unicorn. What has gone on before this morning to bring their marriage to such a place is only for the reader to speculate about.

Our expectations are totally overturned in the tense description of the wife's conversation with the police which ends with the police carrying off the lucid, factual wife to a booby-hatch. When the police ask the husband if he had in fact told his wife that he had seen a unicorn in the garden he replies with her cold realism: "the unicorn is a mythical beast." In the space of this fable roles and attitudes have

been reversed, the impossible has happened, the mythical has been seen and has just as mysteriously disappeared, and all expectations have been flatly denied by experience. Even the moral's meaning shifts before our eyes because it is a pun: "Don't count your boobies until they are hatched."²⁰ In the Thurber fables, the reader laughs because of puns and re-worded axioms in the morals and because of the shock and incongruity resulting from endless series of unexpected events and revelations in the narrative sections. Reality, or what is seen and known of it, is constantly revolving and re-defining itself. The only resolution of all of this flux and contradiction is an over-all sense of essential ambiguity and confusion. We still sympathize with the husband at the end of "The Unicorn," probably because at least he acknowledges the illusory and mythical aspects of life.

Most of the other fables in this collection depend on overturning the reader's expectations, expectations which result from our knowledge of truisms, earlier fables and tales, or ordinary experience. In "The Little Girl and the Wolf" it is the wolf, not the little girl, who gets killed; in "The Moth and the Star" it is the irresponsible dreamer who lives a long and satisfying life; and in "The Patient Bloodhound" the bloodhound's patience is his tragedy and not his salvation. The re-worked axiom ironically moralizes at the fable's conclusion: "The paths of glory lead at least to the Grave, but

²⁰James Thurber, Fables for Our Time, pp. 65, 66.

the paths of duty may not get you anywhere."²¹ As a humorist, Thurber enjoyed denying smug assumptions and twisting clichés and axioms and that is part of what the fables do. More than that is involved in the basic world view which the fables express, however. Thurber is essentially denying the validity of human knowledge and experience in these disillusioning fables; no previous fact or directive prepares one for life in a world of endless permutations, no real truth is capable of being isolated.

This point is made in the brief but devastating fable, "The Fairly Intelligent Fly." The irony is particularly pointed, of course, in the use of the adjective "fairly" to describe the fly who is not intelligent at all as the fable shows us; the comment seems to be that this fly is as intelligent as anyone can be. This fly, priding himself on his wariness, refuses to fly into the spider web trap in which many flies have died. We expect this fly's story to have a happy ending when he cautiously says to the spider, "I never light where I don't see other flies and I don't see any other flies in your house." This is a reasonable, even clever conclusion, but when the fly sees a large number of flies in another location he ironically kills himself with his cleverness. A bee warns him that the swarm of flies is actually stuck there on a piece of flypaper, but the deluded fly, who thinks he is so smart, says "Don't be silly...they're dancing." The profound

²¹James Thurber, Fables for Our Time, pp. 5, 19, 63.

limitations of perception and reason are stressed in the fable itself, while the moral overturns a comforting axiom: "There is no safety in numbers, or in anything else."²² There is also no decision, no conclusion, no vision which a man can expect always to be justified by experience.

Thurber continued this manipulation of points of view and denial of expectations in the second collection of fables, Further Fables for Our Time, published in 1956. One of the finest of these fables, "The Rose and the Weed," matches the intense energy of the earlier fables and demonstrates the immense artistic control which Thurber still had over his subject matter. The narrative concerns an encounter between a rose and a weed in which each plant disparages the characteristics of the other in a verbal war of personalities and "social" class. The rose, of course, represents the conventional view that the weed is inferior to the beautiful, cultivated flower: "You are an unwelcome guest, and unsightly of appearance. The Devil must love weeds, he made so many of them," she says. This seems true enough until the weed suggests that flowers smell worse than weeds when they fester. The haughty rose then replies that weeds have ugly names whereas she is named "Dorothy Perkins." The bifocal vision of the reader continues as the weed asserts that some weeds have even prettier names, like jewelweed and candyweed, so, who can say what is beautiful? In a denegrating pun, "the

²² James Thurber, Fables for Our Time, p. 13.

weed smiled a weedy smile. 'At least,' he said, 'I do not come from a family of climbers.'" This argument is based in antithetical views of reality which, taken in isolation, appear true. The artistic sense of reality is superimposed over the two, however, and in a sense partially derives from the juxtaposition of the two viewpoints. The essential comment of the fable is that all perception is limited and everything is ambiguous. When the rose begins citing Shakespeare's lines about roses to the weed, a wind comes up and "Dorothy Perkins' beautiful disdain suddenly became a scattering of petals, economically useless, and of appearance not especially sightly." The fable is again not so simple as to only overturn our initial programmed response to the comparison of a weed and a rose by proving that the strength of the weed is superior to the beauty of the rose, however. In the last sentence, all is suddenly altered when a gardener snaps up the strong little weed "out of the ground by the roots before you could say Dorothy Perkins, or, for that matter, jewelweed." The moral presents the ultimate ambiguity and changefulness of experience: "Tout, as the French say, in a philosophy older than ours and an idiom often more succinct, passe."²³ Not only does our perception of reality constantly shift as expectations are denied and axioms are disproven, but reality itself is ever-revolving, revealing itself in many surprising and different permutations. The only constant is change; the

²³ James Thurber, Further Fables for Our Time, pp. 15-17.

only order is confusion.

The perpetual transformation of reality is also the subject of "The Rose, the Fountain, and the Dove." In this fable a dove is goaded into leaving a serene valley (where he has always been satisfied) by malcontents, a rose and a fountain, who are frustrated by not being able to leave the valley. "It is always the same wherever one is," complains the rose. The wise dove, who can fly away but wishes to remain over the quiet valley, replies, "To my eye, it is always changing." The eye transforms the action; the individual perception alters the reality. When the dove makes the mistake of flying away he is killed.²⁴ He has mistakenly sought out diversity when all life is diversity itself. Not only do the rose and the fountain see the valley in different terms than the dove sees it, but they each have a mistaken impression of the world outside the valley. It is their confusion about what lies outside the valley which causes the dove to make a tragic error.

"The Goose that Laid the Gilded Egg" is about a stupid goose who thinks he has found a golden egg which will produce a golden gosling; he has, in fact, sat on a painted egg (none of the more realistic females will have it) until "one day, being a male and not a female, he clumsily stepped on the egg broke it, and that was the end of the egg and the end of his dreams." While the fable stresses the fragility of dreams

²⁴ James Thurber, Further Fables for Our Time, pp. 74-78.

and illusions, the moral again questions the more fundamental possibility of knowing at all: "It is better to be hendubious than cocksure."²⁵ Thurber's women, always portrayed as more realistic than their mates, are dubious about appearances. By the time he wrote this late fable, Thurber had genuinely accepted the strength and pragmatism of women as a desirable thing.

The complex fable "The Truth about Toads" attacks not only human vanity but the greatest source of human pride, the limited human mind. This is the story of an evening at the Fauna Club, where all the animals are congregated, each brashly touting his own mistaken self-concept: the rooster brags that he causes the sun to come up, the stork that he is responsible for everyone being born, and the ground hog that he ends winter. There is a strong rejection of both individual vanity and cultural folkways and myth in this fable. When a Raven prophetically hangs a sign above the bar which reads "Open most hearts and you will find graven upon them Vanity," none of the insular and deluded animals thinks that the saying applies to him. An arrogant toad then joins the crowd and swears that he will not get drunk drinking "fireflies" because "nothing can make me lightheaded. I have a precious jewel in my head." He later passes out, however, and a woodpecker opens his head to see the magnificent jewel, only to find that if you "open most heads...you will find nothing shining, not even

²⁵James Thurber, Further Fables for Our Time, pp. 95-98.

a mind."²⁶ All pretensions, illusions, and expectations crumble under the scrutiny of Thurber's eye and the instrument of knowledge and the source of man's indefatigable pride, the mind, is itself limited.

From just the examples given it is possible to see that much of Thurber's work deals with the disparity between what the imperfect, egocentric mind perceives and what is in fact reality. Thurber retains a high level of complexity, ambiguity, and humanity because he does not suggest a new formula or myth to replace an older, disproven one. He is most interested, as Henry James was, to raise awareness so that the reader at least becomes aware of how little is actually known; the truth that he presents is that reality is constantly changing and has a myriad of forms. Paradoxically, the only clear statement is that everything is changing, being re-qualified and re-stated in many permutations, and is, finally, ambiguous.

The characters who seem particularly unattractive, evil or corrupt in Thurber are those who mistakenly think, in deliberate and elaborate self-delusion, that they have the answer, the interpretation, the real control over experience. These include the scientists, the tyrants, the dully prosaic wives. Others, like the eccentric Thurbers in My Life and Hard Times and the poor little gentleman in "The Green Isle in the Sea," are really fairly unconscious of both themselves

²⁶ James Thurber, Further Fables for Our Time, pp. 4-8.

and their situation. No corrective is suggested or implied for them because they are simply acting out the human comedy in all its inherent confusion and disillusionment. The purposeful self-delusion of characters in the fairy tales is more strongly indicted, however. The White Deer, which is in a larger sense about the impossibility of knowing and the constantly changing appearance of reality, also has a few characters who deliberately pervert whatever reality they could possibly know. This is true of the Astronomer Paz, who has invented a rose-colored lens for his telescope "so that even the palest moon and coldest star turn red and deep" and the Royal Recorder, who is mesmerized by his own legalistic gobbledegook. Perhaps the most deluded character in this tale is the Royal Physician, who thinks, in a radical confusion of his own identity, that he is both his physician and his patient. This confusion leads him to be unable to be either physician or person.

When the Black Knight rhetorically asks Prince Jorn, "When all is dark within the house, who knows the monster from the mouse?"²⁷ he has not only commented on the lack of awareness in the deluded and unconscious people in the tale, but has also expressed the severe and inevitable limitations of human perception, which is often dark or lighted only by the reflections from trick mirrors or hallucinations. It is another version of the same question King Clode had demanded

²⁷James Thurber, The White Deer, pp. 25, 27, 33, 85.

the answer for earlier: "In such confusion and caprice who knows his hound dog from his niece?" he cries of the waste land he lives in. The book itself, while satirizing the delusions of Paz, the Physician, and the Recorder, implicitly answers that it is the poet, in the character of Jorn, who can begin to make sense out of the nonsensical enchanted forest which bears much resemblance to the modern world. It is Jorn who wins the lady's hand and triumphs at the end of the book.²⁸ Like the deluded royal advisors in The White Deer, the evil Duke of The 13 Clocks suffers under the supreme delusion that he has murdered time. This delusion, which causes time to stand still in Coffin Castle, radically separates him from other human beings and the pulsating, changing human reality.²⁹

There are works which stress, instead of the limitations of individual awareness, the larger concept of the essentially elusive quality of reality itself. The two are of course related but have a hierarchical relationship; Thurber's depiction of unconscious or deluded characters flows from his larger concept that reality takes myriad forms. This is the area of his treatment of illusion and reality which I wish to explore in further depth now. This section will survey primarily those works which deal explicitly with dreams or the imagination. In Thurber's terms, the distinction which I will be making here is between the factual (material reality) and

²⁸James Thurber, The White Deer, pp. 45, 103-04.

²⁹James Thurber, The 13 Clocks, pp. 17-20.

the possible (what the mind can do with reality; illusions and dreams).³⁰ Although the factual reality which exists outside the mind may be immense and extremely diverse, it is the mind which creates infinite possibilities in its ability to force reality through endless permutations. For any given eye, or perception, there is a different version of what is seen.

In one sense Thurber is suggesting that the powers of the imagination are superior to the prosaic, factual knowledge claimed by scientists and others who smugly assume that they have discovered or understood what is real. He resembles the Romantic poets in his preference for creative, synthetic intelligence over analytical reason.³¹ He makes this point very well in several essays about the imagination in Let Your Mind Alone!, a collection which as a whole deflates the pretensions of modern science and technology as solutions for man's condition. In "The Case for the Daydreamer" Thurber suggests that daydreaming is necessary part of life, even when the dream cannot actually become a reality. Since all that is known of reality is in the mind, anyway, the daydream itself becomes a kind of reality: "The thing to do is to visualize a triumph over the humiliator so vividly and insistently that it becomes, in effect, an actuality." He concludes that

³⁰James Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone!, p. 230.

³¹Cf. Morsberger, James Thurber, chapter on the "Romantic Imagination," for a discussion of this aspect of Thurber's art.

"realists are always getting into trouble"³² and in view of the curiously distorted "realists" he deals with in Let Your Mind Alone! this is a justifiable conclusion: these realists, scientists, psychologists, and sociologists, are those people who, though smug in their systems and intellectual arrogance, only think they understand reality. The daydreamer, who admits reality is much too much for him or that it is incomprehensible, is at least attuned to the true vagaries of human life.³³ Like the prosaic wife in "The Unicorn in the Garden" the scientist's grasp of reality and his control over the situation crumbles when he is confronted with the power of the imagination and the confusion of the world. Although the unicorn is, factually, a mythical beast, who can say, in this world of endless permutations, that myth, which has a basis in some part of reality, is not as adequate a vision of the world as the patterned response of the wife or any other neat formula.³⁴

"The Admiral on the Wheel" is an essay which relates Thurber's remarkable adventures one day when his glasses were broken. This "handicap," which blurred factual or material reality, intensified his mind's operations on what was seen: "The kingdom of the partly blind is a little like

³²James Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone!, pp. 22, 23.

³³Cf. Chapter V, "Man, Science, and Technology: Confusion Extended," for a complete discussion of this subject.

³⁴James Thurber, Fables for Our Time, pp. 65-66.

Oz, a little like Wonderland, a little like Poictesme. Anything you can think of, and a lot you never would think of, can happen there." In the world of Thurber's creation this is, precisely, what remarkably happens. He says that these things happen there; where is there? "There" exists nowhere but in the mind of the perceiver. What happens there is a matter of infinite possibilities, as an individual, eccentric eye looks through the kaleidoscope at the ever-shifting world:

I saw the Cuban flag flying over a national bank, I saw a gay old lady with a gray parasol walk right through the side of a truck, I saw a cat roll across a street in a small striped barrel, I saw bridges rise lazily into the air, like balloons.³⁵

By implication, if he had looked back at any of these images a second time or if his eyesight had been slightly different, the catalogue of visions would be even longer.

Thurber's most famous story, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," depends heavily on dreams for its statement. Walter Mitty is a nervous, insecure, dominated husband who is unable to communicate with his wife or in any real sense face the actuality of living with her. The story follows the Mittys' trip to a Waterbury salon where Mrs. Mitty has her hair done and observes Walter later having trouble parking the car and waiting for his wife in the hotel lobby. Walter Mitty is brutalized by Mrs. Mitty, who orders him around, screams at him, but basically ignores his needs, thoughts, and humanity, and by the gruff and insensitive

³⁵ James Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone!, pp. 242, 243, 241.

people he meets on the streets of Waterbury. His existence is so dead, so impotent, and brutal that Walter Mitty retreats into his mind; his only life is in his mind and therefore, according to my definitions, he is living radically separated from reality and almost totally in illusion. More properly, he is living through his dreams so completely that they have, in a confusion of illusion and reality, become his actual existence. Ironically, the pictures of "the remote, intimate airways of his mind" in the dream sequences are more vivid, more detailed than any element of the death-in-life existence he has with Mrs. Mitty, the parking attendant, or the puppy biscuits. When his wife screeches at him to slow down, pulling him out of the heroic skies of Navy warfare, his reaction is that "she seemed grossly unfamiliar, like a strange woman who had yelled at him in a crowd."³⁶ Although his dreams are out of Hollywood epic and melodrama, they seem preferable to Mrs. Mitty even to the reader.

Thurber is not, of course, suggesting this kind of existence as the ideal human life; he is not even interested, I believe, in making a case for Walter's triumph over Mrs. Mitty. He is simply portraying a tragically isolated, alienated soul who has nowhere to go but into his mind because his actual world is so impossible. F. O. Matthiessen has said, in a review of writers who dealt with the subject of alienation after the second World War, that the image of

³⁶ James Thurber, My World--and Welcome to It, p. 73.

escapism in much modern literature is from a "concern with escape, not from the real, but from the monstrously unreal."³⁷ I can think of no better description of the mundane and horrible reality of the typical Thurber marriage of the Thirties and Forties than that it is monstrously unreal.³⁸ The question at the end of "Walter Mitty" is whether Mrs. Mitty's fact or Mitty's illusion is better and it is a question which goes unanswered because of the feeling that neither choice is attractive or can be really positively chosen; these characters seemed trapped into a pattern and the story, so close to portraying real life, remains ambiguous.

Walter Mitty can at least still walk the streets of Waterbury, buying puppy biscuits and waiting out his life in hotel lobbies and the rain, but Charlie Deshler in "The Curb in the Sky" becomes totally and irrevocably separated from reality. Charles had suffered the misfortune to marry Dorothy, a woman who "had begun, when she was quite young, to finish sentences for people." Charlie was unaware of this charming habit before their marriage, but "as a wife [Dorothy] came, of course, into her great flowering: she took to correcting Charlie's stories." Charlie, like Walter

³⁷F. O. Matthiessen, "Alienation of the Writer," in Responsibilities of the Critic (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 137.

³⁸Cf. "The Curb in the Sky," "The Private Life of Mr. Bidwell," and "Mr. Preble Gets Rid of His Wife," in James Thurber, The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze.

Mitty, retreats into the intimate airways of his mind away from this mundane brutality: "At the end of the second year of their marriage...Charlie would begin some outlandish story about a dream he had had, knowing that Dorothy could not correct him on his own dreams. They became the only life he had that was his own." Thurber is not recommending Deshler's fantasies any more than he had Mitty's; he is simply describing a situation in which retreat into the mind is the only action possible:

Any psychiatrist will tell you that at the end of the way Charlie was going lies madness in the form of monomania. You can't live in a fantastic dream world, night in and night out and then day in and day out, and remain sane. The substance began to die slowly out of Charlie's life, and he began to live entirely in shadow. ³⁹

Ultimately, the question must be which is less unreal, the substance or the shadow? Like Walter Mitty's "reality" and the blurred edges between illusion and reality which Matthiessen's term suggests, the answer is ambiguous.

In an essay defining "Our New Sense of the Comic," Wylie Sypher attempts to elucidate this difficult subject. He suggests that dreams are an essential part of modern comedy because the "very incongruity of the dream world is comic." The incongruity of Mitty's dreams with what we know his factual reality to be is not only comic, however. The dreams are paradoxically a means of revealing the awful face

³⁹ James Thurber, The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, pp. 75, 76, 77, 79.

of reality better than any literal transcription of Mitty's actual day:

Freud interprets the dream and the jest as a discharge of powerful psychic energies, a glimpse into the abyss of the self. We have learned to read our dreams to tell us what we really are, for we now find that the patterns of our conscious life have meanings that can be explained only by looking below them into the chaos of the unconscious life always there, old, irrational, and inarticulate except in the language of the sleeping self.⁴⁰

Mitty, then, is neither the air pilot he pretends in his mind to be, nor the milquetoast that his wife perceives (her perception is necessarily limited, also) but a person defined in the reader's mind by the incongruous juxtaposition of the two views, a juxtaposition accomplished by the artistic consciousness that sees the myriad forms of reality.

Thurber chose to study the confusion of illusion and reality in a form perfectly suited to his conclusions, the fairy tale. His first tale, Many Moons (1943) is the simplest statement of his persistent theme that reality is an ever-shifting entity. This tale tells the story of a little Princess who wants the moon in order to get well. None of her father's royal advisors are capable of getting the moon for her until one day the Court Jester, the wise fool, thinks to ask the Princess herself what she thinks the moon would look like.

⁴⁰Wylie Sypher, "Our New Sense of the Comic," Appendix to Comedy, p. 198; italics mine.

'How big do they say the moon is,' asked the Court Jester, 'and how far away?'

'The Lord High Chamberlain says it is 35,000 miles away, and bigger than the Princess Lenore's room,' said the King. 'The Royal Wizard says it is 150,000 miles away, and twice as big as this palace. The Royal Mathematician says it is 300,000 miles away, and half the size of this kingdom.'

The Court Jester strummed on his lute for a little while. 'They are all wise men,' he said, 'and so they must all be right. If they are all right, then the moon must be just as large and as far away as each person thinks it is. The thing to do is find out how big the Princess Lenore it is, and how far away.'

The little Princess says that the moon, to her, is a golden disc the size of her thumb, because when she reaches her hand out toward it her thumbnail just covers it. She is then given a small disc as the moon and she does not balk when the actual moon rises in the sky. The Jester asks her how the moon can be both in the sky and around her neck on a chain and she replies that, just as the cycles of nature constantly replenish and destroy the earth's flowers, there must be many moons to rise in the sky. There are many dreams, many "realities." She has what is to her the moon, her impression of reality, and the comment seems to be that there are as many "realities" as there are perceivers.⁴¹ Even in this simplest of all his fairy tales it is obvious that Thurber was writing for and about adult experience. Childhood is usually especially jarred by disillusionment such as the experience described in this tale; a child often refuses to believe in anything after a myth or impression is shaken. A lie about

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James Thurber, Many Moons, unpaginated.

about Santa Claus becomes a traumatic experience which causes, in the naive new realism of a child, rejection of all the worth of such myths or dreams. It is a mature personality which can accept the illusory nature of human life without either ranting about the unfairness of it all or demanding that a new "reality" take the place of the original delusion.

The White Deer (1945) depends strongly on the clash of illusion and reality. The magical forest where the action takes place is a "false flux of fact and form" where everything tricks the eye and nothing is constant or certain. The title character, the Princess Rosanore, is a deer turned into a lady and much of the action involves intricate devices used by the King, his sons, and his advisors to attempt to divine the true nature of the "white deer." While the royal advisors are trying not to be "taken in by false shapes and semblances" the three sons of King Clode ride on quests to win the illusory lady's hand. Each one finds that his quest is a sham: Prince Thag finds the mighty Blue Boar of Thedon Grove sleeping and therefore easy prey; Prince Gallow sees that the Seven-Headed Dragon of Dragore is not the heroic enemy of well-known myth, but "the greatest mechanical wonder of the age, meaningless but marvelous;" and Prince Jorn realizes to his dismay that the Black Knight he slays is, in fact, an old, old man disguised in armor. Only Prince Jorn is able to accept the disillusionment because he learns

from the Black Knight the enigma of human experience and understanding:

'You fought the dreadful thing I seemed to be, and that's the test and proof of valor, that's the proof and test. When all is dark within the house, who knows the monster from the mouse?'⁴²

Like the man who sees the Cuban flag instead of the factual reality, the neat formulae of the scientist, or the banality of Mrs. Mitty, Jorn has learned the fundamental ambiguity of human life which expresses itself in constant permutations of reality. The house of life is dark, filled with enchantments and confusing visions. In a sense Jorn is a super-realist, like the Princess in Many Moons, because he is capable of acknowledging the only possible reality, that reality as it is perceived by the human mind is limited, elusive, ever-changing, and incongruous.

In The 13 Clocks the Golux, a magical man who is capable of dealing with existence in the nonsensical world, plays with the theme of elusive reality:

'Half the places I have been to, never were. I make things up. Half the things I say are there cannot be found. When I was young I told a tale of buried gold, and men from leagues around dug in the woods. I dug myself.'

'But why?'

'I thought the tale of treasure might be true.'

This Golux, or light, that helps the story's hero, Zorn, on his journey for Saralinda's love, is Thurber himself, enunciating the essential illusory and incongruous nature of life.

His "tale" which is true even though he made it up could also be art, which is a type of reality often superior to life. Zorn pays his debt to the Duke for Saralinda's hand in Hagga's jewels, jewels created from her tears which will inevitably turn back into tears in a fortnight. These illusory jewels trick the Duke, the ultimate deluded character in Thurber, who ironically clutches these illusory gems as though they were everything: "Begone!" the cold Duke screamed again, and bathed his hands in rubies. "My jewels," he croaked, "will last forever." In the epilogue, the Duke is startled when the gems melt before his eyes and he finally must realize how quickly the facade of reality changes before our eyes. "What slish is this?" he exclaims in horror and disgust. When he is totally disillusioned by his "precious gems turned to thlup" (which, of course, is what they have always been) he gives himself over to Todal, a mysterious monster in the tale, and death.⁴³ He who thought he had known so much, who had falsely felt control over everyone and everything around Coffin Castle, is unable to accept the elementary truth which the Golux teaches: that the only certainty is that everything is illusory, confusing, and changing. Factually, a tale which has been made up is not true, but in Thurber's world of endless permutations the impossible is constantly becoming the possible. The tale told by a magical man or by a creative intelligence may even become more real

⁴³James Thurber, The 13 Clocks, pp. 34, 118, 123.

than the monstrously unreal material world which denies its validity. Although ambiguous, the distinction in Thurber's view of reality which I am suggesting was also effectively drawn by Henry James in "The Art of Fiction:"

It goes without saying that you will not write a good novel unless you possess the sense of reality; but it will be difficult to give you a recipe for calling that sense into being.... Experience is never limited and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative --much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius--it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations.⁴⁴

The intangible, incongruous, and indefinable thus becomes a part of reality, perhaps a superior reality to the view which is limited by the bounds of the explicitly material or actual world.

The face of reality can change when eye glasses are broken, or when a Mrs. Mitty brutally forces Walter Mitty back into the corners of his mind, or when a long-held expectation or illusion is savagely disproven by experience. Reality, or more properly, the individual's perception of it, is also affected by language, an arbitrary system which is sometimes falsely assumed to be only rational and descriptive. For Thurber, language is the gateway to a whole new reality, a whole new series of awarenesses. Often, words, which had originally been devised to describe certain things or

⁴⁴ Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," in The Future of the Novel, p. 12.

concepts, assume meanings of their own, totally separated from the reality they normally denote. Thus, garblings of phrases or pronunciation become, in the mind's eye, images never seen before and create a new order of reality. This transformation of language into reality becomes complete in The Wonderful O, in which language is a character in the action of a fairy tale.

The relationship between language and reality can be comic, as in the literal interpretation of common metaphors in "The Secret Life of James Thurber." Robert Morsberger takes Thurber's point in this essay to be only a demonstration of the Bergsonian comment that a figure of speech is comic when one pretends to take it literally.⁴⁵ Thus, when Thurber recalls that his youthful "secret world of idiom" was his one refuge from mundane Columbus, Ohio, his literal images of a man "tied up" at the office or of a girl who was "all ears" are comic. There is more involved in this essay than comic literalism, however. Thurber has purposefully chosen "The Secret Life of Salvador Dali," the autobiography of the surrealist painter, to contrast with his own memories of childhood. Dali, who is perhaps best known for his literal depiction of dreams, is a perfect choice for Thurber, who sees the constant interchange of the real and the unreal, the dream and the actual world. Although a humorous Thurber protests too much that Dali has had a more lively and exotic

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Morsberger, James Thurber, p. 64.

life than he has, ("Let me be the first to admit that the naked truth about me is to the naked truth about Salvador Dali as an old ukelele in the attic is to a piano in a tree, and I mean a piano with breasts") he gradually works up to an admission of more similarity than difference with the famed antic surrealist. Surrealism stressed the nonrational and subconscious significance of imagery and especially used unexpected juxtapositions for effect. Dali and Thurber share a similar artistic vision of an every-changing face of reality:

It never occurred to me to bite a bat in my aunts' presence or to throw stones at them. There was one escape, though: my secret world of idiom.

Two years ago my wife and I, looking for a house to buy, called on a firm of real estate agents in New Milford. One of the members of the firm, scrambling through a metal box containing many keys, looked up to say, 'The key to the Roxbury house isn't here.' His partner replied, 'It's a common lock. A skeleton will let you in.' I was suddenly once again five years old, with wide eyes and open mouth. I pictured the Roxbury house as I would have pictured it as a small boy, a house of such dark and nameless horrors as have never crossed the mind of our little bat-biter.

This "fantastic cosmos"⁴⁶ which Thurber inhabits as a result of the ability of language to transmogrify his experience is haunted by an infinite number of images and visions, visions which are often only slightly reminiscent of the literal or factual reality to which the words relate. A skeleton key, in no way a horror in the actual world, becomes an image of indescribable horrors.

⁴⁶ James Thurber, The Thurber Carnival, pp. 33, 34. [Italics mine.]

Thurber had a poet's understanding of the suggestive and connotative powers of language so that in his consciousness words, which are usually regarded as representations of ideas or reality, become themselves a new order of reality. In "The Black Magic of Barney Haller" an eerie hired man working at Thurber's country house transforms summer afternoons into wild thunderstorms and himself into a Teutonic savage through his weird garblings of ordinary language:

'Dis morning bime by,' said Barney 'I go hunt grotches in de voods.'

'That's fine,' I said, and turned a page and pretended to be engrossed in what I was reading. Barney walked on; he had wanted to talk some more, but he walked on. After a paragraph or two, his words began to come between me and the words in the book. 'Bime by I go hunt grotches in de voods.' If you are susceptible to such things, it is not difficult to visualize grotches. They fluttered into my mind: ugly little creatures, about the size of whippoorwills, only covered with blood and honey and the scrapings of church bells. Grotches... Who and what, I wondered, really was this thing in the form of a hired man that kept anointing me ominously, in passing, with abracadabra?

Barney's potent abracadabra also transmogrifies the simple image of a hired man--the material reality--into strange and unexpected visions: "I had a prefiguring of Barney, at some proper spot deep in the woods, prancing around like a goat, casting off his false nature, shedding his hired man's garments, dropping his Teutonic accent, repeating diabolical phrases, conjuring up grotches." Thurber pointedly refers to Barney as "a traveller back from Oz" and finally resorts to nonsense language himself to scare Barney away:

'Listen!' I barked, suddenly, 'Did you know that even when it isn't brillig I can produce slithy toves? Did you happen to know that the mome rath never lived that could outgrabe me? Yeah and furthermore I can become anything I want to; even if I were a warb, I wouldn't have to keep on being one if I didn't want to. I can become a playing card at will, too....

And, indeed, in Thurber's world, he can. In this special world anything can suddenly become anything else and language is one of the frequent catalysts of quick transformation. In the following chapter I will explore the full implications of Thurber's use of the language of confusion; for my purposes here it is sufficient to note the role that language plays in transforming reality into something new and undreamed of before.

