



# PCR

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# From the Editor



Editing *Popular Culture Review* for the last 27 years has been a labor of love. I would like to acknowledge the support of UNLV's College of Liberal Arts and Department of English as well as PCA/ACA and, most recently Policy Studies Organization.

Thank you all,  
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# THE POPULAR CULTURE REVIEW

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Through the Editor's Eye

When a holographic plate through which the laser beam passes to create its three dimensional image (remember the Princess Leia projection in *Star Wars*?) is cut into pieces, each fragment, no matter how small, retains the image of the whole

So in the study of Popular Culture does each fragment retain the image of the whole, as, by extension, does this issue of PCR. Whether we examine pastoralism in the Industrial Age, the mythology of pro-wrestling, the regional lyric poetry of Texas or any of the other topics covered in this issue, we gain a greater understanding of both the topic itself and of its place in the larger cultural context.

It is with an eye to the above that the referees and I have made our selections. We hope that you find them stimulating.

Felicia Campbell



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# A Peculiar Method of Literary Transformation: "Defamiliarization" in the Cowboy-Novel Serial

Literary works turn the "old" into the "new" by offering a fresh look at the available range of life experiences, or the available range of literature dealing with those life experiences, fantasy literature not excluded. Early in the present century a group of Russian writers and artists became interested in the possibilities of renovating that which was overly familiar, in life and art, so as to greatly enhance literature's overall effect on the reader. These Russian Formalists, as they came to be called, developed the idea of "defamiliarization" (*ostranenie*)--breaking up the predictable format of plot, syntax, or whatever, to bring about this renovation. This paper deals with an American cowboy-western novel published in 1976, which is an excellent example of this "defamiliarization" process in the production of literary works.

It is a well-known fact that many literary works change the "old" into the "new," offering the reader the equivalent of seasoned wine in fresh bottles. Among the specific illustrative examples are Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Shakespeare's plays; among the particular types are recycled myths, legends, and folktales ... burlesques, satires, and travesties. Literature in fact is grounded in transformation--transformation of that which is predicated on mimesis: imitation of life or of some vision produced by the human imagination. Eventually the transformation that is the literary rendering of a picture of life or an image in the imagination may itself become transformed. How? By the author's "defamiliarization" (in a sense) the very language, or more generally, the way of presenting the rendition, so that the reader (observer), by "taking in" the new mode of presentation, can get much of the benefit of "the same old stuff" without having to deal with its aspect of staleness.

About seventy years ago a loosely affiliated group of writers, thinkers, and artists--including Roman Jakobson, Viktor Shklovsky, and Vladimir Propp--evinced particular interest in this general

renovation-recycling process in literature. In addition to placing form above content in importance, these Russian Formalists (as they came to be called) emphasized "'device' over message, and strangeness over familiarity" (Holman & Harmon, 1986, p. 212). According to Holman & Harmon, they believed that literary language, because of its distinctive qualities, should "break up predictable patterns--of sound, grammar, plot--by means of conspicuous 'defamiliarization' (ostranenie) that restores freshness and vitality to language."

The idea, here, of breaking up predictable patterns of plot by "conspicuous 'defamiliarization'" becomes all the more interesting when we look at a curious and intriguing short novel (ignored, apparently, by the critics ever since its publication in 1976) about cowboy stories: *The Invention of the West*, by Alvin Greenberg. Early in the present century one of the more imaginative and penetrating Russian critics in the Formalist movement, Shklovsky, wrote extensively on the subject of plot in its complex relation to the story itself. Another major figure in the Formalist group, Boris Eichenbaum, called attention to Shklovsky's contributions in this regard. He pointed out "special devices of 'plot construction' and their relation to general stylistic devices" found in certain major works. His findings on "plot arrangement . . . changed the traditional notion of plot as a combination of a group of motifs and made plot a compositional rather than a thematic concept." Plot and story could no longer be taken as the same thing. Thus as Eichenbaum explained Shklovsky's influence, it was natural for the Formalists to make plot construction the basic subject of their concern, since plot is the distinctive element of the art of narrative. Whether Greenberg consciously adapted Formalist principles relating to plot cannot be known, apparently; his novel was not even mentioned, after its publication, in the annual volume of *Book Review Digest*. Yet in a way he might have outdone the Russian Formalists, in theory and practice, at their own game.

In one of the many comic scenes in *The Invention of the West*, the old-fashioned cowboy hero, MacLean, gives his two followers (or trackers) the lowdown on how story (not the story, but story per se) is told. Author, protagonist, reader: all are part of the story-generation process, all do the essential inventing. Here is Maclean on the subject of invention. He has just been asked about his own concept of self, what he thinks about his position in the world and about his

actions. All he knows, Maclean answers, is that he just does what he does. No one knows what really happens, is Maclean's point, not even Berkeley, the author of the Western series featuring his adventures. One finds himself "in a situation" and where does he go, what does do then? Answer: he doesn't go anywhere, and what he does is "all a matter of invention . . . Man himself . . . is a fairly recent invention. Does it pay to ask how he happened to be invented?" What can an author do, with all the things that are always taking place, in even the plainest tale? "Invent his way through it all . . ." But he can't, any more than Shakespeare himself, understand all that goes on. He had "some doubts himself about why his characters" acted the way they did, about their actual wants, about "their darkest thoughts . . . How [could] he know about these things except where his own [entered] in as well?" MacLean soon repeats this notion: "The thing is to recognize the author's point of conjunction with his story" (Greenberg, 1976, pp. 91-93).

Greenberg's world of the West is that of the writer, the reader, the protagonist. Behind the narrative itself lie middens of discarded, all but forgotten pulps--singles and serials: the Beadle Dime Novels, the Hardy Boys, Zane Grey, Max Brand, Louis L'Amour, and a corral of others. Greenberg's world, to be more precise, is a series of cowboy novels featuring the great (if atypical) cowboy hero, MacLean. The author of these books is a man named Berkeley, whose style almost always derives from the familiar western genre (not the best western, by any means). All the incidents have often been used before, in some form, Greenberg informs us; the characters, in their mannerisms and actions, are "as recognizable as the painted scenery against which the usual rapid and violent sequence of events takes place." The plot of Greenberg's novel, however, is in striking contrast to the clichés which constitute the substance of the narrative, if not the form. Most of the time Berkeley's own literary talent is hidden, one exception being his treatment of MacLean, and that too is generally "purely conventional."

Here Greenberg descends from spoofing to leg-pulling: denying tradition, but admittedly for his own philosophical and artistic reasons. In accordance with the principles on which the western novel is based—we are told in *The Invention of the West*--no MacLean novel by Berkeley includes a reference to whatever happens to MacLean in one of the others novels. Rather, with every book, the

hero "is born anew, a man without a past . . . whose skills, needs, fears, ideals--whose very saddle sores--we must be introduced to as if for the first time" (Greenberg, p.19).

MacLean first appears in a cowboy novel called *Riders East, Riders West*; his role is trivial, almost comic: a nameless figure, he is shot accidentally in a sensitive place by one of his companions just as they are finally capturing the villain. But the other sixteen or so MacLean titles deserve more attention: *Vanity Fair*, for example, a tale of the Honduran jungles; *Passage to India* and *Swann's Way*, which depict, sympathetically, a lumberjack-villain of French-Canadian origin; *The Golden Bowl*; *The Man Without Quality*; *Death in Venice*; *Lord Jim*, etc. Our MacLean is a far-ranging cowboy with red-lingered seductresses, fur smugglers in northern North Dakota, and Bengal tigers in the Mexican mountains near Tampico Bay.

MacLean, in Berkeley's self-centered novels, but particularly in Greenberg's novel, is both stereotype and anti-stereotype. Possessing the familiar attributes of our famous movie cowboys, he is nevertheless deeply introspective and philosophical, articulate and sophisticated . . . a seasoned gourmet who requires the best food and wine . . . a rider who hates horses and suffers from saddle sores . . . finally, a writer and illustrator of autobiographical cowboy fiction. In his own peculiarly American way, Greenberg has clearly pushed the "defamiliarization" (ostranenie) process practically to the limit, except insofar as language is concerned. Whereas an American poet, E. E. Cummings, has actually defamiliarized his poetic utterances by creating his own grammar, syntax, and signifiers (as in "anyone lived in a pretty how town"), Greenberg's language is standard English, straightforward and familiar as a country breakfast of pancakes with fried eggs and sausage, hot rolls and all the strong coffee you can drink.

Bill, the narrator, whose obsession with the fictional and real-life MacLean gives the novel its *raison d'être*, finds on going through the MacLean canon a curious tie-in between the author and the illustrator of the covers. He has in fact never seen anything like this at any other time. Each MacLean novel, except for the "deviant" *Riders East, Riders West*, has on its cover a close-up "in sharply-etched primary colors . . . [of] a scene which appears . . . in some other MacLean novel." Now, there are two time scales or patterns. Our

cowboy hero's "age-- indeterminate, as required by convention-- [doesn't] change in the least over the many years of simple historical time covered by the novels." But Berkeley's static time pattern is countered by the time pattern of the cover illustrator, "whose illustrations reveal . . . a slow aging process" barely noticeable when "the books are placed side by side--from the boyish tenderfoot to the tanned and weathered veteran." This latter format is inconsistent with the publication dates "either of the books on which the illustrations appear or of those containing the incidents to which the illustrations refer . . ." Whatever else Greenberg may have had in mind, there is a clear echo of the textbook editorial apparatus for Fenimore Cooper's five *Leatherstocking Tales*: sequence of events and aging process of the protagonist Natty Bumppo are in one pattern, while publication dates of the serial novels are in another. But Greenberg makes the obvious point about paperback thrillers and their lurid cover illustrations: you can't tell a book by its cover.

*The Invention of the West* on one level describes the narrator's determined search for his cowboy hero MacLean, his physical entry into the world of the latter (MacLean will call him Bill, though that is not his name), and his dogged trailing of MacLean all over creation until they meet and relate superficially, whereupon Bill continues following MacLean, but much more closely. A weirdly pedantic young woman named Emily, knowing almost nothing about the latter, also gets the MacLean fever and takes off after him. Under Western skies Bill, and Emily, sometimes MacLean too, discuss such matters as the inner essence of life in relation to literature, and vice versa. But MacLean knows, from his reading of Berkeley's novels about him, that there is to be a great showdown in the town of Marshall, at twilight on Sunday, and that he will be killed. The matter worries him to distraction. Finally, with a contemptuous oath, he leaves. This uncharacteristic move (he is going against his own life story) makes Bill feel that either MacLean is losing control or Berkeley is, or both are. Properly out of the story now, MacLean heads for some distant place. Before long, he may even deplane from a jet at Chicago's O'Hare Airport and be met by his wife. Emily, totally hooked on MacLean, rides off to find him, but Bill know she won't succeed. Even if MacLean were found, Bill is convinced that neither he (Bill) not Emily could keep up with the fast-paced cowboy.

There is another narrative line in the book, and it concerns the showdown scene and MacLean's death. According to what I call the kaleidoscope plot (glittering fragments of ideas are rotated in a drum, producing a different effect at every turn of events-- just what the Russian Formalists would have appreciated), the following are essential story elements. MacLean is in a Kansas City hotel, for some reason, and the desk clerk, Wendell, hands him a telegram: MACLEAN MARSHALL MAIN STREET TWILIGHT SUNDAY BE THERE BE READY. He mounts his horse and rides off to the town. Marshall's main street is all but deserted. Tethering his horse, MacLean awaits the meeting. A movement at the end of the street catches his attention. He whirls around and lets the moving object (a dog) have it with both of his revolvers. A mysterious stranger, hidden behind an upstairs hotel window, has been waiting for this moment, and shoots MacLean down.

This takes place before the mid-point of the story. But throughout the book we are reminded that the MacLean saga, with its autonomous segments, is filled with gaps through which MacLean disappears on occasion. Since Berkeley has not filled in these intervals, MacLean is not obliged to do anything specific, and thus he can find out what is really going on around him; hence his feeling that the gaps are the best and most interesting times of his life. This is important to Bill at the end of the story, because he becomes MacLean, having steeped himself so deeply in the MacLean saga that he know MacLean better than anyone else in the world. And Bill wonders, as he takes MacLean's place and rides off to Marshall on that fateful Sunday, noticing that the sun is going down--will he know what to do with those gaps? The MacLean telegram about the deadly rendezvous (that Bill had found at MacLean's campsite) "waves like a flag from [his] back pocket" (Greenberg, pp. 9, 17-18, 20, 54-56, 113, 136). Is he then, like MacLean, to die a provisional death?

What to make of this defamiliarized cowboy story about an improbable series of cowboy novels? Throughout the book everybody's view of MacLean (even the reader's) is too subjective for the real MacLean to be understood. Hence MacLean's complaints, his both hating and loving horses, his "living" in the unfilled gaps of fictional time, his (in effect) rising from the dead, and later flying to Chicago (in Bill's dream). MacLean naturally comprehends his own life story better than Berkeley ever could--Berkeley with his bad eyesight and

the horrible fate awaiting him (suicide, apparently). Hence the other discrepancies in Berkeley's series of novels mentioned in Greenberg's book: MacLean's cover illustrations being out of sync with their corresponding volumes and with the hero's process of aging: with the result that each novel is autonomous. No one knows what is really going on, in the all-the-world's-a-stage drama of art and of life; the leading player simply has to continue to invent his role to the very end.

What is remarkable about Greenberg's transforming of the old into the new, his recycling of the cowboy-hero westerns, is that he invokes so many technical philosophical concepts in doing so. He gives us existentialism (one makes oneself over, as if there were no fixed and familiar order of things), phenomenology (simply stated, the view that things are what the individual perceives them as), ontology (an inquiry into the nature of existence), and epistemology (an inquiry into what knowledge is and where it originates)—to name only four areas of philosophy. Then, too, he takes away from us our complacent notion that a contemporary cowboy western composed of the trite-and-true familiar features of the genre is basically just another version of the same old story.

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Holman, C. H. & Harmon, W. (1986). *A Handbook to Literature* (p. 212). (5th ed.). New York: Macmillan.