One sentence in this story describes the endless permutations which reality undergoes in Thurber's world better than any statement about Thurber's intentions. After Barney had said, "Once I see dis boat come down de rock," to a "faintly creepy" Thurber, the writer interjects:

It is phenomena like that of which I stand in constant dread: boats coming down rocks, people being teleported, statues dripping blood, old regrets and dreams in the form of Luna moths fluttering against the windows at midnight.⁴⁷

Factually, of course, a moth is a moth and statues do not drip blood, but often the impressions made by external

⁴⁷ James Thurber, The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, pp. 160-61; 61-62; 160. "The Black Magic of Barnery Haller," one of Thurber's finest and most original short stories, is based on an actual gardener which the Thurbers had one summer; Mrs. James Thurber, Interview with Catherine Kenney, Dec. 2, 1973. [Italics mine.]

stimuli are more revealing and more "real" than the elusive fact itself. Dreams and illusions are glimpses into the abyss of the self as well as products of an ever-expanding awareness in the chamber of consciousness.

Thurber distilled the confusion of illusion and reality as it relates to language into a very short portion of "More Alarms at Night" in My Life and Hard Times. In the famous section beginning, "I had been trying all afternoon, in vain, to think of the name Perth Amboy," Thurber shows the ease with which reality is transformed into fantasy and language is transformed into a real demon with a will of its own. He recalls the anxious night in his youth when he struggled with language and the sound of words long after he had gone to bed and a curious chain reaction of thoughts and words lead him to the brink of madness. He began simply by trying to think of the name Perth Amboy, but could only think of "terra cotta, Walla-Walla, bill of lading, vice versa, hoity toity...." and on and on until

I began to indulge in the wildest fancies as I lay there in the dark, such as that there was no such town, and even that there was no such state as New Jersey. I fell to repeating the word 'Jersey' over and over again, until it became idiotic and meaningless.... I got to thinking that there was nobody else in the world but me, and various other wild imaginings of that nature. Eventually, lying there thinking these outlandish thoughts, I grew slightly alarmed. I began to suspect that one might lose one's mind over some such trivial mental tic as a futile search for terra firma Piggly Wiggly Gorgonzola Prester John Arc de Triomphe Holy Moses Penates.... This silly and alarming tangle of thought

and fancy had gone far enough.⁴⁸

Language, assumed to be a tool of man and a means to clarify and describe his existence, becomes a self-propelled force acting out a part in the human comedy. It can even mesmerize the young Thurber into believing, since he has "lost" the words, that the real or material city which the name Perty Amboy only represents is non-existent or that even he does not exist. "When all is dark within the house, who knows the monster from the mouse?"

The total identification of language and reality is the basis for the fairy tale, The Wonderful O, and for the series of drawings entitled "A New Natural History" in The Beast in Me. In the first work, a tyrant capriciously bans the letter "O" from the island of Ooroo and then directs his men to destroy everything with an "O" in its name. The narrative is concerned with the islanders' attempts to put the "O" back into their lives and thus retain hope, love, valor, and freedom. Language has become so identified with life itself for Thurber that the name of thing is the thing; without an "o" there is no word "freedom," and without the word for freedom, there is no freedom. A short passage from The Wonderful O shows how our perception of reality shifts before our eyes by the simple omission of a letter:

⁴⁸ James Thurber, My Life and Hard Times, pp. 63-64. [Italics mine.]

'When coat is cat, and boat is bat, and goatherd looks like gathered, and booth is both, since both are bth, the reader's eye is bothered.'

'And power is pwer, and zero zer, and, worst of all, a hero's her.' The old man sighed as he said it.

'Anon is ann, and moan is man.' Andrea smiled as she said it.

'And shoe,' Andreus said, is she.'

'Ah, woe,' the old man said, 'is we.'⁴⁹

"The New Natural History" presents a whole new way of seeing, a whole new "reality" by the literal, pictorial representation of metaphorical or abstract words and phrases or by a new use of ordinary words. In the first category, Thurber draws pictures of "a semi-edible vegetable," the "Arpeggio;" "a bare-faced lie;" "a trochee encountering a spondee;" and "an upstart rising from a clump of Johnny-Come-Lately." The new visual images for common words include a carrot-like vegetable called a "scabbard," an animal with a toothy-pointed back called a "metatarsal," and a snake-like creature which is a "serenade."⁵⁰ Thurber now can actually visualize a word itself.

What is real? Where is this happening? Because the mind is the seat of all knowledge, and because the mind itself only provides a limited perception of reality at best, the answer is finally ambiguous. I believe Thurber's kaleidoscopic view of reality, reality which can be transformed by a slip of the tongue or a slight personality quirk or an

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James Thurber, The Wonderful O, p. 50.

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James Thurber, The Beast in Me and Other Animals, pp. 151-168.

unexpected turn of events, resembles Jamesian muddlement in its essential clarification of only the ambiguities of experience and the myriad forms of reality. Usually Thurber's narrators are detached from the action and understand from the beginning the confusion and unconsciousness of the characters. Occasionally, however, in "Doc Marlowe," "The Breaking Up of the Winships," and "A Call on Mrs. Forrester,"⁵¹ he effectively uses a Jamesian type of narrator as the story follows the developing awareness of the narrator himself.

In "A Call on Mrs. Forrester," the comparison with James is overt and I wish to look at the story's development of consciousness in some detail to demonstrate my conclusions about the influence of James on Thurber's sense of reality. The epigraph to this story reads "After rereading, in my middle years, ...Henry James' "'The Ambassadors'" and the language of the story constantly refers to the level of vision or perception of the narrator. The narrator says that, on his return to Marian Forrester's town, the place now "seemed to me, vulgar and preoccupied," in contrast to his earlier and more favorable illusions about the place and the lady herself. Before, he had "persisted in seeing only the further flowering of a unique and privileged spirit" in the character of Marian Forrester, for he "had built the lady very high, as you see." The story takes place entirely

⁵¹In James Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone! and The Beast in Me and Other Animals.

inside the narrator's mind, as his impressions of Mrs. Forrester and her surroundings shift before his eyes and the reader's simultaneously.

He never actually calls on Mrs. Forrester but only views her house and her "presence" from the distance, trying to get his "point of view" straight:

As I crossed the bridge, with the Forrester house now in full view, I had, all of a sudden, a disturbing fancy. There flashed into my consciousness a vivid vision of the pretty lady, seated at her dressing table, practicing in secrecy her little arts, making her famous earrings gleam with small studied turnings of her head...and, unhappiest picture of all, rehearsing her wonderful laughter.

This glimpse of the Awful, a faint glimmer of an awareness in the narrator's mind concerning the true Marian Forrester, the woman beneath "the raiment of a lady," is followed by a swift succession of "ungallant fancies" in which the lovely lady becomes incredibly banal and her once beautiful house is transformed into the vulgar cache of the American nineteenth century middle west:

There would be an old copy of Ainslee's on the floor somewhere, a glitter of glass under a broken windowpane, springs leaking from a ruptured sofa, a cobweb in a chandelier, a dusty etching of Notre Dame unevenly hung on the wall, and a stopped clock on the marble mantel above a cold fireplace. I could see the brandy bottle, too, on a stained table, wearing its cork drunkenly.

Just to the left of the front door, the big hall closet would be filled with relics of the turn of the century, the canes and guns of Captain Forrester, a crokinole board, a diavolo, a frivolous parasol, a collection of McKinley campaign buttons, a broken stereopticon, a table tennis set, a toppled stack of blue poker chips and a scatter of playing cards, a woodburning set....

Never content with overturning simply one expectation or

illusion, Thurber intensifies the confusion and muddlement of this story by portraying another complete upheaval in the narrator's mind. Suddenly, just as his new impression of Marian Forrester the vulgarian has confidently replaced his earlier illusions about her grace and charm, his sensibility is shaken and another impression takes its place:

'I beg you to remember it was once said of Madame de Vionnet that when she touched a thing the ugliness, God knows how, went out of it.' 'How sweet!' I could hear Mrs. Forrester go on. 'And yet, according to you, she lost her lover, for all her charm, and to a snippet of an applecheek from New England. Did the ugliness go out of that? And if it did, what did the poor lady do with all the prettiness?'

As I stood there in the darkening afternoon, getting soaked, I realized sharply that in my fantasy I had actually been handing Marian Forrester stones to throw at the house in Paris, and the confusion in my viewpoint of the two ladies, if up to that moment I had had a viewpoint, overwhelmed me.

The story ends, with our narrator never approaching the house, in a confusion of viewpoint which implies the fundamental ambiguity of his experience and his perception of reality. He is able to clearly choose neither Madame de Vionnet, the super-refined sensibility who would pretend not to see an omelet in a guest's lap, nor Mrs. Forrester, the vulgarian who, the narrator knows, would at least have enough humanity to appreciate the comedy of an omelet on a man's lap and be able to laugh it off.⁵² Thurber has thus captured in this short story not only James' idea of character and perception, but the essential ambiguity in James'

⁵² James Thurber, The Beast in Me and Other Animals, pp. 120-126.

comparisons of Americans and Europeans, a comparison which is often regarded simplistically by readers of James who expect a definite statement from the master of nuance and muddlement. The question of whether Madame de Vionnet is better than Mrs. Forrester (or Christopher Newman or Isabel Archer) is finally unanswered, unless it is an answer that neither is better. In a large sense, all experience is muddled and all "reality" ambiguous.

Thurber's view of reality as an ever-shifting, ambiguous entity is not only an evidence of his Jamesian influence, however. Wylie Sypher suggests that modern comedy is built upon a split-vision of the world, depending as it does "upon double occasions, double premises, double values." Since we live in a world of irreconcilables the modern form of comedy is the form which, even more than tragedy, best reveals truths to us: "After all, comedy, not tragedy, admits the disorderly into the realm of art.... [and] ours is a century of disorder and irrationalism."⁵³ The resultant art, attempting to affect order within disorder, is as ambiguous as life itself.

Thurber admitted that he was himself in a constant state of flux about reality and life:

Intelligent persons are expected to formulate 'an integrated and consistent attitude toward life or reality;' this is known as a 'philosophy' (definition 2c in Webster's New International Dictionary. Unfortunately,

⁵³ Wylie Sypher, Comedy, pp. 213, 201.

I have never been able to maintain a consistent attitude toward life or reality, or toward anything else. This may be entirely due to nervousness. At any rate, my attitudes change with the years, sometimes with the hours.⁵⁴

This ambivalence or doubleness leads Thurber constantly to qualify and re-qualify his position in the essays; it is also at least a partial basis for his depiction of many characters' elusive hold on any attitude, illusion, or perception of reality. This inability to make a consistent or patterned statement about life is the ultimate expression of his one consistent vision, that of the unending chaos and disorder of human life.

Mrs. Thurber has cautioned the student of Thurber not to attempt to force a consistent viewpoint or philosophy on Thurber's mind or art; she remembers him as a person who tended to react to individual situations, people, and events in all their complexity rather than as a person who had analyzed life into a neat pattern or attitude.⁵⁵ This, too, is consistent with his *Anatomy of Confusion* and is partially responsible for the diversity of his subjects and characters and the similarity which most of his work has to real life. The inherent contradictions in his character are also apparent in the range of his work. One would perhaps not expect the same man to write satiric Aesopian fables, fairy tales,

⁵⁴James Thurber, "Statement," I Believe, p. 295.

⁵⁵Mrs. James Thurber, Interview with Catherine Kenney, Dec. 2, 1973.

literary essays, stream-of-consciousness short stories, researched articles on bloodhounds and insects, Jamesian parodies, and critiques of American soap operas. The same man did, however, and in order to effectively deal with all of his work it is necessary to refuse to limit oneself to any traditional labels or definitions.

Paradoxical as it is, Thurber clearly stated the essential ambiguities of human experience and substituted a kind of super-realism for a factual, limited understanding of life and human nature. His wicked or truly unattractive characters are those who would pretend an order or a formula which is unreal, those who are deluded into taking illusion as reality. His wide view of the human spectacle perceives the delusion and the severely limited awareness of the individual and the group which cause them to stumble from confusion to confusion. Like Henry James, Thurber did not make the mistake of offering another incomplete formula to replace the old illusions, but was interested in elucidating the infinite complexity and even contradictory nature of life. The one fundamental illusion to be destroyed, then, is the false belief that reality is ever self-evident or clear, that the ever-revolving mind is ever finished in detecting the myriad permutations of reality.

CHAPTER VII

THE LANGUAGE OF CONFUSION

Ours is a precarious language, as every writer knows, in which the merest shadow line often separates affirmation from negation, sense from nonsense, and one sex from the other.

--Lanterns & Lances

The world in Thurber's prose and drawings is most often that part of the universe in which things get remarkably out of hand, in which a tiny, apparently inconsequential misunderstanding can become more and more confused until the nature of reality is ultimately questioned. It is, among other things, a world of confused and confusing language. Very often, in fact, the apex of confusion is the result of an involved linguistic confusion: mispronunciation, garbled quotation, outrageous punning, or in the broadest sense, a seeming inability to communicate at all. Thurber explores and exploits the evocative, incantatory properties of language, as well as the full range of its denotative capacity, to the point that language itself becomes a character in the action; in The Wonderful O, for instance, language becomes totally personified, with moral and cultural roles to play.

The purpose of this chapter is to explain Thurber's preoccupation with language and to relate it to his other interests and attitudes, specifically as it is a key to understanding his attitude toward man's perpetual state of

confusion.

Although it has become rather axiomatic to say that Thurber wrote a "lucid, correct, and expensively simple English"¹ as a result of his gift for language and his legendary system of revising, admirers of his superb style have often failed to realize that the word simplicity only partially describes Thurber's use of language; they have even more often failed to see the intimate relationship between his use of language and either his subject matter or his artistic credo that the writer must attempt to bring grace and measure out of chaos.² The more extreme forms of his linguistic obsession have also generally been regarded as a minor fault and a major idiosyncrasy, at times obscuring meaning rather than aiding it; critics with this view usually notice the growing concern with words and sound after the advent of Thurber's blindness in the early 1940's and the increase of involved word games in the later books. Some critics find the language pieces offensive from the very beginning of his career; Walter Blair, for instance, mistakenly reads "The Ladies' and Gentlemen's Guide to Modern English" in The Owl in the Attic³ as an indication of Thurber's own

¹Malcolm Cowley, "Lions and Lemmings, Toads and Tigers," The Reporter, XV (Dec. 13, 1956), 43; see also David McCord, "Anatomy of Confusion," Saturday Review of Literature, XXXVI (Dec. 5, 1953), 33; and Moynihan, "No Nonsense," p. 872.

²Cf. Chapter I, note 42, above.

³James Thurber, The Owl in the Attic and Other Perplexities (Nes York: Harper and Brothers, 1931).

trouble with language, and therefore, a boring piece of grammatical explanation.⁴ The more common opinion, however, is that only the late pieces tend to be overwhelmed by punning, esoteric jokes, and other word play which result in a markedly inferior literary product.⁵

I believe, however, the Thurber's interest in language, in its power and limits, is consistent throughout his career (although intensified in the last two decades of his life as he became more of an "ear writer"⁶) and that this predilection, far being a mere personality quirk or tangential indulgence, is fundamentally related to his other subjects, his view of mankind, and his perception of the role of the artist. Interest in language is consistent and integral in Thurber's art. He liked to refer to himself as a "word man"⁷ and from the very beginning of his career he viewed language as both a possibility for achieving the most precise balance in a world of disorder and a probability for triggering an unforeseen bedlam.

Despite random comments of praise from other writers, Thurber's use of language has been seriously neglected. Only one study, Alice Baldwin's "Congruous Laughter," deals with

⁴Walter Blair, Horse Sense in American Humor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), pp. 284-85.

⁵Cf. Updike, "Indignations," p. 5.

⁶Breit, "Talk with James Thurber," p. 17.

⁷James Thurber, Alarms and Diversions (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), p. 66.

Thurber's language and Dr. Baldwin confines herself to statements about some of Thurber's linguistic devices in a very limited area of his work, the casual essays. No one has demonstrated the basic relationship of Thurber's linguistic obsession and his fine prose style to his themes and subject matter. No one has realized that, as Thurber understood the world to be a state of perpetual confusion, he regarded language as both a prime instigator of confusion and, paradoxically, our only chance to surmount it. Through language and human communication, Thurber suggests, we can attempt to say what, exactly, is the matter; we can attempt to close the gaps which necessarily exist between muddled, perplexed, and hostile individuals; we can at least register our recognition (and, often, our disapproval) of the chaos of our world. This conception of language is but a corollary of Thurber's understanding of the role of the artist as one who brings grace and measure to a chaotic world; in his own calm, precise, and amazingly creative language, Thurber, the humorist, recollects the bedlam and carnival of human life.

Language itself, the only chance Thurber sees as a way to end the confusion, often fails. This chapter is especially concerned with the unique Thurber rendering of "The Language of Confusion," the mistaken, garbled, inaccurate, or insufficient communication attempts made by people in a world of multiple confusions. Nothing shows Thurber's complex and sometimes contradictory attitude toward confusion

better than his many depictions of the language of confusion, a language which he alternately regards as a delight and a horror. Thurber's statement seems to be that only the poet or artist can make sense from the language of confusion, create with it, and, occasionally, use it as a weapon. In order to demonstrate the immense range and fineness of Thurber's language and the importance of his linguistic obsession in his vision of the world as a state of confusion, I will survey his language chronologically in this chapter. For a detailed enumeration of the hallmarks of Thurber's prose style and analyses of especially fine and representative passages, see Appendix II, "The Elements of Thurber's Style."

In Is Sex Necessary? or Why You Feel the Way You Do (1929),⁸ Thurber collaborated with E. B. White on his first published book; it firmly established the basic parodic tendency of much of Thurber's language, while also employing such future style markers as frequent neologisms, especially mock jargon coinages, and lists of words or phrases which are not normally collocated. In a recent study of American humor, neologistic tendencies and other types of experimentation were cited as chief characteristics of our humor.⁹

⁸ James Thurber and E. B. White, Is Sex Necessary? (Delta Book edition of 1929 text; New York: Dell, 1957); Thurber wrote The Preface and Glossary, along with Chapters I, III, V, VII, and all of the drawings.

⁹ Jesse Bier, The Rise and Fall of American Humor (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968), p. 17.

Is Sex Necessary? is basically a parody and it is the particular kind of parody that Thurber was to favor--next to the literary parody--over all others: parody of the scientific treatise. In Thurber's use of parody in this book and later in the scientific parody of Let Your Mind Alone!, he differs from the general parodic tradition which associates at least partial admiration of the model with its imitation. Auden has said that "it is only possible to caricature an author one admires because, in the case of an author one dislikes, his own work will seem a better parody than one could hope to write oneself."¹⁰ Thurber uses parody in the more conventional manner in the later literary parodies, especially those of Henry James, in which it is mainly the style which is outrageously distorted. In the parodies of scientific jargon and political language the content and conclusions of the writing are being ridiculed even more than the language itself.

Since this book was written as a parody specifically of the "sex books" or popularized psychology books of the 1920's, Thurber uses mock case histories such as this record of "patient" George Smith:

George Smith, aged 32, real estate operator. Unmarried, lived with mother. No precocious mother fixation. Had freed his libido without difficulty from familial objects, and was eager to marry. Had formed an attachment in 1899, at the age of 29, with a young virgin. Her Protective

¹⁰ W. H. Auden, The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 382.

Reactions had been immediate and lasted over a period of three years, during which he had never held her hand. Defense Devices: usually euchre (four handed), or pedro. Definite and frequent fudge-making subterfuge. Post Office and Pillow, both with low degree of success.¹¹

As Dr. Baldwin has established in regard to Thurber parodies in general, the humor of this passage results from Thurber's careful balance of exaggeration and understatement: "Ultimately, the reader laughs because he has the sensation of seeing double. Thurber has kept two points of view so successfully balanced that the resultant Gestalt is like a photographic double exposure which is nevertheless perfectly clear."¹² Thus, there are only slight indications along the way (including "no precocious mother fixation" and the facts about the patient's attachment to a young virgin precisely timed in 1899, at the age of 29) but the careful language, nearly correct, ("Defense Devices," "Protective Reactions") leaves the small jolt, and hence, the laugh, for the mention of card games and fudge-making at the end of an apparently technical description. Of course, Thurber is not only satirizing modern science here, but also its involved language and its (assumed) inability to deal effectively with human problems.

Such a criticism is also inherent in the mock anthropological voice of the Preface. In attempting to decide the cause of attraction between the sexes, Thurber speaks with

¹¹ Thurber and White, Is Sex Necessary?, p. 49.

¹² Baldwin, Congruous Laughter, p. 92.

confusing verbosity: "Almost immediately the two halves of the original cell began experiencing a desire to unite again --usually with half of some other cell."¹³ The shift down in tone in the last phrase of this sentence is a hallmark of Thurber's comic prose style; it is similar to the surprise in the following sentence, which results from a tone shift within a list of normally uncollocated words: "Its commonest manifestations are marriage, divorce, neuroses, and, a little less frequently, gun-fire."¹⁴ The presence of gun-fire in such a list negates not only the other parts of the list, but also confuses the phraseology enough to cause the reader to question all scientific reporting. (Thurber seems to particularly like the humorous effect of such a tone shift in lists; he especially uses long and involved lists with tonal variations in the fairy tales later in his career.)

Is Sex Necessary? is particularly enlivened by the neologistic games Thurber plays with his reader: "The Nature of the American Male" is a "study of Pedestalism;" "Schmalhausen trouble," "the Lilies-and-Bluebird Delusion," and "Übertragung Period" describe various sexual maladies; and that incomparable combination of perfect formation and insane definition, "Neuro-Vegetative Reflexes," means "A male's, particularly a husband's, quick, unpremeditated reaction to stewed vegetables...." In the essays and Glossary of this

¹³Thurber and White, Is Sex Necessary?, p. xxiii.

¹⁴Thurber and White, Is Sex Necessary?, p. xxiii.

book Thurber is already beginning to experiment with the elasticity of language; usually, now and in later pieces, he is able to make words or common morphemes of words do exactly what he wants. In addition to his coinages, the twists found in his definitions of ordinary and established words are often the result of tonal shifts in the latter part of the phrase: "Neurosis" is "the beginning of the end, unless the husband can go away somewhere;" "erotic" is "pertaining to sex, usually in a pretty far fetched manner;" and "narcissism" is the "attempt to be self-sufficient, with overtones." The ultimate twist is on the definition of love (which is really the subject of Is Sex Necessary?): "The pleasant confusion which we know exists."¹⁵ This definition, which denies through the use of the word confusion the sentimental tradition against which Thurber revolted, is like the others in which a shift in tone or a twist in meaning occurs; they all are examples of the established comic technique of setting up expectations which are then pointedly not fulfilled.¹⁶

If this book were only a parody, and a parody of a now dated sexual mini-revolution, it would not be worthy of much consideration, nor would it have been reprinted in 1957. But the book is intrinsically interesting because it includes some of Thurber's important ideas, ideas which are also in

¹⁵ Thurber and White, Is Sex Necessary?, pp. 183-87.

¹⁶ Northrop Frye, "The Mythos of Spring: Comedy," in Comedy Meaning and Form, ed. by Corrigan, says an important theme of all comedy resides in creating and dispelling illusions, p. 147.

themselves important. Thurber here establishes the significant subject of the inability of the sexes to communicate, especially in "the Lilies-and-Bluebird Delusion;" this early, humorous rendition of the communication gap prefigures the near horror of such confusion in the later short stories like "A Couple of Hamburgers," "The Breaking Up of the Winships," and "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty."¹⁷ In this essay, communication is stifled by adherence to stock phrases, old wives' tales, and superstition; due to inadequate sex education, a young wife believes procreation is affected by flowers being brought into the bedroom (what her mother had told her). Her husband attempts explanation, first in English, then French, but finally admits "I just don't know enough words."¹⁸ At the end of the essay, the picture of the homes of such mute partners is as foreboding as it is funny:

The home becomes a curious sort of hybrid, with overtones of the botanical garden and the aviary. The husband grows morose and snappish, the wife cross and pettish. Very often she takes up lacrosse and he goes in for raising rabbits. If allowed to go on, the situation can become so involved and intricate that not all of the analysts from the time of Joan of Arc could unravel it.¹⁹

Thus, in his first book, Thurber has already begun to develop his ability to plumb language's creative possibilities, while

¹⁷James Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone! (Universal Library paperbound edition of 1937 text; New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1960); My World--and Welcome to It! (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1942).

¹⁸Thurber and White, Is Sex Necessary?, p. 118.

¹⁹Thurber, Is Sex Necessary?, p. 121.

also being extremely aware of the limits of language; in a sense, Is Sex Necessary? is a parody of the creaking mechanism of language itself.

Thurber followed Is Sex Necessary? in 1931 with The Owl in the Attic and Other Perplexities. In it he presents the first well-drawn Thurber couple, Mr. and Mrs. Monroe, along with "The Pet Department," in which the persona is a tongue-in-cheek newspaper columnist, and "The Ladies' and Gentlemen's Guide to Modern English." In the Monroe stories he again deals with married people who are unable to communicate. They play involved games with each other, many of which result from John Monroe's daydreams--daydreams caused by his inordinate interest in popularized philosophy and its jargon. In "The Imperturbable Spirit," Monroe turns the adjective "imperturbable" over and over in his head until even canes in a shop window appear imperturbable:

He liked that adjective, which he had been encountering in a book he was reading on God, ethics, morals, humanism, and so on. The word stood staunch, like a bulwark, rumbled, like a caisson. Mr. Monroe was pleased to find himself dealing in similes.²⁰

It is his attraction to this word and the false promises of philosophical literature that causes John Monroe to get into involved problems: "Mr. Monroe began to feel pretty much the master of his fate. Non-fiction, of a philosophical nature always affected him that way, regardless of its content."²¹

²⁰ Thurber, The Owl in the Attic, p. 11.

²¹ Thurber, The Owl in the Attic, p. 12.

It is the incantatory properties of language alone, specifically of the word imperturbable rolling around in his head, that tricks Monroe into believing that he is imperturbable. However, when his wife arrives at the customs station he is unable even to help her clear a dozen bottles of Benedictine, a task she finds quite simple in her truly imperturbable manner. The final ironic thrust of the story is a picture of John Monroe caught again in the myth of imperturbability: "He read in a deep, impressive voice, and slowly, for there was a lot his wife would not grasp at once."²² One of Thurber's strong women, Mrs. Monroe is not such easy prey for the word. John Monroe's susceptibility to the power of language should be compared to the "victim" of a grammatical confusion in the Guide:

The gentleman with two variants on his hands, takes to mumbling to himself, first one and then the other--'We would have liked to have joined you in,' 'We would have liked to find you in.' After he does this several times, both expressions begin to sound meaningless. They don't make any sense at all, let alone make precise sense.... his strength of mind... [has] been challenged.²³

Later, Mr. Monroe is left to oversee a move; he meets the packers with his imperturbable mask, but soon the real world closes in on ineffectual John Monroe and the men proceed from calling him chief, to mister, buddy, pardner, and finally, sonny. The word, the name, then, not only represents the man as he appears to himself and others, but is emblematic of his

²²Thurber, The Owl in the Attic, pp. 14, 20.

²³Thurber, The Owl in the Attic, pp. 143, 144.

own grasp of the situation.²⁴

Animals usually partake of neither the negative nor positive uses of language; therefore, "The Pet Department" has only one question concerning language. In answer to why a police dog would act strangely after being continually asked "If you're a police dog, where's your badge?" Thurber answers, "the constant reiteration of any piece of badinage sometimes has the same effect on present day neurotic dogs that it has on people."²⁵ Therefore, like poor John Monroe and the victim in the Guide, even the dog has been forced into a state of perplexity by language.

The Guide was "inspired" by Fowler's Dictionary of Modern English Usage; it is an excursion into the labyrinth of grammar and, implicitly, into the nature of meaning. In it Thurber displays his characteristic fascination with language as well as its limitations. Not only is Thurber indicating the amount of confusion possible in trying to deal with grammar, but, implicitly, the comment is that the English language, and perhaps all language, is absurd.²⁶ Example:

Unfortunately, it is only in rare cases that "where" can be used in place of "whom." Nothing could be more flagrantly bad, for instance, than to say "Where are you?" in demanding a person's identity. The only conceivable answer is, "Here I am," which would give no hint at all as to whom the person was.²⁷

²⁴Thurber, The Owl in the Attic, p. 41.

²⁵Thurber, The Owl in the Attic, p. 80.

²⁶Baldwin, Congruous Laughter, p. 89.

²⁷Thurber, The Owl in the Attic, pp. 100-01.

Therefore, language, the only hope for intelligent communication, can be the very factor in eluding meaning.

Is Thurber, as some critics have assumed, himself confused? Blair's remark that Thurber was indicating in the *Guide* his own perplexity with language ignores the careful manipulation of the problems and properties of the English language in this section. For instance, consider the perceptive comment implicit in the following apparently nonsensical statement which shows Thurber's knowledge of the confusion resulting from latinate English: "it is better to use 'whom' when in doubt, and even better to re-word the statement, and leave out all the relative pronouns, except ad, ante, con, in, inter, ob, post, prae, pro, sub, and super."²⁸ Thurber's knowledge of language and his precise ear for English prose style are also demonstrated in the parodic passages, such as the following passage, in which language is personified, a grammatical problem solved, and Ernest Hemingway's style explained:

The young man who originally got into that sentence was never found. His fate, however, was not as terrible as that of another adventurer who became involved in a remarkable whichmire....the safest way to avoid such things is to follow the path of the American author, Ernest Hemingway. In his youth he was trapped in a which-clause and barely escaped with his mind.... [He learned to skirt the morass by writing this way]: 'He was afraid of one thing. This was the one thing. He had been warned to fear such things.'²⁹

²⁸ Thurber, The Owl in the Attic, p. 102.

²⁹ Thurber, The Owl in the Attic, pp. 105-06.

Although written with heavy exaggeration, this description is pointed and especially humorous because it is but a distortion of two very real things: the perplexity of man confronting a difficult passage and the style of a famous writer.

In "The Split Infinitive" Thurber relates language rules and problems to social ones: "Word has somehow got around that a split infinitive is always wrong. This is of a piece with the sentimental and outworn notion that it is always wrong to strike a lady."³⁰ This statement is followed by a description of the ease with which a polite dinner party turns into a brawl; the abyss of chaos awaits in the drawing room, in the sentence. In the Guide, Thurber is not solely concerned with grammatical problems, but with the possibility of "avoiding grammatical confusion," a confusion which can lead a man into a fatal whichmire or precipitate the breakdown of a marriage, a social event, or a nation.³¹

Language similarly precipitates a wild disarray of events in My Life and Hard Times (1933). In it, there is a notable tension between the precision of Thurber's prose and the imprecise communication of the characters in his stories. "The Night the Bed Fell" and "The Day the Dam Broke" are

³⁰Thurber, The Owl in the Attic, p.111.

³¹Thurber, Owl in the Attic, pp. 118, 119; Thurber's skill with parody should also be noted in in the uncollected pieces "Recollections of Henry James," New Yorker, June 17, 1933, pp. 11-13; and "The Threefold Problem of World Economic Cooperation (By Six or Eight Writers for the "Times" Magazine Section, All Writing at Once)," New Yorker, Aug. 5, 1933, pp. 19-20.

results not only of a linguistic confusion, but are themselves misnomers; the bed did not fall, the dam did not break, but the events are continually referred to in these terms.³² In all of the shouting in "The Night the Bed Fell" no one bothers to find out where the noise actually originated (a cot had collapsed on Thurber) and the shouting only intensifies the muddlement since mother had decided from the beginning that the bed had indeed fallen on father. Father, only partially conscious, finally irrationally shouts, "I'm coming, "I'm coming!" to the Lord who awaits him at his imagined death. Nothing whatever, remember, has happened.

"The Day the Dam Broke" is a quintessential Thurberian confusion: hundreds of citizens rush by the Thurber house (itself a paradigm of reason as we already know)

in a wild panic, screaming "Go east! Go east!" which is followed, for no obvious reason, by the alarm: "The dam has broken!" There are few persons capable of stopping to reason when that clarion cry strikes upon their ears, even persons who live in towns no nearer than five hundred miles to a dam.

The words "The dam has broken" wreak havoc on Columbus. Even the presumably calming announcement that "The dam has not broken!... tended only to add to the confusion and increase the panic for many stampedeers thought the soldiers were bellowing 'The dam has now broken!', thus setting an official seal of authentication on the calamity." Only after repeated announcements does the crowd disperse.³³

³²Thurber, My Life and Hard Times, pp. 28, 21.

³³Thurber, My Life and Hard Times, pp. 43, 45.

In "More Alarms at Night" the individual is menaced by language; Thurber's father is plagued by the inane repetition of the words "ate some burnt hoss flesh, ate some burnt hoss flesh" from a Victrola record revolving in the same groove and by the pretended delirium of brother Roy, who screams at Charles Thurber, "Buck, your time has come!" repeatedly until Father almost believes he is Buck. These are adventures into the land of meaninglessness and confusion, like their maid's repetition of the phrase "de 'speriority ob de race" even though she admits she does not know what it means.³⁴ There is no confusion like the confusion of the narrator himself, however, on the night after "I had been trying all afternoon, in vain, to think of the name Perth Amboy." Lying in bed, trying to think of the name, his mind flows to "such words and names and phrases as terra cotta, Walla-Walla, bill of lading, vice versa, hoity-toity ... without even coming close to Perth Amboy." But this is not simply a boy trying to think of a word; or a piece of nonsensical humor; it is a consciousness trying to make sense from nonsense and exploring the meaning of meaning:

I began to indulge in the wildest fancies as I lay there in the dark, such as that there was no such town, and even that there was no such state as New Jersey. I fell to repeating the word 'Jersey' over and over again, until it became idiotic and meaningless.... I got to thinking that there was nobody else in the world but me...I began to suspect that one might lose one's mind over some such trivial mental tic as a futile search for terra firma

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Thurber, My Life and Hard Times, pp. 60, 62, 76.

Piggly Wiggly Gorgonzola Prester John Arc de Triomphe
Holy Moses Lares and Penates³⁵

Although many critics like to compare Thurber with Joyce in terms of the language obsession of a blind writer, Thurber's Joycean handling of this passage--and, presumably, the earlier experience itself--predates his blindness by almost a decade. One reviewer of the book in 1935 did, however, perceptively describe Thurber as "a Joyce in false-face" whose characters "take their subconsciouses out on "benders."³⁶

Although the tone of My Life and Hard Times is one of very high spirits, lighter than many of the darkly humorous stories of the later Thurber, most of his readers do not recognize the essential horror underlying this picture of Thurber's mind, echoing words and being menaced by sound and meaning. The scene is funny for two reasons. It is humorous because it exploits the principle of comic repetition fully; it is the long, involved obsession with the words Perth Amboy and its alternatives which makes us laugh.³⁷ It is funny also because it violates, in an established technique of comedy, one of the laws of language that "words are man-made things which men use, not persons with a will and consciousness of their own. Whether they make sense or nonsense depends on

³⁵ Thurber, My Life and Hard Times, pp., 63, 64.

³⁶ Cf. Holmes, The Clocks of Columbus, p. 178, quotes from a review of the book by Charles Poore in The New York Times, Nov. 24, 1935.

³⁷ Frye, "The Mythos of Spring," in Comedy, ed. by Corrigan, p. 146.

whether the speaker uses them correctly or incorrectly."³⁸

But here, in the darkened room, words stalk the man in a scene both comic and frightening. Thurber himself always recognized the element of pain and even of fear in laughter. In 1936 he wrote: "You know that hysterical laugh that people sometimes get in the face of the awful. Maybe it's the rock-bottom of humor. Anyway it exists."³⁹ His own humor was from the beginning a special blend of the funny, the sad, and the horrible. Therefore, the critics who say that Thurber revelled in linguistic and other forms of confusion as a young writer and was only menaced by words and chaos later in his career miss the point of near-horror in this description. In these stories, as in the grammatical morass in the Guide and the misfortunes of Mr. Monroe, language can be as real a demon as any man. It appears to be a possibility for reason and calm; it was the repeated announcement that the dam had not, in fact, broken which eventually quelled the stampede. It is the material with which a writer works. Even more surely, however, language is a first step to bedlam.

Language and communication problems become even darker subjects in Thurber's next book, The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze (1935).⁴⁰ This distinguished collection

³⁸ Auden, Dyer's Hand, p. 379.

³⁹ Eastman, Enjoyment of Laughter, p. 343.

⁴⁰ James Thurber, The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935).

has a greater complexity of subject matter and moods than the previous books; its pieces that are particularly concerned with language range from the flippant word games in "The State of Bontana" to the high burlesque of "Something to Say" to the eerie "Black Magic of Barney Haller." It is significant that Thurber liked "The Black Magic of Barney Haller" the best of all these stories;⁴¹ in it his fascination with language and its ability to stimulate the imagination is balanced with even more menace than before in the nocturnal battle against the words Perth Amboy.

Thurber's description of how he (or his assumed persona) reacted to Barney Haller is illustrative of the complexity of his attitudes toward confusion and the non-rational aspects of life. Barney was an eerie hired man who not only brought thunder storms with him but spoke a Teutonic English which triggered Thurber's wildest imaginings:

'Bime by I go hunt grotches in de voods.' If you are susceptible to such things, it is not difficult to visualize grotches. They fluttered into my mind: ugly little creatures, about the size of whippoorwills, only covered with blood and honey and the scrapings of church bells. Grotches...Who and what, I wondered, really was this thing in the form of a hired man that kept anointing me ominously, in passing, with abracadabra?⁴²

This "traveller back from Oz" transports Thurber to the dark corners of the imagination and through his incantatory language even transmogrifies himself: "I had a notion that he

⁴¹Holmes, Clocks of Columbus, p. 178.

⁴²Thurber, Middle-Aged Man, pp. 160-61.

was standing at the door barefooted, with a wreath of grape leaves around his head, and a wild animal's skin slung over his shoulder."⁴³ All of these strange mental transformations are caused by the things Barney says, what he mispronounces and what those mispronunciations seem to mean to his audience. However, the reasonable explanation of what it is, exactly, that Barney means does not diminish the efficacy of his oral black magic; even though Thurber has known Haller and remembers that his horrific "Once I see dis boat come down de rock" was really only a garbled statement of an ordinary fact, his previous experience and rational knowledge do not help him in dealing with the emotional and psychological problems of other meetings with Haller. "Of course I finally figured out what Barney meant: something about a bolt coming down the lightning rod on the house; a commonplace, an utterly natural thing. I should have dismissed it, but it had its effect on me."⁴⁴ The dilemma of Thurber and Haller is germane to an understanding of Thurber characters, most of whom continually meet experience unprepared by past experiences, unable to do what seems reasonable, and destined to make the same errors and fall into the same confusions as before. They are especially unable to use language reasonably.

Thurber tries to manage implacability in this onslaught of verbal voodoo by using his reason and the weapons

⁴³Thurber, Middle-Aged Man, 162.

⁴⁴Thurber, Middle-Aged Man, p. 160.

of a literate man. He attempts to continue reading Proust while Barney drones on, but "his words began to come between me and the words in the book." Quoting Frost to Barney does not work much better and finally it is Lewis Carroll nonsense rephrased which makes sense to the nonsense-speaker:

'Listen!' I barked suddenly. 'Did you know that even when it isn't brillig I can produce slithy toves? Did you happen to know that the mome rath never lived that could outgrabe me?'⁴⁵

Thurber is here challenging the concept of language as an instrument of reason and as an objective reality in which constant meanings are established. Sense from nonsense, only nonsense from sense. He is, of course, correct in his choice of Carroll who used nonsense language to make the same kind of statement. Thurber in some measure wins out over Barney; his own nonsensical incantations send Haller away forever. But the fundamental ambiguity of Thurber is caught in the last line of the story. After all of his hatred and fear of this devil in workman's clothes, the voice in the essay says, "I am sure he trafficked with the devil. But I am sorry I let him go."⁴⁶ Again, as in My Life and Hard Times, the confusions of life and language are fascinating material for the imagination, irrevocably drawing the writer to them, while another part of his nature fights for meaning, tranquility and order.

⁴⁵Thurber, Middle-Aged Man, p. 163.

⁴⁶Thurber, Middle-Aged Man, p. 164.

The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze presents many other characters with communication problems: Emma Inch cannot communicate with anyone but thinks her dog talks to her; the Thurber persona in "The Gentleman is Cold" is harassed by people who call him Jacob Thurman; and Mr. Bruhl is menaced by repetition of the word "cooked" to the point of suicide. Mr. Bidwell's similarly self-destructive private life is necessitated by the incessant application by his wife of the non-word "goop," and others equally demoralizing, to his behavior. In a most extreme case of the inability of the sexes to communicate, a pair of lovers meet in "The Evening's at Seven" and speak to each other in a nervous counterpoint that is reminiscent of parts of The Waste Land in its emptiness:

Oh, she said, and this and that and so and such (words he wasn't listening to). Yes, he said, absently, I suppose so. Very much he said (in answer to something else), very much. Oh, she said, laughing at him, not that much! He didn't have any idea what they were talking about.⁴⁷

The communication problem between the sexes is also unrelieved in "The Curb in the Sky," in which Charlie Deshler cannot even complete a sentence without his wife finishing it for him, usually with corrections.⁴⁸

In a less serious vein Thurber describes one of the minor irritations of business correspondence in "The Guessing

⁴⁷Thurber, Middle-Aged Man, pp. 190, 10, 1, 169, 71; compare Thurber, p. 190 with Eliot, "The Waste Land," in Complete Poems, lines 111-172.

⁴⁸Thurber, Middle-Aged Man, pp. 75-80.

Game." In it Thurber answers a cryptic but evocative note that states:

An article was found after your departure in the room which you occupied. Kindly let us know if you have missed such an article, and if so send us a description and instructions as to what disposition you wish made of same.

This rather slight piece is humorous because Thurber turns a minor irritation into a three-page confusion, beginning with the statement that "this whole thing is going to be much more complicated than you think." And indeed it is; the attempt to put a name on a member of the general group "article," an article which has not even been missed and therefore must be imagined, turns into a complicated puzzle.⁴⁹

The elaborate joke of language--a joke perpetrated on unwitting man--is more fully developed in "Something to Say," a parody of James's "The Coxen Fund."⁵⁰ The essential irony of this typical Thurber title (Elliot Vereker has, in fact, nothing to say) sets the tone of this story. Vereker is the prototypical dilettante. That "he had an inordinate fondness for echoes" indicates his lack of potential for real communication. And yet he speaks and inexplicably has an audience: "Proust, I later discovered, he had never read, but he made him seem more clear to me, and less important, than anybody else ever has." Not only do his banal comments receive attention but he is "listened" to even when no one can hear him:

⁴⁹Thurber, Middle-Aged Man, p. 37.

⁵⁰Holmes, Clocks of Columbus, p. 30.

Vereker always liked to have an electric fan going while he talked and he would stick a folded newspaper into the fan so that the revolving blades scuttered against it, making a noise like the rattle of machine-gun fire. This exhilarated him and exhilarated me, too, but I suppose that it exhilarated him more than it did me.

The superficial inanity of this passage expands in the mind of the reader to a deeper meaning; it is the fundamentally spell-binding nature of even meaningless language that Thurber is again dealing with here. Language, the instrument of reason, can mesmerize millions with goobledgook. Vereker presents empty epigrams which ridiculously combine the corny and the pseudo-intellectual: "Breaking lead pipe is one of the truly enchanting adventures in life;" "Here but for the gracelessness of God...stands the greatest writer in the history of the world."⁵¹ Thus, Thurber slays enough pretentious literary dragons to become not even too sure of the artist's grasp of measure and grace in language or in life.

Two years after The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze Thurber published a collection combining parody of popular psychology and philosophy books with a section of stories that are basically studies in social relations. The book is titled Let Your Mind Alone! and Other More or Less Inspirational Pieces (1937) to indicate the dichotomy of subject matter and tone. A reader familiar with Is Sex Necessary? will immediately recognize the Thurber war against jargon and the false promises of modern science. Throughout the

⁵¹ Thurber, Middle-Aged Man, pp. 175, 177-78.

first half of Let Your Mind Alone! Thurber reduces systems men and confidence peddlers to absurdity. The enemies are the authors of such banalities as "How to Worry Successfully," "Wake Up and Live!," "Streamline Your Mind," and "Be Glad You're Neurotic."⁵² The problem is that men believe these slogans.

Science concocts its own meaningless language which leads to confusion, so that an astounded Thurber notes that the fear of a fear is what "the psychologists call phobophobia (they really do). But now he is afraid of the fear he had of being afraid and hence is a victim of what I can only call phobophobophobia, and is in deeper than he was before. Let us leave him in this perfectly frightful mess..."⁵³

Thurber further explodes scholarly language, especially through a use of comic literalism; i.e., at one point he refers to the dramaturgy of the Marx brothers as "Marxist."

Not only scientific jargon causes confusion and Thurber here, as in "Barney Haller," balances the desire for confusion against the destructive powers of confusion. For instance, Bert Scurse in "The Destructive Forces in Life, develops an elaborate and entertaining mix-up which "promised to have all the confusion which his disorderly mind so deplorably enjoyed." After posing over the telephone as a cleaning

⁵² Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone!, pp. 41, 26, 19, 49.

⁵³ Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone!, pp. 42, 74.

woman and a hotel clerk to two friends and driving them to the breaking point with his "will to confuse," he not only destroys their streamlined minds and confidence, but reduces the confidence of the reader in the validity of the concept of a well-ordered intelligence. The telephone, which is supposed to facilitate communication and erase many of its barriers, becomes an instrument of verbal confusion.

In Let Your Mind Alone! Thurber alternately praises and damns the language of confusion. In refuting Dr. James L. ("Streamline Your Mind") Murrell's attempt to force everyone to "get a precise and dogmatic meaning out of everything they read," instead of being open to the powers of the imagination and the evocation of poetry, Thurber writes:

There is no person whose spirit hasn't at one time or another been enriched by some cherished transfiguring of meanings. Everybody is familiar with the youngster who thought the first line of The Lord's Prayer was "Our Father, who are in Heaven, Halloween be thy Name." There must have been for him, in that reading, a thrill, a delight, and an exhaltation that the exact sense of the line could not possibly have created.⁵⁴

In "Aisle Seats in the Mind" Thurber defiantly asserts to the promulgators of organized and closed minds that he admits even the most vagrant and idiotic thoughts; his mental pot-pourri is typified in a nonsense rhyme which he says is a "thought...without reason or motivation" which has been going around in his mind to the tune of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow:"

⁵⁴ Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone!, pp. 75, 76.

A message for Captain Bligh,
And a greeting to Franchot Tone.

The artistic consciousness permits such disorder so that even experience is transformed by language. Since Thurber's maid described a certain part of the refrigerator as "doom-shaped" his whole life has altered:

If I were a true guardian of the portal of my thought, I would have refused that expression admittance, because it is too provocative, too edgy, and too dark, for comfort, but then I would have missed the unique and remarkable experience that I had last Sunday, when, just as night was falling, I walked down a doom shaped street under a doom shaped sky....⁵⁵

Man's ability to deal with language in new ways is a central part of his humanity; a pun attributed to Abraham Lincoln at least proves that "our man was human and quick on the up-take."⁵⁶

It is possible to experiment with language and fail miserably, however. In "The Case Against Women" Thurber states succinctly that he hates "women because they have brought into the currency of our language such expressions as 'all righty' and 'yes indeedy' and hundreds of others." If such conversational cleverness can boomerang, the confusion arising out of an order to admit only fifty-two standees to a play on its first anniversary can lead to an even more involved linguistic confusion. When a prospective theatre-goer asks for a ticket and is told there is standing room

⁵⁵ Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone!, pp. 148,149.

⁵⁶ Thurber, Let Your Mind Alone!, p.144.

only but he cannot purchase a ticket even for standing room, the events and language get very cloudy:

Mr. Fifty-Three: I don't get it. It sounds as if you kept saying there is standing room but you can't sell me any.

Box-Office Man: That's what I said.

Mr. Fifty-Three: Well, say it again. Some other way.

Box-Office Man: All I have is no standing room. No standing room only.

Now into a morass of grammatical absurdity, the frustrations of meaningless activity cause the fifty-third man to question his identity; "What's the matter with me?" he says. When assured that nothing is the matter with him, he concludes the most logical of conclusions and the one the reader has already drawn: "Well, something must be the matter with somebody."⁵⁷

In The Last Flower (1939) Thurber combines his primitive drawings and elegantly simple words with perhaps the greatest and most subtle interplay of his career; neither the drawings, with their bare suggestion of scenes, nor the words, perfectly chosen and with an almost biblical rhythm, can exist by themselves. The total effect is the visual equivalent of a very finely executed concerto, with the boy, the girl and the flower as soloists of hope, and life, and love against a background of orchestrated hate, despair, and destruction. For his language Thurber chose pictures as well as words and unlike many artists retains a high degree of suggestiveness even in pictorial language. Perhaps the product of his fantastic speed at drawing, the pictures are generally composed

of the fewest lines arranged in the most evocative manner. They are barely there, only skeletons of life, but emblematic of a complete universe.

The drawings are another aspect of the language of confusion, for through a simple downward stroke of the pen into a strangely perplexed mouth or the suggestion of a sag in the shoulders of a man confronting obstacles or the sometimes crowded pictures of a whole group or society in mayhem (as in the pages of armies in The Last Flower and the drawings of "The War Between Men and Women") Thurber freezes in his pictures a moment of confusion which somehow represents the confusion at large, the chaos of our world. It was probably this ability which led Dorothy Parker to say that a Thurber drawing "deals solely in culminations."⁵⁸ It is significant that oral language is used between people in The Last Flower only after the girl finds the flower; she goes to tell everyone in the world that the last flower is dying and only the boy will listen. It is this communication alone which leads to a rebirth of love in the world. After this happens, the silence of the world is broken and people begin to laugh and speak. This inevitably leads to speakers without moral or real things to say, however; liberators come along and are depicted speaking to the assembled masses. It is such speeches that "set fire to the discontent" again in the world and

⁵⁸Dorothy Parker, "Introduction," to The Seal in the Bedroom by James Thurber (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1932), p. vii.

brought about its destruction.⁵⁹ Language, a human faculty, is the invaluable tool and inspiration for man, but it is also the path to the confusions of demagoguery, discontent, and destruction.

Thurber followed The Last Flower with a collection of Fables for Our Time (1940) which even more fundamentally questions the language with which we get through life. Many of the morals, as a modern ironic twist on Aesopian moralizing, question established values by rephrasing or punning axioms, proverbs, and clichés. Perhaps the most pointed of these morals is the conclusion to the rewritten Aesop fable, "The Tortoise and the Hare." Thurber's tortoise loses to the hare in a ridiculous race inspired by the gullible tortoise's reading of the ancient fable. Moral: "A new broom may sweep clean, but never trust an old saw."⁶⁰ This fable typifies the tone and thrust of the entire collection; in it the clichés of behavior and language are not rejected simply because of their lack of elegance or artistic fire, but because many of them represent false assumptions and are often accepted too easily. Some of the best re-worded clichés are "Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy and wealthy and dead;" "A burden in the bush is worth two on your hands;"

⁵⁹ James Thurber, The Last Flower, (New York: Harper and Row, 1939,) unpaginated.

⁶⁰ James Thurber, Fables for Our Time (New York: Harper and Row, 1940), p. 61.

"You can fool too many of the people too much of the time;" and "It is better to have loafed and lost than never to have loafed at all." One of the fables, "The Very Proper Gander,"⁶¹ relies on the pun in its title for its meaning.

A demagogue (human, of course, but in the shape of an owl) in "The Owl Who Was God" sways the entire population with his meaningless "You whos" and "To woos" in answer to all of their questions. With his simplistic vocabulary he leads them all unwittingly to their deaths.⁶² In "The Unicorn in the Garden" a Thurber male is menaced by his wife with the words "booby" and "booby-hatch." Unlike Mr. Bruhl or Bidwell or even Thurber himself in My Life and Hard Times, however, this man affects the destruction of his wife and her words. Through an intricate plot he turns her prosaic reaction to his vision of a unicorn in the garden into an offensive against her; when she calls the police to hurry to her house with a straight-jacket for her crazy husband, he remarks to the police under questioning that of course he saw no unicorn, for as his wife had said, "the unicorn is a mythical beast." In a rare occurrence the Thurber male wins out and his "realistic" wife is sent off to an institution. The punning moral: "Don't count your boobies until they are hatched."⁶³

⁶¹Thurber, Fables, pp. 22, 27, 36, 55, 17.

⁶²Thurber, Fables, pp. 35-36.

⁶³Thurber, Fables, pp. 65-66.

"The Birds and the Foxes" operates on the ironic use of the word "liberation" for the slaughter of an innocent people in a supposed sanctuary away from the world. The real energy of this fable, of course, arises from the fact that the word liberation has been abused in just this way by dictators in many times. In 1940, the meaning was particularly pointed to the "liberation" of many European peoples by the Nazis. Although perhaps written out of a passionate disgust for the crimes of the moment, the revised quotation in the moral has timeless value: "Government of the orioles, by the foxes, and for the foxes, must perish from the earth."⁶⁴

Perhaps the most devastating of all the fables is "The Green Isle of the Sea," for it depends not only on a play on words in its moral for energy, but the entire fable is a play on the formula of much popular and inspirational literature: the happy ending. While reading of the slow degeneration of a little old gentleman who seems completely blameless the reader hopes for some good surprise at the end, either a funny or ironic twist or a description of a windfall of good fortune. Neither happens and the old man is left stripped of his pride, humanity, and property only to be easy prey to the bombers overhead. Moral: "The world is so full of a number of things, I am sure we should all be as happy as King, and you know how happy Kings are."⁶⁵ Even in its moral

⁶⁴Thurber, Fables, p. 53.

⁶⁵Thurber, Fables, p. 43.

the expectation of hope is set up to be dashed in that final phrase. The devastation is complete: subject, language, and reader are savagely unmasked.

Aptly titled, Thurber's next collection, My World-and Welcome to It (1942), presents a cross-section of his world, including both the celebration of language's power and fascination and its inherent limits and potential for horror. The collection begins with an invocation of Lewis Carroll in "What Do You Mean It 'Was' Brillig?" Like Barney Haller before her, Thurber's maid sends his mind wandering with the mispronunciation of the word wreath; "They are here with the reeves" she said rather calmly to be instigating a trip through a semantic labyrinth. Thurber plays a game with Della, unlike his battle with Barney, and looks up her garbled words in the dictionary to see what an actual "reeve" is like. Thurber's own favorite garbling concerns Della's brothers, who had just passed his "silver-service eliminations. Della is delighted about that, but she is not half so delighted about it as I am." The language of confusion is here presented as a delight. As part of their elaborate game Thurber tells Della he is from "Semantics, Ohio," and when she replies that there is one of those in Massachusetts, too, Thurber says truthfully, that the one he means "is bigger and more confusing." Della, and the reader, reply, "I'll bet it is."⁶⁶

From the joy of the scene with Della, Thurber, and a

⁶⁶ Thurber, My World--and Welcome to It, pp. 3, 5, 7.

dictionary in "Brillig," to the blackness of "The Whip-Poor-Will" is not only a journey from one end of the Thurber temperament to the other; it is a trip from one pole of his languages obsession to the other. Here, more completely than ever before, language stalks the man and wreaks total destruction. It is the nonsensical chirping of the whip-poor-will coupled with Kinstrey's knowledge of an old saying that a whip-poor-will near the house means death, that drives him to commit a triple murder and suicide. Inundated by the sound, Kinstrey is horrified: "I suppose like the drops of water or the bright light in the third degree, this could drive you nuts," he says to himself. The "words" of the bird carry over into the rhythms and tone of all other words; the phrases "nev-er have, nev-er have" and "nevermore, nevermore" and "whip him now!:" ring in Kinstrey's ears until he confronts the butler with a butcher knife and the simple question "Who do you do first?"⁶⁷ He does them all, driven to it by the apparently trivial and meaningless repetition of a phrase. It is evident that Thurber recognized not only the ability of language to spellbind and confuse man, but that he was aware of the psychological effects of hearing the spoken word. In My Life and Hard Times, the excited crowd hears "now broken" instead of "not broken" because of a predisposition to hear that. In "The Whip-poor-will" only Kinstrey is bothered by the message of the bird and his own distressed condition

⁶⁷ Thurber, My World--and Welcome to It, pp. 18-32.

leads to a transformation of the words within his head into horrifying shapes.

Two of the stories in the collection reject the clichés of pulp fiction. In "The Macbeth Murder Mystery" an American lady reinterprets Macbeth in the light of her previous reading, the Penguin detective series. Her mind has become so saturated with stock formulas and phrases that she reads only what she wants to read (or has been perverted to read) into any literature.⁶⁸ Perhaps Thurber's most famous story, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," also relies heavily on exposure of the demon cliché for its statement. Mitty's dreams are all in terms of Hollywood clichés and the myth of Western man, strong, inscrutable, undefeatable. The comedy and pathos of the story arises from the clash of the reality of Mitty and the clichés he puts his faith in.⁶⁹ T. Y. Booth has said that Thurber often writes to "satirize the cliché habit of mind."⁷⁰ Thurber's rejection of clichés resembles much New Yorker humor which is often in the comedy of manners tradition. One of the magazine's regular features was, in fact, Frank Sullivan's hilarious series of questions and answers for Dr. Arbuthnot, "The Cliché Artist," who was able to effortlessly rattle off stock phrases and corny sentiments

⁶⁸ Thurber, My World--and Welcome to It, pp. 18-32.

⁶⁹ Thurber, My World--and Welcome to It, pp. 72, 73.

⁷⁰ T. Y. Booth, "The Cliche: A Working Bibliography," Bulletin of Bibliography, XXXIII (1960), p. 63.

on any subject. As in the debunking of morals in the Fables and slogans in Let Your Mind Alone!, "Walter Mitty" is an attempt to explain and destroy the cliché habit of mind. In this story the attempt is so successful because the reader gets into that mind, filled with the debris of canned culture, and actually hears the phrases echo and re-echo.

But "Walter Mitty" is more complex than even the Fables in the use of language. Much of the humor hinges on the absurdly ignorant use of technical vocabulary by Walter; the verisimilitude of the story depends on the superficial correctness of just those mistakes. Hence, Mitty says of his dream-patient that "coreopsis [which is a flower] has set in" and he carries, in another dream, a "Webley-Vickers 50.80," which, if manufactured, would be a gun about four feet in diameter. Mitty had confused the names Webley-Forsly and Vicker-Maxim into one weapon. The precision and subtlety with which Thurber renders this story is a result of the painstaking care he took with his writing. "Walter Mitty" had fifteen complete revisions.⁷¹

Inside Mitty's mind, Thurber experiments with onomatopoeia in the famous "ta-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa" of first the bomber and then the failing hospital machine. The free-

⁷¹Thurber, My World--and Welcome to It, pp. 75, 77; "James Thurber in Conversation with Alistair Cooke," The Atlantic, CXCVIII (Aug., 1956), p. 37; and James Ellis, "The Allusions in 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty,'" English Journal, LIV (1965) pp. 311-313.

association habit of Mitty's mind causes the idiotic mental list "toothpaste, toothbrush, bicarbonate, carborundum, initiative and referendum?"⁷² In obvious emotional difficulty, Mitty is only a few steps beyond the idiotic and meaningless chain of words Thurber arrived at in his desire to remember Perth Amboy in My Life and Hard Times. Thurber understood the irrational and super-rational aspects of language as well as any poet. In "Walter Mitty," "The Black Magic of Barney Haller," and "The Whip-poor-will," he isolated the heavy emotional content of language. Language is certainly not simply a descriptive, intellectual, or representational material in Thurber's hands, but has an infinite capacity for connotation and suggestion. Each individual consciousness is affected differently by a word or phrase and, in turn, each person means something slightly different in his use of a word. In Thurber's vision of a world of endless permutations, language is one of the prime catalysts in quick, unexpected, and inexplicable changes in the face of reality. Walter Mitty, therefore, moves from "toothpaste" to "bicarbonate" (an expectable connection) to "initiative and referendum" (a totally unexpected and nonsensical connection) because his mind is actually being swept along by the incantatory nature of the words themselves. The ease with which man moves from sense to nonsense (which had also been shown in "Perth Amboy" in My Life and Hard Times) not only implies his basic inability

⁷²Thurber, My World--and Welcome to It, pp. 72, 75, 76-77.

to understand experience but in turn adds to his muddlement and confusion.

In the "real" world Mitty is distinguished by an almost complete inability to communicate, partially because of his audience and implicitly because of his own nature. The only intelligent, knowing thing he says in the story is the statement to his wife that "Things close in." She completely ignores this distress signal and only promises to take his temperature when they get home.⁷³ Walter Mitty has succumbed so completely to the cliché, has confused it so totally with reality, because his life itself is unreal. His use of the cliché further precludes reality in a spiralling, self-destructive course.