# Macho Man Meets the Million Dollar Man: Mayhem and the Mythology of Pro-Wrestling

Televised American pro-wrestling in the late 1980s has not changed much from the French wrestling of "second-rate halls" in Paris that Roland Barthes analyzed thirty years earlier in *Mythologies*. Wrestling is still a spectacle of excess which presents synchronic snapshots of absolute powerlessness, defeat, and humiliation. Wrestling's gestures work as signs which have an absolute clarity. Wrestling's gestures, like the gestures of Greek theater, are in Barthes' words an "intelligible representation of moral situations which are usually private."<sup>(1)</sup> Wrestling's presentation of character through body type and costuming still resembles Commedia del'Arte's use of the same techniques.

The fundamentals of wrestling are apparently unchanging, or at least resistant to change, for they are essentially still what Barthes identified: an exhibition of Suffering Defeat, Justice.<sup>(2)</sup> Wrestling still thrives on quick, dramatic reversals and "triumphant disorder" at the end of a fight. Rules can be broken for a deserved punishment now just as then, or as announcer Vince McMann puts it, "You have to fight fire with fire sometimes."<sup>(3)</sup> Burger King, sponsor of the October, 1989 Saturday Night's Main Event, has a slightly different version of this fundamental--rules can be broken for profit. Their wrestling version of "have it your way" is "If you wanna give people what they want, sometimes you gotta break the rules." Announcer Jessie "the Body" Ventura, champion of the bad guys of wrestling, has another version of this philosophy as he observes about Tito Santana and Rick Martel, whose match ended in a double disqualification, "You gotta remember something, McMann, sportsmanship don't mean nothing. It's who wins. That's what counts." That Burger King and the bad guys of wrestling share the same philosophy is apparently detrimental to neither.

The differences that Barthes found between American and French wrestling in the 1950s no longer seem valid. Then, Barthes defined American wrestling as a mythological fight between good

and evil which was quasi-political in nature because the bad wrestler was usually identified as a "Red". French wrestling, on the other hand, was concerned with ethics, not politics.(4) The leading characters of French wrestling exhibited moral values or the lack thereof. The villain was asocial, used the rules for his own advantage, and was dangerous (to society) because he was inconsistent, unpredictable and, therefore, a constant threat because he could not be anticipated and, thus, thwarted and controlled.

As always, I find Barthes' boundaries between ethics and politics rather illusory--one of his conjuring tricks. American wrestling is still a mythological fight between good and evil, but those qualities are exhibited on the same terms as French wrestling. It is no longer absolutely necessary for good to win, and the politics have shifted from the national scene to the homefront. While the characters portrayed by the wrestlers in the 1989 Main Event mythologize a partial history of America--for instance, Macho King as a representative of corrupt monarchy; Superfly Snuka as a representative of American individualism: "There is no king or queen over the Superfly Jimmy Snuka. I am my own man...a free man;" Zeus as a black slave owned by the Million Dollar Man, the ultimate capitalist;--the focus has shifted from defending capitalism and democracy to resisting an awareness of issues of class, gender and race.

The signs of wrestling retain their "absolute clarity" only in the gestures within the ring. The match itself has become a smaller and less significant component of wrestling on t.v., while the wrestlers' boasts before and after the match--those speeches which recall both Miles Gloriosus and Twain's Child of Calamity [compare, for instance, the Child's "I put my hand on the sun's face and make it night in the earth; I bite a piece out of the moon and hurry the seasons; I shake myself and crumble the mountains! Contemplate me through leather--*don't* use the naked eye!"(5) to Rowdy Roddy Piper's "I don't know if you've ever caught me, but I'll be after you like a man headed for West Berlin, chump. You ain't never seen nothing like primetime, here. You've heard of Hurricane Hugo? I make Hurricane Hugo look like a summer breeze, baby. So check it out, Hot Rod's back and he's back to stay, "]-those boasts have swollen, as if on their own hot air, to fill the greater proportion of airtime, bringing with them all the distortions and ambiguity of language.

The language of wrestling may be mythical, but the language and images which wrestling has stolen to make its own metalanguage are curiously resistant to the naturalization Barthes says should occur.(6) The traces of the original language are often only too apparent: wrestling's outdated mythos of male dominance, white supremacy, and cultural chauvinism hemorrhages under the pressures exerted by a culture self-consciously aware of gender, race, and class.

At first glance, sexism is rampant in the World Wrestling Federation. The focus of the sexism is the only woman featured in the Main Event, Queen Sherry, Macho Man's consort. We perhaps should not be surprised about the comments directed at Sherry, given the audience for televised pro-wrestling, determined here from the advertising demographics which are a perfect representation of a male, 18- to 25-year old audience. The sponsors are hawking beer, fast food, soft drinks, cars, auto parts, movies, videotape, radio stations, and the United States army. The one exception is Pacific Bell. Announcer Jessie "the Body" Ventura, even though he is adamantly on Macho King's side (or should that be *because* he is on Macho King's side), constantly slams the token woman allowed to participate—the woman whose hand he had kissed only moments earlier (after receiving Macho King's permission, of course). As Ventura says, "Look at this now, the King snaps his fingers, the Queen responds—just as it should be." Ventura's response to Vince McMann's complaint about Sherry hanging on to Superfly Snuka's (Macho King's opponent's) leg is "Hey, she's just a woman McMann, what can she do?" To which McMann replies, "Oh, really. Well, Dugan...At one time Hacksaw Jim Dugan, the former king, had said that if Sherry wants to act like a man then people should treat her like a man." I think we can safely assume that Dugan was not speaking about equal pay or opportunity.

But this overt sexism begins to crumble when you take a closer look at what is happening in the match between Macho King and Queen Sherry on the one side and Jimmy "Superfly" Snuka on the other. In this match, Macho King, formerly Macho Man, Randy Savage wins because of Sherry's help, and wins with, of all things, a purse. Sherry and Macho King doubleteam Snuka, just as later in the event Zeus and the Million Dollar Man doubleteam Hulk Hogan and Jimmy "the Snake" Roberts. While Sherry is dressed in highheels and a red-spangled evening gown, her attire is hardly more feminine than the glitter and makeup worn by the wrestlers. Sherry's

costuming is just as functional, too, we realize as she kicks Snuka four times in the chest with her heels. Despite Sherry's submission to the snapping of Savage's fingers, Sherry is hardly demure or submissive during the match. Sherry is acting as Savage's manager during the match, and she screams out commands to him throughout it--yelling "get him, get him." Sherry's active participation in the match only begins with her highheels. Sherry chokes Snuka with her pursestrap, unhooks Macho King from the ropes, gives him her purse to hit Snuka in the back with, is choked by Snuka, and saves Macho King from being flattened by Snuka's jumping off the ropes on top of him.

Most of this particular match is not about suffering, but about double-entendres and ambiguous gender roles--this is the match of the purse. Ventura cannot understand why the match continues after the purse has been used and the purse has been won. Why does the match continue as Ventura says bewildered, "He's already won the purse,"--the prizemoney. In the incident where Sherry saves Macho King, McMann says, "Snuka should leap on both of them. Leap! Leap!" To which Ventura replies, "What courage by Queen Sherry, saving the king, putting her body on the line for the King."

The Macho King/Snuka match is not the only one where women or feminine attributes are degraded. However, such incidents of female bashing, instead of separating gender roles more rigidly, create an ambiguity about the wrestler's gender. Rowdy Roddy Piper, always ready with a topical allusion, spends most of the time before his fight with Haku, a member of the Henan family of wrestlers, comparing his opponent to a woman. Piper starts out comparing Haku to a woman whom only Leona Helmsley could compete with as 1989's woman-the-public-most-loved-to-hate, "When I get through with Haku...he's gonna be crying like Zsa Zsa Gabor in court, only her hair looks prettier; she's probably smarter." Piper gets even more vicious later--of course, Haku's manager, Bobby "the Brain" Henan, has called him "that dumbbell in the dress." (Piper wears a kilt.) Piper's plans for Haku do degrade women, but their main thrust is to undermine Haku's masculinity: "You know where I come from what they do with weasels when they got too many family members? We get 'em fixed. Course they gain weight and you say, well what would you do with Boobsie then? Well, that's okay cause people'd be chasing 'em." Even the Bushwhacker brothers, Butch and Luther,

those Australian swamprats in camouflage pants and army boots who have a habit of licking each other on the face, have this encounter with the Announcer Mean Gene. Butch and Luther each lick Mean Gene on the face. Gene's response? "Not on the lips, fellas, I might get emotionally involved."

Some of the signs of race and class in wrestling almost attain the clarity of wrestling's physical gestures. For wrestling is much clearer about which race and class wins, and should win, than it is about the importance of masculinity. Hulk Hogan and Ted Debiassi's match provides a typical example of wrestling's mythology of race and class. Ted Debiassi, the Million Dollar Man, is cast in a composite role of High Roller/Business Tycoon/Slave Owner for this match. Debiassi wears a shiny black tux with glittering gold lapels and gold usher stripes with a large gold dollar sign on the back, small black dollar signs on the lapels, a gold lame handkerchief, diamond studs and a gold cummerbund. The Million Dollar Man has purchased an "insurance policy" for this match: his slave, Zeus, the Human Wrecking Machine, a large black man who grunts and flexes while Debiassi speaks, and who is only ever allowed to shout out one sentence--after the match. As Debiassi says, interspersed with evil laughter, "I buy only the best--the purest gold, the clearest diamonds, and Zeus...Money will talk, and Hogan will walk, if he's able...I know the price of success and I'll pay it...I have the resources to get the job done." All the promotion and aftermath for this event are phrased in business terms. For instance, announcer Jessie Ventura's forecast for the match is "I predict that tonight Hogan will take the biggest beating since Donald Trump whomped Merv Griffin in Atlantic City." Hogan's boast before the event extends the business terminology even further than the Million Dollar Man's boast did: "I plan to use the Hulkamania system of checks and balances, brother. Not only will I balance out, I'll carry the load all the way to the bank and we'll cash in. Zeus has gotta be your biggest investment and your greatest find, man. The thing is, to be the player of this game, brother, ya gotta be a majority stockholder. And to get the majority stockholder position, you gotta beat me, brother. But you can't do it, because I've invested all my assets wisely, dude. I've invested in the future of all those little hulkamaniacs. And with the big bankteller in the sky on my side, Mean Gene, not only will I bankrupt the Million

Dollar Man and turn his pockets inside out, if Zeus gets in my face, me and all my Hulkamaniacs are gonna wipe him out too."

Hogan, the golden boy of wrestling, the suntanned surfer boy with his rock star gestures like ripping his t-shirt off and throwing it to his adoring fans, Hogan, everybody's brother, man, can beat the big bad financier at his own game. Debiassi is labeled upperclass not only by his diamonds and his ownership of Zeus, but also by his diction. Debiassi's grammar is correct and he does not use much slang. Hogan, on the other hand, like most of the wrestlers, uses "gotta", "ya", "ain't", "dude", "man", "brother", etc. Debiassi, as a representative of the upper class loses his match against Hogan, of course. Zeus, as a representative of an ethnic minority had previously lost his three matches against Hogan that year, despite his strength and size advantage.

Though any kind of white man can win his match in wrestling, even the Bushwhackers, aka the Marching Morons, representatives of ethnic minorities, who at least now are allowed in the ring, only win against each other and sometimes not even then. In the Main Event match between former tagteam partners Tito Santana, who wears a red sombrero and lightning bolts on his white trunks, and Rick Martel, the Italian style boy who calls himself, "the Model," and who calls Santana, "the refried beanbrain," both wrestlers were disqualified after their match turned into a free-for-all as their buddies on the sidelines stepped into the ring to turn it into a four-corner circus.

So, while wrestling has changed since Barthes' day, some of the significations are really still the same. The mythology of the American formula for success in wrestling is you should be male, white, and middle to lower class, but you should also be aware of what is going on in the world in order to use it to your own advantage. You should not be over-educated--for instance, you should not speak standard, grammatically correct English--but you should be able to read, or at least, to understand a television newscast. More importantly, you should know how to protect the bottomline of your financial statement; even if you, like the Million Dollar Man, have to take out a bonecrushing insurance policy. While Elvis is still alive in the person of the Honky Tonk Man and the American flag is alive and well on the royal cape of Macho King and in the hands of the Fabulous Rougeau Brothers, even if they do wear Fleur-de-Lis

costumes, just as visible in Glitterland are Wall Street and West Berlin.

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Jill Hall

#### Endnotes

1. Roland Barthes, "The World of Wrestling," *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (1972 New York: Farrar, 1987) 18.
2. Barthes, 19.
3. All wrestling quotes are from the telecast of the October, 1989 Saturday Night Main Event in Cincinnati, Ohio whose main match was between The Million Dollar Man and Hulk Hogan.
4. Barthes, 23.
5. Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Berkeley: California UP, 1985) 110.
6. Barthes, 25.



# Popular Culture and the Great Debate: The Canon and The Comics

A specter is haunting faculty debates in colleges and universities all around the nation. It is the specter of "the Core" or, as it is sometimes called, "General Education"-- those basic courses that every college graduate should take. But the debate does not stop with just the courses; rather, it includes what the student should read and ponder in those same courses. The extreme positions have been well defined and publicized. On the one hand stands Allen Bloom, author of *The Closing of the American Mind*. Bloom, with eloquence and passion, argues the case for a narrowly defined "Great Books" program anchored in Plato's *The Republic*. On the other extreme stand the stalwarts at Stanford whose motto is "Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western Civ. must go." To Bloom the basic truths are to be found in a narrowly defined set of traditional texts; to the other extreme, those "basic truths" are a set of ideas, goals, and values designed to insure that western white males maintain their hegemony over minorities both around the world and at home. While the typical university campus will have representatives of both extremes, the real debate is centered somewhere near the middle.

In the remainder of this space I would like to argue the case for a fairly traditional core of courses with a reasonably traditional set of texts. The basic reason for my traditionalism is deep-seated. I believe that one goal of an American university is to point its graduates in the direction of living a full life outside the university. They can achieve this at a minimal level without knowing much about the non-Western world. I do not think such a situation desirable, but it is minimally acceptable. They cannot live such a life without knowing what the American and Western experience is about. This, I think, is beyond discussion. I also believe that one's formal education is but a start down the road of learning, and I believe that this start is best begun by acquiring a solid grounding in one's own culture.