The collection describing the terrain of Thurber's world ends on a lighter note with a nostalgic section on the happier days of France, "The France which we know will rise again."⁷⁴ "A Ride with Olympy" is about the confusion which arises from the conversations of an American and Russian who can only converse in broken French. Totally incompetent with idiom or even much elementary vocabulary, Thurber describes his relationship with Olympy, a Russian gardener in the south of France:

⁷³Thurber, My World--and Welcome to It, p. 80.

⁷⁴Thurber, My World--and Welcome to It, p.211.

Often I did not know what he was talking about, rarely did he know what he was talking about. There was a hush, faraway quality about this relationship, in French, of Russia and Ohio. The fact that the accident Olympy and I were involved in fell short of catastrophe was, in view of everything, something of a miracle.

After admitting that this "polyglot approach to the fine precision of a gas engine is roundabout and dangerous" Thurber continues his ride with Olympy, with occasional shouts in no language known to man.⁷⁵

By the early 1940's Thurber, already an incredibly versatile and prolific writer, turned not only to the ancient fable form for variety but also to the drama and the fairy tale. The Male Animal, Thurber's only play which was co-authored by Elliot Nugent, is not particularly involved with the subject of language.⁷⁶ The play limits itself to the language of the middle class living room, except for the use of stock black dialect for the Turner's maid and a few witty confusions resulting from deficiencies in vocabulary among the football players; Wally, for instance, thinks the word "masochist" should not be used in front of the women.⁷⁷

The fairy tales are a different matter. From Many Moons (1943) to The Wonderful O (1957) this old and established literary form is reinterpreted by Thurber and the five

⁷⁵Thurber, My World--and Welcome to It, pp. 235, 236, 241.

⁷⁶James Thurber and Elliot Nugent, The Male Animal (New York: Random House, 1940).

⁷⁷Thurber and Nugent, Male Animal, pp. 5, 6, 160.

books bear the inimitable Thurber stamp. All of these tales make language an important element of the story and in The Wonderful O it is both the subject and the hero of the action. In the simplest and earliest of the tales, Many Moons, Thurber writes in a particularly clear and distinct style, obviously intending to be understandable to an audience of children. The language is deceptively simple, however. For example, the description of how the Princess Lenore had "fell ill of a surfeit of raspberry tarts" appears to be a formula phrase to elicit sympathy for the poor princess but a surfeit of raspberry tarts is hardly a calamity; the humorist is at work.

The King in this story is surrounded by a group of advisers so schooled in legal and political jargon that they open wide the gates to confusion as well as any of the psychologists of Let Your Mind Alone! They all carry involved lists of things and events with them and believe that the occurrence of the name of a thing on a list makes it exist. In having one adviser read a list of favors done for the King, Thurber has his usual fun with dissonant collocation:

I have got ivory, apes, and peacocks, rubies, opals and emeralds, black orchids, pink elephants, and blue poodles ...troubadors, minstrels and dancing women, a pound of butter, two dozen eggs, and a sack of sugar--sorry, my wife wrote that in there.

When the King objects that he does not remember any blue poodles, this perfect bureaucrat replies nonsensically, "It says blue poodles right here on the list, and they are checked off with a little check mark....so there must have been blue poodles."

The highly pretentious and convoluted language of these royal advisers becomes so divorced from reality that they equate abstract or metaphorical phrases with concrete objects; the Wizard says that he has given the King "The golden touch, and a cloak of invisibility;" the Royal Mathematician can take credit for calculating "the distance between the horns of a dilemma....how far is Up, how long it takes to get Away and what becomes of Gone." Their pseudo-scientific incantations are humorous not only because of the piling up of long enumerations of such nonsense phrases, but through the use of malapropisms like "the square of the hippopotamus" and the absurdly comic preciseness of a phrase like "how many birds you can catch with the salt in the ocean--187, 796, 132...." Thus, these unwise men make old wives' tales and ill-gathered data sound like the truth by couching them in language technical enough to be convincing and involved enough to be meaningless. When the Royal Mathematician argues that he has calculated "how far is Up, how long it takes to get Away, and what becomes of Gone," the humor progresses beyond a criticism of the specious exactitude of statisticians or the jargon of science and government. Thurber is essentially posing metaphysical questions and suggesting the inability of these men to find answers to such questions. The book's conclusion, which is indirectly stated by the little Princess, is that Up is as far away as the mind understands it to be, just as there are as many moons as people perceive. It is ultimately only the Court Jester and the little Princess who

are able to speak with any sense at all,⁷⁸ a fact which establishes a pattern in the fairy tales.

The Great Quillow (1944) further explores the confusing language of power and government. Much of its action occurs in the fertile territory of a town council meeting in "a far country" which seems very much like any town, any where. The council sits around conversing in the banalities of a comfortable and insular people: they discussed "the number of stars in the sky...the wonderful transparency of glass, and praised the blueness of violets and the whiteness of snow." Into this situation of institutionalized verbosity comes a giant who speaks simple and direct commands and the council is dumbfounded; they complain that the document which contains the giant's demands "is most irregular. It does not contain a single 'greeting' or 'wheras' or 'be it known by these presents'!" It is finally only through the simplicity and invention of Quillow, the quiet toymaker who becomes a teller of tales, that the city is saved.

Quillow is not a prisoner of language like the others, but is able to mold it for his own purposes and turn it into magic against the cruel giant. He convinces the giant that when "all words were one to him. All words were 'woddly'" that his mind would be gone forever. Then cleverly Quillow repeats the word woddly until the giant believes he is sick

⁷⁸James Thurber, Many Moons (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1943), unpaginated.

and succumbs to the word. Quillow introduces hints of such superstition into the giant's mind by telling tales until the giant is convinced to drown himself in the sea.⁷⁹ Quillow, the poet, the maker, is one of the happy few who can make language serve the needs of man and bring grace and measure to a generally chaotic and ineffectual existence.

In The White Deer (1945), a fairy tale for adults, Thurber's linguistic virtuosity results in one of his best achievements. As in the other fairy tales, the story's King Clode is surrounded by a group of legalistic dunces totally divorced from reality. The Royal Physician, like Elliot Vereker, talks best to himself, discussing his illness as with a patient.⁸⁰ The Royal Wizard, equally deluded, attempts to discover the identity of the lost Princess by making up imaginary Kings. King Clode, the confused realist, barks in disgust that "the lovely lady may be nameless, but any fool can see she is not an imaginary daughter of an imaginary monarch." Only Prince Jorn, the poet, can make sense out of the nonsense of this world in which a "false flux of fact and form" exists; his brothers, confused by the confusing world of the enchanted forest, cannot understand his riddle which states succinctly the theme of The White Deer:

⁷⁹James Thurber, The Great Quillow (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1944), pp. 5, 6, 11, 15, 27, 28, 51.

⁸⁰James Thurber, The White Deer (Harbrace Paperbound Library edition of 1945 text; New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1963), p. 33.

What's black is white,
 What's red is blue,
 What's dark is light,
 What's true is true.⁸¹

Even in this upside down world what is true remains and it is for the poet to recognize it.

The real value of this tale is not in its condemnation of legal and scientific jargon, although it is highly effective at this; its real artistic merit is the sophistication with which language is used in the telling of the story. Marked by heavy paradox and alliteration throughout, the book is a magic web, drawing the reader into its sway with incantations of a trip in which:

Twenty hoofs thundered hotly through a haunted hollow of spectral sycamores hung with lighted lanterns and past a turquoise tarn and along an avenue of asphodel that turned and twisted down a dark descent which led at last to a pale and perilous plain.⁸²

This passage is perhaps the most illustrative example of Thurber's consistent preference for alliterative language. The first phrase also demonstrates his gift for onomatopoeia.

This book is a real linguistic extravaganza, using alliteration perhaps more than any other device, but also playing elaborate tricks on the reader. Not only does it present a world full of inversions and paradox ("In such confusion and caprice who knows his hound dog from his niece?")

⁸¹Thurber, The White Deer, pp. 35, 15.

⁸²Thurber, The White Deer, p. 19. Cf. Appendix II for analysis of this passage.

King Clode wails) for the reader must travel through a world that is like a jigsaw puzzle with minute and seemingly ill-fitting pieces. Thurber is at his anagrammatic and allusive height in this story. Prince Gallow, for instance, is told that he has to find the Seven-headed Dragon of Dragore "The Hard Way....down and down, round and round, through the moaning grove of Artanis."⁸³ To translate from Thurber language into more prosaic English, this passage alludes to the lines from "Old Black Magic," "Down and down I go, round and round I go,/ In a spin, love is the spin I'm in,/ under that old black magic called love." Gallow, his head certainly spinning in an impossible quest for love, is told that he must go through the moaning Grove of Artanis, or through the banal (Coconut?) Grove of S-i-n-a-t-r-a to find it. If this were not confusing enough for both Gallow and the reader, he is then advised not to fear "the dreadful Tarcomed" nor "the surly Nacilbuper" (try spelling these proper nouns backwards), and to "turn to the right and follow a little white light," presumably, to find the paradise of popular song, "My Blue Heaven."⁸⁴ The White Deer can certainly be read and enjoyed without noticing or understanding these allusions but the recognition of them adds another dimension to enjoyment of

⁸³ Thurber, The White Deer, pp. 45, 68.

⁸⁴ Thurber, The White Deer, pp. 68-69; see also Thurber's use of song lyrics in "The Evening's at Seven," The Middle-Aged Man, pp. 189-192.

the tale and admiration for Thurber's agility with words.

Prince Thag has no easier time than Gallow on his journey through a surrealistic forest in which birds chirp "verti verti verti go" while language is hopelessly garbled: When Thag asks "what type is it?" a voice answers "Its sick and thirsty...or half past hate or a quarter to fight." Like the idiotic King's advisers in Many Moons, Thag is directed out of the labyrinth by nonsensical guides who say "ride by the Bye" and "pass the Time of Day."⁸⁵ The sheer horror of man's intense need for direction and intelligent communication in a world where only garbled words and jargon prevails is a strong undercurrent in Thurber, often surfacing in The White Deer. Like the teller of tales, Quillow, the poet Jorn is the hero of this tale because he surmounts the language of confusion and resists the clichés of existence. After the King and his advisers have enumerated the traditional ways to tell a Princess of royal blood ("I knew her...by the manner of her speech and the carriage of her head") Prince Jorn says simply, "I knew her by the singing in my heart."⁸⁶

The demon cliché is also attacked in the collection of drawings, Men, Women and Dogs, as well as in "The Catbird Seat," one of the new pieces written for the 1945 retrospective collection, The Thurber Carnival. In Men, Women and Dogs many of the captions distill the empty and ludicrous quality

⁸⁵Thurber, The White Deer, pp. 54, 55-56.

⁸⁶Thurber, The White Deer, p. 104.

of man's communication in society into a single phrase or puncture his inflated phraseology through an absurd use of a cliché. Thus note the perplexed looks on the faces around a dinner table in response to the inanity of a host's obnoxious, pseudo-sophisticated announcement that the wine is "a naïve domestic Burgundy without any breeding, but I think you'll be amused by its presumption;" or the chill emptiness of the slangy introduction, "Miss Gorce is in the embalming game." The stupidity of man as easy prey to the cliché and stock phrase is satirized in many other drawings in the collection: "She says she's burning with a hard, gemlike flame. It's something they learn in school, I think," a mother remarks of a child with a curiously distorted face. One miserably confused man states to another man that he "never really rallied after the birth of my first child." And in another drawing an absurdly demented-looking girl prays the prayer of the All-American girl, "Keep me a normal, healthy girl."⁸⁷

In "The Catbird Seat" from The Thurber Carnival, the cliché habit of mind is cause enough for someone to be murdered. Mrs. Ulgine (ugly engine) Barrows causes confusion at F&S by her incessant repetition of gibberish like "lifting the oxcart out of the ditch," "tearing up a pea patch," and "sitting in the catbird seat." The story is more complex than simply making Mr. Martin, her virtuous "murderer," the

⁸⁷ James Thurber, Men, Women, and Dogs (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1943), pp. 6, 95, 139, 100, 42.

enemy of such badinage, however. He, too, has fallen for the cliché; he plans her murder with ridiculous adherence to the formulas of detective fiction and even imagines that by using the slang term "rub out" for murder that the crime would be simpler and somehow moral.⁸⁸

"The Secret Life of James Thurber" explains the power of literalism both as a comic device and as a gateway to the imagination. Thurber here says that "his fantastic cosmos" of language and experience was found through his escape into "my secret world of idiom." In this world the prosaic realities of life are enlivened by a literal reading of such metaphorical expressions as a businessman being "tied up at the office," or "the man who left town under a cloud."⁸⁹ In this secret world of idiom the language of confusion is spoken; it is alternately a delight and a horror, a black magic wreaking havoc on meaning and order or a white magic slaying dragons. Only the poet or artist can make sense from it, create with it, and, occasionally, use it as a weapon.

The Beast in Me and Other Animals (1948) shows Thurber at his parodic height. Always pursued by the ghost of Henry James, Thurber here presents a literary pastiche of the master, "The Beast in the Dingle," which he said was not in fact a parody but an imitation of how James would have

⁸⁸James Thurber, A Thurber Carnival (Delta Book edition of 1945 text; New York: Dell Publishing, 1964), pp. 10, 9.

⁸⁹Thurber, Thurber Carnival, pp. 33, 34.

written the story.⁹⁰ A close look at the piece will demonstrate that Thurber was playing an elaborate joke on his reader in offering such a simple explanation for this remarkably allusive and parodic story. It is very difficult to get beyond the title of the story without a recognition of its humor. Any reader familiar with James reads the word "dingle" for "jungle" and smiles at the incongruity of the sound of the word dingle (what it would seem to mean) and James's monumentally serious and involved story. "The Beast in the Jungle" is about John Marcher, a man to whom nothing ever happens (a subject with great potential for humor). The humor is not quite so overt as may appear at first glance, however. A dingle is not a nonsensical substitute for the word jungle, but a genuine Anglo-Saxon word meaning a shady dell. The choice is then both humorous and appropriate.

On first reading it appears that Thurber is interested only with the involved Jamesian language in this story. He has done an excellent job of writing a parody of the late style of the master:

He had brought himself so fully in the end, poor Grantham, to accept his old friend's invitation to accompany her to an 'afternoon' at 'Cornerbright' that now, on the very porch of the so evident house, he could have, for his companion, in all surrender, a high, fine--there was no other word for it--twinkle.⁹¹

⁹⁰Malcolm Cowley, The Literary Situation (New York: Viking Press), p. 92.

⁹¹Thurber, The Beast in Me, p. 128.

Absurdly exaggerated, yet close to the rhythms of its model, this passage at the beginning of the story sets a humorous tone through the use of quotation marks and the word *twinkle* at the end of the tortured sentence. Only a reader who both knows and likes the later James (as Thurber did) can fully enjoy the humor. Compare the above passage with James's:

It led, in short, in the course of the October, to his closer meeting with May Bartram, whose face, a reminder, not yet quite a remembrance, as they sat, much separated at a very long table, had begun merely by troubling him rather pleasantly.⁹²

"The Beast in the Dingle" is not only a parody of "The Beast in the Jungle," however; it is a pastiche recalling James's later work generally, especially the subjects of The Golden Bowl, and the imagery of The Wings of the Dove, with allusions to The Turn of the Screw and the poetry of T. S. Eliot. Alice B. Baldwin concluded that even Thurber's casual essays could not be read by a person without a high level of literary sophistication because the humor often depends on subtle allusions;⁹³ in this story the allusions are the entire point. Thus, a reader who knows the complicated imagery of The Wings of the Dove more fully enjoys the parody intended in Thurber's repetition of elaborate symbolic passages in the story; the reader who knows something of James's artistic method understands those particularly happy (and hilarious) lines of

⁹² Henry James, Great Short Works of Henry James (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 450.

⁹³ Baldwin, Congruous Laughter, p. 96.

Grantham and Amy Lighter (a better name could not be chosen):

Incident! Incident! he had softly cried, and when, at this, his poor bewildered confidant could only give back a halting 'What?' he had found for his abject surrender a plainer form: 'Dramatize! Dramatize!' he had then implored her.

Add to the Jamsian references the involved Prufrockian echoes in the last part of the story (Amy sees Grantham as "the very type and sign of old J. Alfred Prufrock") and the story becomes even more complex.⁹⁴

The story is about two rather confused people and its style is purposefully confusing; its allusions are not chosen simply as part of an esoteric joke, however. Thurber admired James throughout his life; that he saw the humor inherent in James's seriousness and in his characters does not diminish this admiration. But the language in "The Beast in the Dingle" is carefully chosen to make a statement about James and the modern world. In a *mélange* of references to the refined sensibility of James characters and the nervous hyper-sensitivity of Prufrock's "question," Thurber denies the possibility of high seriousness for modern man:

'If I should strike,' he made his step, 'at every rustling in the undergrowth, a high heroic stance, sword drawn from cane, and cry, 'Come out, come out!' and if this should advance in answer to my challenge, on veritable tippy-toe, the most comical of beasts, about its neck a pink and satiny ribbon tied in the fluffiest of bows, what, dear lady, in the name of Heaven, would become of me?'

So Grantham's beast in the dingle is out: he has only a "kitty cat for a tiger!" as the prototypical modern man whose

⁹⁴ Thurber, Beast in Me, pp. 133, 146, 147.

defeat even lacks significance because of the insignificance of the stakes and the enemy.⁹⁵ The humor and subtlety of this story could not have been produced without the complex language and style in which it is written and, like so much of Thurber's work, it demands a highly literate reader for full appreciation. This passage is funny basically because of its description of, not a beast in the jungle, but a comical kitty cat who would answer Grantham's challenge absurdly on "veritable tippy-toe." There is also subtle humor in the reader's mental image of Grantham "making his step" as though to strike out at the "rustling in the undergrowth," since in this motion Grantham appears to take literally a metaphorical description of behavior.

Thurber also includes several pieces in The Beast in Me on the confusion that results from language difficulties. In both "The Waters of the Moon" and "The Ordeal of Mr. Matthews" people are shown at cocktail parties where each person speaks to others in formulaic phrases without any real communication. Often two people carry on entire conversations on different topics without ever realizing it. They also seem to read in this way. In discussing another writer, a Thurber personal remarks satirically,

Greg's writing has what he calls Projected Meaning. He feels that in another millenium the intellectuals will understand it readily enough. I have never made head or tail of any of his stories myself, but there is no missing the unique quality of the most exquisite

⁹⁵Thurber, Beast in Me, p. 147.

English prose of our time.⁹⁶

The language of confusion has in fact been institutionalized and adopted. It has been promulgated not only in conversations and by the professions, but by the use by the press of such absurdities as "We thus see Dewey trying to out-Truman Truman, which will, of course, lead Truman to out-Dewey Dewey." Thurber concludes that when the language has come to this, we have "the Presidential Year of the Confused Identities or--and I hate this as much as you do--The Presidential Year of the Dewey Dewey Fog." The imprecision of the power structure in dealing with language is typified in "Exhibit X," an essay which explains how a single typographical error in a State Department telegram sent Thurber, instead of the books which had actually been ordered, to Europe as a code clerk. He remarks that "Even after thirty years, the power of that miniscule slip of the alphabet gives me a high sense of insecurity."⁹⁷

To balance the seriousness of linguistic confusion, the sheer joy of word games is also found in The Beast in Me. In "Here Come the Tigers" Thurber is confronted by two drunken friends who have "discovered a new dimension of meaning" through an unravelling of words and parts of words in anagrams. Of course, they have not discovered this game and Thurber is already accomplished at it himself; during the mayhem they

⁹⁶ Thurber, Beast in Me, p. 53.

⁹⁷ Thurber, Beast in Me, pp. 85, 62.

challenge him to find the three six-letter words in "tiger":

I leaned back, gazed at the ceiling, and hunted the tiger. For the next five minutes, I heard the sound of Jordan's voice but it didn't make any sense. I found the roach in orchard, the horse in shore, the owl in wobble, the stag in ghastly, and the bear and zebra in brazen, but no glimmer of a tiger anywhere.

He is in "my own jungle of words" at this point where he remains through the early morning hours, lying on the bed, trying to find the three six-letter words in the five-letter word tiger as he had tried to think of Perth Amboy years before.⁹⁸ Often even the game of language becomes an enemy.

The "New Natural History" in The Beast in Me is purely playful; it consists mainly of imaginary animals which are literal depictions of words or what words suggest. Thus, in a drawing of a trochee encountering a spondee, the trochee has an upward slanting back while the spondee is level on both ends; a drawing of a large and ugly bird is described as "a garble with an utter in its claws;" and an animal with six feet is, of course, a hexameter. There is also the remarkable punning nonsense caption for the drawing of an angular, mechanical-looking bird, "A female Volt with all her Ergs in one Gasket," and A group of drawings unrelated to the denotative meanings of their captions that are drawn from the mere evocation of a word or name: a drawing of a scone and a crum-pet; a Great Gatsby butterfly; a Tantamount; and a Peeve (or a Pet Peeve).⁹⁹

⁹⁸Thurber, Beast in Me, pp. 103, 107, 108.

⁹⁹Thurber, Beast in Me, pp. 151-168.

Finally, there is in the nonsensical essay, "Extinct Animals of Bermuda," unabashed hilarity reminiscent of parts of Is Sex Necessary? and Let Your Mind Alone! in its mock scientific tone and comic specious exactitude:

A woan, so called because he woaned, was frequently seen, four or five hundred years ago, in the larders and bureau drawers....Scarcely larger than a blue cream pitcher, the woan had three buttons on the vest of his Sunday suit, and was given to fanning his paws at spendrift. He built his nest of gum wrappers and violin bows, which gave it roughly the shape of a gum-wrapped violin bow.¹⁰⁰

The 13 Clocks (1950) returns us to Thurber's fairy land which is always a curious mixture of love and fear. Everyone in this book speaks in riddles, nonsense and neologisms except for the wandering minstrel Prince Zorn, who communicates in a silent language with the Princess Saralinda.¹⁰¹ Most of the language in which the story is told is powerfully effective in portraying the evilness of this land where time stands still at the hands of a tyrant. The Prince must go on a journey for his lady's hand; like the quest of the Princes in The White Deer his journey is poetically described in alliterative and onomatopoeic evocations of horror:

The brambles and the thorns grew thicker and thicker in a ticking thicket of bickering crickets. Farther along and stronger, bonged the gongs of a throng of frogs, green and vivid on their lily pads. From the sky came the crying of flies, and the pilgrims leaped over a bleating sheep creeping knee-deep in a sleepy stream, in which swift and slippery snakes slid and slithered silkily, whispering sinful secrets.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Thurber, Beast in Me, p. 171.

¹⁰¹ Thurber, The 13 Clocks (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1950), p. 57.

¹⁰² Thurber, 13 Clocks, p. 73.

Prince Zorn is also menaced by the nonsensical threat that "He will slit you from your guggle to your zatch;" the horrific description that "the Todal looks like a blob of glup....it makes a sound like rabbits screaming, and smells of old, unopened rooms;" and the incantation that "The way is dark, and getting darker. The hut is high and even higher, I wish you luck. There is none."¹⁰³ Thurber's constant attention to the rhythms of English prose is highly effective throughout this tale, especially in the spellbinding effect of this last quotation. Thurber's use of the powers of language to evoke images of peace and beauty as well as horror and fear is also demonstrated in The 13 Clocks. The Princess Saralinda "wore serenity brightly like the rainbow....her eyes were candles burning on a tranquil night." And the delight of that ultimately evocative Thurber phrase, complete in its simplicity, that describes the friendly Golux: "He wore an indescribable hat."¹⁰⁴ Language is totally in the control of this man who can make a reader feel a slit from his guggle to his zatch as well as imagine the indescribable.

When Thurber looked back on his life in The Thurber Album (1952) he attempted to ascertain those influences which had helped him become a writer and a man. He especially praised Professor Joseph Taylor, who had taught him that "art is revision" and introduced him to Henry James. Taylor had

¹⁰³ Thurber, 13 Clocks, pp. 50, 24, 73.

¹⁰⁴ Thurber, 13 Clocks, pp. 40, 31.

what Thurber calls "the good writer's dissatisfaction with imperfect statement," a telling remark which perhaps partially explains Thurber's own precision. In The Album he also praises those other English professors at Ohio State who had "fought the good fight against Slur" in a region where the language "Gudda" is spoken (as in "Where's he gudda go?").¹⁰⁵ Thurber's obsession with language, far from being a mere game or only a comic tool, has the connotations of a religious and patriotic duty. He has said "my most intense dedication is the defense of the English language"¹⁰⁶ and his books are records of the assaults daily made on language as well as examples of Thurber's attempt to bring precision and grace to the battlefield. The Thurber Album is partially a tribute to others engaged in the war against confusion.

Thurber Country (1953) further defines territory of that battlefield, offering Aunt Wilma, who cannot add, subtract, or communicate with anyone because of her stubbornness; Chanda Bell, who had "fondness for surrogate words with ambiguous meanings, like words in dreams: 'rupture' for 'rapture' 'centaur' for 'sender' . . . ;"¹⁰⁷ and a whole room full of pseudo-intellectuals who say "I'm not so stupid as to believe that the cocktail party in 'The Cocktail Party' is actually a cocktail

¹⁰⁵ James Thurber, The Thurber Album (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), pp. 179, 185-86.

¹⁰⁶ Brandon, "A Conversation with James Thurber," p. 16.

¹⁰⁷ Thurber, Thurber Country, pp. 11, 152.

party."¹⁰⁸ Thurber immortalizes the inability of the average educated American to read in the series of letters entitled "File and Forget" and continues his neologistic and anagrammatic games in "Do You Want to Make Something Out of It?"¹⁰⁹

It is in "The Case Book of James Thurber," however, that Thurber succinctly states his ideas about the relationship between language and the confusions of the world. His world of slurred pronunciation, garbled names and quotations, and wildly inappropriate words is where the Gloucester telephone supervisor becomes "the Gloucester sympathizer" and a cocker spaniel is transformed into "a cockeyed Spaniard." It is a world at once frightening, perplexing and funny. In his "Case Book," Thurber offers the "most singular of all my cases" as a part of what he calls the large subject of "The Anatomy of Confusion."¹¹⁰ Although this case book is incomplete on the subject, the totality of Thurber's writing does present us with a fairly complete anatomy of confusion. It is significant that he chooses to portray the general confusion of the world as a result of linguistic confusions in "The Case Book."

Language has become so completely identified with life that Thurber's next book, a collection of Further Fables

¹⁰⁸ Thurber, Thurber Country, pp. 219-229.

¹⁰⁹ Thurber, Thurber Country, pp. 83-99, 127-137; see Alice B. Baldwin, "James Thurber's Compounds," Language and Style, III (1970), pp. 185-96, for analysis of Thurber's method of compounding.

¹¹⁰ Thurber, Thurber Country, p. 103.

for Our Time (1956) "seems to be presenting us with a perfectly verbalized universe" in which the end of a society is pictured, appropriately, as a mass suicide resulting from verbal confusion.¹¹¹ These fables parallel the earlier collection of fables in their persistent rejection of proverbs and clichés, usually by rephrasing them in the morals: "Let us ponder this basic fact about the human: Ahead of every man, not behind him, is a woman;" "Nowadays most men lead lives of noisy desperation;" and "It is not always more blessed to give than to receive, but it is frequently more rewarding."¹¹² The rigorous realism indicated in these morals is balanced, as it is always balanced in Thurber, with a desire to preserve the fragility and beauty of man's dreams. Thus, in "The Turtle Who Conquered Time," a celebrated ancient turtle is exposed as a fraud to the other animals and "from the grass of the meadow voices once carefree and gay joined in a rueful and lonely chorus, as if someone great and wonderful had died." Thurber concocts new words with an Old English directness and flavor in the Kennings of the moral: "Oh, why should the shattermyth have to be a crumplehope and dampenglee?"¹¹³

Two of the fables in this collection deal most

¹¹¹ Cowley, "Lions and Lemmings," p. 44.

¹¹² James Thurber, Further Fables for Our Time (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), pp. 3, 94, 158.

¹¹³ Thurber, Further Fables, p. 143. [Italics mine.]

directly with the language of confusion. In "The Weaver and the Worm" Thurber presents a common confusion. A weaver, watching a silkworm spinning its cocoon, asks, "Where do you get that stuff?" The silkworm replies, "Do you want to make something out of it?" and they go their separate ways, each thinking he had been insulted. Thurber, continuing his war against Slur and incoherence, concludes: "We live, man and worm, in a time when almost everything can mean almost anything, for this is the age of gobbledygook, doubletalk, and gudda." The moral is "a word to the wise is not sufficient if it doesn't make any sense."¹¹⁴

The collection ends on a note which is the peculiar Thurber combination of hope and despair; the last fable's subject is language. Although Thurber has intensified his interest in words themselves and in the sound quality of his writing since the early 1940's (an interest particularly apparent beginning with The White Deer), the verbal confusion of "The Shore and the Sea" is remarkably like the confusion which led to the great run in "The Day the Dam Broke" in My Life and Hard Times. In this fable, for some inexplicable reason, someone cries "FIRE!" and others follow him, deciding also inexplicably to shout "The world is coming to an end!" as they all run down to the sea. Someone then yells "It's a pleasure jaunt" which another transforms into it's "a treasure hunt." "Go it!" encourages a young lemming, which

¹¹⁴ Thurber, Further Fables, p. 129.

becomes "Goats!" and "Ghosts" in the screaming of the crowd "until there were almost as many different alarms as there were fugitives." The irrational running, away from nothing and implicitly to disaster; the inability of language to communicate any intelligent idea, in fact, its hinderance of reason and truth; and the apparently spontaneous nature of the irrational action all place this fable very close to the early story in My Life and Hard Times. Nothing demonstrates the continuity and consistency of Thurber's attitude toward both language and confusion than these parallels. Thurber's view of the life of man on earth is that it is perpetual confusion, confusion often instigated by language.

Here, in this last fable we see a lone scholarly lemming watch the mass of lemmings drown themselves, as the artistic consciousness of a mature Thurber had looked back on the chaos of another moment for the earlier story. The lemming was so distressed with the sight that he "tore up what he had written through the years about his species, and started his studies all over again." Like the fine thread of the possibility for hope in The Last Flower, the only piece of hope here is the remaining literate man who will perhaps be able to interpret his existence better the next time. The moral of the fable is a statement on all the confusions which Thurber depicts: "All men should strive to learn before they die what they are running from, and to, and why."¹¹⁵ In Thurber's world this knowledge remains only a

¹¹⁵Thurber, Further Fables, pp. 172-74.

possibility for which to strive and the only people who come anywhere near to it are the poets, the artists, the men of letters who must not only observe the confusion of their species but attempt to interpret it and surmount it. At the end of Further Fables for Our Time Thurber has pictured "The end of mankind as only Thurber could have imagined it: not with a bang, not with a whimper, but in a universal confusion of voices and meanings."¹¹⁶

The Wonderful O (1957) is both Thurber's most ambitious linguistic effort and the work in which the relationship between language and life is most apparent. This is a tale about the gentle people of Ooroo who succumb to the tyranny of a man named Black and his accomplice Littlejack. The island is thrown into confusion, or cnfusin, when Black bans the letter O for the arbitrary and irrational reason that "I've had a hatred of that letter ever since the night my mother became wedged in a porthole. We couldn't pull her in and so we had to push her out." Ooroo becomes "R" and all things and ideas which have an O in them are destroyed in a wild search for the island's legendary jewels:

The crew set about their new task with a will, and before they were through they had torn down colleges and destroyed many a book and tome and volume, and globe and blackboard and pointer, and banished professors, assistant professors, scholars, tutors, and instructors. There was no one left to translate English into English. Babies often made as much sense as their fathers.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶Cowley, "Lions and Lemmings," p. 44.

¹¹⁷James Thurber, The Wonderful O (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), pp. 26, 20, 30.

English must be translated into English where not only does Goldilocks sound "like a key jiggled in a lck" and Ophelia Oliver's name sounds so horrible that she said "Phelia Liver" once and "vanished from the haunts of men," but where poetry died, because a poet and his dog were both pets and the world was made Chatic, "a cross between chaos and static:"

'When coat is cat and boat is bat and goatherd looks like gathered, and booth is both, since both are bth, the reader's eye is bothered.'

'And power is pwer, and zero zer, and worst of all a hero's her.' the old man sighed as he said it.

'Anon is ann, and moan is man.' Andrea smiled as she said it.

'And shoe,' Andrews said, 'is she.'¹¹⁸
'Ah, woe,' the old man said, 'is we.'

There are always people who do not sense the encroachment of freedom and a lawyer of R named Hyde stands up and says that even if they have no chocolate, "chocolate is bad for the stomach anyway" and they should be happy with their lot for "we shall still have wintergreen and peppermint. Hail to Black and Littlejack, who will liberate us all from licorice and horehound!" Hyde is therefore appointed "Chief Clarifier" whose job it is to make the most chaotic clarification possible. Thus, even though grapefruit does not have an O, he bans it under its French name pamplemousse.¹¹⁹ The world spins in a mad circle of absurdity.

It is finally the poet Andrews who says that when "oft becomes the same as foot, and odd the same as dodo,

¹¹⁸Thurber, Wonderful O, pp. 4, 50.

¹¹⁹Thurber, Wonderful O, pp. 18-20.

something must be done at once, or we shall never know what we are saying." As a man of letters he concludes "the answer must lie...in what's been written" to end the confusion of R:

They are swing chas. What is slid? What is left that's slace. We are begne and webegne. Life is bring and brisk. Even schling is flish.

This, says Andrews, is English made into gibberish without its O's as the result of the cruel decrees of a tyrant; it is the beginning of general chaos.

Although most of the books had been destroyed, a woman named Andrea finds a book to help them overthrow Black and it is she who finally ends their gibberish:

Be not afraid to speak with O's....We cannot live or speak without hope, and hope without its O is nothing, and even nothing is less than nothing when it is nthing. Hope contains the longest O of all. We mustn't lose it.

It was difficult to arouse the people to overthrow the tyrant, however, because they had fallen prey to conformity:

'O-lessness is now a kind of cult in certain quarters,' Hyde observed, 'a messy lessness, whose meaninglessness nonetheless attracts the few, first one or two, then three or four, then more and more. People often have respect for what they cannot comprehend, since some men cannot always tell their crosses from their blessings, their laurels from their thorns....O-lessism may become the ism of the future.¹²⁰

Finally, it is through the repetition of the word "hope" by a few of the people and the attack of the little things with O's in them--the locusts, hornets, and honeybees--against Black and Littlejack that causes the downfall of "the law of the letter." To aid the little O animals and insects come

¹²⁰ Thurber, Wonderful O, pp. 28-29, 32, 46.

the characters out of literature and legend, still alive in memory, to harass Black with their O names:

Lancelot and Ivanhoe, Athos, Porthos, Cyrano, Roland, Rob Roy, Romeo, Donaldbane of Burnam Wood, Robinson Crusoe and Robin Hood; the Moody Doones of Lorna Doone, Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone; out of near and ancient tomes, Banquo's ghost and Sherlock Holmes....¹²¹

It is at the eleventh hour that the only clock that Black has not destroyed, the "clock that strikes in conscience," strikes and is followed by the noonday ringing of a bell marking the end of Black's reign and giving the people of R the idea of what O word must not be forgotten:

They then heard the ringing of a distant bell, sounding near and sounding nearer, ringing clear and ringing clearer, till all the sky was filled with music as by magic.

'Freedom!' Andreus cried, naming the gleaming word the men had found, the word that glowed and glittered.

'Freedom!' Andrea echoed after him, and the sound of the greatest word turned the vandals pale and made them tremble.

'I knew the word could not be doom,' the old man said, 'or sorrow. I was afraid that it might be tomorrow.'

Now that the people have their O's back, they have the four things that must never be lost: love, valor, hope, and freedom.¹²² Language has become so identified with life for Thurber that the name of the thing is the thing; without the word for freedom, in a curious inversion of the definitions of language by cultural anthropologists, we have no freedom. Lest anyone abuse that freedom, the pirate's foresaken parrot who keeps repeating the nonsensical threat "Squack his thrug" at the end of the story is dismissed by Andreus in a funny

¹²¹Thurber, Wonderful O, pp. 60-61.

¹²²Thurber, Wonderful O, pp. 65, 69.

and apt pun: "Now he has the freedom of screech."¹²³ Neither the arbitrary rules of a dictator or nation nor the indulgence of a personal idiosyncrasy will achieve a language that is sensible or a free land in which the Wonderful O is remembered and retained.

Toward the end of his long and varied career Thurber's interest in language continued and usually was expressed in essays rather than in stories or tales. In Alarms and Diversions (1957) Thurber presents an essay designed to help cure the "carcenenomenclature of our time." The essay "The Psycho-semantic Will See You Now, Mr. Thurber," is about the new branch of science which "will specialize in the havoc brought by verbal artillery upon the fortress of reason." The essay, only vaguely humorous, is effective because Thurber is able to expose the cancerous state of language by using the language of obfuscation itself in parodic passages like those he had learned to use very early in his career:

The carcinomenclature of our time is, to be sure, an agglomerative phenomenon of accumulated concretions, to which a dozen different types of elaborative descriptivists have contributed.... Once the political terminologists of all parties began to cross-infect our moribund vocabulary, the rate of degeneration became appalling. Elephantiasis of cliché set in.... We have become satisfied with gangrenous repetitions of threadbarisms, like an old man cackling in a chimney corner, and the onset of other meaningless is imminent.¹²⁴

For Thurber, the writer must always be searching for the correct precise word, although he knows the impossibility

¹²³ Thurber, Wonderful O, p. 71.

¹²⁴ James Thurber, Alarms and Diversions, pp. 18-19.

of ever finding it. In The Years With Ross (1959) Thurber tries to define the character of Ross with common nouns like dreamer, visionary, cosmopolitan and provincial, but must finally admit that "There is only one word that fits him perfectly, and that word is Ross."¹²⁵ Thus, the word and the man, the name and the thing are inseparable.

In his last completed book, Lanterns and Lances (1961), Thurber explores the state of the American language, "This area of obfuscation," by looking variously at the freedom which children have been given with the telephone, thus meeting every urgency with "baby talk or prattle tattle;" the blight on the spoken word caused by the "spreading reiteration of the phrase 'you know;'" the plethora of mispronounced words, "crippled or wingless words that escape, all distorted, the careless human lips of our jittery time;" and the "charmingly tainted idiom" in which we speak worn-out clichés.¹²⁶ This defender of the English language against the onslaught of meaninglessness was never better or more serious.

In Lanterns and Lances Thurber is preoccupied with the subject of the decay of language and he takes an opportunity to discuss Henry James, not an author of the most simple style, as a master of prose:

He can set so many metaphors and implications dancing at the same time on the point of his pen that it is hard

¹²⁵ James Thurber, The Years with Ross (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1959), p. 8.

¹²⁶ James Thurber, Lanterns and Lances (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), pp. 20-21, 31, 40, 61.

to make out the pattern in the fluttering of all the winged words.

But the pattern is there and only the artist can achieve such a pattern with language because "the pure artist, [is] less susceptible than almost any other to unreasoned impulse."¹²⁷ It is the artist who watches the confusion of the world and studies it to bring order out of the chaos. For this writer facing the linguistic confusion of the world it was increasingly obvious that "something central and essential in the mechanism of meaning began losing its symmetry" by the agency of the mass media, advertising, popular songs, the jargon of every faction of society, and, ultimately, the irrational nature of man himself.¹²⁸

Thurber was persistently and painfully aware of both the powers and limits of language, of its ability not only to indicate the level of a culture but to forge the nature of the culture itself. In "The Last Clock, A Fable for the Time, Such As It Is, of Man," he pictures the horrific country just "the other side of tomorrow" where a people so satiated with the pleasures of the flesh can only speak in a "jumble of mumble." In this country time has been destroyed by an ogre who eats clocks and no one can do anything about it because no one specializes in clock-eaters; even a general practitioner cannot help because "as a general practitioner,

¹²⁷ Thurber, Lanterns and Lances, p. 110.

¹²⁸ Thurber, Lanterns and Lances, p. 60.

modern style, I treat only generals." Despite the admonition from an inspirationalist that "the final experience should not be mummum," the people are finally overtaken by time. Explorers from another planet find only this banal reminder of a culture in which language was only a mumble of jumble:

We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us,
Mummum in the sands of time.¹²⁹

In this fitting parody of a sentimental Nineteenth Century poem about the dignity of man and the meaning of life, Thurber's last plea, like the aging inspirationalist's, was that the final experience of man not be only mummum.

The posthumous collection of essays, Credos and Curios (1962), shows Thurber further investigating the advent of mummum in our time. Although some reviewers¹³⁰ attacked the book as an expression of Thurber's language preoccupation in the extreme, the linguistic jokes and puns are generally very well integrated with his subject matter and are a fitting postscript to his career. The inclusion of "Menaces in May," a 1928 short story, is instructive regarding the superior achievements of Thurber's later style. Helen Thurber has said that the story has "more than a touch of juvenilia"¹³¹ and is nowhere more manifest than in Thurber's language in the piece. One cannot imagine the Thurber of The White Deer

¹²⁹Thurber, Lanterns and Lances, pp. 48, 49, 58.

¹³⁰Updike, "Indignations of a Senior Citizen," p. 5.

¹³¹James Thurber, Credos and Curios (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. x.

or even the much earlier My Life and Hard Times writing a stale expression like "the side of the Palace Theatre across the street looms up there like a dark hill."¹³²

Credos does include a plethora of puns: Too Many Kooks Spoil the Brothel would be a play about clergymen in a brothel; "The United Notions" would be a world conference of Area men; "The Brink of War has become the Brink of Was" explains the age of the Bomb; and "Alice Threw the Looking Glass" is a good piece for the addicts of terror on television, or "terrorvision."¹³³ Far from being a departure from his usual attitudes, the book represents the logical culmination of his fears about language. In "The Lady of the Land," a woman inebriated by both alcohol and ignorance speaks of the playwright "Hendrick Hudson," Thurber's love of tortoises (he had written of porpoises), and "Robert Adlai Stevenson." Thurber wails, as his entire career had attested, "nobody gets anything right anymore" and concludes in another essay that "life at the moment's a tale told in an idiom, full of unsoundness and fury, signifying nonism." This could be a statement on all the language and confusions he had surveyed for three decades.

A bit apologetic throughout the book for his sidetrips into word games, Thurber himself states the special relationship his mind has had to the word:

¹³²Thurber, Credos, p. 10.

¹³³Thurber, Credos, pp. 37, 88, 101, 103.

My trouble, as you can see, is the gift of total recall. Thought association, for the total recaller, is endless and often cruel, particularly in the mind of an ancient who is a victim of chronic word garbling. Such a mind, prowling at night, can turn 'A Window in Thrums' into 'A Window in Slums,' and 'When Knighthood Was in Flower' into 'When Girlhood Was Deflowered.' What is worse, the nocturnal mind that fossicks (look it up in the OED) may get around to 'Little Boy Blew His Top' and 'The Pie-eyed Peeper of Hamlin.'¹³⁴

The mind that created such irrelevant and irreverent associations was also the mind that cried out against nonism and mum-mum; it is unlikely that any other type of mind would have been so able to take the language apart as well as to structure and re-structure it.

I have attempted to indicate something of the range and fineness of Thurber's language in this chapter and to demonstrate that his interest in language was both consistent with his view of life as a state of confusion and significantly related to his other subjects throughout his long career. His own expression, precise, subtle and evocative, is always at odds with the language spoken by most of his characters, the language of confusion. It is a language which alternately delighted and frightened him, a language which always perplexed and intrigued him. He may at some times seem to feel, along with King Clode of The White Deer, that "I blow my horn in waste land,"¹³⁵ as he studies the land of dead and dying language leading to an era of meaninglessness. At other

¹³⁴ Thurber, Credos, pp. 53, 52, 92, 101.

¹³⁵ Thurber, White Deer, p. 111.

times, when a maid enhances his powers of imagination by use of the garbled adjective phrase "doom-shaped" or when playing word games with friends, the non-rational, incantory and confusing aspects of language are relished. Although a seeker of order and sense, his was a mind and art open and varied enough to admit nonsense and disorderliness; part of the sheer delight of Thurber resides in this quality. At the outset of his career he had defined humor, in his typical parodic voice, as "emotional chaos told about calmly and quietly in retrospect;" near the end of his career he stated that only the artist or poet could bring grace and measure out of that chaos. The world perceived by James Thurber is a world of confusion, of chaos, and he, like the poets of the fairy tales, like the lone scholarly lemming of the fable, has taken it as his role to bring grace and measure through the medium of language to that chaos. The essential paradox of his phrase. The Anatomy of Confusion, describing his study of the bedlam and carnival of the world, flows from his perception of the role of the artist. Thurber, the artist within the chaos, the anatomist of confusion, systematically and reasonably studies the systemless, unreasonable world. A certain attraction for confusion is of course necessary to interest a man in its study for over thirty years. More than anything else, however, Thurber's sense of duty in attempting to make sense out of nonsense carried him through many years of writing, continually and often eloquently pleading for the last experience to be more than mummum.

To expose the limits and decadence of language Thurber chose to use dialect, clichés, garbled phrases, pretentious diction, jargon, and empty conversations to illustrate his complaints. To explore the power and joy of language he created a fine English prose that was often parodic, allusive, alliterative, onomatopoeic, neologistic and rhythmic, in order to illustrate the possibilities and hopes for language. His characters often can really communicate with no one; when they think they are communicating they are usually angering someone- making fools out of themselves, or opening the gates of bedlam with the twist of a phrase or the transposition of a letter. They speak confused and confusing language and often talk their way into monumental confusions. Their language of confusion is retold however, in a careful, exact, and exacting language which often challenges the most astute reader.

I have made no attempt to relate Thurber to the standard New Yorker style. Dr. Baldwin has covered that aspect of Thurber's style very well and she concludes, as Thurber himself felt, that his style is actually quite different from The New Yorker style even in his casual essays; as a reader familiar with the direct and understated New Yorker style can see, he is even farther from that style in many of the short stories, tales, and fables. Dr. Baldwin states that even in his early period, when The New Yorker influence was highest, "Thurber's style is a curious combination of the straightforward Group Style and the indirect one of his favorite author,

Henry James."¹³⁶ Thurber, like James, was not trying for indirectness but for that perfectly right word or phrase to connote all possible and correct impressions.

Although the Jamesian influence is significant in Thurber, it would appear more appropriate to distinguish the opposite tendencies in Thurber's writing as being a combination of the two patterns which Constance Rourke noted as the dominant strains of classic American humor: the ebullience of western humor coupled with the Yankee economy of speech.¹³⁷ The joyous extravagance of the word games, the poetic sections of the fairy tales, the delightful confusions of meaning--all these are balanced by the opposite tendency in Thurber toward simplicity, order, and meaning. Thurber's prose is variously simple and complex, understated and extravagant, and it is the convergence of these elements which also lends a great deal of energy to his writing. The tension between indulgence and restraint usually results in a superior literary product that has freshness and vigor as well as symmetry.

Thurber's conception of the world as a state of chaos is intrinsically related to his linguistic obsession and his careful attention to prose style. He knew as well as anyone the seriously impaired nature of human communication in a world of perpetual confusion but he also believed that only

¹³⁶ Baldwin, Congruous Laughter, p. 76.

¹³⁷ Constance Rourke, American Humor (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1931), p. 134.

through language, imperfect as it is, would man ever approach making sense from his nonsensical existence or bringing order from the disorder which is apparent at every turn. Thurber's great devotion to language was born of his natural love for it and his strong desire to bring grace and measure out of the chaos of man on earth. Language was identified with life for Thurber and his most original fairy tale, The Wonderful O, describes the quintessential Thurberian confusion: a society in chaos because language has become perverted and communication has been stifled. One of Thurber's great achievements is that not only did he create a unique vision of human experience as a state of chaos and unending linguistic confusion, but that he was able to communicate his vision in an equally significant, individual, and remarkable way.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

Thurber subtly warned the future students of his work that "the Anatomy of Confusion is a large subject," which it has indeed proven to be, and followed that remark with the ironic demurrer that he had "no intention of writing the standard treatise on it."¹ This revealing sentence was written in 1953, however, and its irony is based primarily in the fact that by this time Thurber had already written many pieces of a large work which can best be described by his own term, "An Anatomy of Confusion."

The body of his work, diverse, extensive and spanning a consistently successful period from 1929 to 1961, is distinguished by its consistent use of the confusion motif. When Max Eastman asked Thurber to define humor he said that it was "a kind of emotional chaos told about calmly and quietly in retrospect."² Therefore, both the subject matter which we have discovered in Thurber's canon and his own definition of humor are directly related to the concept of confusion.

Thurber was certainly not the only writer to deal

¹James Thurber, Thurber Country, p. 103.

²James Thurber, "Statement," in Max Eastman, Enjoyment of Laughter, p. 342.

with the subject of confusion. Before Thurber began to publish, Eliot's The Waste Land had depicted the dissolution and incomprehensibility of the modern world and Fitzgerald had immortalized the confusion of the 1920's in a story about man's essential inner contradictions, The Great Gatsby. Thurber's persistent allusions to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and The Waste Land would suggest a direct influence from Eliot. Although Thurber does not directly allude to Fitzgerald's fiction, The Great Gatsby was his favorite twentieth century American novel and Mrs. Thurber recalls that he knew it almost entirely from memory.³ Fitzgerald's pictures of dissolution and his concept of characters that are thinly veiled barbarians under the raiment of respectability probably became part of Thurber's imagination.

Many other artists would probably generally agree with Thurber's conclusions that human life is organized chaos at best. What distinguishes Thurber's view of this subject and what justifies it as the basis for a study of the entire body of his work is that he actually defined his artistic form and role as a study of confusion. Flowing from his conception of humor and art, his work is pervaded by references to confusion, perplexity, chaos, muddlement, and misunderstanding. His work, unlike that of many of his contemporaries, does not incidentally or partially deal with the confusion motif, therefore, but presents many different subjects and

³Mrs. James Thurber, Interview with Catherine Kenney, Dec. 2, 1973.

attitudes which are only variations on the large theme of universal and perpetual bedlam.

Thurber viewed all aspects of life as elements in the macrocosm of confusion, human society. He often pictures modern civilization on the edge of an abyss, reeling in destruction and mass hysteria. Whenever two people are together, Thurber suggests, confusion is the probable result. For this reason he often deals with war (The Last Flower), social disorder (My Life and Hard Times), tyranny (The Fables), and the failure of cultural myths (The White Deer; "The Greatest Man in the World"). His wide view of the macrocosm of confusion--the universal bedlam and carnival of life on earth--is an often grim picture of human nature. Concomittant to his view of human nature and the inevitability of confusion is an especially melancholy sense of the inexorable running out of time in a world of finite and imperfect men who are doomed to change, decay, and death.

His writing provokes insight, discomfort, and questioning, therefore, but usually and at its best offers "the only solvent of terror and tension:" humor.⁴ This combination of a sense of humor and difficult, even distressing subjects results in Thurber's special blend of laughter and tears, hope and melancholy. His art simultaneously affects both a recognition and an acceptance of the Awful. His literary form is thus best described as humorous, which

⁴ James Thurber, Lanterns and Lances, p. 142.

according to his own definition means a quiet study of chaos, and as tragicomic, the incongruous blending of the sad and the funny, hope and despair.

As parts of his *Anatomy of Confusion* Thurber chose to study in detail the *War Between Men and Women*, the dismal failure of modern scientific theory and the advent of technology to end the confusion, the disparity between the innocent beasts and confused man, the confusion of illusion and reality in the limited human mind, and the confusion resulting from man's garbled attempts to communicate through language.

Thurber's analysis of the *War Between Men and Women* is especially pointed and revealing. He always distrusted any social group and for him the state of marriage in modern society was the very distillate of confusion. If The Last Flower and many of the Fables portrayed whole societies crumbling and destroying themselves in war, the people locked into marriages in the short stories were also entrenched in daily, often silent, warfare and unending battles of nerves and egos. Thurber's portrayals of marriage in the modern world were unrelieved in their sense of the fundamental gulf and resultant confusion between men and women. These modern marriages were usually pervaded by a strong feeling of sadness, impotency, frustration, and regret. They are all dominated by the Thurber woman and the early Thurber portrayal of marriage shows the strong woman as a source of fear and ridicule. When Thurber chose to dream or prophesy in the

fairy tales or in the essays dealing with future societies, however, he often portrayed strong, wise, and resilient women as the hope of mankind. The modern world, nevertheless, revolves in unending confusion and most of Thurber's fiction deals with the elementary unit of that confusion: the relationship between men and women in twentieth century American life.

Modern science and technology had promised an end to many of man's difficulties: remedies for disease, anodynes for anxieties, blueprints for a happy life, reduction in work load, saving of precious time. Thurber's ironic discovery that these two developments which had promised so much had become only extensions of man's confusion is the basis of much of his effective satire and parody, especially in the period before 1945. It was particularly funny and frightening to Thurber that the often elaborate scientific systems and the sophisticated machines were only adding to the general complexity and misunderstanding of modern life.

Man's reason, which some thinkers would offer as his best hope for solving confusion, Thurber found to be the ultimate and inclusive confusion. The limited and egocentric human consciousness perpetually transforms the action which it perceives so that reality takes a myriad of forms. These endless permutations which reality assumes in Thurber's kaleidoscopic view of the world are the essential expression of confusion: nothing is constant, the impossible is suddenly possible, the face of reality revolves as though reflected

by many mirrors of different levels of distortion. Like his great literary enthusiasm and model, Henry James, Thurber's only real clarification is, paradoxically, the essential ambiguity of human life. Also like James, Thurber's manipulation of illusion and reality is for the purpose of at least raising levels of awareness and expanding the chamber of consciousness so that some men may approach, though never reach, a knowledge of reality.

Thurber had a unique and enduring gift for language and an equally fine understanding of its powers and possibilities in human life. He created a fine, brief, and clear English prose to relate his saga of chaos. His prose style is distinguished by its remarkable rhythm, similes, economy, and energy. In much of his work a great deal of energy results from the fundamental tension caused by the clash of Thurber's sensibility, under-statement, and calm with the voices of his characters who mumble along in their multiple confusion, speaking the language of confusion. To Thurber, language, the arbitrary system developed by men to aid communication and affect some kind of order and sense within the chaos, was often the instigator of confusion and its first manifestation. Through language, man's fundamental incomprehensibility and confusion are illuminated.

Thurber's world is also filled with the noble and uncomplicated "lower" animals; their presence serves to put his Anatomy of Confusion into perspective. Against the backdrop of gathering cosmic dark and destruction march the

totally appealing Thurber dogs, the wise dolphins, the extinct but lamented dinosaurs, and the delightful if non-existent bestiary of "The New Natural History." Their incongruous presence among the chaos of man on earth is not only humorous, however. It makes human failure more poignant because man is compared unfavorably even to the "brutes" of nature. The Thurber animals also aid us in accepting the misery and confusion of men by relieving and counterbalancing the horrors of human society.

Thurber's many subjects, then, are only different aspects of his fundamental premise: that the life of man on earth is chaos. Thus, when man tries to end the confusion with the bright promises of modern technology or the plans for masterful adjustment of the psychologist; when he attempts to find comfort or stability in the institution of marriage; when he tries to comprehend his experience or express it in language, the result is always confusion. This is the legacy of man. Thurber relieved his grim criticism of human nature by offering laughter as a means for accepting such an impossible existence. Although tentative, he also suggests the creative powers of woman as a future way out of the history of confusion, death, and destruction. In the present world, the Thurber dogs, a sense of humor, and the grace and measure achieved by the artist inside the confusion are the only anodynes.

When Thurber attempted to assess the life and career of Harold Ross, the founder and editor of The New Yorker, he

remarked that since Ross was neither artist nor poet he could not bring grace and measure to the chaos of man on earth.⁵ Inadvertently, Thurber gave his own artistic credo: the artist, the poet must bring grace into the battleground, balance within the disparate elements, sense from nonsense, order from disorder. James Thurber, the artist, brings this grace and measure to our chaotic world through the creation of a refined, poetic, wildly flexible, and exact English prose and through the development of a sensitive and steady perception of the varied elements of the human comedy.

It is often suggested as an inherent weakness of works of humor and comedy that they are temporal and therefore less significant than other literary forms. Great comedy, the work of Molière, Cervantes, Fielding, Chaucer, and Shakespeare, disproves this objection and Thurber's own best work denies it. Some of his work, like that of most prolific writers, is ephemeral and minor. His finest work, however, the fairy tales for adults, the fables, and the fine short stories and essays, deals with significant and enduring subjects: love, hope, freedom, disillusionment, vanity, alienation, the significance of language in human life, the ability of the mind to construct meaning from existence, and the ability of the human heart to survive in a hostile, chaotic world. Beyond his subjects, his magnificent prose style and his agility with both the sound and sense of the English language assures him

⁵ James Thurber, The Years with Ross, p. 115.

a place among the important and lasting writers of this century. His exploration of the meaning of language and communication in human life is one of his great delights and possibly his greatest contribution to our understanding of ourselves.

The special difficulty in dealing with Thurber's work is that, unlike most significant writers in American literature, he chose to write many short stories and essays; his longest works, the fairy tales, barely approximate the length of a short novel. This diversity probably frightens off many potential admirers and students, not only because of the difficulty it presents in developing a general impression of the entire body of his work, but because of our American obsession that "bigger is better." His drawings, which are basically outside the scope of this study and which Thurber considered infinitely less important than his literary efforts, also complicate matters for the student of Thurber. Because even his hastily done cartoons show Thurber's view of the confusion of the modern world, I have attempted to make a few statements about them to clarify points being made in the different chapters.

In attempting to draw all of Thurber's disparate subjects, forms, and attitudes into a cohesive whole I have labored not to force a blueprint or a formula on this complex and often ambiguous mind. I did not want to reach the end of this study with the haunting and penetrating question from Thurber's Chanda Bell ringing mockingly in my ears:

"You have found the figure...but have you found the carpet?"⁶

In the sense of her Jamesian query, I believe that although Thurber's carpet may not have a single or easily recognizable "figure," even in its great complexity and diversity it is one carpet woven from the conflicting elements of life. The carpet of his art is both serious and humorous and consists of an impressive and effective Anatomy of Confusion. Such a carpet does not imply the existence of a formula, label, or neat prescription in Thurber's world: it covers the immense and often paradoxical landscape of modern America on which all possible elements of the confusion move. It is a bright and melancholy spectacle, this Thurber carnival, as it presents an individual, significant, and largely enduring vision of human experience.

⁶James Thurber, Thurber Country, p. 156.

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Interview

Personal Interview with Mrs. James Thurber, New York City, December 2, 1973.

A P P E N D I X I

APPENDIX I

CONFUSION'S REIGN:

THURBER'S MELANCHOLY SENSE OF TIME

Many people have noticed the deep strain of melancholy in much of Thurber's writing. His friend E. B. White probably was the first to notice this melancholy strain within the humor in his introduction to The Owl in the Attic: "I finally met Thurber in New York.... I see him now, slinking around the streets, trailing a thin melancholy and leading a terrier bitch." Thurber himself continued the characterization in the Preface to My Life and Hard Times:

To call such persons 'humorists,' a loose-fitting and ugly word, is to miss the nature of their dilemma and the dilemma of their nature. The little wheels of their invention are set in motion by the damp hand of melancholy.¹

Richard Tobias really ignores the melancholy undercurrent in Thurber by forcing a conventional comic interpretation on every Thurber story, so that he considers even "The Whippoorwill" (the story of a triple murder and suicide which plumbs the deepest regions of man's subconscious fears and obsessions) a "comedy." Charles Holmes, while mentioning Thurber's melancholy side, interprets it as simply a counter-

¹E. B. White, "Introduction," in The Owl in the Attic, p. xiii; and James Thurber, "Preface," My Life and Hard Times, p. 11.

balance to his humor.² I believe, however, that Thurber's melancholy results from the same source as his humor: from his perception of man's imperfect, finite nature in a world of confusion and chaos. Both are related to a strong and persistent sense of the inevitable running out of time.

Traditionally time and confusion have been considered inseparable. In Judaic-Christian terms, time began with the fall of Man, a fall from paradise (or eternity) into a finite world in which death, decay, and change are unavoidable. Many other mythologies have explained Man's mortality and the chaos of the world in similar terms. In Greek myth Chaos preceded the creation of the universe (which was presumed ordered) but even there Chaos begot Night and Day. More similar to Thurber's view of time and confusion is the hybrid philosophy of Edmund Spenser, for whom the ultimate enemy "mutabilitie" loomed largest. At the end of The Faerie Queene in "The Cantos of Mutability," Spenser described the coming of Time as the cause of universal confusion and disorder. The Titanesse Mutabilitie announces "'I am a daughter, by the mothers side,/ Of her that is grand-mother magnified / Of all the gods, great Earth, great Chaos child" and her reign throws the world into disorder:

For she the face of earthly things so changed,
That all which Nature had establisht first
In good estate, and in meet order ranged,

²Charles Holmes, Clocks of Columbus, p. 330; and Richard Tobias, Art of Thurber, p. 88.