I received my undergraduate education at one the nation's lesser bastions of the Liberal Arts, New Mexico A&M, now New Mexico

State University. However, even in that benighted mesquite grove of academe the faculty had a fairly good idea of what it meant to be an educated person and they did their best with the unpromising material that passed through their hands. For example, the school had a required general science course for all non-science Arts and Sciences majors designed to turn out a person who could read the Science section of *Time* magazine and understand it. As a young "intellectual," that seemed rather pedestrian to me. As a middle-aged historian, it now seems to be not a bad idea at all. I relate this story to put in context my goal for Arts and Sciences students. I think they should be sufficiently grounded in the Western tradition to read and understand the daily comics. Before you set this aside in disgust, let me add but a few examples of how our future leaders, the graduates of Duke, Brown, Stanford and other elite institutions where opposition to the Western tradition, as it is commonly defined and studied, is strong, are going to be left sitting at their breakfast tables some future morning wondering just what is supposed to be so funny in their daily comics.

I have picked this area with malice aforethought. It is an area not commonly identified with what might be called high culture. My purpose in using it is to demonstrate just how crucial a working knowledge of Western Civilization is to understanding our society.

Let us begin with the comic strip that is the oldest of my three examples, "Peanuts." Herein are examples, two specific and one general, that I would like to focus on. The first is "Snoopy" in one of his many manifestations. How, pray tell, can you truly enjoy his adventures in France without knowing who the Red Baron was and what is going on between the two? And where do you get that sort of knowledge if not from Western history? Second, why does Schroeder play Beethoven instead of Led Zeppelin (and incidentally where did that group get their name?), or an even more subtle question--why not Mozart? Again, from whence comes your answer if not from an understanding of the Western tradition? The general example from "Peanuts" is that of Linus and his biblical speculations. To be sure, Charles Schultz deals skillfully with his readers' probable biblical illiteracy. He spells out the point of each comment very well. (I believe that he is also a wise and kindly man; perhaps he feels sorry for those of his readers who did not receive their educations at the

New Mexico A&Ms of this world.) But you miss a good deal of the nuance and subtlety of the strip if you do not have a broad knowledge of the sacred canon.

My second example is from a newer strip, "Fast Track". In this strip one of the major characters is a hard-bopping feminist with the delightful name Wendy Rommel. (Her name itself carries a certain amount of intellectual baggage.) She is married to a genial slob named Art Welding and she is pregnant. They are discussing what to name the child. She has several suggestions, Gloria Steinem Welding, Betty Freidan Welding, and so forth. He raises the question of what to call the child-to-be if he is a boy. She rises to the occasion with two inspired choices--George Sand Welding or George Elliot Welding. That, I submit, is a marvelous feminist joke. But I must also note that when I read it I had a vision of Duke, Brown, and Stanford graduates looking up at their well-educated spouses and asking what in the world the punchline meant. For their sakes I hope their spouses attended a backwater college like New Mexico A&M.

For a third example I refer to yet another new strip, "Funky Winkerbean." This strip, set in a modern American high school, their mascot, the Scapegoat (once again a broad smattering of biblical knowledge makes a good joke better), has an interesting cast of characters. One of the principal figures, the Band Director, is constantly involved in fund-raising activities on behalf of his band. His chosen vehicle is, of course, the Band Boosters' Club. They apparently have a sizable bank balance, and the computer, which handles their investments and has a mind and voice of its own, has michandled the funds. It has placed all of the Boosters' funds in the Silas Marners S & L. As an aside, I might add that the Band Director, furious at the computer for losing all the money, asks it why it didn't invest in something safe like U.S. Treasury securities. The computer, in its defense, asks the director if the money should have gone into a fund whose owner is three trillion dollars in debt. As in the earlier case of "Fast Track", here again is a very topical joke with a clear antecedent in English literature. Again I hope that those academicians and their followers who find Western Civ. repugnant didn't miss the joke, but in my limited experience with those of their ilk, I have not noticed a well-developed sense of humor welling out of them. That snide comment aside, I do think we will be cheating their

students if we deprive them of the opportunity to enjoy to the fullest this, at times, rather subtle strip.

My last example, "Calvin and Hobbes", is in many ways the most subtle and best of all. It has two principal characters, the first a six-year-old lad who is the personification of the Puritan's unregenerate man. He is the embodiment of the consequences of original sin. His name interestingly enough is Calvin, a name not entirely unrelated to his nature, nor is it a name without some meaning in educated circles. His almost constant companion is a tiger, life-sized and animate when just the two of them are present, small and stuffed in the presence of a third person. The tiger's name is Hobbes. His name, like that of his friend Calvin, is not without some significance in the Western tradition. Hobbes has some of the characteristics which his namesake wrote about and discussed. These two names carry a certain intellectual baggage; they stand for specific ideological positions and they were not chosen accidentally. Calvin and his behavior are rooted in the Calvinist tradition, and Hobbes, on occasion, is quite Hobbesian. To be sure, Hobbes the tiger is not always completely Hobbesian, but then Hobbes the philosopher was not always completely Hobbesian either. Two examples from the strip should suffice. The two are in bed and Hobbes announces that he is hungry; Calvin notes that it is a long time until breakfast. Hobbes observes that it is a brave man who will sleep with a hungry tiger. The last picture shows Calvin in front of the open refrigerator door, asking if a tuna sandwich will be okay. The second example also occurs at night in bed. Calvin asks several very Calvinist questions: "I wonder why man was put on earth? What's our purpose? Why are we here?" Hobbes gives a very Hobbesian answer: "Tigerfood," and grins a very toothy grin. Calvin looks apprehensive. I am not insisting that one need read the original Calvin and Hobbes to understand the comic strip. I am strongly suggesting that a knowledge of the originals and their thought makes the contemporary Calvin and Hobbes more interesting.

I hope I have made my point on the pervasiveness of the western tradition in our lives. I could, of course, cite other examples such as Mother Goose and her dog Grimm and cat Attila, a strip with a heroine named Ophelia Rosencrantz, or Prince Valiant and his recent search for Prester John, but that might be academic "overkill."

The point, I hope, is a simply one. Education is a major item in the budget of every state. It is a major item in the federal budget. It takes up a major portion of local tax revenue, and heaven knows how much is spent on education in the private sector. If, at the end of a sixteen-year process involving who knows how much money per student, we turn out college graduates who cannot fully comprehend and appreciate the comic pages of the daily newspapers, then we have not been very good stewards of the public treasury.

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# Lessons From Hollywood: Feminist Film Theory and the Commercial Theatre

My purpose in this paper is to explore the relationship of feminist criticism written about the live theatre, with the more established feminist scholarship that has analyzed mainstream, Hollywood film. I want to suggest that contemporary feminist film theory, with its interest in the mainstream sector of the art form of film, can offer a great deal of help to those critics who are committed to the attempt to forge a more populist live theatre. This would seem to be useful as it is generally accepted that the legitimate theatre has progressively become an increasingly elitist institution, largely irrelevant to the public in general and to the working-class in particular, while mainstream film and television enjoy a prominent position in the cultural fabric of contemporary American society.

In short, I want to determine whether the critique of film scholars--which has progressed from merely denying that the Hollywood cinema had any populist impact, to a revisiting of the possibility for female dialogue within its patriarchal constraints--could be used as a model for encouraging the response of reluctant theatre scholars to the commercial, live theatre. The result might be a challenging of elitism and the promotion of theatre that will be important in the lives of a mass audience.

Feminist film theory should be of great interest to the theatrical populist. Unlike broadly similar work within the live theatre, it has often focused on a well-known and easily definable "dominant" text (the commercial, Hollywood cinema), meaning that the work has looked at film that attracts wide, popular audiences. Feminist film theorists have attempted to understand exactly how the audience for a dramatic work interacts with the artwork in question, and how that relationship affects the production of meaning. Equally importantly, many feminist critics--including Annette Kuhn, Maria La Place and Judith Mayne--have acknowledged the complexity of this performance/audience relationship and they have tried to explain why the popular taste (especially, of course, that of women) takes the shape it does, a

finding obviously relevant to anyone committed to expanding the theatre's relationship with populism.

The idea of popular theatre learning from Hollywood is, of course, controversial. For one thing, Hollywood's principal motivational forces are financial, which accounts for its paramount interest in fulfilling audience tastes. Many theatrical populists consider any compromise between popular theatre and such inherently decadent commercial forces to be anathema. These theorists often ignore the existence of a commercial sector of the live theatre, or alternatively view it as a spectacle-laden lost cause, and have little or no interest in that sector becoming more populist, preferring instead to focus on the fringe theatre.

Feminist critics, on the other hand, have been interested in mainstream, commercial film from the early seventies onwards. The first wave of critics--like Molly Haskell and Marjorie Rosen--essentially approached such films sociologically, listing the kind of roles in which female characters could be found. More recent feminist critics have noted the limitations of Haskell's assumption that dramatic characters can be equated directly with women who have a real-life existence--critics using the ideas of structuralism and semiology point out that such characters can be more accurately seen as a collection of signs and symbols that govern the film's narrative.

Feminist film theorists--such as Laura Mulvey--have been particularly active in the approbation of psychoanalysis and, specifically, Lacanian, theory. Such ideas are particularly useful when it comes to explaining the popularity of the dominant film. Mulvey argued that a viable alternative to the dominant film can be fashioned only if certain aspects of it are first understood and then broken down--especially the inclination of the cinema to build the way a woman is to be looked at into the spectacle itself.

Although Mulvey's insistence that the dominant cinema be broken down is a problematic one, especially as she advocates an audience freed from voyeurism, allowed the unlikely privilege of indulging in "dialectics [and] passionate detachment,"(1 ) her work was seminal in the field because she analyzed the appeal of the mainstream and the popular. Whatever action is to be subsequently taken (and it is true that Mulvey offered nothing appealing to replace the "voyeuristic active-passive mechanisms of the dominant cinema"(2 ) that she so detested; there seems no reason why an

audience used to voyeurism would feel motivated to pay good money to participate in dialectics or detachment), that knowledge is pivotal. Its importance makes it all the more surprising that an adequate similar analysis (one, that is, with an adequate critical base) has not been attempted within the live theatre.

Sue-Ellen Case, one of the few scholars to apply ideas from feminist film theory to the live theatre, has pointed out the applicability of Lacanian theory. Despite being careful to point out "whereas in film the principal means of organizing the gaze is the camera, a different set of dynamics applies to the stage,"(3) Case shows the close relation--at least in feminist terms--of the two art forms. The idea of the male "gaze" can certainly be effectively applied to the theatre, as Case aptly demonstrates:

a play induces the audience to view the female roles through the eyes of the male characters. When the ingenue makes her entrance, the audience sees her as the male protagonist sees her. The blocking of her entrance, her costume and her lighting are designed to reveal that she is the object of his desire. In this way, the audience also perceives her as an object of desire, by identifying with his male gaze.(4)

Case rather glosses over the fact that much of the film theory she draws upon was derived from an analysis of the dominant film, and she has trouble identifying a corporate body of the live theatre that can function as the antithesis of all that is feminist, in the manner of the ubiquitous Hollywood products that were once easily attacked. She argues that the texts of various classical dramas--from *Hamlet* to *The Glass Menagerie*--are told (textually) from the point of view of the male protagonist, with weak female characters, but one could question the extent to which Shakespeare or even Tennessee Williams make up the true commercial, or dominant, theatre. It would have made more sense to analyze the more popular play of the last twenty years (the work of Neil Simon or Alan Ayckbourn, for example) if the translation from film to theatre were to be strained as little as possible. Such playwrights, of course, lack academic legitimacy, which perhaps accounts for Case's reluctance to consider

them in detail. She also makes little attempt to discuss why people apparently derive so much pleasure from melodramatic and other mainstream forms of drama.

The solution to the foregrounding in the theatre of woman as object is, for Case (as it was for Mulvey), the construction of an alternative that would deny the male spectator's pleasure from viewing the woman as an object of sexual desire. Case's alternatives, like Mulvey's, are highly problematic, not least because they retreat into the area of fringe or alternative theatre where theatre and populism tend to part company. Case ultimately resorts to celebrating the work of Monstrous Regiment (a fine, but *alternative*, feminist theatre group that fights the patriarchal dominance of the theatre), or the plays of Caryl Churchill and advocates the formation of a new, feminist poetics. Her concluding assertion to that end is positively cathartic in tone. The only solution must take place outside of the dominant culture. Once the patriarchal forms of representation have been deconstructed:

the stage can be prepared for the entrance of the female subject, whose voice, sexuality and image have yet to be dramatized within the dominant culture . . . The feminist in theatre can create the laboratory in which the single most effective mode of repression--gender--can be exposed, dismantled and removed.(5)

One is left bemused as to exactly how the female subject will enter. Will this relegate to the point of worthlessness all theatre that does not follow the new poetics? Will the female subject enter from within the mainstream theatre, or from within the alternative, fringe sector. Will anyone be in the audience when she enters? Without an understanding of the pleasure mechanisms of the dominant theatrical forms, it seems doubtful anyone could persuade an audience to embrace such radical revisionism.

The question, then, remains as to where this feminist revolution will leave the popular audience, and whether or not it is possible to create a new poetics embraceable by a populace who prefer to attend the work of Wendy Wasserstein or Marsha Norman to the avant-garde. Psychosemiotic revolutions are of little use to those who have

not heard of the term, nor for those who have not been persuaded to enter the theatre where such revolutions are planned to take place. Artists and cultural theorists, whatever the powers imbued them by the ascendancy of the sign, cannot become effective reactionaries or revolutionaries unless someone (arguably, a good many people) is or are watching their work.

In other words, one can find in Case's work a problem similar to that of many of the other theatrical critics who write from a revolutionary standpoint. In the first instance, little attempt is made to ascribe any value at all to the commercial theatre, which is relegated to the position of a non-art form worthy of attack; there is no acknowledgment that the reaction of a spectator (whether male or female) to the dominant theatre may be ambiguous and nowhere near as clear-cut as Case suggests. In other words, subversion and subversive or oppositional readings on the part of an audience apparently exist only with the creation of a radical, alternative theatre which seems--given its radical political posture and self-styled "guerilla action"--to inevitably be relegated to the fringes. From that position, perhaps, it will be praised in academic journals, watched by intellectuals (largely feminist, if the art work is critical of patriarchy), and studied in universities. Yet it will pass the general populace by.

Case is not the only feminist critic whose emphasis and purview is the alternative, fringe theatre. Helene Keyssar devotes lengthy chapters in her book, *Feminist Theatre*, to the fringe playwrights--such as Megan Terry or Michelene Wandor--whose work has been largely outside of the commercial theatre, whilst grouping together commercial playwrights--such as Wendy Wasserstein or Marsha Norman--in a brief collective chapter perjoratively entitled "Success and its Limits."(6)

Keyssar's main point is that the commercial playwrights are effectively poor relations of their more academic, theoretically correct friends--"dramas by women that have achieved commercial success tend to take fewer theatrical risks and to be less threatening to a middle-class audience than those performed on the fringe of the theatre establishment."(7) She casts her argument to suggest that any show that is popular is inevitably less good. She has this to say about Mary O'Malley:

*Once a Catholic* is not a failure or a corruption of feminist theatre, it is just not enough. The positive aspect of its commercial success is that it makes us want more of O'Malley. Her next play, *Look Out, Here Comes Trouble*, explores the landscape of a mental institution, and does probe more deeply into the dilemmas of women, especially in relation to men. Indicatively, this play never achieved the popular success of *Once a Catholic*.(8)

The implication is that the populace at large will only accept superficial plays, profound plays being destined for popular rejection. This is an assumption for which Keyssar presents very little evidence. While it may be true to suggest that the hit, commercial shows by and about women have remained on relatively safe terrain, Keyssar make no attempt to assess the impact of these shows on their audience (generally much larger in size than those addressed by their more ideologically sound counterparts). Just as Mulvey did not address the ways in which a viewer interacts with the screen to produce meaning, nor does Keyssar consider the ways in which a viewer interacts with the stage. Both critics suggest that this whole area is absolutely quantifiable, rather than in any way ambiguous. The latter explanation seems much more likely to be the case.

Instead of bemoaning tokenism, it would be more useful to analyze the abilities of these dramas to undermine the dominant ideology of the commercial theatre. Keyssar, of course, approaches this argument from the other direction--suggesting that the commercial forces undermine the artistic intentions of the playwrights. While there is value in noting that any production can subvert the intention of its playscript, that does not justify this blanket dismissal of the ideological impact of work by Marsha Norman, Catherine Hayes, Nell Dunn, Wendy Wasserstein and Mary O'Malley:

The weakness common to these plays is inherent in their particular strengths: no matter how serious the topic, they are all comedies of manners, revelations of the surfaces of sexual identity and

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sexism; they are not challenges to the deeper social structures that allow these manners to endure.(9)

Such a stance is extremely simplistic. It assumes that the commercial and the shallow are synonymous (and that the comedy of manners can have little ideological impact), which are inaccurate generalizations. Keyssar also implies that she, herself, knows in some concrete manner the only methodology by which theatre can challenge the deeper social structures of society. Given the lack of knowledge about the nature of the impact of the political theatre on an audience, such information seems unlikely to be in Keyssar's hands. Her position can be construed as the embodiment of an unsubstantiated bias against the commercial theatre.

She is not alone in that bias. Karen Malpede states her position clearly and succinctly in her preface to her book, *Women in Theatre*. The implication here is that feminist work and the commercial theatre are mutually exclusive entities:

I wanted to make a volume of theoretical writings by women who, no matter what their particular craft, had created or envisioned entire theatres which, for the most part, existed outside a commercial mainstream. I have been more interested in aspiration and persistence than in fame and profit. I wanted a volume that would speak to young women of a brave heritage, reminding each of us that theatre must be created anew by each generation.(10)

Whilst there is certainly a case for foregrounding the work of women from outside of the commercial theatre, the omission of the mainstream--apparently on some kind of moral or political grounds--makes the book pointlessly incomplete. Ironically, there is actually no shortage of work celebrating the feminist fringe. Yet relatively little has been said about women who enjoy or work within the commercial theatre.

Contrary to Malpede's implications, it could be cogently argued that there is no branch of the theatre that requires more aspiration and persistence than the commercial theatre. Moreover, her use of the word "profit" suggests (unfairly) that those who choose to work

within the "commercial mainstream" have profit as their primary motivation, rather than reaching as wide an audience as possible, which is equally likely. Given the huge sums of money to be made in the mass media, there would seem to be few playwrights in the commercial theatre for financial gain.

Jill Dolan's consideration of *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* does include an analysis of mainstream theatre--Dolan devotes a chapter of her book to the 1983 Broadway production of Marsha Norman's *Night Mother*--but her analysis is enormously problematic, not least because it completely ignores the play's impact on its audience.

Dolan approaches her study of the production from a theoretical position that is inherently unsympathetic to the commercial theatre, and she essentially selects tenuous examples that back up her commitment to an alternative theatre. I do not want to imply that Dolan's findings are not in many ways useful, because she arrives at many interesting and accurate conclusions. Her major emphasis is on what she terms the "gender-biased politics of reception," and she finds that the critical response to the production was polarized around gender politics, with the (predominantly male) mainstream critics marginalizing the play by responding to such things as the performers' physical appearance or the play's focus on domestic issues, and by refusing to accept its universality. In short, Dolan found that sexist male critics were desperately trying to find some way to contextualize the playwright "that would avoid threatening the male dramatic bastion." (11)

Although Dolan's findings aptly illustrate the sexism of the New York literati (which is hardly a controversial finding), they do not justify her oppositional stance towards the commercial theatre. She argues with very little evidence (beyond a design concept that differed from Norman's instructions in the script) that the Broadway production compromised its author's intent, suggesting (again, without much evidence) that the author is inevitably powerless in the face of institutional approbation. "Her collaborators . . . imposed their own readings," (12) complains Dolan, as if such compromise cannot apply to an equal extent within the non-commercial theatre. Dolan even goes so far as to suggest that the literary industry were in a league of conspiracy with "Norman's collaborators," against the play's universal vision. That is obviously absurd.

Although such conclusions are strained at best—especially as they stand without any comment of agreement from the author in question—Dolan's most significant omission is her lack of interest in the audience, and in whether or not this play was able to have any impact despite the alleged constraints of the commercial theatre. Critics, after all, are not members of the popular audience, and the latter attended this play in great numbers. Dolan seems to ignore this fact—even though *'Night Mother* arguably reached a more mixed, less politically committed audience (and certainly a much larger audience) than the typical piece of alternative theatre, or the typical performance art offering in the East Village, which Dolan devotes a good deal of her book to celebrating.

Alleged political compromise aside, *'Night Mother* did run for 388 performances on Broadway, winning a Pulitzer Prize, attracting numerous press articles, and eventually being made into a film. Although Dolan notes that this play's popularity was so great that it brought in \$10,000 a day at the box-office, at the height of its popularity, she uses its popular appeal as fuel for her theory of institutional approbation, which completely ignores its significant impact on a large number of theatre-goers. Although Dolan justifiably criticizes the tendency of the press to focus on Norman's femininity (especially her love for knitting), the fact remains that a work with feminist sympathies did attract the attention of the popular press. By virtue of its success in the commercial theatre, *'Night Mother* perhaps reached the uncommitted, the unacademic and even the non-middle class.

Although I do not mean to imply that Dolan's revelations of latent sexism are not accurate, I suggest that any critique of the allegedly nasty commercial forces, and their ability to subvert a successful play's political or feminist ideology, should be accompanied by a consideration of what the play actually achieved. *'Night Mother* played to thousands of people, yet that seems not to arouse Dolan's curiosity. She also appears uninterested in what accounted for its popularity, whether a subversive (or at least an ambiguous) reading can be made of the production and whether the commercial production was, at least, better than nothing. It is unreasonable to view a sexist response on the part of male critics as negating the worth of an entire production—and there is a danger that the critic who is unsympathetic to Broadway will find evidence of

tampering with universality, feminism or the author's integrity, even when none actually occurred. Dolan's approach insults the audience by not ascribing them any discriminatory powers (beyond enjoying the perception of the mainstream), whatsoever. There is a need for a counterbalancing argument.

Such a counterbalance can now be found within feminist film theory, and the developments in theatrical criticism have lagged behind the more inclusive and liberal approach of the feminist film critics. These latter critics have now gone a stage beyond that exemplified by Mulvey: by revealing the limitations of approaching feminist film criticism from the point of view of disavowing every element of the dominant, mainstream cinema. These critics have now turned their attention to the way in which women used the mainstream cinema as a means of communications, despite its inherent barriers and obstacles.

Feminist critics have been giving increasing attention to what Lucie Arbuthnot terms "readings against the grain."<sup>(13)</sup> Arbuthnot herself has suggested, for example, that the film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) contains a systematic undercutting of dominant ideological themes (such as heterosexual marriage), and suggests some resistance to female objectification—even though the film may have been directed with the typical male audience member in mind. In other words, the film—which, incidentally, has been seen by huge numbers of people—can be viewed in two ways. It is at once a piece of generic, hegemonic propaganda, as well as a subtle, subversive expression of feminism. Critics Maria La Place and Judith Mayne reached a similar conclusion about the film *Craig's Wife* (1936).<sup>(14)</sup> Writing about the well-known melodrama *Stella Dallas* (1937), Linda Williams found that the film's central character is essentially a grotesque parody of femininity.<sup>(15)</sup> Williams argued that *Stella Dallas* was a film that searched (through the methodology of exaggerated characterizations that intentionally undermine the film's credibility as a piece of domestic realism) to locate spaces whereby women could speak to each other within an infrastructure so outwardly dominated by patriarchy.

Similar interpretations have been made of more contemporary films. Robin Wood, for example, has eloquently argued that the "generalized crisis in ideological confidence" that characterized the decade of the seventies can be read clearly in the ideological

ambiguity (even ideological opposition or subversion) of mainstream, Hollywood films like *Taxi Driver*, *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* or *Cruising*.<sup>(16)</sup> This led Wood to the intriguing conclusion that "we can go back to Hollywood in the seventies as a period when the dominant ideology almost disintegrated."<sup>(17)</sup> What is interesting about Wood's look at the mainstream cinema is that it asserts that some films offer more complex experiences for the viewer than first meet the eye. Wood is arguing that although radicalism may be taboo on the surface of mainstream, Hollywood products, that does not mean that commercial films cannot acknowledge and house oppositional interpretations. Such is the "incoherence" of many of the supposedly mainstream films of the seventies, Wood argues, that it can only be resolved "through the adoption of a radical attitude."<sup>(18)</sup> In other words, an ambiguous, incoherent piece of dominant film can demonstrate the incapacity of the system, and the dominant ideology, to resolve the dilemmas such a film raises. Thus, a piece of Hollywood fare like *Taxi Driver* "testifies eloquently to the logical necessity for radicalism."<sup>(19)</sup> It all depends on one's individual reading of the film.

It is appropriate to conclude with a clear statement of the message from feminist film critics that wholesale rejection of the dominant texts is problematic, as is an examination of the work of fringe artists (be they in film or theatre) without a consideration of their impact on an audience. To use Mayne's words: "(the) context for discussion . . . needs to be opened up a bit."<sup>(20)</sup>

The same could be said about the relationship of feminism with the live theatre. We should open up the discussion to include the mainstream and the commercial sectors of the theatre. For all theatrical capitalism's sins, any discussion of populism and feminism within the theatre is otherwise incomplete.

Lucie Arbuthnot has argued that

it is time that feminist film critics move beyond the analysis of male pleasure, in order to destroy it, to an exploration of female pleasure, in order to enhance it. Feminists who make films aimed at destroying men's pleasure are in fact making films that men rarely watch. And these films also perpetuate a male-centered view of art-making in

their very opposition to men. A more important task, I believe, is for feminists to explore in greater depth our own pleasure in watching traditional Hollywood films.(21)

I would argue that Arbuthnot's comment has important ramifications (and implications beyond the circle of feminism) for the theatre. First, there is an implicit acknowledgement in the above quotation that, whatever the effects of the cinematic avant-garde, the dominant cinema will always be the main point of interaction with the art form for most women. The same could be said of the theatre, and it would better behove critics like Keyssar to follow Arbuthnot's advice than to merely attack the commercial theatre in an unfocused manner. That is to say, there seems more point in considering *how* audiences interact with a commercial play than attacking it simply on the grounds that its popular success, and commercial sector production, somehow necessitate ideological compromise.

With apologies to Aubuthnot, it also seems that her argument can be extended beyond feminism. If the feminist avant-garde is making films that men rarely watch, then the theatrical avant garde is making plays that women and men rarely watch. If avant-garde feminist films perpetuate a male-centered view of art-making in their very opposition to men, then the theatrical avant-garde perpetuates an elitist, class-centered view of art-making in its very opposition to the dominant theatre. It is a more important task to explore how dominant theatre creates pleasure, how its ideological base can be extended, and how it can be made to attract more diverse groups of people.

In short, feminist theatrical criticism has seemingly not progressed beyond wholesale support of the avant-garde, and the negation of the commercial theatre as being hopelessly patriarchal and generally negative. Film theory, on the other hand, seems much more open to notions of ambiguity, the possibility of readings against the grain, and the importance of the audience in the production of meaning. For the theatre, the main lesson from feminist film theory is the importance of the recognition of why dominant forms of drama have the popularity that they do and an understanding of the absurdity of critiquing dominant or avant-garde theatre without

considering its effect on an audience, and the parameters of those reactions.

Finally, I suggest that, like the film critics discussed in this paper, theatrical populists could gain a great deal from a recognition of the likely continuing nature of the primary position of the dominant, commercial theatre, at least in terms of reaching larger audiences, and a willingness to simultaneously recognize the problematic nature of hegemony and an ideology that represents only the interests of a narrow, ruling class, coupled with a willingness to work within these parameters to establish channels of discourse in a apparently hostile territory.