She did pervert, and all their statues burst:

Ne shee the lawes of Nature onely brake,
 But eke of Justice, and of Policie,
 And wrong of right, and bad of good did make,
 And death for life exchanged foolishlie:
 Since which all living wights have learn'd to die,
 And all this world is woxen daily worse.
 O pittious worke of Mutabilitie!
 By which we all are subject to that curse, 3
 And death, instead of life, have sucked from our nurse.

Although not many writers deal so directly with the subject, much literature has been written to impart immortality, through lasting art, to mortal man. This certainly was part of the motivation for Shakespeare's Sonnets and for the great elegies of Milton, Shelley, and Tennyson. The almost panic urge to stave off death through artistic creation is not only present in such obvious examples, however; it is part of the motivation of many writers seemingly preoccupied with other subjects. I believe Thurber to be a writer who envisioned the world as a kind of perpetual chaos and who was also consistently plagued by the spectre of time, death, and extinction. Only with time and change could life revolve in unending confusion. Thurber's recognition of the running out of time and the chaotic human spectacle are concomittant and, taken together, they explain the melancholy strain within his humor.

To Thurber, humor was an attempt to recollect and

³ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, VII, 6, xxvi, v, vi, in *The Poems of Edmund Spenser*, ed. R. E. Neil Dodge (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1936).

analyze chaos, and art was an attempt to bring grace and measure to that chaotic scene. His persistent treatment of the inevitable running out of time, therefore, is not anti-thetical to his humorous bent, but is an integral part of his artistic vision. Although many other writers have dealt with Man's chaotic state as the result of time's ravages and even more have created art out of a desire for some kind of permanence or immortality, I believe Thurber is unique in combining a fine perception of the chaos of our world and of the melancholy of time with a steady and sustaining sense of humor. Such a combination is possible only within the context of Thurber's particular definitions of humor and it explains the often savage realism of Thurber's world which quite remarkably manages both to encourage a recognition and acceptance of man's lot and offer a means of dealing with the sorry scene.

Thurber suggested that perhaps the essence of humor is "that hysterical laugh that people sometimes get in the face of the Awful."⁴ Although the reader does not often experience such hysterical laughter in reading Thurber, there sometimes seems to be an element of near hysteria about his characters, situations, and world view. (Cf. "The Shore and the Sea," in Further Fables for Our Time; "The Day the Dam Broke," in My Life and Hard Times; and "The War Between Men and Women," in Men, Women, and Dogs.) The "Awful" would

⁴ James Thurber, "Statement," in Max Eastman, Enjoyment of Laughter, p. 343.

include, I think, the frightening, the decadent, and the evil. It would perhaps most likely be the spectre of mutability, aging, and death and all of the confusion resulting from man's mortality. As death is the consummate awful reality which we each must face, Thurber's humor provides us with a helpful release for our common fear as well as a healthy recognition of our lot. Thurber's tragicomic type of humor was based in "a kind of mellowed self-pity" more than in the feeling of superiority that so many comic theories stress.⁵ Since everyone is subject to confusion and time, a humor dealing with these subjects will affect such self-recognition and pity.

A survey of Thurber's many references to time, clocks, death, aging, and extinction will illustrate my conclusions. I will approach his writing career chronologically. Although Thurber was just past thirty when he began to publish professionally, his characters have a remarkably middle-aged feeling about them even in the early work. Like both Eliot and Fitzgerald, he seems to have enjoyed "aging" both himself and his characters far beyond their actual ages. Eliot was in fact quite young when he wrote "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and Fitzgerald managed to make the passage of Nick Carraway's thirtieth birthday sound like the coming of age of the western world.⁶

⁵ James Thurber, "Statement," in Max Eastman, Enjoyment of Laughter, p. 343.

⁶ Cf. F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1925), pp. 136, 179.

In The Owl in the Attic (1931) Thurber admits that Mr. and Mrs. Monroe are "quite young" (Owl, p. 4) but from their characteristics they seem to be among those ageless middle-ageds of Thurber's drawings: John Monroe forgets things, they sleep in separate bedrooms, and they seem to have suffered life for a long time together. This is most evident in "The Middle Years," a story in which John is portrayed as too old and tired for an appealing indiscretion, sleeping away the evening of a planned rendezvous with a lovely lady:

He merely favored her with an intense and wonderful glance (or so he believed it to be), paving the way for a charming sequel without spoiling it all by seeming too youthfully impetuous. Of course if it came to impetuosity, he would show 'em who was impetuous. But, at thirty-five, to make the right effect, one had to go slow. Besides, he was a little tired, the party having lasted infernally late. He was glad that someone else was seeing the lady home this particular night. It was devilishly cold. (Owl, pp. 64, 65)

Monroe's self-image recalls both Prufrock and Sweeney: "It struck him, as he glimpsed himself in a long glass, that a tall thin man looks like an ass in socks and garters." (Owl, p. 71) The Monroe series as a whole leaves the reader with the impression of a couple getting older as time runs out.

The Preface to My Life and Hard Times (1933) continues the aged fiction. Admitting that he is not yet forty, the age which Cellini recommends for writing an autobiography, Thurber declares that "the grim date moves toward me apace; my legs are beginning to go, things blur before my eyes, and the faces of the rose-lipped maids I knew in my twenties are

misty as dreams." (My Life, p. 9) The plight of such men is worsened by the fact that age has not brought them very much, for "in the House of Life they have the feeling that they have never taken off their overcoats." (p. 10) The Preface ends with Thurber's peculiar synthesis of humor, sadness, and fear; whatever happens, he says, "the claw of the sea-puss gets us all in the end." (p. 13) With this humorous metaphor for the inevitability of death, Thurber incongruously begins the high hilarity of his famous reminiscences

In this book the Grandfather's eccentricities are the result of his losing his sense of time (p. 34). In both "University Days" and "Draftboard Nights" it is the passage of time moving swiftly by Thurber which is both funny and sad. In the first story Thurber writes that he had to re-take botany and military drill each year during college since he continually failed both, and in his last year at Ohio State he was the only senior still in uniform, a uniform which he had ridiculously outgrown. (pp. 88, 98) Even worse, "Draft Board Nights" discusses the fact that because of some bureaucratic mix-up, Thurber was drafted each week during the First World War and each time, after marking precious time in the maze of examiners, he failed the physical because of his poor vision. At the end of this story the reader feels, as Thurber must have felt, the inevitability of fate and time's caprice: "Late one morning, shortly after my last examination, I was awakened by the sounds of bells ringing and

whistles blowing. It grew louder and more insistent and wilder. It was the Armistice." (p. 111)

Four years later, in Let Your Mind Alone!, Thurber included two fine short stories which deal with married couples whose lives seem especially sad against the background of passing time. In "The Breaking Up of the Winships," a couple who had once been happy get into an absurd argument which ends in loneliness and alienation. "It started innocently enough, amiably even, with laughter from both of them, laughter that froze finally as the clock ran on and their words came out sharp and flat and stinging." (p. 83) Like many of Thurber's stories, the reader here is reminded of universal confusion and time by references to clocks. In "A Couple of Hamburgers" we watch another couple creeping slowly down a highway (a metaphor for life) bitterly arguing, misunderstanding, and denegrating each other. The wife threatens her husband that he will understand her warnings only "when it is too late" and Thurber describes the scene in terms of time's passage: "It had been raining a long time, a slow cold rain falling out of iron-colored clouds. They had been driving since morning and they still had a hundred and thirty miles to go. It was about three o'clock in the afternoon." (p. 192) Their misunderstanding and unhappiness seem especially poignant because of the inevitability of time's running out and their aging.

In an even more sombre tone, "After the Steppe Cat, What?" looks at the ravages of time on the planet earth.

This essay, which recalls The Waste Land as well as Shelley's "Ozymandias," concludes from a newspaper clipping about a rhodent plague in Silesia that the rats will soon take over the wasted modern landscape: "There would appear to be no way out, in a time of world decay, no matter what you do." The inevitable doom for "the last stages of a civilization" is foretold in our knowledge of history, man's past: "where Carthage once stood in her glory and pride there rises a cluster of modern villas, forming a suburb of the modern city of Tunis. Thus has the greatness of a sovereign power diminished. To what new kind of metropolis may Tunis someday become a suburb?" (Let Your Mind Alone!, pp. 225, 229) The cycles of time move relentlessly on, as both individuals and cultures reel in unending confusion.

In the same decade, Thurber published a collection the very title of which indicates his obsession with aging and its incongruities: The Middle-aged Man on the Flying Trapeze (1935). In this collection are other sad, lonely, and middle-aged characters who are overcome by time. The unnamed main character of "The Evening's at Seven" watches the clock move on as he almost sleep-walks through life and experiences "the mingled thoughts clocks gave him." (p. 191) Similarly, Mr. Kirk of "One is a Wanderer" passes his evening wandering in and out of a hotel lobby, drinking, looking for messages, and singing "Bye, Bye Blackbird," as the clock moves on:

'George,' he said, when the waiter walked over for his empty glass, 'I will be forty-one next November.' 'But that's not old, sir, and that's a long way off,' said George. 'No, it isn't,' he said. 'It's almost here. So is forty-two and forty-three and fifty, and here I am trying to be--do you know what I'm trying to be, George? I'm trying to be happy.' 'We all want to be happy, sir,' said George. 'I would like to see you happy, sir.' 'Oh, you will,' he said. 'You will, George. There's a simple trick to it. You just shut up and get married. But you see, George, I am an analyzer. I am also a rememberer. I have a pocketful of old used years. You put all those things together and they sit in a lobby getting silly and old.' (p. 221)

The Thirties were ended with The Last Flower (1939), a book about the cyclic nature of all life and the fragility of human survival. The book begins and ends in a wasteland, a world destroyed by man, and the only hope is that there will always be left one man, one woman, and one flower. It is a tenuous hold on life, but it is all we have and even though change and confusion are ubiquitous on earth, Thurber asserts that there is yet in man a creative desire to rebuild eachtime. A book which is in no way humorous but yet hopeful, The Last Flower demonstrates as well as any other of his works Thurber's ambiguous view of human experience.

The Last Flower signalled a widening range in form for Thurber and in the next two decades he added fables and fairy tales for adults to his work. Both the fable and the fairy tale forms allow him to deal with universal subjects in a didactic way without being offensive. In all the fairy tales, time seems to be the great enemy. In Many Moons (1943) the King and his advisors work against time since they must get the moon for the little Princess before she sees it rise

again in the sky. In The Great Quillow, the townspeople must work through the night to satisfy the demands of the great plundering giant Hunder, and many of them still cannot finish their tasks. The three Princes of The White Deer (1945) ride against time to succeed in quests for one lady, and in The 13 Clocks (1950) Prince Zorn has only ninety-nine hours to achieve a goal which should take ninety-nine days. Finally, in The Wonderful O (1957) after the people of Ooroo have raced against the unseen clock, it is only at the eleventh hour that they manage to end the reign of Black and Littlejack on their island and regain their freedom.

In each tale man must work against the time which limits his existence. In The White Deer each of the brother's guests is manipulated by a woods wizard to cause them to arrive triumphant at exactly the same time; no matter what the odds or human effort, it seems, man arrives at the same place. Time is the great equalizer. Although the book suggests the possibility of conquering time through lasting love (the lady-deer will not ever be changed back into a deer if Jorn truly loves her) the Epilogue suggests that Morgan le Fay may yet be around in the woods to curse the happy couple and throw their kingdom back into confusion. Furthermore, one of the book's most sympathetic characters, the real truth-teller in the tale who must be identified with Thurber, is the almost blind Royal Clockmaker Tocko, who carves these foreboding legends on sundials: "After this brief light, the

unending dark," "It is darker than you think," and "This little light and then the night." (The White Deer, p. 26)

These light and darkness images in metaphors for death would suggest that Thurber's encroaching blindness during this period had intensified his feelings about the swiftness of time and the inevitability of death.

If time is man's enemy, it is just as surely impossible for man to attempt to stop time. The 13 Clocks (1950) is about an incredibly evil Duke who mistakenly thought he had conquered time:

The clocks were dead, and in the end, brooding on it, the Duke decided he had murdered time, slain it with his sword, and wiped his bloody blade upon its beard and left it lying there, bleeding hours and minutes....
(The 13 Clocks, p. 20)

Ironically, the Duke admits the existence of time when he gives Prince Zorn a mission to be completed in ninety-nine hours and by the end of the book the Duke succumbs, as all men must, to time and death because of the powers of Zorn and Saralinda's love and the wisdom of the Golux. When Saralinda starts the thirteen clocks again in the frozen castle and their incessant ticking leads the Duke to moan, "I hear the sound of time" (13 Clocks, p. 108), we know that the unnatural order of the Duke is about to be replaced by the pulsating, human values of Prince Zorn and the Golux. Hark, an advisor, sums up the theme of the book: "No mortal man can murder time," he said, "and even if he could, there's something else: a clockwork in a maiden's heart, that strikes the hours of youth and love-..." (13 Clocks, p. 110) Time is man's

inevitable medium. With this acceptance of time's necessity, Thurber is ready for the mature vision of his most original fairy tale and one of his greatest achievements, The Wonderful O.

The Wonderful O is about the arbitrary banning of the letter "O" from the alphabet by tyrants on the peace-loving island of Ooroo; this story symbolizes the unending and necessary battle for human freedom and human communication against all usurpers. The tale admits both the fear of time and its inevitability:

'We live in peril and in danger,' Andreus told the people, 'and in a little time may have left few things that we can say. Already there is little we can play. I have a piece that I shall read. It indicates the quandary we're in.' And then he read it:

'They are swing chas. What is slid? What is left that's slace? We are begne and webegne.' (Wonderful O, p. 28)

This sense of urgency, of fighting insurmountable odds before time runs out, pervades all the fairy tales. The people of Ooroo continue searching for the four "O" words that must not die (they are love, valor, hope, and freedom) while there is still time; an old man continually says to the poet Andreus that he hopes "we think of it in time." (p. 43.) At the beginning of the tale Thurber had set the mood for the story with this sombre opening sentence: "Somewhere a ponderous clock slowly dropped a dozen strokes into the gloom." (p. 1) This is the sound of Ooroo's doom. By the end of the story, however, time has returned as an unseen clock strikes at the last possible minute, ringing in not only the return of inevitable

time, but ending the reign of Black, the tyrant. Black, too, had raced against time but he had lost his battle to find the island's hidden jewels before a certain hour. When the unseen clock strikes and the bell unexpectedly begins ringing out, the tension which has been felt all through the book turns into joy in the final beautiful image which stresses man's innate reliance on time and on himself:

Then they heard the ringing of a distant bell, sounding near and sounding nearer, ringing clear and ringing clearer, till all the sky was filled with music as by magic.

'Freedom!' Andreus cried, naming the gleaming word the men had found, the word that glowed and glittered.

'Freedom!' Andrea echoed after him, and the sound of the greatest word turned the vandals pale and made them tremble.

'I knew the word could not be doom,' the old man said, 'or sorrow. I was afraid that it might be tomorrow.' (p. 65)

The people of Ooroo have learned, as Thurber has, that time is man's only medium and that he must learn to live life on its own unrelenting terms, that is, in the present. Black, like the Duke in The 13 Clocks, erroneously thought he had murdered time. "I destroyed all clocks," he cried as the clock finally chimed. "All clocks save one," said Andreus, "the clock that strikes in conscience." (p. 64) It would seem that Thurber has come to think that man carries time within him, as part of his nature; along with a natural sadness and fear of time he must come to accept it. The movement toward an acceptance of time which I am suggesting happens in the fairy tales is possibly a movement which comes, paradoxically, with aging. Thurber's change could be compared to the difference between

the Eliot of The Waste Land, who lamented, "I had not thought death had undone so many" and the poet of Four Quartets, who would assert that "Only through time time is conquered."⁷

In 1940 Thurber had published his first collection of Fables for Our Time. A distinguishing characteristic of this collection is that the majority of the fables end in death, often in unexpected death and sometimes in a mass slaughter. Typical of this deathly aspect of Thurber's fables, in "The Green Isle in the Sea" an old man is ironically described as arising "one sweet morning in the Year of Our Lord, Nineteen hundred and Thirty-Nine...in the living sun." (p. 43) He is then systematically assaulted and finally murdered by different elements of his society in a frightening kind of wasted landscape. The living sun which seemed to shine beneficently upon him at the beginning of the fable becomes the glaring light by which bombers overhead are able to see him and shoot him down. The moral only reinforces the bitter truth of the fable, in its savage picture of life on earth: "The world is so full of a number of things, I am sure we should all be happy as kings, and you know how happy kings are." (p. 43) (Cf. "Birds and the Foxes," "The Owl Who Was God," and "The Hen and the Heavens," for fables which deal with mass death.)

Thurber's next collection, My World--and Welcome to It

⁷T. S. Eliot, The Waste Land, line 63; and Four Quartets, "Burnt Norton," II, line 44, in The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950 (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1952).

(1942), also has a heavy dose of murder and death. In "The Whip-poor-will" Kinstrey is driven to murder and suicide by the idiotic and incessant chirping of a bird which seems to remind him of his own mortality: "Its dawn call pecked away at his dreams like a vulture at a heart.... Through the gloomy hallways of his mind rang the Thing's dolorous cry: nevermore, nevermore, nevermore, whip-poor-will, whip-poor-will, whip...." Since he cannot murder the bird and end its "fatal bell, fatal bell" singsong, he murders his wife and servants and kills himself in a flood of fear and frustration. (My World, p. 27)

In the same collection "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" ends with Mitty's imagined death, which matches his "death-in-life" existence. The reader strongly senses the pressing in of time as the Mittys seem locked into a sterile pattern of living as time moves past them. Mitty himself tries to acknowledge this in the statement that "Things close in" but Mrs. Mitty is oblivious of their tragedy. Since even Mitty's awareness is only vague, however, he cannot really articulate the problem and there is nothing that either one of them can do about it. (Cf. My World, p. 80) The essential sadness of this story resides as much in this sense of time's passage as in Mitty's impossible dreams. In "Footnote on the Future" Thurber declares simply that he has been "quietly waiting for the finish of this fragile Luna moth we call mortality" (My World, p. 111), and in another short essay he voices the fear that there is a "Timekeeper" somewhere, "a

man holding a watch on me," the ticking of which he can hear faintly throughout the universe. (My World, p. 122) The collection ends on an elegiac note, in the "Memorial" for Thurber's poodle who had accepted death better than her master could as simply "the closing of full circle" (p. 208) and in the final section of essays on pre-war France, the France of "so long ago," which remains as only a cherished memory. (p. 211) The Thurber Album (1952) similarly is not only a reminiscence of Thurber's now dead family and ancestors, but a kind of elegy for turn of the century America as a way of life and a culture which had died too soon. (Cf. The Thurber Album, "Conversation Piece," "The Tree on the Diamond," and "Daguerreotype of a Lady")

The 1956 collection of Further Fables for Our Time is as deathly and time-ridden as the earlier fables; just a perusal of the morals shows Thurber's melancholy sense of time: "Tout, as the French say, in a philosophy older than ours and an idiom more often succinct, passe;" "O why should the spirit of mortal be proud, in this little voyage from swaddle to shroud?;" "Ashes to ashes, clay to clay, if the enemy doesn't get you your own folks may;" "This is the posture of fortune's slave: one foot in the gravy, one foot in the grave." The final fable, "The Shore and the Sea," is a quintessential Thurberian picture of the chaotic world: when enough lemmings scream "The world is coming to an end!" they arouse the whole population, save one scholarly lemming, to drown themselves in the sea. Death is the only end, we know, for man, but

the moral is a perfect mixture of Thurber's melancholy and his hope: "All men should strive to learn before they die what they are running to, and from, and why." (Further Fables, pp. 17, 59, 86, 112, 174) Death and confusion are inevitable but at least we can attempt an awareness of ourselves and our situation.

That we come to know ourselves better and face our fate was really Thurber's aim, regardless of man's inability to conquer time, avoid death, or transcend confusion. This is the theme of his last completed collection of essays, Lanterns and Lances (1960) which he stated in the preface:

We all know that, as the old adage has it, 'It is later than you think.' I touch on that theme myself, as every writer who can think must, but I also say occasionally: 'It is lighter than you think.' In this light, let's not look back in anger, or forward in fear, but around in awareness. (Lanterns and Lances, p. xv)

This is Thurber's most succinct statement that it is desirable to dwell neither in the past nor in the future, but to bravely confront the present, living on the only terms that life gives us. Always tinged with terror, this awareness is our only, if meager, solace. Thurber was still preoccupied with aging in Lanterns, however, and in "Midnight at Tim's Place" he imagines himself in "a sudden frightening vision of walking about the city in a few years, wearing only one shoe." (Lanterns, p. 4) In another essay he characterizes himself as a patient (which he had been many times since 1940 when his serious eye problems began) being attended by idiotic nurses ever since "the silent artillery of time began firing at me." (Lanterns,

p. 77) He also humorously wishes to "mourn the swift mortality of Man that will prevent him from reading The Decline and Fall of Man by Professor B. N. Dolphin" in a Thurber vision of the apocalypse, "Here Come the Dolphins." (Lanterns, p. 150) Thurber declines, the West declines, Man declines. In a darker but similar vein, "The Last Clock: A Fable for the Time, Such as It Is, of Man" tells the story of a clock-ogre, much like the Duke of The 13 Clocks or Black of The Wonderful O, who tried to murder time by eating all the clocks. Even though all the people on earth die and the planet becomes a wasteland, time prevails: "Eventually, the sands of a nearby desert moved slowly and inexorably toward the timeless town, and in the end it was buried." No mortal man can conquer time. After "era, epochs, and aeons" visitors from Venus find one broken clock in the rubble of human civilization and do not know what it is; they are possibly a superhuman race that has surmounted time: "And they took it [the last clock] back to Venus, in a cargo rocket ship, with other mysterious relics of the Time of Man on Earth." (Lanterns, pp. 58, 59)

Thurber became less detached from his subjects, and therefore less humorous, during the last few years of his life. He had recognized in his very early definition of humor the necessity for such detachment (viewing chaos in retrospect implies detachment) but it seems that toward the very end of his life, age, blindness, and illness became harder to bear, and Thurber began to address his themes more directly, with less laughter and more urgency than ever before.

It is perhaps unfair to judge him on the basis of Credos and Curios (1962), which his wife Helen put together from the work left after his death in 1961. When much of this was written he was already suffering from a series of minor strokes which, although unrecognized at the time, undoubtedly affected his behavior and thinking.

In looking at Credos it is obvious how much Thurber sensed his own time was running out within the scheme of universal confusion and mortality and that his obsession with the ravages of time and disorder was even more intense than before. In one essay in the collection he says that he remembers turn of the century Columbus, Ohio, "as fondly and sharply as a man on a sinking ship might remember his prairie home...." (Credos, p. 57) and in another piece, recalling an old Thurber theme, that the Collapse of Civilization is just around the corner. (p. 97) The title of a representative piece from the collection, "The Future, if Any, of Comedy, or, Where Do We Non-Go from Here?," indicates the overwhelming feeling that perhaps not even laughter or awareness is enough. This is the darkest version of Thurber's consistent distrust of human nature, but it is filled with more anger, bitterness, and frustration than ever before. He questions whether there is any future at all for humanity (p. 86), a fear which probably grew as much out of the problems of the Atomic Age as out of his own illness: "The greatest truth of our time is both simple and awful--total war means annihilation, and the Brink of War has become the Brink of Was." (p. 90)

Accompanying this dark conversation piece about the imminent collapse of civilization is a drawing which Thurber originally published in Men, Women and Dogs (1942) with the caption "Destinations." It is a stark and ironic picture of an unwitting mass of people scurrying feverishly about their business, unaware that they are all the time passing a large and imposing cemetery, their final destination. On viewing the drawing or reading the accompanying pun which simply states the enigma of the modern world, one experiences that inaudible laugh in the recognition of the Awful which is the essence of Thurber's peculiar brand of humor.

Thurber managed to get humor out of the grimmest of situations and subjects: the decline of the west, the imperfection of human nature, the unending chaos of human existence. He was certainly not always humorous but he always wrote with a steady hand to anatomize the confusion in which mankind revolves and which he had taken as the subject of his humor. It was his theory that humor was a study of chaos from a distance and his hope that the artist might somehow affect an order within the confusion. His consistent knowledge of man's confusion and of the mortality and mutability of human life colored his humor with seriousness and melancholy. During confusion's reign--the time of man on Earth--time and death are lamentable but inescapable, a factor which man must accept as the ultimate awful reality.

A P P E N D I X I I

APPENDIX II

A. The Elements of Thurber's Style

Thurber not only had an intense interest in language and in its relationship to man's state of confusion, but he also has a particular gift for language. His style is one of the most refined and delightful of any prose writer of this century. Hallmarks of his style are his remarkable ability with brevity, similes, and description. The following examples are in no way exhaustive: they are selected to give some indication of the precision and beauty of Thurber's language and to perhaps enhance the reader's future readings of his work. The citations are listed in chronological order.

His mastery of comic timing:

They caught me standing in my towel at the top. A heavy policeman bounded up the steps. 'Who are you?' he demanded. 'I live here,' I said. 'Well, whattsa matta, ya hot?' he asked. It was as a matter of fact cold; I went to my room and pulled on some trousers. On my way out, a cop stuck a gun into my ribs. 'Whatta you doin' here?' he demanded. 'I live here,' I said.

(My Life and Hard Times, p. 55)

Gertie Straub: big, genial, and ruddy, a collector of pints of rye (we learned after she was gone), who came in after two o'clock one night...and awakened us by bumping into and knocking over furniture. 'Who's down there?' called mother from upstairs. 'It's me, dearie,' said Gertie, 'Gertie Straub.' 'What are you doing?' demanded mother. 'Dusting,' said Gertie.

(My Life and Hard Times, p. 69)

I found this out when I tried wandering around the West Indies one summer. Instead of being followed by the whispers of men and the glances of women, I was followed by bead salesmen and native women with postcards. Nor did any dark girl, looking at all like Tondelayo in 'White Cargo,' come forward and offer to go to pieces with me. They tried to sell me baskets.

(My Life and Hard Times, p. 114)

In Martinique, when the whistle blew for the tourists to get back on the ship, I had a quick, wild, and lovely moment when I decided I wouldn't get back on the ship. I did, though. And I found that somebody had stolen the pants to my dinner jacket.

(My Life and Hard Times, p.115)

In the tense little knot of men standing behind him, a quick, mad impulse flared up. An unspoken word of appeal, of command, seemed to ring through the room.... The President, pale, grim, nodded shortly. Brand, a tall, powerfully built man, once a tackle at Rutgers, stepped forward, seized the greatest man in the world by his left shoulder and the seat of his pants, and pushed him out the window.

'My God, he's fallen out the window!' cried a quick-witted editor.

'Get me out of here!' cried the President.

(The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, p.212)

When the police and the psychiatrist arrived they sat down in chairs and looked at her, with great interest. 'My husband,' she said, 'saw a unicorn this morning.' The police looked at the psychiatrist and psychiatrist looked at the police. 'He told me it ate a lily,' she said. The psychiatrist looked at the police and the police looked at the psychiatrist. 'He told me it had a golden horn in the middle of its forehead.' she said. At a solemn signal from the psychiatrist, the police leaped from their chairs and seized the wife. They had a hard time subduing her, for she put up a terrific struggle, but they finally subdued her. Just as they got her into the strait-jacket, the husband came back into the house.

'Did you tell your wife you saw a unicorn?' asked the police. 'Of course not,' said the husband. 'The unicorn is a mythical beast.'

(Fables for Our Time, pp. 65-66)

'I had high hopes of being Evil when I was two, but in my youth I came upon a firefly burning in a spider's web. I saved the victim's life.'

'The firefly's?' said the minstrel.

'The spider's. The blinking arsonist had set the web on fire.'

(The 13 Clocks, p. 34)

Comment: While it is very difficult to appreciate these examples out of context, it is possible to see in them the deft and understated approach Thurber consistently used to

achieve a humorous effect. At his best, Thurber did not use one extra word and each of these examples are under-written. They all utilize the clash of expectation and reality or resolution and irony.

His gift for choosing the one perfectly evocative, descriptive, and seemingly simple word or phrase:

Grandfather was...tall, hawknosed, round-oathed.
(My Life and Hard Times, p. 36)

Mrs. Doody, a huge, middle-aged woman with a religious taint.
(My Life and Hard Times, p. 73)

A tall, unexpected young man named Byron Landis.
(My Life and Hard Times, p. 109)

Her hair was drab and unabundant, her face made no impression on you, her voice I don't remember--it was just a voice.
(Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, p. 7)

The long porch was hot and the wicker chair I sat in complained hotly.
(Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, p. 159)

Its headlights shone on the man: middle-aged, bewildered, sedentary.
(Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, p. 19)

He [a dog] got a great, wagging satisfaction out of his work.
(Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, p. 184)

He [a man] gave them each a limp, moist paw and a brief, unlovely grin.
(Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, p. 210)

She looked at me with big, dim eyes. There's something wrong with her glands. She's awful but she has a big heart, which makes it worse.
(Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, p. 225)

Madame was large and shapeless and possessed of an unforgettable toothiness. (Let Your Mind Alone!, p. 136)

It had been raining for a long time, a slow, cold rain falling out of iron-colored clouds.

(Let Your Mind Alone!, p. 112)

It wasn't what prose said that interested Miss Groby; it was the way prose said it. The shape of a sentence crucified on a blackboard (parsed, she called it) brought a light to her eye.

(My World--and Welcome to It, p. 167)

'As royal a run as any king could know,' he growled, 'and it ends as always in vanished venison.... [a description of the white deer who became a lady at arrow's point].

(The White Deer, p. 19)

The King raised his head and gave the great 'Harrooo' of a lion tortured by magical mice.

(The White Deer, p. 48)

On the trees hung heavy musical instruments he had never dreamed of, and the people were dressed in a remarkable fashion and danced in a remarkable way.

(The White Deer, p. 70)

I could see the brandy bottle, too, on a stained table, wearing its cork drunkenly.

(The Beast in Me, p. 122)

He wore an indescribable hat.