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#### Endnotes

1. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3,6.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 119.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 132.
6. Helene Keyssar, *Feminist Theatre* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 148-167.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
10. Karen Malpede, *Women in Theatre* (New York: Drama Book Publishers, 1983), p. xiii.
11. Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988), p.19.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
13. Lucie Arbuthnot, *Main Trends in Feminist Criticism: Film, Literature, Art History - the Decade of the Seventies* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1982), p. 229.

14. Judith Mayne, "The Woman at the Keyhole: Women's Cinema and Feminist Criticism," *New German Critique*, no. 23, 34-35 (1981). This film was based on the stage play of the same name by George Kelley.

15. Kaplan prefers to see *Stella Dallas* as a piece of patriarchal propaganda. See her article on the film in *Heresies*, 16 (Autumn 1983), 81-85.

16. Robin Wood, *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 46-69.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

20. Mayne, p. 39.

21. Arbuthnot, p. 218.

## *The Silence of the Lambs:* A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing?

*The Silence of the Lambs* by Jonathan Demme is a potentially ambiguous film, filled with its own symbolism of sexuality and filmed with a camera as perverse as Dr. Lector himself. People are not who they appear to be and strive to define themselves through false images. Clarise Starling is the young FBI recruit who identifies so completely with her father, a sheriff for a small West Virginia town, tragically shot when Clarise was a child, that she seeks to mold herself into a part of his world—a man's world of law enforcement. Buffalo Bill, the serial killer, has been abused as a child and now hates his own identity so much so that he seeks out female victims through which he can transform himself into a "thing of beauty."

Although on the surface this film appears to give Clarise a voice, on a deeper level it portrays the complicity of the victim in victimization by paralleling her struggle to gain acceptance in a male-dominated world with Buffalo Bill's murderous search for transformation. It is from this perspective that we see that the film truly, belongs to Dr. Lector, the brilliant psychiatrist imprisoned for cannibalism, in spirit as well as vision. Like Lector, the camera can see what is undetected and undetectable by the ordinary person. The camera can easily delve into the minds of the characters and then just as easily leap outside to watch, uncover, and devour.

The camera does, of course, at times create a subjective identification with Clarise, but never for very long. Often the camera seems to wander away from Clarise, examining the surroundings to suit its own ends, jumping ahead of her as she threads her way through the various mazes through which she must pass on her journey of acceptance, or simply watching her, detailing the fear she is experiencing.

The issues of camera identification and symbolism are important in determining this film's message about women in society as well as sexual roles and their importance in general. Through these the film asks visually: What does it mean to be to a woman in this society? What does it mean to be a man? Are the differences

inherent in our natures, or merely a product of the symbols and images which surround us and against which we hold ourselves?

The controversy surrounding this film reflects not only the complexity of the film itself but, more importantly, the degree to which these questions are unanswerable. When faced with powerful, fictional imagery projected as a facsimile of "reality" (with regard to the degree to which questions of verisimilitude are answered by modern cinema and its technically sophisticated audience), repressed groups, such as women and homosexuals, are offended deeply, precisely because they are unable to point to satisfactory societal images of themselves in "reality".

That this is not a woman's film is clear. That Clarise is the "lead character" does not in itself guarantee that the film is developed from her point of view. Through both the camera-work and the storyline, we are shown how she is cut off from her own identity, manipulated by the two major male characters and terrorized by the third. From the beginning the camera is above her, trained on the gray, misty sky seen between silhouetted branches. It then cranes down to the obstacle course. Clarise is seen as a tiny struggling figure, straining toward the camera. She makes the incline and is now held in close-up as she turns her head deciding which way to go next. All of this is done in a single take and lends a sense of foreboding to the opening of the film. This foreshadows the mazes, both physical and psychological, which she will face and also the preference of the camera to capture her indecision and struggle.

Throughout the opening sequence the camera is generally ahead of her, sometimes even circling her as she attempts some strenuous maneuver. As she makes her way to Jack Crawford's office for the first time, the camera is more interested in how she appears to others than how she sees the world through which she is moving. A large man walks from behind camera to inform her that she is wanted by Crawford and we are struck by her diminutive size. Also the camera zooms in and holds his face in close-up after she has exited the frame. He is a granite-faced white male wearing an FBI cap and she is a soft-spoken little girl. Next we see her as a soft gray figure descending into the building's entrance followed by not only the camera, but also the stares of the numerous male recruits exercising together. From there the camera watches her from outside the building which she has just entered. When the camera does enter the

building itself, it waits for her from room to room. At one point the camera has become so engrossed in detailing the objects which line a hall shelf, that it very nearly misses her entrance into the extreme right-hand portion of the frame as she she walks through to her destination. In fact it isn't until she is confronted with the clippings regarding Buffalo Bill which are tacked up in Crawford's office that we, the audience and the camera, really see what Clarise is seeing. Point-of-view shots and even basic eye-line matches are held to a disturbing minimum where Clarise is concerned. Situations involving fear or her attachment to the past are those wherein the camera identifies most strongly with Clarise. Of course as a psychiatrist, Dr. Lector is concerned with these same situations regarding Clarise.

The strongest example of the conflicting statements made by the camera about Clarise involves the sequence at the funeral parlor where Clarise will experience first-hand the handiwork of Buffalo Bill. First we are given the world around her. Crawford asks the local sheriff to adjourn to another room to avoid discussing this "sex" crime in front of Clarise. As he and the sheriff leave, the camera pans from face to face (at a slight low angle to emphasize their imposing stature) as the male officers, one by one, fix their stares upon Clarise (shot at a slight high angle to emphasize her lack of physical presence). When the camera cuts to her reaction, we see her squirming, anxious. She turns her back to the men and, consequently, to the camera as she fidgets with her coat and scarf. Then something catches her eye. At this point the camera becomes undoubtedly subjective as Clarise walks toward an open casket. Here we are seeing more than what Clarise is seeing in a strictly material sense; we are now seeing what she is thinking, what drives her, what clouds her vision. As she nears the casket the camera cuts to a view from inside the casket to reveal the ten-year-old Clarise mourning the loss of her father, a man who in life, must not have been too far removed from the sensibilities of the men who had previously made her so uncomfortable.

Here is a paradigm for the thorny issue of identification seen in various sequences throughout the film. Demme's camera at once assaults Clarise with her "differentness" from the world around her and then identifies with her deluded perspective, thus creating a disturbing dialectic which drives the entire film, a dialectic examined by Lector and exploited by Crawford. Her relationships

with Jack Crawford and Dr. Hannibal Lector epitomize the conflict between what the world wants of her and what she does not understand about herself.

Crawford is the restrained, rational demanding father figure from whom Clarise seeks approval. It is he who assigns her to the "interesting errand" which introduces her to Lector. She defers to Crawford, caters to him, and is hurt, but nonetheless loyal to him. Through him she can complete the role of the loving daughter denied her by her father's death when she was only ten years old. She "reads" him like any good daughter or wife would, so that without a word from him, she will act to please him. She interprets, assumes and expresses his emotions for him. Although Crawford will never openly commend Clarise for her "feminine" powers of empathy and will, in fact, discourage her from displaying them too flagrantly (from a telephone exchange regarding the death of Miggs: Clarise, "I don't know how to feel about this?" Crawford, "You don't have to feel anything about it."), this will not stop him from using them to his advantage and savoring their favor. Crawford stresses to Clarise that she must reveal nothing personal to Dr. Lector ("You don't want Lector inside your head.") but that is precisely what Crawford expects to happen. Crawford is as capable of manipulating Clarise as is Lector.

The sequence which best illustrates Clarise's daughter-like attention to Crawford takes place in the examining room of a small town funeral parlor. The camera opens the scene with a close-up of Crawford shouting to be understood over the telephone, then the camera pulls back to reveal the hubbub of officers passing out coffee cups, talking distractedly around the corpse on the table. Clarise had been preparing ink for fingerprints when Crawford's shouting captures her attention. Clarise (positioned at the lower right-hand portion of the frame) turns her back to the camera to face the officers and Crawford and then asks the officers to leave the FBI personnel to their work by thanking them for their "sensitivity". As they leave, Clarise steals a glance toward Crawford, now speaking freely as the initial shot is reversed to close-in on Crawford's satisfaction.

His place over her is reinforced through the shot-countershot exchanges between them. He dominates the left-hand portion of the frame while Clarise is relegated to the right. In our left-to-right reading culture the left is the area of visual control, the area to

which our eye initially seeks out information. The right indicates weakness, passivity. On the right, you are the last thing to be noticed. The focus also questions her authority. Often when Clarise is shown in tight close-ups, she is held in soft focus while Crawford or Lector are held in crisp focus. The use of this soft-focus technique in a film about a young FBI recruit cannot be written off to the aesthetics of glamour. The aggravating manner in which Clarise slips in and out of focus begs many questions: Is this done to show that women see men clearly and that men see women indistinctly? Or, rather, does this imply that the men in this film possess the true vision and it is Clarise who is clouded?

Dr. Lector, whom I have mentioned as embodying the spirit of the film, possesses a "clarity" of mind which is truly compelling. Amid all the amateurish mind games being played out by all the characters involved in the film, he, oddly enough, is the one character most helpful to Clarise. If Dr. Lector had been a character from a 19th century novel, he would have been described as having "gone native". Although his travels did not take him to darkest Africa to encounter the cruelty of Western Progress visited upon unsuspecting natives, they did take him into the darkest heart of the troubled, repressed souls of 20th century America. Lector has seen clearly the horrors both trivial and mammoth which have plagued his patients and he has decided that they deserve them.

Despite his grisly crimes, he is a seductive character. Clarise is just as riveted by his grace and taste as is the camera. When questioned by Clarise about his drawings, Lector explains that he has memories instead of a view. He wheels around, turning away from Clarise. The camera follows him, rising above him. His powers of description, of discernment, of suggestion are made visible by Demme's camera. With the light pouring down upon his face, his eyes gazing up into the camera, we can almost believe that the light is from the sun and that we are looking at him through that window he craves so deeply, the view he has created.

That the balance of control is in favor of Lector is shown during the first "quid pro quo" sequence, when Clarise is shot from a high angle and Lector from low, but more striking are the shots of Lector's face when he has turned away from Clarise. We do not see Lector from her point-of-view. We simply see Lector. He is so much stronger, so fully realized that he steals the camera away from her.

He knows the answers to all of Clarise's questions but he wants her to look within herself for them. He has always known the identity of Buffalo Bill. He is moved to help with the case only through his attraction to Clarise.

That the film is shot almost entirely in faded blues and grays with splashes of red associated only with Lector further asserts not only his character (cannibal) but his dominance as well. Unlike Clarise and the others who restrain and repress their inner passions and present only a faded mask drained of color and truth, he is whole, flesh and mind. Red bathes Clarise's face as she views a photo indicating Lector's cannibalistic tendencies. Reds and golds surround him in his cell in the Shelby County War Museum. Blue is cool and analytical. It is the color of most police uniforms. It represents the world of which Clarise wishes to become a part. Red is passion. It is emotional. It represents all things which frighten Clarise, all the things from which she is running away.

Lector confronts her with the sexuality which she has tried to repress, with the responsibility she feels for her being different (i.e., attracting the stares of men and exciting them sexually, exciting them to violence by merely existing). Lector draws upon her feelings to find the answers to her questions and rejects her textbook analyses. The reason she does not recognize Buffalo Bill's pathology is that it is too close to her own. The reason she is so easily led astray by surface details is she is unaware of her own self-denial--her own struggle for acceptance through transformation.

Lector helps Clarise by explaining Buffalo Bill to her, explaining that he is not a homosexual/transsexual but only affects those mannerisms to conform to the expectations he believes society has of him. The audience, however, comes to know him visually through the animal/insect symbolism which surrounds him. The camera travels through his house, concerned with the clutter of objects piled on top of one another, not him. The Death's Head Moth is his calling card. The sewing room of the first victim is papered in a butterfly print with a couple of inches of horses and saddles left exposed around the doorjambes to show this had once been a boy's room. It is here in this room that Clarise realizes that she is close to finding him. Buffalo Bill owns a white toy poodle, the most effeminate of all dogs. Again and again Buffalo Bill is described visually through effeminate mannerisms and images of transformation and while they

serve to show that he is trying to mask his true identity, there exists the danger that these visual cues will merely reinforce negative stereotypes which depict homosexuals as aberrant and dangerous.

The animal symbolism associated with his victims also has the potential to reinforce negative stereotypes about women. Cats represent Buffalo Bill's victims. Both Frederica Bimmel and Catherine Martin own cats. It is Frederica's cat which leads Clarise to discover the sewing room. It is Catherine's cat which is held in close-up as Catherine is driven off by Buffalo Bill. Cats are seen in this culture as fickle, feminine. They are associated with intuitive thinking. By and large, men in this culture do not like cats--they don't come when they are called. Dogs, however, are seen as loyal, masculine. They are associated with determination and straight-forwardness. After the ten-year-old Clarise greets her father (in a flashback), the camera pans away from them to follow a pick-up truck with a hunting dog in the back. Clarise would not have seen this from the angle chosen by Demme's camera, so it must be there to indicate the course she will take in life. She will strive to be a protector, a hunter of man. Women are also associated with sheep as the title suggests. Clarise relates to Lector the childhood trauma of the lambs in the slaughterhouse and her attempt to rescue them. The lambs of her memory were as helpless to understand that the people who had raised them were now going to kill them as the female victims were to understand the violence visited upon them by men who were supposed to protect them.

Through this animal imagery, Demme assigns codes by which to judge sexual roles. What appears to be "socially correct" behavior is exhibited in the traditional western reading of the animal symbols chosen for the characters. When the characters align themselves with the "socially incorrect" animal imagery they lose sight of their true identities. Both Clarise and Buffalo Bill covet false images and both will kill in the process of attaining them.