(The 13 Clocks, p. 31)

'I must be going,' Price said. 'May I make you a drink, Mrs. Lockhorn?'

'No thank you,' she said in a tone that corked the bottles.

(Thurber Country, p. 65)

I had been particularly pleased to witness the going away of the middle-aged man who rode the tricycle, the school-teacher who had resigned from the human race to become a bird, and Miss Menta, the disturbingly nude Chilean transcendentalist.

(Thurber Country, p. 152)

Black made an evil and impatient gesture.

(The Wonderful O, p. 13)

It comes to me with no special surprise that none of them is stained with blood or bright with danger, in the active, or Hemingway, sense of the word.

(Lanterns and Lances, p. 182)

An exciting and fast-moving novel about the most colorful and crowded marriage of the Crazy Twenties... [in reference to Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald]

(Credos and Curios, p. 154)

Comment: Thurber's distinctly understated and deceptively simple style is reflected in the examples above; he chooses modifying phrases which are unexpected, terse, and accurate. He is also a master at suggesting a whole picture or mood with a simple word or phrase; what description could possibly fit the un-coiffure of Emma Inch so well as "unabundant," what could be more suggestive than to say that the Golux, who is magical man, wears a hat that is "indescribable?" Thurber's reader delights in being able to supply the image suggested by these well-chosen words. A perfect example of his brevity, in the phrase "middle-aged, bewildered, sedentary," Thurber describes the characteristic little Thurber man. "Remarkable" is a favorite Thurber adjective; as in the last example in the list above, it is a word which is both definite and connotative enough to please him.

His incomparable similes:

He gazed at me a long, as if I were a slot machine into which he had, without results, dropped a nickel.

(My Life and Hard Times, p. 58)

Tires booped and whooshed, the fenders queeled and graked, the steering-wheel rose up like a spectre and disappeared in the direction of Franklin with a melancholy whistling sound, bolts and gadgets flew like sparks from a Catherine wheel.

(My Life and Hard Times, p. 95)

There were literally hundreds of Coras among his wife's connections. They kept recurring, like leaf blight, among the spreading branches of the Allyn family.

(Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, p. 64)

There he was, coming along the road, lightning playing about his shoulders, thunder following him like a dog.

(Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, p. 159)

The Bronx loomed up before him, like an ether nightmare he had had as a boy.

(Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, p. 198)

Enraged at that, she had recourse to her eyes as weapons and looked steadily at him for a while with the expression of one who is viewing a small and horrible animal, such as a horned toad.

(Let Your Mind Alone!, p. 85)

Her smile, under her considerable mustache, was quick and savage and frightening, like a flash of lightning lighting up a ruined woods.

(Let Your Mind Alone!, p. 136)

He bowed and sighed and bowed again and watched the Princess cross the grass like summer rain and vanish through a portal.

(White Deer, p. 31)

Lydia sat back, covered her eyes with her hand, and shook her head despondently, like a frustrated prima donna whose trunks have gone astray in a small town.

(The Beast in Me, pp. 29-30)

His voice sounded like iron dropped on velvet.

(The 13 Clocks, p. 38)

The Duke's chuckle sounded like ice cackling in a cauldron.

(The 13 Clocks, p. 53)

The traveler vanished, like a fly in the mouth of a frog.

(The 13 Clocks, p. 31)

'The Todal looks like a blob of glup,' he said. 'It makes a sound like rabbits screaming, and smells of old, unopened rooms.'

(The 13 Clocks, p. 50)

'It's made of lip. It feels as if it had been dead at least a dozen days, but it moves about like monkeys and like shadows.

(The 13 Clocks, p. 59)

The jewels of Hagga's laughter turned to tears, with a little sound like sighing.

(The 13 Clocks, p. 122)

A purple ball with gold stars on it came slowly bouncing down the iron stairs and winked and twinkled, like a naked child saluting priests.

(The 13 Clocks, p. 95)

Charles Vayne, as regular and futile as a clock in an empty house....

(Thurber Country, p. 152)

From the grass of the meadow voices once carefree and gay joined in a rueful and lonely chorus, as if someone great and wonderful had died and was being buried.

(Further Fables for Our Time, p. 143)

His voice when he spoke was as deep as a gong in a tomb.

(The Wonderful O, p. 2)

He gazed at Littlejack as if the sailor were a jigsaw puzzle that had too many parts, or not enough.

(The Wonderful O, p. 3)

[Ooroo] sounds like the eyes of a couple of ghosts leaning against an R.

(The Wonderful O, p. 4)

[When the letter "O" was banned] Little Goody Two Shoes lost her O's and so did Goldilocks, and the former became a whisper, and the latter sounded like a key jiggled in a lck.

(The Wonderful O, p. 9)

And as he fell he heard another O, sounded by an old owl in a mossy oak, a little like an oboe obbligato.

(The Wonderful O, p. 68)

I can only pray that clothed sensibility will survive, too, brave in the midst of peril, like an Englishman calmly dressing for dinner on the edge of the jungle.
(Lanterns and Lances, pp. 37-38)

Comment: It is difficult to add to the understanding and enjoyment of these similes other than to recommend re-reading of them, preferably in their original contexts. It should be noted that many of them also employ a strong element of surprise (which is necessary for any good simile) and that a large number of them very accurately describe sound through words. Perhaps Thurber relied so heavily on similes in his writing because, since they draw analogies, similes affect a type of order among disparate things in life.

His neologistic vocabulary:

Pedestalism: The American male's reverence for the female or, better yet, her insistence on being revered...

Voyeurism: Sex Kibitzing.

Exhibitionism: Going too far but not really meaning it.
(Is Sex Necessary? pp. 185, 187)

It picked up the tired old automobile...and drubbed it unmercifully....Tires booped and whooshed, the fenders queeled and graked....
(My Life and Hard Times, p. 33)

If you are susceptible to such things, it is not difficult to visualize grotches. They fluttered into my mind: ugly little creatures, about the size of whippoorwills, only covered with blood and honey and the scrapings of church bells.

'Listen!' I barked, suddenly. 'Did you know that even when it isn't brillig I can produce slithy toves? Did you happen to know that the mome rath never lived that could outgrabe me?'

(Middle-aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, pp. 161, 163)

We have here what I can only call a paradise of errors. I find, in Dr. Shellow's presentation of the problem and her solution of it, Transference, Wishful Thinking, Unconscious Substitution, Psychological

Dissociation, Gordian Knot Cutting, Cursory Enumeration,
Distortion of Focus, Abandonment of Specific Gravity...
Overemphasis on Italics, Rhetorical Escapism, and Disre-
gard of the Indefinite Article.

(Let Your Mind Alone!, p. 69)

Bill noted that she smelled faintly like a Los Angeles
roadateria....

(My World and Welcome to It, p. 69)

'He will slit you from your guggle to your zatch.'

The zickering of bats was echoed by the walls.

'The Todal looks like a blob of glup.'

'It gleeps,' said Hark.

Hark stepped on something that squutched beneath his foot
and flobbed against the wall.

(The 13 Clocks, pp. 24, 42, 50, 59, 124)

Pussgrapple. A bickering, or minor disturbance; an argu-
ment of dispute among effeminate men. Also, less
frequently, a physical struggle between, or among,
women.

Messgranter. An untidy housekeeper, a careless housewife.
Said of a woman who admits, often proudly, that
she has let herself go; a bragdowdy, a fraumpess.

Cussgravy. A husband who complains of his wife's cooking
more especially a husband who complains of his
wife's cooking in the presence of guests; an
ill-tempered fellow, a curmudgeon. Also, some-
times, a peptic-ulcer case.

Chorusgrable. Orig. a young actress, overconfident of
her ability and her future; a snippet, a
flabbertigibbet.

(Thurber Country, pp. 135, 136)

'I'll squck his thrug till all he can whupple is geep.'

'Enough of this puppybabble and pussyfret....'

'He was driven from his castle by such a crew of bashlocks
and shatterclocks as plagues us now.'

(Wonderful O, pp. 8, 32, 33)

Comment: These examples demonstrate Thurber's interest in the creative powers of language; he used neologisms for the purposes usually found in English, that is, for a way to better express either sound or sense than our ordinary vocabulary permits. Sometimes, as in the coinages for Is Sex Necessary? and Let Your Mind Alone!, he purposefully parodies scientific language in the formation of his new words. In the second quotation from Middle-aged Man on the Flying Trapeze Thurber has re-worked, and thus, expanded, on Lewis Carroll's special vocabulary. Much of the sheer joy of reading Thurber resides in his word games.

His penchant for parallel construction:

To call such persons 'humorists,' a loosefitting and ugly word, is to miss the nature of their dilemma and the dilemma of their nature.

He talks largely about small matters and smallly about great affairs.

(My Life and Hard Times, p. 11)

It was one of those hot days on which the earth is uninhabitable; even as early as ten o'clock in the morning, even on the hill where I live under the dark maples.

She had what he called the New York mouth, a grim, set mouth, a strained, querulous mouth, a mouth that told of suffering and discontent.

The fact is that all things do fade; with twos, and with fours; all bright things, all attitudes and angles and lights and colors, all growing in intimacy and understanding.

(Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, pp. 159, 216, 219)

She tried patiently at all times to understand Man's way of life: the rolling of his wheels, the raising of his voice, the ringing of his bells; his way of searching out with lights the dark protecting corners of the night; his habit of building his beds inside walls, high above the nurturing earth.

(My World--And Welcome To It, p. 205)

'Time is for dragonflies and angels. The former live too little and the latter live too long.'

The Prince uncrossed his arms and crossed them. And then, without a rhyme or reason, out of time and out of season, Hagga laughed and kept on laughing.

(13 Clocks, pp. 46, 86)

'Your furred and finned and feathered friends with 0 are either gone, or quite extinct, or never were!'

(Wonderful 0, p. 41)

Comment: Thurber uses very effective and beautiful parallel constructions occasionally. They seem to be used especially to clarify and re-clarify his meaning. The use of such construction lends a feeling of balance and order to his prose, which is often engaged in describing disorder and confusion.

His talent for unusual and refreshing collocation:

Grandfather was given to these sudden, unexpected, and extremely lucid moments; they were generally more embarrassing than his other moments.

(p. 36)

My father, as a matter of fact, had been known to have nightmares, usually about Lillian Russell and President Cleveland, who chased him.

(p. 63)

(My Life and Hard Times)

What must he have thought that April evening...when he came home from the fields to find a new gleam in his wife's eyes and nineteen new corpses under her feet?

(p. 66)

She believed that the children of famous people brilliant people, and of first, second, and third cousins would be idiotic.

(p. 91)

He was home by seven-thirty, almost exactly, and he said good evening to old Mrs. Spencer (who had the sick husband), and good evening to old Mrs. Holmes (who had the sick Pomeranian)....

(p. 192)

It warmed him up a little and he thought about going to the movie at the Paramount; it was a movie with action and guns and airplanes, and Myrna Loy, the kind of movie that didn't bother you.

(p. 216)

People living alone, after all, have made a great many things. Let's see, what have people living alone made? Not love, of course, but a great many things: money, for example, and black marks on white paper.

(p. 219)

(Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze)

The average sedentary man of our time who is at all suggestible must emerge from this chapter believing that his chances of surviving a combination of instinct, complexes, reflexes, glands, sex, and present-day traffic conditions are about equal to those of a one-legged blind man trying to get out of a labyrinth. (p. 58)

I have started out with an admittedly minor confusion--the definition of personality--but let us go on to something so mixed up that it becomes almost magnificent. (p. 68)

I couldn't think of anything important that had happened to me up to the time I was thirty-three and began raising Scotch terriers. (p. 180)

Socially, economically, physically, and intellectually, Man is slowly going, I am reliably informed, to hell. (p. 230)
(Let Your Mind Alone!)

Early to rise and early to bed makes a male healthy and wealthy and dead.

(Fables for Our Time, p. 22)

Here is a list of gifts which should especially be excluded: a clipping of an article written by the eminent gentleman for a school paper when he was fifteen; a copy of one of his plays done on the head of a tenpenny nail; a copy of one of his plays translated into Shawnee by an employee of the Department of the Interior; a paragraph laboriously constructed by rearranging all the words in the titles of all his books and intended to supply a key to What He Has Been Trying to Say; any caricatures, effigies, or likenesses of the great man, particularly those made out of typewriter punctuation marks, embroidery floss, field-corn kernels, buckeyes, matches, toothpicks, pipe cleaners, paper clips, tiddlywinks, dice, pigeon feathers,

spools, milk-bottle caps, cigar bands, BB shot, or potatoes. The value of these objects is not enhanced by the fact that they were made by a child under seven, a woman over ninety, a Camp Fire Girl, Mayor O'Dwyer, the seventh daughter, or a midget. (p. 94)

The woan...was frequently seen, four or five hundred years ago, in larders and bureau drawers. Many people also saw him in their cups.

(pp. 170-71)
(The Beast in Me)

He wore gloves when he was asleep, and he wore gloves when he was awake, which made it difficult for him to pick up pins or coins or the kernels of nuts, or to tear the wings from nightingales. (p. 17)

'We all have flaws,' he said, 'and mine is being wicked.'
(p. 114)
(The 13 Clocks)

Some frightened sponsors and radio stations and other well-known pussycats have shown, from time to time, a phobia...

(Thurber on Humor, p. 13)

A husband should not insult his wife publicly, at parties. He should insult her in the privacy of the home. (pp. 44-45)

She kept all dates, important and otherwise, neatly arranged in the back of her mind, along with her fine collection of old platitudes. (p. 180)

(Thurber Country)

Someone she met on night of high wind and Bacardi at Cambridge Beaches in Bermuda.

(Alarms and Diversions, p. 76)

I must...begin writing those noble volumes about Me which will one day run to several hundred billions items, many of them about war, death, conquest, decline, fall, blood,

sweat, tears, threats, warnings, boasts, hopelessness, hell, heels, and whores. (p. 69)

The next Sunday the parson preached a disconsolate sermon, denouncing drink, carryings on, adult delinquency, front page marriages, golf on Sunday, adultery, careless handling of firearms, and cruelty to our feathered friends. (p. 162)
(Further Fables for Our Times)

And so it went, and some lads lost their lasses, and most men lost their tempers, and all men lost their patience, and a few men lost their minds.
(The Wonderful O, p. 45)

I like to think of them taking turns at shooting albatrosses and playing the bassoon. (p. 76)

The brain of our species is, as we know, made up largely of potassium, phosphorus, propaganda, and politics.... (p. 120)

In my day, Latin was taught in high schools to prepare the youthful mind for the endless war between meaning and gobbledegook. (p. 121)

Man, being Man, doesn't care much for submissive victuals, but loves to beat the hell out of some of his main dishes.... (p. 151)

That night, three highball glasses, two friendships, and a woman's heart were broken. (p. 26)
(Lanterns and Lances)

Comment: Thurber tends to order words within series or sentences in a surprising way. Often, this is a process of juxtaposition which combines the familiar with the unusual, the formal with the colloquial. (Cf. quotations 1 and 2 from Lanterns, above.) He also uses the periodic sentence, which leaves its complete meaning until the last clause, as in the first three examples in this list. Since an element of surprise is involved in such unusual collocation, humor often results (Cf. Quotation 1 from Thurber Country; Quotation 2,

(13 Clocks, above). Thurber's word order often involves clashes of tone, diction, and expectation and resolution. Such clashes are related to the kinesthetic quality which his prose sometimes has. See below.

His ability to imbue prose with a kinesthetic quality:

I passed all the other courses that I took at my University, but I could never pass botany. This was because all botany students had to spend several hours a week in a laboratory looking through a microscope at plant cells, and I could never see through a microscope. I never once saw a cell through a microscope. This used to enrage my instructor. He would wander around the laboratory pleased with the progress all the students were making in drawing the involved and, so I am told, interesting structure of flower cells, until he came to me. I would just be standing there. 'I can't see anything,' I would say. He would begin patient enough, explaining how anybody can see through a microscope, but he would always end up in a fury, claiming that I could too see through a microscope but just pretended that I couldn't. 'It takes away from the beauty of flowers anyway,' I used to tell him. 'We are not concerned with beauty in this course,' he would say. 'We are concerned solely with what I may call the mechanics of flars.' (pp. 88-89)

In the pathways between office and home and home and the houses of settled people there are always, ready to snap at you, the little perils of routine living.... (p. 115)
(My Life and Hard Times)

Mr. Pendly was not particularly unhappy about the actual fact of not driving a car any more. He had never liked to drive much. It galled him slightly that his wife could see better than he could and it gave him a feeling of inferiority to sit mildly beside her while she solved the considerable problems of city traffic. He used to dream at night of descending, in an autogiro, on some garden party she was attending: he would come down in a fine landing, leap out, shout 'Hahya, Bee!' sweep her into the machine, and zoom away. He used to think of things like that while he was riding with her.
(Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, p. 57)

Once upon a sunny morning a man who sat in a breakfast nook looked up from his scrambled eggs to see a white unicorn with a golden horn quietly cropping roses in the garden. The man went up to the bedroom where his wife was still asleep and woke her. 'There's a unicorn in the garden,' he said. 'Eating roses.' She opened one unfriendly eye and looked at him. 'The unicorn is a mythical beast,' she said, and turned her back on him.

(Fables for Our Time, p. 65)

'We're going through!' The Commander's voice was like thin ice breaking. He wore his full-dress uniform, with the heavily braided white cap pulled down rakishly over one cold gray eye.... 'Full strength in No. 3 turret!' shouted the Commander. 'Full strength in No. 3 turret!' The crew, bending to their various tasks in the huge hurtling eight-engined Navy hydroplane, looked at each other and grinned. 'The Old Man'll get us through,' they said to one another. 'The Old Man ain't afraid of Hell!'

'Not so fast!' You're driving too fast!' said Mrs. Mitty. 'What are you driving so fast for?'

'Hmmm?' said Walter Mitty. He looked at his wife, in the seat beside him, with shocked astonishment. She seemed grossly unfamiliar, like a strange woman who had yelled at him in a crowd.

.....
They went out through the revolving doors that made a faintly derisive whistling sound when you pushed them.

(My World--and Welcome to It, pp. 72, 73, 80)

It was after midnight and I had got up to turn off the radio and go to bed when a baritone began to sing 'Bye, Bye, Blackbird' with the rueful reverence the song deserves.

(The Beast in Me, p. 103)

Comment: These examples show the clash between Thurber's understated, almost reflective prose and the vivid, sharp, sometimes brutal dialogue of many of his characters. In the first passage from My Life the quiet self-effacement of the narrator's voice is juxtaposed with the harsh reply of his professor, especially in the ugly phrase "the mechanics of flars," with its hard Cs in the first word and the hideously mangled pronunciation of flowers. In the second quotation a phrase of short, even curt words interrupts the sinuous sentence just as the perils themselves snap at an unwary wanderer. In "Walter Mitty" there is the clash between Mitty's

reticent, quiet voice and his wife's unfeeling shrieks and between the vivid, powerful language of his dreams and the unreal feeling of the descriptions of his "real" experience. Such juxtaposition expresses the cacophony of personal relations.

His fine prose rhythm:

They sit on the edge of the chair of literature. (p. 10)

In the pathways between office and home and home and the houses of settled people there are always, ready to snap at you, the little perils of routine living, but there is no escape in the unplanned tangent, the sudden turn.
(My Life and Hard Times, p. 115)

She tried patiently at all times to understand Man's way of life: the rolling of his wheels, the raising of his voice, the ringing of his bells; his way of searching out with lights the dark protecting corners of the night; his habit of building his beds inside walls, high above the nurturing earth.
(My World--and Welcome to It, p. 205)

The next morning the Princess sat in an eastern room, and watched the sunlight, falling through slits and circles in the ancient castle wall, make small bright patterns on the cold stone floor. (p. 22)

'In such confusion and caprice who knows his hound dog from his niece?' (p. 45)
(The White Deer)

I am concerned with the beast inside, the beast that haunts the moonlit marges of the mind, never clearly seen, never wholly lost to view, never leaving, in its wanderings, pawprints sharp enough to follow
(The Beast in Me, epigraph)

Then they heard the ringing of a distant bell, sounding near and sounding nearer, ringing clear and ringing clearer, till all the sky was filled with music as by magic. (p. 65)

The sun went down, and its golden glow lighted with fire the wonderful O.

(The Wonderful O, p. 72)

Tout, as the French say, in a philosophy older than ours and an idiom often more succinct, passee.

(p. 17)

All men should strive to learn before they die what they are running from, and to, and why.

(Further Fables for Our Time, p. 174)

Trivia Mundi has always been as dear and as necessary to me as her bigger and more glamorous sister, Gloria. They have both long and amicably inhabited a phrase of Coleridge's, 'All things both great and small,' and I like to think of them taking turns at shooting albatrosses and playing the bassoon.

(Lanterns and Lances, p. 76)

Comment: Thurber had a very fine ear for the rhythms of English prose. I have selected only a few of the outstanding examples of his attention to rhythm but most of his work was written with a great sense for balance and cadence. It should therefore be read aloud for complete appreciation and enjoyment.

His Jamesian style:

Little Mrs. Monroe met the challenge of the very blonde lady with all of her charming directness.

(p. 29)

He remembered (oh, keenly) as he stepped toward her, how she was wont to "go to pieces" over trifles. Well, she would find him a changed man. He kissed her warmly, but withal such a strangely masterful manner, that she was at first a little surprised--a tennis player taken aback by the sudden tactics of an old, old opponent. In three minutes of backcourt rallying she figured out that he had been reading something, but she said nothing. She let his lobs go unkilld.

(p. 13)

When, as John Monroe was helping the lovely lady with her coat, she leaned ever so slightly--and unnecessarily--backwards, he was conscious of a quick warm glow. He was even more conscious of a vague perplexity, the

the reason for which--or one of the reasons, anyway--finally came washing up to him on the stream of memory. This had all happened before, almost precisely as now, but with another girl, and years before.

(p. 64)

(The Owl in the Attic)

The trouble that broke up the Gordon Winships seemed to me, at first glance, as minor a problem as frost on a window-pane. Another day, a touch of sun, and it would be gone. I was inclined to laugh it off, and, indeed, as a friend of both Gordon and Marcia, I spent a great deal of time with each of them, separately, trying to get them to laugh it off, too--with him at his club, where he sat drinking Scotch and smoking too much, and with her in their apartment, that seemed so large and lonely without Gordon and his restless moving around and his quick laughter.

(Let Your Mind Alone!, p. 83)

She would follow me to the door. In her house, by an ancient rule, Marian Forrester always had the final moment--standing on the threshold, her face lifted, her eyes shining, her hand raised to wave good-bye. Yes, she would follow me to the door, and in the hall--I could see it so clearly I shivered there on the bridge--something wonderful would happen. With the faintest of smiles and the slightest of murmurs I would bow to my hostess, open the door and walk, not out into the rain, but into that damn closet, with its junk and clutter, smashing the Easter egg with my shoe, becoming tangled in the table tennis net, and holding in my hand, when I regained my balance, that comic parasol. Madame de Vionnet would ignore such a calamity, she would pretend not to see it ...but Marian would laugh, the lost laugh of the bright occasions, of the day of her shameless passion in the snow, and it would light up the house like candles, reducing the sounds upstairs, in some miraculous way, to what they really were, the innocent creaking of the old floor boards.

(p. 125)

He had brought himself so fully in the end, poor Grantham, to accept his old friend's invitation to accompany her to an 'afternoon' at 'Cornerbright' that now, on the very porch of the so evident house, he could have, for his companion, in all surrender, a high, fine--there was no other word for it--twinkle. Amy Lighter perfectly took in, however, as, for his constant wonder, she always

perfectly took in, the unmade, the wider gesture, the unspoken, the wonderful 'oh.'

.....

Oh, he had the answer for that; it was as if he had kept it, for the longest while, shined up and ready, in his most accessible pocket. 'Nothing,' Charles Grant-ham exquisitely wailed, 'nothing,' and in the deep silence that followed, a clock, somewhere, far away, sprinkled the disconsolate, the incomprehensible hour upon their bowed heads. There was for our lady--oh, for our gentleman, too--the feeling of a fine literature of living breaking into flame, flaring high, falling suddenly to ashes.

(pp. 128, 147)
(The Beast in Me)

Just then the master and the class heard a strange alarming sound, a sound like thunder growing close and growing closer.

(Further Fables for Our Time, p. 169)

'The way is long,' the torn man said, 'and getting longer. The road goes uphill all the way, and even farther.'

.....

'The way is dark, and getting darker. The hut is high and even higher.'

.....

The brambles and the thorns grew thick and thicker....

(The 13 Clocks, pp. 72, 73)

They saw before them now a dark and gloomy forest, stretching on and on, and on and farther.

(p. 53)

Then they heard the ringing of a distant bell, sounding near and sounding nearer, ringing clear and ringing clearer....

(p. 65)
(The Wonderful O)

Comment: Thurber's extensive reading of and admiration for Henry James is obvious not only in the two parodic passages quoted above from The Beast in Me but in much of his expression. In the first parody, he differs from James in his juxtaposition of involved, introspective language with the almost colloquial image of "that damn closet." In the second parodic passage the language is even closer to James's tortured late style, but the passage becomes comic with the word

"twinkle" at the end of such a sentence. All of the quotations up to the one from Further Fables effectively use Jamesian controlling metaphors. The last six recall the cadence of James's combination of adjective and a comparative form of the same word; i.e., in Portrait of a Lady, Isabel thought "far into the night and still further." (p. 347)

Irony:

He read in a deep, impressive voice, and slowly, for there was a lot his wife wouldn't grasp at once. (p. 20)

Mr. Monroe loved to kill spiders for his wife.... It gave him a feeling of power, and enhanced the sweetness of his little wife's dependence on him. (p. 21)
(The Owl in the Attic)

'I'm glad,' said mother, who always looked on the bright side of things, 'that your grandfather wasn't here.' (p. 26)

Grandfather was in the attic, in the old walnut bed which, as you will remember, once fell on my father. (pp. 50-51)

The act was abandoned and some xylophone players were brought on to restore order. (p. 71)
(My Life and Hard Times)

Proust, I later discovered, he had never read, but he made him seem more clear to me, and less important, than anybody else ever has. (p. 175)

Some time after this we all decided to make up a fund and send Vereker to Europe to write. His entire output, I had discovered, consisted of only twenty or thirty pages, most of them bearing the round stain of liquor glasses; one page was the beginning of a play done more or less in the style of Gertrude Stein. It seemed to me as brilliant as anything of its kind. (p. 180)
(Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze)

Let us examine, as a typical instance, a brief case history presented by the learned Mr. David Seabury.... I select it at random. (p. 11)

Harvey Lake never in his life got into a plane (he died in a fall from a porch) but I do not regard that as

neurotic....

(p. 64)
(Let Your Mind Alone!)

The world is so full of a number of things, I am sure we should all be as happy as kings, and you know how happy kings are.

(Fables for Our Time, p. 43)

'I want some biscuit for small, young dogs,' he said to the clerk. 'Any special brand, sir?' The greatest pistol shot in the world thought for a moment. 'It says "Puppies Bark for It" on the box, said Walter Mitty.

(p. 78)

Then, with that faint, fleeting smile playing about his lips, he faced the firing squad; erect and motionless, proud and disdainful, Walter Mitty the Undefeated, inscrutable to the last.

(p. 80)
(My World--and Welcome to It)

I find no cause to doubt the scroll, for it is signed and sealed, and witnessed, and attested.

(The White Deer, p. 115)

'I have never made head or tail of any of his stuff myself, but there is no missing the unique quality of the most exquisite English prose of our time.'

(The Beast in Me, p. 53)

'But you must have heard it said that the drawing room disappeared forever with the somnolent years of James and the antic heyday of Coward. I myself hear it said constantly-- in drawing rooms.'

(Credos and Curios, p.82)

Comment: No literary device is more difficult to appreciate out of context than irony. In a sense, many of Thurber's stories are ironic in their entirety. He shares this predilection for irony not only with other humorists but with many modern writers who write in other forms. The irony in the above examples usually causes subtle, wry laughter.

Specious accuracy for comic effect:

Sex is by no means everything. It varies, as a matter of fact, from only as high as 78 per cent of everything to as low as 3.10 per cent. The norm, in a sane, healthy person, should be between 18 and 24 per cent.
 (Is Sex Necessary?, p. 140)

I first met D. H. Lawrence on a train platform in Italy twelve years ago. He was pacing up and down.... He had the manner of a man who was waiting for something; in this case, I think it was the train.
 (Let Your Mind Alone!, p. 91)

'I have discovered the length of the sea serpent, the price of the priceless, and the square of the hippopotamus. I know... how many birds you can catch with the salt in the ocean--187, 796, 132, if it would interest you to know.'
 (Many Moons, unpaginated)

'These spells,' the Royal Recorder said, 'are shockingly untidy. These spells should all be written down and witnessed and attested. Of all assumptions in our law, the strongest one is this: Scribendum est, which is to say that if the scroll does not exist, the scroll does not exist. And if the scroll does not exist, the spell is null and void, violable, unviable, and fallible, and tolerable only to the gullible. These present spells, i.e., --spells A and B, involving Rosanore and Tel, hereinafter to be referred to as One and Two, should either be recast or just ignored, as never having been in legal fact, which holds that if a thing that should not be, has been, it never was.
 (The White Deer, p. 108)

Names of dogs end up in 176th place in the list of things that amaze and fascinate me. (p. 37)

The doctor, on the other hand, contended that the mounds were built by the Mound Dweller (Plate I). This primitive creature was about the size of the modern living room. (p. 97)

Scarcely smaller than a small blue cream pitcher, the woan had three buttons on the best of his Sunday suit.... (p. 171)
 (The Beast in Me)

The hour was late.... One third of the dogs in town began to bark.

(The 13 Clocks, p. 27)

Mr. Ego, whom I shall hereinafter call I, for he is I, and I am a busy man myself, has been particularly agonized by what has happened verbally to certain present participles in our great, jumpy land. I find that 84.5 per cent of Americans of both sexes stretch into three syllables such words as 'sparkling'....

(Lanterns and Lances, p. 42)

Comment: Thurber did not use this device very often, but when he did the result was a wildly undiluted humor. The specious exactitude feigned by the humorist makes fun of the involved and confused thinking of specialists and statisticians.

The characteristic Thurberian understatement:

They found him finally, and ejected him, still shouting. The Theatre, in our time, has known few such moments. (p. 30)

Gasoline, oil, and water were much the same to her, a fact that made her life both confusing and perilous. (p. 31)

It was the only case in history where a tree doctor had to be called in to spray a person, and our family had felt it very keenly; nobody else in the United States caught the blight. (p. 34)

When I got to the attic, things were pretty confused. Grandfather had evidently jumped to the conclusion that the police were deserters from Meade's army, trying to hide away in his attic. (p. 56)

It made an excellent imitation of thunder, but I suppose it was the most roundabout system for running a household that was ever devised. It took a lot out of mother. (p. 86)

He cut off abruptly for he was beginning to quiver all over, like Lionel Barrymore, and he genuinely wished to hold onto his temper; his scenes with me had taken a great deal out of him. (pp. 89, 90)

(My Life and Hard Times)

They went through the revolving doors that made a faintly derisive whistling sound when you pushed them. It was two blocks to the parking lot. At the drugstore on the corner she said, 'Wait here for me. I forgot something. I won't be a minute.' She was more than a minute.

(My World--and Welcome to It, p. 80)

The Royal Wizard squatted on the floor of his room in a tower, trying to change a piece of common filed stone into gold by wiggling his fingers at it and crying 'Ixxyzo!' Nothing happened.

(The White Deer, p.60)

He looks around the walls and spots the Mixmaster, but something keeps him from trying to open the can of peaches by putting it in the Mixmaster and starting the thing. He is suddenly no longer hungry.

(Thurber Country, p. 80)

Comment: Most of Thurber's prose is underwritten and his understatement results not only in a refined English prose but in a remarkably subtle kind of humor. The reader is nudged along, laughing, and not assaulted by the kind of comedy which constantly calls attention to its devices.

Puns:

Whatever it was, he ran east on Broad Street (probably toward the Maramor Restaurant, a favorite place for a man to meet his wife).

(My Life and Hard Times, p. 42)

A burden in the bush is worth two on your hands. (p. 27)

It is better to have loafed and lost than never to have loafed at all. (p. 55)

(Fables for Our Time)

The long-distance record of Bosco must be reluctantly set down as a case that would stand up only in a court of lore.

(The Beast in Me, p. 115)

There are queer and present dangers to worry about.

(p. 65)

"The Moribundant Life, or Grow Old Along with Whom?" (p. 66)

'Violence by mossy stones is what I crave!'
(Further Fables for Our Time, p. 77)

The pain in Twain stays mainly in the brain. (p. 125)

Great oafs from little icons grow. (p. 147)
(Lanterns and Lances)

I called the other afternoon on my old friend Graves Moreland...who lives alone...on the Upson Downs.... (p. 78)

'The time has come,' the walrus said,/'To speak of manic things,/Of shots and shouts, and sealing dooms/Of Commoners and kings.' (p. 79)

There is enough Babel and Bedlam the way it is, and an organization called the United Notions would get us nowhere even faster.... Such a convention might even lead to the First Word War. (p. 88)

'Life at the moment is a tale told in an idiom, full of unsoundness and fury, signifying nonism.' (p. 92)
(Credos and Curios)

Comment: Puns, one of the simplest forms of verbal humor, were attractive to Thurber but he seemingly kept the fascination under control better than many other humorists. Toward the end of his life, especially in the essays in Credos, the pun becomes very important and often seems to actually overrun the essay. This could be because Thurber, when blind, came to live in an almost totally verbalized universe.

Thurber's preference for alliterative language:

'If we are going to indulge in adjectives beginning with "m,"' said the lemming, sharply, 'let me apply a few to your species--murderous, maladjusted, maleficent, malicious, and muffle-headed.' (p. 83)

The scientists, who look beyond the little menaces of the mundane moment.... (p. 111)
(My World--and Welcome to It)

Prince Jorn strummed a sorrowful song on his lyre. (p. 9)

Twenty hoofs thundered hotly through a haunted hollow of spectral sycamores hung with lighted lanterns and past a turquoise tarn and along an avenue of asphodel that turned and twisted down a dark descent which led at last to a pale and perilous plain. (p. 19)

The white deer led its pursuers through a silver swamp and a bronze bog and a golden glade, its speed still swift as light. (p. 18)
(The White Deer)

The Duke's chuckle sounded like ice cackling in a cauldron.
(The 13 Clocks, p. 53)

With all his remaining life and strength he swam and swam until at last he reached the sullen shore of a sombre island inhabited by surly tigers, lions, and other great cats. (p. 58)

You are all wrong in the crotch, and in the cranium, and in the cortex. (p. 68)
(Further Fables for Our Time)

They came so swiftly...streaming out of lore and legend, streaming out of song and story, each phantom flaunting like a flag his own especial glory....
(The Wonderful O, p. 60)

I dread, as much as anyone else, the white watches of the woeful night.... (p. 168)

Prisoners of parody and paraphrase, prostrate and pillowed, are prone to tinker with the world and words of Lewis Carroll at the slightest prod or provocation. (p. 181)
(Lanterns and Lances)

Comment: Thurber's interest in the sound of language, which became intensified after the encroachment of his blindness in the early 1940's, was often expressed in heavily alliterative language. Sometimes (Cf. quotation 2 from Further Fables, above) this alliterative language becomes comic; more often, it is simply evidence of Thurber's poetic devotion to the sound of English (Cf. quotations from The White Deer, above.)

Deliberate and feigned archaisms:

The Monroes opened their summer place a little late, for carking cares had kept them long in town.
(The Owl in the Attic, p. 21)

Twenty hoofs thundered hotly...past a turquoise tarn....
(The White Deer, p. 19)

Just the other evening, when the womenfolks were washing up the supper dishes and setting them to dreen, they could hear me rocking back and forth and laughing to myself.
(The Thurber Carnival, p. 18)

He was driven from his castle by such a crew of bashlocks and shatterclocks as plagues us now.
(The Wonderful O, p. 33)

Oh, why should the shattermyth have to be a crumplehope and a dampenglee?
(Further Fables for Our Time, p. 143)

'The lady on my left is a nameless waif out of the night, a poor windlestraw on the stream of time.'
(Lanterns and Lances, p. 10)

What is worse, the nocturnal mind that fossicks (look it up in the OED) may get around to Little Boy Blew His Top and The Pie-eyed Peeper of Hamlin.
(Credos and Curios, p. 101)

Comment: Except for the examples from Further Fables and The Wonderful O, the italicized words above are actually archaisms. Thurber may have chosen them to distance his literary world from the everyday world or because he particularly liked the sound of a particular archaic word or simply as a result of his addiction to language experimentation and dictionary reading. In the feigned neologistic "archaisms," such as "crumplehope" and "shatterclocks," he creates Twentieth Century equivalents of the Old English kenning.

B. Analysis of Selected Passages

1. From My Life and Hard Times:

In one of the finest passages from all of Thurber's writing, we see many elements of his polished mature prose style as early as 1933. It is fair to say that, after apprenticeship on several newspapers, Thurber sprang into maturity as a writer in his very early work for The New Yorker and in the collections he began publishing in 1929. Since this dissertation deals only with Thurber's work after he joined The New Yorker, I am speaking of the work of a fairly accomplished and mature craftsman throughout this study.

In the following passage, the concluding paragraph of My Life and Hard Times, we delight in the already understated, evocative, fastidious, and characteristic Thurberian expression:

There was, of course, even for Conrad's Lord Jim, no running away. The cloud of his special discomfiture followed him like a pup, no matter what ships he took or what wildernesses he entered. In the pathways between office and home and home and the houses of settled people there are always, ready to snap at you, the little perils of routine living, but there is no escape in the unplanned tangent, the sudden turn. In Martinique, when the whistle blew for the tourists to get back on the ship, I had a quick, wild, and lovely moment when I decided I wouldn't get back on the ship. I did, though. And I found that somebody had stolen the pants to my dinner jacket. (My Life and Hard Times, p. 115)

At this point in the "Note at the End" of My Life, Thurber has just concluded a statement of his old desire to be "a first rate wanderer in the Conradean tradition." This, he says, has always been impossible because of his Ohio

accent, his horn-rimmed glasses, and his frequent trips to the dentist (pp. 113, 114, 115). Then, in a characteristic Thurberian attempt to qualify his initial statement, he points to the ironic aspect of all man's desires and hopes by saying that "there was, of course, even for Conrad's Lord Jim, no running away," which is to say that Thurber has dreamed about something not only unattainable to him but to everyone. One often senses in the patterns of Thurber's prose this hesitancy and persistent reevaluation of each statement and step; the final effect of such reevaluation is to create a feeling of uncertainty in the reader's mind about the possibility of arriving at any answer or conclusion.

In the following sentence, Thurber surprises and amuses the reader with the typically Thurberian juxtaposition of a highly literate, even formal phrase, "the cloud of his special discomfiture followed him," with the rather colloquial, homely simile, "like a pup." Thurber's style often has a good deal of energy resulting from such strong clashes of tone or diction. The next sentence in the passage, which also relies heavily on juxtaposition, has a real kinesthetic quality as it mimics the movement of a wanderer through tortuous pathways. Its sense describes the special province of much of Thurber's fiction: "In the pathways between office and home and home and the houses of settled people there are always, ready to snap at you, the little perils of routine living, but there is no escape in the unplanned tangent, the

sudden turn." This marvelously constructed sentence holds up under the closest scrutiny. "Pathways" is a word both descriptive enough to signify the normal roads and streets by which one reaches home, and indefinite and suggestive enough to evoke in the reader's mind the metaphorical journey to find a "home," a resting place. There is an additional twist on the definition of home here in the implied contrast between "home and the houses of settled people." That the narrator's home seems unsettled, perhaps insecure even to himself, matches the sense of the statement to the restless, wandering movement of the sinuous sentence itself. By using the conjunction "and" three times in the sentence and by the repetition of the word "home," a feeling of the maze-like wanderings of our narrator is imparted. The feeling is much like that which Eliot had achieved in the picture of Prufrock's imagined trip through "streets that follow like a tedious argument/of insidious intent" ("Prufrock," lines 8 and 9).

Thurber follows this sinuous opening with a jolt in the middle of the sentence, appropriately simulating the shock of our daily encounters with those things that are always "ready to snap at you, the little perils of routine living." The short consonant sounds of the monosyllabic phrase "snap at you," especially because it follows the sinuous phrase before it, mimics the abruptness and harshness of experience. Thurber follows this jolt with, again, the

characteristic reconsideration, for even though these little perils will always get you in the pathways of ordinary existence, it is just as dangerous to attempt to elude them by seeking the exotic: "there is no escape in the unplanned tangent, the sudden turn." The inevitable dilemma of man is so forcefully pictured here that, on reflection, the reader must connect this sentence with the similar last line of "The Preface" to My Life and Hard Times which warns the reader that "even a well-ordered life can not lead anybody safely around the inevitable doom that waits in the skies. As F. Hopkinson Smith long ago pointed out, the claw of the sea-puss gets us all in the end." Thus the "Preface" and "Note at the End" affect a type of order on the book and a feeling of the cyclic inevitability of human experience.

Although he was constantly pursued by the idea of man's mortality and imperfection, Thurber tended to use this terror for humorous effect. Therefore, My Life ends with the little anecdote about a "quick, wild, and lovely moment" when Thurber had considered trying to run away from the perils of routine living by staying in Martinique. He delays the book's final laugh, a subtle and satisfying laugh, to the thump at the end of the final sentence: "I decided I wouldn't get back on the ship. I did, though. And I found that somebody had stolen the pants to my dinner jacket." The incongruity of his dream (to be a Conradean wanderer) and his dilemma (not only an Ohio accent, but a man without evening pants!) is both the fitting last stroke of a humorous

genius and a telling comment on the plight of modern man. This experience is the ultimate expression of the tyranny of trivia. This passage combines the humor, precision, fine rhythm and evocative qualities of Thurber's best writing. In it the reader experiences the special delight characteristic of Thurber's prose: a mixture of quiet amusement, insight, and a sense of the great possibilities of the English language.

2. "The Unicorn in the Garden:"

I select one of Thurber's finest and most famous fables, "The Unicorn in the Garden" from Fables for Our Time (1940), for a short discussion of the fables' form. I also wish to demonstrate Thurber's emphasis on rhythm, timing, and contrast in his prose structure in terms of this fable. Thurber's fables are short didactic beast narratives which, like Aesop's, have animal characters representing human actions and attitudes. Usually only a page in length, Thurber's fables are followed by a direct and separately stated moral. Unlike Aesop's morals, Thurber's morals tend to surprise the reader with a new twist on an old idea or phrase. They do not encourage or validate conventional thinking or homespun philosophy and in fact one of the fables has as its moral "Never trust an old saw." Significantly, the titles of both collections of fables indicate this intention: Fables for Our Time they announce, implying a necessary break with tradition. There are several good surprises in the "Unicorn" and even the moral is a delightful pun which unexpectedly rearranges meanings. It begins:

Once upon a sunny morning a man who sat in a breakfast nook looked up from his scrambled eggs to see a white unicorn with a golden horn quietly cropping roses in the garden. The man went up to the bedroom where his wife was still asleep and woke her. 'There's a unicorn in the garden,' he said. 'Eating roses.' She opened one unfriendly eye and looked at him. 'The unicorn is a mythical beast,' she said, and turned her back on him. (Fables for Our Time, p. 65)

The fable begins on a halcyon note with the traditional

fairy tale opening phrase of "Once upon a sunny morning" and continues into a mythical scene wherein a man sees a unicorn eating roses in his garden. That we are still in twentieth century American suburbia and not another world is indicated by the simple yet incongruous statement that the man sees the unicorn from "a breakfast nook." This peaceful, bright mood is broken savagely by the wife's brash retort to her husband's announcement of the unicorn in the garden: "The unicorn is a mythical beast" she snaps flatly to the quiet, gentle husband. Seemingly undaunted by her "realism," the husband returns to the garden, finds the unicorn again, and goes back to tell his wife again of his vision. When he attempts to further describe the unicorn in the garden, cacophony reigns in the clash between his quiet simplicity and his wife's second ugly retort, which seems unwarranted and inexplicably nasty even when compared with her first snap at him:

With a high heart, because there was a unicorn in his garden, the man went upstairs and roused his wife again. 'The unicorn,' he said, 'ate a lily.' His wife sat up in bed and looked at him, coldly. 'You are a booby,' she said, 'and I am going to have you put in the booby-hatch.'

(Fables, p. 65)

The husband does not really react to the wife's surprising threat, but drolly says only "We'll see about that."

In the next paragraph Thurber manipulates comic timing and juxtaposition at its best, especially in the restraint with which he selectively quotes each of the three speakers and in the repetitions and inversions of the

narrative phrases about the police and the psychiatrist:

As soon as the husband had gone out of the house, the wife got up and dressed as fast as she could. She was very excited and there was a gloat in her eye. She telephoned the police and she telephoned a psychiatrist; she told them to hurry to her house and bring a straight-jacket. When the police and the psychiatrist arrived they sat down in chairs and looked at her, with great interest. 'My husband,' she said, 'saw a unicorn this morning.' The police looked at the psychiatrist and the psychiatrist looked at the police. 'He told me it ate a lily,' she said. The psychiatrist looked at the police and the police looked at the psychiatrist. 'He told me it had a golden horn in the middle of his forehead,' she said. At a solemn signal from the psychiatrist, the police leaped from their chairs and seized the wife. They had a hard time subduing her....

(Fables, pp. 65, 66; italics mine)

There are little hints along the way (especially in the ironic aside that the police and psychiatrist looked at the wife "with great interest") but the unwary reader gets to the last sentence above without knowing that it is the wife, not the husband, who is going to the booby-hatch. By the last paragraph, irony runs rampant as all of the reader's expectations are overturned simultaneously with the overthrow of the wife's authority in her household and her certainty:

Just as they got her into the strait-jacket, the husband came back into the house.

'Did you tell your wife you saw a unicorn?' asked the police. 'Of course not,' said the husband. 'The unicorn is a mythical beast.' 'That's all I wanted to know,' said the psychiatrist. 'Take her away. I'm sorry, sir, but your wife is as crazy as a jay bird.' So they took her away, cursing and screaming, and shut her up in an institution. The husband lived happily ever after. (p. 66)

The final shock, and resultant laughter, is in the punning moral: "Don't count your boobies until they are hatched."

As one re-reads this fable it is apparent that there

is not one unnecessary word and that the words are arranged in the only way possible to achieve these heightened effects of irony, contrast, surprise, and of course, laughter.

3. From "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty:"

Thurber's most famous story is constructed, like so much of his work, through a use of clashing forces; Mr. and Mrs. Mitty clash with each other, Mitty's dreams clash with our awareness of his actual experiences. These clashes are expressed through the use of contrapuntal dialogue and descriptive passages. The reader, then, affects a kind of synthesis of the two in his mind in order to attempt to understand the total reality of the Mittys's existence. "Walter Mitty" tells the story of the Mittys's trip to Waterbury, where Mrs. Mitty has her hair done. While she is in the salon, Walter Mitty buys puppy biscuits and over-shoes, both of which his wife has ordered him to shop for while she is busy. After he drops her off for her hair appointment, Walter Mitty parks the car (with some difficulty), finds the puppy biscuits (with some embarrassment), and waits for her in the lobby of a nearby hotel (with some frustration). All the time, however, the story lets us see into the fantastic dream world of Mitty's mind, which seeks to compensate for his drab existence with a series of dreams of heroic action in a Navy bomber, of miraculous surgery on a world-famous banker, of mysteriously conquering a complicated piece of hospital machinery with a fountain pen, and of being brave in the face of execution by some untold but malevolent force which works against "Walter Mitty the Undefeated."

Thurber chose to begin the story with the highly

dramatic language of Mitty's dreams. Since the story begins and ends in Mitty's mind, the reader's attention is immediately focused on Mitty and our ultimate sympathy is with him. When Mrs. Mitty shrieks "Not so fast! You're driving too fast!" (My World--and Welcome to It, p. 73), to our "Commander" the central conflict of the story is set up. Mitty is shaken from his dreams and we are jolted out of the "intimate airways of his mind" and we know which side we are on.

I want to look at the final lines of this story to demonstrate the subtlety and understatement of Thurber's prose:

They went out through the revolving doors that made a faintly derisive whistling sound when you pushed them. It was two blocks to the parking lot. At the drugstore on the corner she said, 'Wait here for me. I forgot something. I won't be a minute.' She was more than a minute. Walter Mitty lighted a cigarette. It began to rain, rain with sleet in it. He stood up against the wall of the drugstore smoking.... He put his shoulders back and his heels together. 'To hell with the handkerchief,' said Walter Mitty scornfully. He took one last drag on his cigarette and snapped it away. Then, with that faint, fleeting smile playing about his lips, he faced the firing squad; erect and motionless, proud and disdainful, Walter Mitty the Undefeated, inscrutable to the last. (My World, pp. 80, 81)

Thurber describes the Mittys' exist from the hotel simply; we are told of nothing seen or experienced between the hotel and their car. The well-chosen phrase that describes the "faintly derisive whistling sound" of the revolving door when pushed not only sounds like a door being pushed but expresses Walter Mitty's self-concept, which would make even the sound of a revolving door seem "derisive" to him.

It is assumed that the two block walk from the hotel to the car is in silence following the Mittys's latest argument. Just as they almost reach the car Mrs. Mitty snaps at Walter to wait a minute (he has already waited half the day for her) with the ironic "I won't be a minute." Thurber's masterful understatement, "She was more than a minute," heralds Mitty's final retreat into the world of his dreams. A heavy tiredness and frustration pervades the scene. When it begins to rain, "rain with sleet in it," a chill descends on the reader as well as Mitty, preparing us for the "death scene" (Mitty's last daydream in which he is executed by a firing squad) and a final wince at the story's tragicomic conclusion. Mitty is here pictured standing against the wall, waiting in the rain. It is a fitting scene for a character about to be executed and it was probably Mitty's own subconscious association of his leaning against a brick wall with a Hollywood type of execution scene.

After his dream begins, heavy irony pervades the passage. Mitty throws away the handkerchief scornfully; he snaps away the cigarette (both strong adjectives which imply more decisiveness and power than his character would allow in real life). He is described as erect (in contrast to the drawing of him on the same page which depicts the typical stoop-shouldered, reticent Thurber man) and as both proud and disdainful, neither of which, of course, he is. The final irony is in the last, memorable descriptive phrase, "Walter Mitty, the Undefeated, inscrutable to the last." Life has

defeated Mitty everywhere but in his dreams and now he even dreams of his own extinction. The capitalization of Undefeated indicates this final irony and a perceptive reader laughs the Thurber laugh, that inner, reflective, sad laugh combining self-pity with superiority. We both identify with Mitty's essentially tragic situation and his daydreaming habit as a "solution" for his problems and view his comic actions with detachment. Walter Mitty is anything but Undefeated and we are painfully aware of the disparity between his melodramatic vision of himself and his actual world. The final masterful touch is in the use of the ironic adjective "inscrutable" to describe a character whose inner-most thoughts and dreams are known to everyone who reads the story and who seems, in what we see of his material existence with Mrs. Mitty and the car, the very antithesis of mystery and intrigue. There is not one superfluous word in this deceptively simple Thurber ending.

4. From The White Deer

At the point in the narrative where Clode and his three sons are chasing the white deer through the Magical Forest, having already flashed "past the barking tree, across the musical mud, in and out of a flock of wingless birds," the climax of their chase is described in the following dazzlingly beautiful and evocative passage:

Twenty hoofs thundered hotly through a haunted hollow of spectral sycamores hung with lighted lanterns and past a turquoise tarn and along an avenue of asphalt that turned and twisted down a dark descent which led at last to a pale and perilous plain. The setting sun sank into the sea, seven stars shone suddenly in the sky, and the white deer's dreadful day was done, its race was run, for now it stood silent and still and shivering under the mighty crag called Centaurs Mountain.

(The White Deer, p.19)

The reader has been prepared for such a vision by the previous pages of the book which are written with heavy alliteration inversion (the enchanted forest is a place where smokes goes down instead of up and nearby things sound faraway), and ritualized rhythm, all of which create a distance between the reader and the faraway, almost exotic world of the tale. We are in a special world, a world in which a deer could turn into a lady at arrow's point. In the passage quoted above visual and aural effects are equally important. Both are enhanced by the deliberately ritualized, sometimes archaic language. Instead of naming the King, his three sons, and the white deer, Thurber says only "Twenty hoofs thundered hotly through a haunted hollow," a phrase which evokes the sound of panting and galloping horses through the use of

persistent initial "h" sounds. The adverb "hotly" is a typically appropriate and superficially simple Thurber modifier; it is the best imaginable word in terms of both sound and sense. It sounds like the motion of horses running (say it slowly aloud) and it literally expresses the "heated" chase.

The horses' twenty hoofs thundered "through a haunted hollow of spectral sycamores hung with lighted lanterns." Here Thurber characteristically chooses alliterative adjective-noun phrases not only to delight the reader with formal poetic language but to enhance the magical mood of the scene. The sentence reads like an incantation into another world. A spectral sycamore should, however, appear in a haunted hollow; only a lighted lantern would give the spectre its full visual force. Therefore, Thurber is not only playing with language but making the language do everything he wants it to do: create a mood, describe an image, excite both the ear and the imagination. Once they pass through the haunted hollow, they ride on "past a turquoise tarn and along an avenue of asphodel" and the deliberate archaism "Tarn" enhances the other-worldliness of the narrative. That it is a "turquoise" tarn effectively continues the alliteration while suggesting the exotically beautiful nature of the scene.

The reader is delighted by the quick, kaleidoscopic changes in color: from the eerie shadows of the hollow, to the exotically springtime description of a turquoise lake and an avenue with pastel flowers he is charged onward "down a

dark descent which led at last to a pale and perilous plain." Fittingly, in the light of this open and twilight plain, the deer is at last vulnerable to her pursuers. As we read the first sentence of this passage, sensation upon sensation piles up in a frenzied, unrelenting description which recreates a feeling of the chase itself. Then, quickly and unexpectedly, the deer's doom is announced in short declarative clauses: "The setting sun sank into the sea, seven stars shone suddenly in the sky, and the white deer's dreadful day was done, its race was run, for now it stood silent and still and shivering under the mighty crag...." The effect is to call a halt in the reader's mind after the chase and to recreate a feeling of the swiftness and inevitability of fate. Since the white deer's race is run, it is finally cornered in a vivid, frightening scene. In a real tour de force, Thurber pulls the reader from a furious chase, in and out of many exotic and fabulous images, to an abrupt and almost reflective stop. He manages language like a poet.

5. From The 13 Clocks:

Thurber was always conscious of the sound of language; this predilection became more intense during the 1940's when five unsuccessful eye operations had left him nearly blind. He had always had a poet's devotion to language and as his physical vision decreased language became an even more important reality for him. The following passage from the 1950 tale, The 13 Clocks, is selected for its fine sense of sound, demonstrating as it does Thurber's ability with onomatopoeia and assonance. As in the passage from The White Deer, Thurber's penchant for alliteration and his deft handling of highly sensual images combine to create an exciting and challenging experience for the reader. Thurber's work is best appreciated when read aloud. This passage should be read aloud before going on the analysis which follows it.

The brambles and the thorns grew thick and thicker in a ticking thicket of bickering crickets. Farther along and stronger, bonged the gongs of a throng of frogs, green and vivid on their lily pads. From the sky came the crying of flies, and the pilgrims leaped over a bleating sheep creeping knee-deep in a sleepy stream, in which swift and slippery snakes slid and slithered silkily, whispering sinful secrets. (13 Clocks, p. 73)

This passage has an exceptionally ominous quality. Not only does the bramble threaten Prince Zorn on his quest, but the mocking and frightening sounds of the forest and swamps seem to almost overwhelm him. The brambles "grew thick and thicker," a common Thurber construction which combines an adjective with a comparative form of the same word. This

construction tends to intensify the description even more than the use of the superlative could. The assonant "ticking thicket of bickering crickets" onomatopoeically expresses the sound of the scene, as does the language in which the other images are drawn. Nothing could better describe the sight of frogs as well as recreating their haunting night-time croaking than the assonant sentence "Farther along and stronger, bonged the gongs of a throng of frogs, green and vivid on their lily pads." This evil and frightening picture is concluded with the wonderfully sinister image: "swift and slippery snakes slid and slithered silkily, whispering sinful secrets." This rolls around with liquid "l" sounds in the mind of the reader; the persistent hissing of "s" sounds recreates the sound of snakes as the liquid and languorous "ls" suggest the way snakes insidiously move about in the image. Thurber's language must be read aloud for complete enjoyment and appreciation of his remarkable ability to manipulate both the sound and sense of the English language. Reading a Thurber fairy tale is an exciting, challenging, and never-completed experience. He had a poet's love of words for their own sake and at his best he demonstrates a poet's talent for compression, evocation, description, and suggestion.

6. From "The Psychosemanticist Will See You Now, Mr. Thurber:"

As Thurber went into the last decade of his life, he tended to write more essays and fewer stories, with the notable exception of The Wonderful O. The following passage from one of Thurber's later collections, Alarms and Diversions (1957), shows Thurber in a role which recalls the subject matter of George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" and the passion of Swift's ragings against man's follies. Thurber, like Orwell, believed that the state of a language not only indicates the state of a culture but that it does in a real sense create the culture itself. Therefore, decadent language not only results from decadent culture but continues the cycle by in turn causing the quality of life and civilization to decrease as the language decays.

This essay has the peculiar Thurber touch in its heavy reliance on neologisms and its parodic style; he wrote the essay in the manner of the decadent "modern English" which he is criticizing:

I believe there are no scientific investigators that actually call themselves psychosemanticists, but it is surely time for these highly specialized therapists to set up offices. They must not be carelessly confused with psychosomaticists, who study the effects of mental weather upon the ramparts of the body. The psychosemanticists will specialize in the havoc wrought by verbal artillery upon the fortress of reason. Their job will be to cope with the psychic trauma caused by linguistic meaninglessness, to prevent the language from degenerating into gibberish, and to save the sanity of persons threatened by the onset of polysyllabic monstrositis.
(Alarms and Diversions, p. 18)

The first sentence of this essay is fairly straight until

the Thurber concoction "theraputicians" strikes. As Thurber goes on to define his terms, he develops the definition in terms of a particularly vivid and appropriate metaphor. It is especially apt that he chooses a military metaphor since in this essay he is fighting what he considers a holy war against meaninglessness and gobbledegook. He is, in fact, attempting to anatomize that "havoc wrought by verbal artillery upon the fortress of reason."

This all seems mild, however, when compared with the thundering parody of this passage several paragraphs later:

The carcinomenclature of our time is, to be sure, an agglomerative phenomenon of accumulated concretions, to which a dozen different types of elaborative descriptivists have contributed--eminently the old Communist intellectuals, with their 'dialectical materialists,' 'factional deviationists,' 'unimplemented obscurantists,' and so on, and so on. Once the political terminologists of all parties began to cross-infect our moribund vocabulary, the rate of degeneration became appalling. Elephantiasis of cliché set in, synonym atrophied, the pulse of inventiveness slowed alarmingly, and paraphrase died of impaction.... We have become satisfied with gangrenous repetitions of threadbarisms, like an old man cackling in a chimney corner, and the onset of meaninglessness is imminent. (Alarms and Diversions, p. 19)

I italicize words which parody the very jargon and gobbledegook which the essay rails against. The humor of this passage resides in the fact of its extreme exaggeration, to the point of parody, of the style which it abhors. It further impresses the reader with the aptness, the nearly correctness, of some of its vintage Thurberisms ("carcinomenclature," "elephantiasis of cliché"). The first word mimics the modern tendency to concoct synthetic words through an often awkward

and overly involved combination of parts of familiar words. The mock-medical phrases describing the tyranny of the cliché in modern usage effectively makes us consider the disease of decadent language. The passage is, in effect, a "diagnosis" of an illness.

Deftly managed, the parody, humor, and word play of this essay are allowed to demonstrate but not obscure the essay's thesis, which is simply stated in the essay's conclusion: [there is] "a necessity to speak and write in such a way that we can be understood by the English-speaking peoples as well as the other races of a world that stands in grave need of clarity, accuracy, and sense." When Thurber thus holds a mirror up to our threadbarisms, banalities, and gobbledegook he offers a corrective for our sickness. This discussion of the beauty, clarity, and power of Thurber's language ends with his serious plea for sense in a world of nonsense, order in a time of disorder, goals which man, according to Thurber's vision, never achieves but which can only be approached through the use of his greatest creative tool, language.

APPROVAL SHEET

The dissertation submitted by Catherine McGehee Kenney has been read and approved by the following Committee:

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The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval by the Committee with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

5/16/74
Date

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