Clarise succeeds in killing Buffalo Bill and the final sequence involving her shows her entering the male world she has coveted. In a tight close-up we see Crawford shake Clarise's hand while in voice-over he states: "Your father would have been proud." Her transformation has been somewhat more successful than that of Buffalo Bill - "somewhat" because she achieved her success over Buffalo Bill alone. Throughout the film the men are shown to array

themselves in groups (the men exercising, the sheriff's officers, etc.). Clarise is alone either by choice or because she has been purposely excluded. She relates her discoveries regarding Buffalo Bill to Crawford who cuts her off by telling her that he already knows the identity of the killer as well as his whereabouts. After all her work on the case, she is denied participation in the actual bust by Crawford. He has assembled an all-male force to capture Buffalo Bill. All this information is exchanged over a telephone line. Clarise is calling from the home of the first victim, while Crawford receives her, cruising overhead in a special military aircraft. This emphasizes his control, his access to the machinery which keeps the society in check, under his surveillance. But for all his seemingly omnipresent control wielded from the top of the social machine, he cannot solve a mystery which Clarise solves alone, using the sensitivity and intuition of a victim and, most importantly, the guidance of Dr. Lector.

Lector is always at the center of this film. Clarise is reminded by Crawford, in her last scene, that she has a telephone call waiting. It is Lector. He has escaped to a tropical island. Clarise, in a panic, looks to Crawford (her source of acceptance into a masculine world of reason and law) who is ascending the stairs to leave. The camera cranes up above her as she repeats, "Dr. Lector", into a telephone receiver. This last image of Clarise reminds us not only of danger posed by Lector but also of the danger lurking behind her own facade. The camera shifts to Lector as he stalks his former tormentor, Dr. Chilton. Once again Lector has stolen the fire from Clarise.

By ending with Lector, any question as to whether Clarise is or is not a strong female character is moot. No truly positive images of women are shown--women are either victims of a male world or, as is the case of Clarise, assimilated into a male world. And Buffalo Bill's attempt to assimilate himself into an imaginary female world is repulsive and regressive. Time and time again Clarise is shown to be trapped in a male world--seeking approval from the very world which trivializes her strengths.

The psychological games, the loaded imagery are all woven far too intricately to detail in this short analysis, but the theme of false identification is central. Both Clarise and Buffalo Bill are striving for an externalized unity with their surroundings. Where the true images of men and women are to be found is not addressed in this film,

we are only shown the madness which stems from not fitting in with the imagery society provides.

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# Christian Science in the Gilded Age: Its Philosophical and Intellectual Challenge

The philosophy of Christian Science is both simple and profound. It rejects materialism and reinterprets transcendentalism to mean the perfectibility of man through spirit rather than flesh. While many American philosophers of the post-Civil War era eagerly acclimated themselves to a harsh materialism, Science demanded the recognition of an older truth: The presence, in all humankind, of God's eternal, immutable law.(1)

The thrust of the conventional intellectual attack was directed at the originality, validity and progressiveness of Christian Science. Intuitively, the idealism of Science was more attractive than the selective, patrician doctrine of Herbert Spencer; rationally, Darwinist cynicism negated progress. In order to defeat Science, Darwinists were obligated to defend the worthlessness of humanity and the righteousness of poverty. In any age, the defensibility of this position is questionable.

The relevance of Christian Science to the society of the late nineteenth century was questioned by several American thinkers. The Science philosophy was more vulnerable than most because it appears that the germ of it did not originate in the mind of Mary Baker Eddy. The fact that Mrs. Eddy was not absolutely candid, often contradicting her previous pronouncements on the movement's birth, merely compounded the confusion and gave the philosophical argument against her a measure of credibility which it otherwise would not have possessed.

Mrs. Eddy's second husband, Daniel Patterson, was captured by Confederate soldiers in the autumn of 1862. Disheartened and physically unwell, she travelled to Maine to take a cure with a physician named Phineas Parkhurst Quimby. They met on the brisk October morning in a year when Mary Baker Eddy was particularly receptive to revelations.(2)

At the time of confrontation, was Mrs. Eddy already groping toward a new approach or was her mind activated and subconsciously motivated by Quimby? Even her official biographer

hedges(3) because, in later years, she denied any Quimby influence, stating that the latter was a magnetic healer while she was a spiritual one.(4 ) All that can be said for certain is that the Belfast doctor was a leader of the mental healing movement in the United States(5) and that he attempted to identify his theory with theism. "He believed that God must reveal himself to a scientific age through law . . . and if this was so, then the saving knowledge of His holy laws must come as an eternal science."(6)

Mary Baker Eddy was treated by Quimby from October 1863, until his death in January 1866. The assertion that she was stumbling toward a personal philosophy prior to her treatment is unproved.(7) Evidently, Mrs. Eddy's affliction was mental because Quimby cured her to the extent that she never had to visit a regular doctor for her chronic aches and pains. Quimby impressed upon her his conclusion that disease was both caused and cured by the mind. Before 1866, Mrs. Eddy publicly denied that Quimby's cure was "electromagnetic" or hypnotic; she declared that it was both spiritual and truthful.(8)

After Quimby's death, his disciple, Julius Dresser, felt himself inadequate to the task of perpetuating the mental healing philosophy. At this time, Mrs. Eddy's confidence in the deceased leader's teachings remained unshaken. Sometime between 1866 and 1872, probably during the genesis of her first work, *The Science of Man*, Quimby's philosophy was submerged in her own.(9)

Through the forty-year reshaping of American philosophy, 1870 to 1910, Christian Science was claimed to have had antecedents other than Quimbyism. At times, it was believed to be regressive, a "recrudescence" of Mrs. Eddy's "youthful memories" bred in a New England atmosphere where Shakers prayed and Bible-thumping ministers shattered the stillness with their tirades. It was also traced back to Charles Poyer's 1837 study of animal magnetism and even further back along the same route to Mesmer.(10) Idealist philosophers, (11) American spiritualists(12) and Oriental asceticism(13) were also tossed into the Christian Science grab-bag.

In the first decade of industrial consolidation, intellectuals found it difficult to criticize Christian Science because it appeared to be a religion but claimed to be a science.(14) Moreover, Mrs. Eddy shared with Herbert Spencer a contempt for mortal man which belied her transcendental belief in the upward progress of the human spirit.(15 ) Her view of God was, in many ways, as inexorable as

natural law. As envisioned by Mrs. Eddy, the triumph of the spirit would occur when material humanity yielded to the love of God, realizing its helplessness before the divine law.(16 ) Her belief that evil was unnatural seemed to agree with the prevailing materialistic ethic(17) but her subsequent rejection of materialism(18) defies categorization of this sort.

In the 1870s, the contradiction in her thought was already apparent; her denial of matter,(19) sickness, sin and death was "sensational and sinister" to Herbert Spencer.(20) And to more progressive minds she seemed conspicuously uninspired: "There is no indignation . . . There is no pity for the sufferings of those around her; the long tragedy of human history leaves her unmoved."(21)

Before the end of the first complete postbellum decade, Mrs. Eddy became obsessed with malicious animal magnetism (the "evil eye"); shortly, her morbid preoccupation became a doctrine: she conceded the existence of evil – something she had never been willing to admit (except to the extent that it exists in "mortal" mind).(22) Ostensibly, the tenets of her faith were so relative that they could be interpreted as an affront to both pragmatists and Social Darwinists. Consequently, neither philosophy truly accepted Science, and bombardment from both camps was inevitable.

A fresh, energetic philosophy initiated by the Quimby clique challenged Christian Science in the 1880s. Julius Dresser and Walter Felt Evans, a Methodist minister, developed an optimistic theory which did not contradict the laws of evolution. New Thought utilized the Quimby belief that mind and matter were separate; although physical disease existed, it stemmed from a basic unsoundness in the mind. Their acknowledgment of the reality of matter led them to the conclusion that cures were effected through the use of mental healing in conjunction with formal medical care. They held that absent treatment achieved satisfactory results in some situations but, for the most part, an essential physical relationship between doctor and patient was most conducive to the latter's well-being. Finally, they trusted in the power of positive thinking. Concentration on the "higher life" would, in their opinion, reduce mental disorders, thereby preventing somatic ailments.(23) Hence, New Thought did not deny the existence of matter or disease; it merely affirmed the power of the mind.(24)

The two Quimby supporters had excellent grounds on which to attack the originality and radicalism of the Eddy doctrine. Speaking at the Church of the Divine Unity in Boston, Massachusetts, on February 6, 1887, Dresser declared that Christian Science was fathered by P.P. Quimby and that a manuscript stolen from him by Mrs. Eddy supplied the impetus for her writings.(25) Credence was lent to this argument in 1921, when Dresser's cousin Horatio published the Quimby papers. Horatio Dresser arrived at the conclusion that Mary Baker Eddy most assuredly "borrowed" from Quimby in formulating her own ideas; he also alleged that Quimby's mode of healing was primarily spiritual, relying on the divine presence. Every reference he made to Mary Baker Eddy attempted to confirm the truth of this twin assumption: "The turning point with Mrs. Eddy, as with all who came to Dr. Quimby was . . . the silent, spiritual treatment which she received. . . ." The manuscript entitled "Questions and Answers," appearing at the end of each edition of *Science and Health*, was alleged to be the stolen document referred to by Julius Dresser and formerly entitled "Extracts From P.P. Quimby."

In conclusion, both Horatio Dresser and George Quimby (the mental healer's son) said that the system of therapeutics called "Christian Science Healing" was stolen from Quimby. However, both disclaim responsibility for the religion of the same name. In a letter from Belfast, Maine, written in 1901, George Quimby declared that "the religion she teaches certainly is hers for which I cannot be too thankful; for I should loathe to go down to my grave thinking that my father was in any way connected with Christian Science."(26) By the close of the 1880s, people who had once been sympathetic toward the Eddy philosophy began to cry fraud.(27) Although New Thought was utopian, it did not deny matter, sickness or drug cures and was not, like Christian Science, inviting attack as a "theory which contradicts scientific laws that we see proved everyday."(28)

The approach to the problem remained the same until the dawning of the new century. In the nineties, it was still believed that God left man to work out his own salvation; that the task was being accomplished through science and man's intelligence and that Christian Science, denying the natural (i.e., material and physical) goodness of man, was a deviation from nature and was, therefore, fallacious because "nature is one with the highest life."(29) The Christian Science philosophy was still "unthinkable. . . [and] . . .

extravagant,"(30) derived from the rather doubtful creed of Quimby.(31)

During the last decade of Mary Baker Eddy's life, progressives and the twilight of Social Darwinism combined for a final philosophical salvo against her. In the Progressive era, the denial of matter meant the denial of the scientific age and the ability of man to shape his own destiny. John Churchman railed against the notion of non-existent evil in a society where corruption was shamelessly flaunted; he called the Science system a philosophical heresy and its innovator a dilettante and a fanatic.(32) The concept of matter as an illusion(33) seemed closely allied to Social Darwinism in its denial of poverty and its blithe disregard for those on the lower rungs of society. The crux of the argument was that "matter" [e. g., the new scientific discoveries and technological advances of the twentieth century] was saturated with God; to say that God revealed himself to man in any other way was a monstrous belief.(34) The chief indictment of progressives against Christian Science was that "it tended to shut off the current of growth and lock the wheels of progress."(35)

However, the progressive intellectuals were split. To Benjamin O. Flower, editor of the muckraking *Arena*, materialism had paralyzed virtually an entire country; Christian Science was the last expression of moral idealism left.(36) A theistic idealist, Gerhardt Mars, identified Mrs. Eddy with the culmination of the philosophical concept of man's spiritualization. Although he approved of mental healing, he believed it to be most effective when proper medical precautions were taken. In a figurative sense, he interpreted Mrs. Eddy's philosophy to be the beginning of man's victory over death--humanity would master its material environment and build a new heaven on earth. (37) Joel Rufus Mosley, a young American thinker, demonstrated the relevance of Christian Science to Platonic idealism and the subjective idealism of Berkeley, Kant and Hegel.(38) Thus, the morality, idealism and spiritualization of Christian Science were regarded by some as manifestations of modern idealism rather than an ill-conceived delusion.(39)

Christian Science was buffeted in a philosophical crosscurrent. If progressives were not completely sold on her theories, neither were the right-wing naturalists. Henry White called the movement a "medieval revival"(40); others claimed it was a regressive step on

the evolutionary scale, a return to primitive existence.(41) Frank R. Medina presents a comprehensive critique of Science in which he proves himself an ardent advocate of Spencer:

From the standpoint of evolution . . . Christian Science is a movement backward. . . to primitive man. . . where all phenomena were caused by spirits. . . [and] disease and death. . . [were] produced by supernatural beings. . . It (Christian Science) is a cult that retards the natural evolution of religious ideas. . . it is a cult that retards secular ideas as it mixes natural with supernatural which is primitive. Christian Science, by rejecting secularism, is barbarous . . . .

While experience is the foundation of reality, continued the writer, dreams are the foundation of supernaturalism. Primitive man could not distinguish his actual beliefs from his unconscious dreams because, to him, both seemed real. As man progressed, his intelligence evolved and his dark, irrational self became less material and more spiritual. Christian Science proposed a return to primitivism by returning to the dream beliefs of early humanity. Therefore, Mrs. Eddy and her followers retarded human progress by invoking the supernatural against sin, in defiance of the scientific, rational age: "While the great white sun of science is strong in the outer expanse, the new cult leads the world back into the deserted caves of ignorance and holding up its glimmering lantern cries, 'Behold the light.'"(42)

Those who attacked the originality of Mrs. Eddy's thought have presented strong evidence to justify their position. However, those who group "Eastern asceticism, Hinduism and Quimbyism together(43) and call them all Christian Science precursors are mistaken. The riddle of Christian Science is explainable in terms of response to unique American problems. Spiritualism in New England, the teachings of Thoman Lake Harris and Andrew Jackson Davis, transcendentalism and pragmatism were reflected, to a greater or lesser degree, in the spiritual, heavenly optimism of Mrs. Eddy. Perhaps it is not the material exuberance fomented in an age of science and reform but neither was it the verdict of Spencer; it is the link between the two.

Mrs. Eddy did not plagiarize consciously from the writings of Quimby. When she first began to construct her theory she referred to his healing practices as the twilight of discovery. Quimby dealt with mind as an agency to heal the body. To Mrs. Eddy, the human mind was not the healer of disease -- only the principle of God could accomplish that, since that principle was divine and not human.(44) Many recent histories, including those of her supporters, acknowledge the debt Science owes Quimby(45). Mrs. Eddy's error was not in extending or modernizing Quimbyism; it was in opening the floodgates of criticism unnecessarily by denying her debt.

Was Christian Science philosophically in tune with the twentieth century or was it merely a spiritual manifestation of Social Darwinism? From the positive standpoint, the Emmanuel movement was regarded as an "Episcopal flirtation with Mrs. Eddy." Believing that mental illness could predate physical illness or vice-versa, the Emmanuels united clergymen and doctors in an effort to heal the mind and the body.(46) Emmanuelism, less divine but more material and pragmatic, completed the revolution begun by Christian Science.(47)

Though not a philosopher, Georgine Milmine found Mrs. Eddy's historical perspective narrow and uncompromising: "All the physical sciences are the harmful inventions of mortal mind and the slow. . .painful accumulation of exact knowledge has been but the baser element of human nature. There was never such a discouraging view of human history."(48) Yet, in another article, the journalist sneers at the new religion for appealing to materialism and perpetuating the fiction of a healthy society.(49)

The answer is simply that Christian Science philosophy belongs in two eras. It offered release to the businessman of the gilded age and hope to the rising middle and laboring classes in the next generation. Christian Science discarded and added, adapting to the needs of a dynamic society; it stood at the crossroads of American intellectualism. It moved hesitantly, slowly, leaving its mark on a new age, creating no philosophical revolution but, nevertheless, inciting to a new and evolutionary trends.

## Endnotes

1. Katherine Coolidge, "Modern Expression of the Oldest Philosophy," *The Arena*, VII, pp. 555, 559,562.
2. Georgine Milmine, "The Encounter with Quimby," *McClure's Magazine*, XXVII (February 1907), pp. 339-354.
3. Robert Peel, *Mary Baker Eddy: The Years of Discovery* (New York, Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1966), pp.167-168, 182.
4. Mary Baker Eddy, *Miscellaneous Writing 1883-1896* (Boston, Trustees Under the Will of Mary Baker Eddy, 1896), p.378.
5. Robert Peel, *Christian Science: Its Encounter with American Culture* (New York, Henry Holt, 1958), p. 114.
6. Robert Peel, *Mary Baker Eddy: The Years of Discovery*, p.179.
7. Georgine Milmine, "The Quimby Controversy," *McClure's Magazine*, XXVII (March 1907), p. 508. Four different dates were given for the discovery (1853, 1862, 1864 and 1866), two of which predate Mrs. Eddy's encounter with Quimby.
8. Robert Peel, *Mary Baker Eddy: The Years of Discovery*, p.178.
9. The most plausible explanation for this "defection" is that Mrs. Eddy was obliged to interpret Quimbyism her own way after the healer's death. Dresser's refusal to assume leadership played an important role in initiating the break. It is unlikely, though, that she remained loyal to Quimby's philosophy until 1872 when her own book was published. See Horatio Dresser, ed., *The Quimby Manuscripts*. (New York, 1921), pp 152-157.
10. Frank Podmore, "The Pedigree of Christian Science," *Contemporary Review*, XCV (January 1909), pp.43, 46; Rielly, *Psychological Review*, X, p.606.
11. Berkeley, Hegel, Plotinus, Kant, Socrates, Plato, Descartes, Locke, Leibnitz, Hume, Fichte, Huxley, Spencer and the Gnostics, are those to whom, some claim, Mrs. Eddy owes a debt. Others are less charitable, arguing that Mrs. Eddy stole her work from the truths of dead philosophers. Charles Braden, *Christian Science Today*, p. 31; H.S. Ficke, "Source of Science Today," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, LXXXV (October 1928), pp. 417-423.
12. Notably Thomas Lake Harris and Andrew Jackson Davis. See Wilson, *Hibbert Journal*, LVII, p. 164.

13. Bahai, Vedanta, Theosophy, Buddhism and Yoga. See F.F. Ellinwood, "Theosophy, Esoteric Buddhism and Christian Science," *Homiletic Review*, XXXVII (January 1899), pp. 15-20; Joseph Jastrow, *The Modern Occult*, *Popular Science Monthly*, LXVII (September 1900), p. 465.
14. Robert Peel, *Christian Science: Its Encounter with American Culture*, preface, xii-xiii.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 201-204.
17. Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health With Key to the Scriptures*, 11th ed. (Boston, Trustees Under the Will of Mary Baker Eddy, 1934), p. 130.
18. Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health With Key to the Scriptures*, p. 274.
19. Adrian Feverel, "Christian Science: The Cult of the Ridiculous," *Catholic World*, 96 (February 1913), pp. 655-660.
20. Benjamin O. Flower, "The Recent Reckless and Irresponsible Attacks on Christian Science Movement," *The Arena*, XXXVII (January 1907), p. 64.
21. Frank Podmore, *From Mesmer to Christian Science*, 2nd ed. (New York, University Books, 1983), p.291; Georgine Milmine, "Mrs. Eddy's Book and Doctrine," *McClure's Magazine*, XXXI (June 1908), p. 186.
22. Georgine Milmine, "The Revival of Witchcraft," *McClure's Magazine*, XXIX (June 1907), p. 339.
23. Frank Podmore, *From Mesmer to Christian Science*, pp. 255-259.
24. Georgine Milmine, "The Schism of 1888, the Growth of Christian Science and the Apotheosis of Mrs. Eddy," *McClure's Magazine*, XXX (February 1908), pp.390-392.
25. Julius A. Dresser, *The True History of Mental Healing* (Boston, 1887), pp. 15-17.
26. Horatio Dresser, ed., *The Quimby Manuscripts*, pp. 12-15, 154, 389, 433-438.
27. Georgine Milmine, "Literary Activities," *McClure's Magazine*, XXXI (October 1907), pp. 698-699.
28. Frederik A. Fernald, "Science and Christian Science," *Popular Science Monthly*, XXXIV (April 1889), p. 804.

29. J.H. Bates, *Christian Science and Its Problems* (New York, 1898) pp. 33, 141.
30. W.H. Mallock, *National Review*, XXXIII, p. 85; "Inoculating for Error," *Outlook*, XLIX (March 24, 1894), p. 527.
31. "Topics of the Times," *New York Times*, June 11, 1900, p. 6; *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, CLXV (May 1899), p. 845.
32. John W. Churchman, "Christian Science," *Atlantic Monthly*, XCIV (April 1904), pp. 433-438.
33. John Whitehead, *Illusions of Christian Science* (Boston, 1907), pp. 214-222.
34. Mary Platte Parmele, *Christian Science: Is It Christian? Is It Scientific?* (New York 1904), pp. 78-80.
35. B. Calvert, *Science and Health* (n. p., n. d.), p. 12.
36. Benjamin O. Flower, *The Arena*, XXXVII (January 1907), p. 63.
37. "Christian Science as the Ultimate Philosophy of Life," *Current Literature*, XLV (August 1908), p. 186.
38. Joel Rufus Mosley, "Christian Science Idealism," *Cosmopolitan*, XLIII (July 1908), p. 330.
39. Examining the same philosophers Mosley did, Frederik Muller arrives at the conclusion that Science was reactionary. See Frederik W. Muller, "The Essential Falsehood of Christian Science from the Standpoint of the Nineteenth Century Philosophy," *Westminster Review*, CLVIII (August 1902), pp. 179-186.
40. Henry White, "Christian Science: Medievalism Redivivus," *The Monist*, XVII (April 1907), pp. 161-172.
41. Charles W.J. Tennant, "Christian Science Healing." *Nineteenth Century and After*, XCVIII (October 1925), p. 563.
42. Frank R. Medina, "Dreams, Beliefs, and Facts," *Overland Monthly*, LIII (February 1909), pp. 148-152.
43. Clarence Batchelder, "The Grain of Truth in Christian Science Chaff," *Popular Science Monthly*, LXXII (March 1908), p. 211.
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47. "Christian Science and the Emmanuel Movement," *The National*, LXXXVI (June 25, 1908), pp. 572, 575.

48. Georgine Milmine, "Mrs. Eddy's Book and Doctrine," *McClure's Magazine*, XXXI (June 1908), p. 185.

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# Displaced People and the Frailty of Words

No urge seemed stronger to me than that for communication with others. If the never-completed movement of communication succeeds with but a single human being, everything is achieved.

—Karl Jaspers  
"Existenzphilosophie"

Contemporary films about difficult parent-child relationships often rely on a series of semiological puzzles, as the characters who solve the riddles gain love and self-awareness and those who fail to solve them face estrangement and self-doubt. In popular film dialogue, the viewer must deal with a post-Deconstructionist world in which language is simultaneously unreliable and richly suggestive. To some extent, the failure of communication lies in the nature of the tools we all employ. As T. S. Eliot writes in "Burnt Norton" (*The Four Quartets*):

Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still.(1)

In a discussion of the poetics of language, Gerard Genette writes that the "'perfect' or 'supreme' language does not exist, or if it exists, it is elsewhere; perhaps the 'good language' is always that of our neighbors."(2) Poetry, he says, exists only to "repair and compensate" for the defects in language: "If a language were perfect, poetry would have no reason for being, since it would have nothing to repair. Language itself would be a poem and poetry would be everywhere. . ."(3) The longing for words that will do justice to one's feelings and beliefs remains unsatisfied, as we shall discover through a brief study of

problematic dialogue in the award-winning films, *Ordinary People* (1980), *On Golden Pond* (1981), and *Terms of Endearment* (1983). In these central conversations, parents and children are unable to hear one another when one of them addresses core relational issues and the other talks of the mundane. The study focuses on the fabric of human conversation and the longing for understanding and connection in these three representative cultural films.

From 1980 to 1987, numerous articles appeared on *Ordinary People*, *Terms of Endearment*, and/or *On Golden Pond*. The articles dealt with everything from family mythology to family disintegration to the patriarchal crisis to the directing talents of Robert Redford in *Ordinary People*; from child abuse to cancer to mother-daughter relationships in *Terms of Endearment*; and from mortality to turning theater into film to the backflip as a symbol in *On Golden Pond*. Only a few articles addressed the structure of the films and fewer yet analyzed dialogue. None dealt with all three in a comparison of theme, appeal, etc. In a particularly incisive study of structure, Robert T. Eberwein discusses the ghost motif in *Ordinary People* (focusing on the Halloween trick-or-treat scene and the incident during which Beth is startled by Conrad as she sits in Buck's old bedroom). By dealing with these film situations, Eberwein engages one of the concerns of this article—the failure of communication between Beth and Conrad. "Now he stands outside the door," writes Eberwein, "having come apparently out of nowhere while Beth engages in her communion with the dead."<sup>4</sup> Although Beth communes with her dead son, she has lost touch with her living one.

The title of this study, "Displaced People and the Frailty of Words," alludes to a short story by Flannery O'Connor entitled "The Displaced Person," a tale about an immigrant, Guizac. As in all O'Connor stories, the plot is not the point. O'Connor is concerned in "The Displaced Person" with the failure of communication, the inevitable misunderstandings that will never be unraveled within the fictional text. The central example of this failure in the story involves a conversation between Mrs. McIntyre, Guizac's employer, and the local priest. While they talk, the priest is startled by the beauty of several peacocks, which symbolized for O'Connor the transcendency of Christ:

The old man didn't seem to hear her. His attention was fixed on the cock who was taking minute steps backward, his head against the spread tail. "The Transfiguration," he murmured.

She had no idea what he was talking about. "Mr. Guizac didn't have to come here in the first place," she said, giving him a hard look.

The cock lowered his tail and began to pick grass.

"He didn't have to come in the first place," she repeated, emphasizing each word.

The old man smiled absently. "He came to redeem us," he said . . . (5)

The dialogue, which results only in confusion for both Mrs. McIntyre and the priest, relies on the ambiguous pronoun "he": he "didn't have to come here," says Mrs. McIntyre, meaning Mr. Guizac (not understanding that according to Catholic doctrine, Christ, too, "didn't have to come here" or choose a martyr's life). He "came to redeem us" refers both to Christ and, as a reader learns later in "The Displaced Person," Guizac himself.

When Guizac eventually dies violently, Mrs. McIntyre is so deeply affected that she ultimately loses her farm. The immigrant and the prophet from Nazareth are both outcasts, but the two who profess to know them best (Mrs. McIntyre and the priest, respectively) are oblivious to the revelation. A man in awe appears "idiotic" to Mrs. McIntyre; Mrs. McIntyre's lack of compassion and distrust of others are revealed in her labeling Guizac an "extra" person in her world. The priest, who speaks only to himself of the significance of the life of Christ and his transfiguration, has no desire to connect with Mrs. McIntyre (beyond "blandly" reaching for her hand). O'Connor tells the reader directly that Mrs. McIntyre "had no idea what he was talking about." Later, the dialogue between them becomes more adversarial:

"For," he was saying, as if he spoke of something that had happened yesterday in town, "when God sent his Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ Our Lord"—he slightly bowed his head—"as a Redeemer to mankind, He. . ."

"Father Flynn!" she said in a voice that made him jump. "I want to talk to you about something serious!"

The skin under the old man's right eye flinched.

"As far as I'm concerned," she glared at him fiercely, "Christ was just another D.P."(6)

Committed to a belief in the holiness of Christ, the priest can no longer avoid the raw unconcern Mrs. McIntyre feels for the displaced of the world. The semiological puzzle is to some extent solved when the two realize they are interested in different things, but the two speakers remain isolated and estranged from one another.

Popular films with expert screenplays contain many such encounters and use dramatic monologue masterfully. When the stakes of missed communication are high, as in parent-child or romantic relationships, the failure is especially excruciating. In an essay entitled "The Museum's Furnace," Eugenio Donato acknowledges the "dream and hope of a total, finite, rational domain" of human wisdom but says that all must "come to realize that not only is knowledge as a given totality unavailable," "any act of totalization is by definition incomplete, infinite, and everywhere marked by accident, chance, and randomness."(7) In the flawed kingdom of film, failures and limitations are represented by human interaction, revealed in dialogue. Through pivotal conversations in which family members are unable to hear one another, one person often addresses core relational issues while the other talks of the mundane. For example, the priest and Mrs. McIntyre in "The Displaced Person" sound a great deal like Conrad and his mother, Beth, in *Ordinary People* as they strain to talk to one another in the back yard of their plush suburban home.

Beth sees Conrad huddled outside on a lawn chair. In an uncharacteristic effort to reach out to her son, Beth goes outside and tells him to put on a sweater. Conrad tells her how much he would like a pet; she interrupts and tells him how much trouble a neighbor's dog is. Reduced to rage that his mother does not understand his need for something to belong to him, Conrad shouts over his mother's voice, and when she continues talking, he begins to bark. She looks at him stoically and calmly tells him to put on his sweater if he plans to stay outside. Moments later, Conrad follows his mother into the

dining room where she is setting the table for dinner. "Can I help?" he asks quietly. Beth tells him to go upstairs and clean out his closet. His heart in his hands, Conrad says, "Mom. . ." The phone rings. Beth answers it, saying, "No, no. I'm not doing anything. Just getting ready for dinner." Conrad leaves quietly. Eberwein notes that Beth is "not the heavy" in the film, as she is considered by many critics. He refers to the anguish which communication causes for *both* Beth and Conrad:

They end up talking over each other's statements, and Conrad barks. Beth goes back into the house; her effort at being pleasant has failed, for Conrad has been *emotionally* cold to her in the chilly scene and rebuffed the only kind of warmth she is capable of extending to him.(8)

Similar failure to communicate occurs when the two pass in the hall at home:

"I didn't play golf today. It was too cold."  
 (Beth)  
 "How was your golf game?" (Conrad)  
 "I didn't play."  
 "Oh, it did get colder today."  
 "No, I mean for the year, it's colder."

It is no accident, of course, that Conrad, played magnificently by Timothy Hutton, is reading *Jude the Obscure* by Thomas Hardy in his English class. The displaced Jude Fawley finds human relationships obscure and suffers a series of losses. Hardy writes of Jude's continuing disappointments, "Events did not rhyme quite as he had thought. Nature's logic was too horrid for him to care for."(9) This despair is reflected in Conrad's own life. Those around him -- especially his mother -- are mysteries, and his feelings of isolation and rejection are unclear even to him. In dismay, Conrad turns to a psychiatrist, whom he hopes can master the hidden text of his life. The young man's cry, "We just don't connect!" summarizes his relationship with his mother, but it also is the theme and semiological center of the script by Alvin Sargent.

In *On Golden Pond*, the relationship between Chelsea (played by Jane Fonda) and her father, Norman Thayer (Henry Fonda), is symbolized by a provocative semantic war during a seemingly innocent game of Parcheesi. Chelsea equates her father's need to win the board game with his enjoyment of beating others in word games, games which have cost her the intimacy she craves. Unlike Mrs. McIntyre and Guizac, Norman and Chelsea eventually understand that they are no longer talking about an outside person or event but about their own relationship:

"Chelsea doesn't like playing games. . . We don't know why. Probably doesn't like losing." (Norman)

"I tend to panic when the competition gets too intense." (Chelsea)

"What I'd like to know is why you enjoy playing games." (Chelsea)

"Huh?" (Norman)

"You seem to like beating people. I wonder why." (Chelsea)

"What's that supposed to mean?" (Norman)

"Nothing." (Chelsea)

Evident throughout the film is Chelsea's anguished longing for connection with her father, sometimes hidden, sometimes expressed in jealousy or rage, sometimes acknowledged in embarrassment. By refusing to visit her father for long periods of time, Chelsea uses silence to express her pain. When Norman connects with Billy, the son of Chelsea's boyfriend, Chelsea says her father should have "traded [her] in" for a son. That jealousy sometimes is linked with anger: "I've been answering to Norman all my life," Chelsea tells Ethel Thayer (Katherine Hepburn), her mother. "It makes me so mad. Even when I'm 3,000 miles away and I don't even see him, I'm still answering to him." Chelsea also expresses her isolation and frustration in occasional embarrassed confessions of inadequacy: "I act like a big person everywhere else," Chelsea says. "I'm in charge of Los Angeles, and I come here and I feel like a little fat girl." Norman's inability to express his love for his daughter is mirrored in Chelsea's behavior toward him. As Ethel tells Chelsea, "But darling, you're wrong about your Dad. He does care. He cares deeply.

He's just an absolute muck about telling anyone." Without Ethel's facilitating the relationship between Norman and Chelsea, their longing to connect might never have been enough. After Chelsea and her father reach a reconciliation through the help of Ethel, subtle shifts in language once again illustrate the at least temporary transformation of the relationship. As Chelsea leaves, she says shyly, "Well. Good-bye. Norman. . . Dad."

In all three films, characters who are 1) trapped by the inherent unreliability of language as well as 2) enraged by their own inability to meet another family member on common ground remain frustrated and unsure of how to make their feelings clear. Expecting more from themselves, they feel more and more inadequate. It is Conrad of *Ordinary People* who best expresses this inadequacy: "I kept thinking John Boy would have said something about the way he felt." The reference to the perfect son depicted in the long-running family drama "The Waltons" indicates the insurmountable chasm between Conrad's desire to verbalize his pain and his mother's incapacity to hear him.

In *Terms of Endearment*, the stakes are even higher, as Emma Greenway (Debra Winger) and her mother (Shirley MacLaine) struggle to communicate after Emma is diagnosed with terminal cancer. Aurora Greenway is obsessively involved with her daughter from the moment we see her crawl into Emma's crib and make her cry (in order to reassure herself that Emma is still breathing). Emma's father dies, and Aurora alienates Emma's friends ("Sure would be nice to have a mother somebody liked," Emma tells her friend Patsy) and eventually refuses to attend Emma's wedding because she disapproves of Emma's choice of a husband. One of the first examples of the difficulty the two have in addressing central issues between them occurs when Emma and her husband, Flap Horton, move from Houston to Des Moines. As the family hugs farewell, Aurora clings to her daughter. Emma says, "That's the first time I stopped hugging first. I like that." Aurora replies, "Get yourself a decent maternity dress." Emma's disappointment lies behind her eyes as she says, "You had to get one in, didn't you?" In the cancer ward with each new treatment failing, Emma and her mother are alone. The desperate desire to connect is evident as each of them tries to stabilize the alternately troubled/tender relationship between them. Aurora tells her

daughter that she and Garrett Breedlove, the astronaut played by Jack Nicholson, are romantically involved again:

"And you know what?" (Aurora)

"What?" (Emma)

"I got up the nerve to tell him I loved him. You know what his reaction was? Emma?"

"I don't give a shit, Mom, I'm sick. Not everything has something to do with you. I've got a lot to figure out."

"I just don't want to fight anymore."

"What do you mean? When do we fight?"

"When do we fight? You amaze me! I always think of us as fighting."

"That's just from your end. That's cuz you're never satisfied with me."

Aurora doesn't reassure Emma, but she is there when Emma wakes briefly, moves her fingers slowly to wave good-bye, and dies quietly. The loneliness and loss overwhelm Aurora, as she hugs Flap and cries, "My sweet little girl. . . There's nothing harder."

No stranger to this brand of ultimate isolation and emptiness, Karl Jaspers explains in "Existenzphilosophie" why the human desire to "say" is so intense. He writes:

The emptiness caused by dissatisfaction with mere achievement and the helplessness that results when the channels of relation break down have brought forth a loneliness of soul such as never existed before, a loneliness that hides itself, that seeks relief in vain in the erotic or the irrational until it leads eventually to a deep comprehension of the importance of establishing *communication* between man and man.(10)

What Jaspers calls the "act of mutual discovery"(11) occurs only in communication, and he believes (like Saul Bellow in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*) that the individual is not born human but gains humanity through community, through what he calls "communication with

another self-being."<sup>(12)</sup> The sophisticated semiological tangles of *Ordinary People*, *On Golden Pond*, and *Terms of Endearment* are not lost on contemporary film-makers, critics, or viewers. While few of them will explain the gaps in meaning using terms such as "sign," "signifier," or "signified," art still imitates life, and most of us have felt the fear of losing something or someone because of an inability to articulate our need clearly. The very tools we choose are flawed. While this may be true, language also is suggestive and rich and allows for multiple levels of meaning simultaneously. In "From Work to Text," Roland Barthes reminds us that the "logic that governs the Text is not comprehensive (seeking to define 'what the work means') but metonymic." Making "associations, contiguities, and cross-references coincides with a liberation of symbolic energy,"<sup>(13)</sup> he states. Through a complex interchange between "revelation and concealment"<sup>(14)</sup> (terms developed by Wolfgang Iser), symbols come to life in our discourse. Although Conrad and his mother fail to understand one another, he and his father express their love for one another with intensity and vulnerability in the final scene of *Ordinary People*. Chelsea and Norman Thayer have their moments of gold in *On Golden Pond*, and Emma dies knowing she is adored by her mother in *Terms of Endearment*. As an argument for continuing the effort to talk genuinely with one another, Eberwein writes of the characters in *Ordinary People*: "In a world where we seem to be in the grip of circumstance, where people let us down, and where our anger prevents us from forgiving, love seems to be all we have."<sup>(15)</sup> The only avenue to love is speech.

The titles of the films themselves promise rich undercurrents of meaning and remind the viewer of the potential magic of language. In *Terms of Endearment*, for example, James L. Brooks intends the viewer to understand both the concept of "terms" as words or messages and "terms" as conditions. With the latter, the viewer encounters the insidious, implied, and secret terms on which our love for one another often is based. The title *Ordinary People* sets up the ironic possibility that while the characters may be representative, they will be unordinary in their interaction. In *On Golden Pond*, "golden" signifies Norman Thayer's eightieth birthday, the pond beside which the family gathers, and the yellow-orange hues of the late afternoon. Language thereby claims the power to challenge and reassure, but it reserves the right never to be taken for granted.

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Endnotes

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3. "Valery and the Poetics of Language," p. 364.
4. *Literature and Film Quarterly*, 11 no. 1 (1983), 9.
5. *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrer, Strauss and Giroux, 1973), p. 226.
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7. "The Museum's Furnace: Notes Toward a Contextual Reading of *Bouvard and Pecuchet*," in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josue V. Harari (New York: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 214.
8. *Literature and Film Quarterly*, p. 14.
9. *Jude the Obscure* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1978), p. 17.
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## ZZTop and the Regional Lyric Poetry of Texas

"The local is the only universal, upon that all art builds." Thus William Carlos Williams quotes John Dewey in talking about his long poem *Paterson*. Williams's claim is that the poet must discover the universal in the particular, that the artist's imagination relies upon the local as a starting point, an inspiration for its creative impulses. Williams's emphasis on the local has had a profound impact on contemporary poetry, and the work of Walt McDonald is no exception. Director of the creative writing program at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, McDonald writes poetry which draws its lifeblood from the physical and emotional harshness of the West Texas and South Plains landscape with its sandstorms, rattlesnakes, and monotony. Interestingly, the emotional harshness which is so pervasive in the landscape of McDonald's Texas is present also in the early music of the Texas rock 'n roll band ZZTop. Whether depicting a farmer trying to raise cotton on the drought-ridden plains or a laborer waiting all day for a bus crammed full of irritable fellow workers trying to get home, there is in McDonald's collection *Rafting the Brazos* and ZZTop's albums *Tejas* and *Tres Hombres* an overwhelmingly painful sense of the ultimate futility of all effort. But coupled with this feeling of futility is a rather spartan tone of celebration, a rejoicing in the stark, frontier-like beauty of the locale, the Texas landscape. In neither ZZTop's music nor McDonald's poetry does the pleasure, the celebratory tone, supplant the sense of pain and suffering so that an easy optimism results. Instead the pain of harshness and the pleasure of stark beauty are grafted together to represent each artists' vision of the local, of what is his Texas.

The main difference between ZZTop and McDonald is the tone of voice heard in their respective works. In ZZTop the prevalent voice is that of the street wise survivor who knows about drugs, prostitution, and the malaise of urban existence; McDonald, on the other hand, gives us the voice of a rural pioneer living on a frontier between the industrialized modern world and the rugged, desert-like landscape of the south plains with its droughts, tornadoes, rattlesnakes, and sandstorms. For all the difference of tone between ZZTop and McDonald, the end results of the songs and poetry turn out to be

quite similar. The harsh urban and rural existences have a hardening effect which instead of deforming or destroying the beauty of their depicted worlds, actually enhances their appeal and, indeed, becomes an integral part of the artists' finished product.

McDonald's Texas is a place where "A man riding alone carries his rifle for rattlers," but there are dangers worse than poisonous snakes in his world, one of which is the emotional deadliness of monotony. Boredom is an important theme both in McDonald's poetry and ZZTop's music. In the song "Arrested For Driving While Blind," the speaker's struggle against monotony takes the form of drinking and driving. "Now just the other night with nothin' to do / we broke a case of proof 102 / and started itchin' for that wonderful feel / of rollin' in an automobile." Booze helps cut through boredom, and the desire to drive "while blind," as the song says, gives the drinking a sharper edge. At the beginning of the song, driving itself suggests the sheer monotony, even futility, of moving through life; drinking, the song implies, can provide relief by adding a dimension of danger and unpredictability. But the speaker advises against his own solution: "when you're driving down the highway at night / and you're feelin' that wild turkey's bite / don't give Johnny Walker a ride / cause Jack Black is right by your side." The wild turkey's bite, the craving to drink, implies a need to combat the sense of futility, to discover something worthwhile in the passing landscape. But as the speaker says, the battle against monotony is dangerous; the harsh pain of reality and the joy of beauty are inseparably interwoven so that experience of one without the other is impossible.

McDonald's poem "Driving at Night Through Texas" is about a similar struggle with monotony. Here the speaker is driving through country described as "miles of the same / straight road rolling beneath us / like a player piano cranking the same old / country and western tune that takes us / home." McDonald's speaker is feeling "that wild turkey's bite," but instead of drinking, he proposes a solution which is at least as risky as giving "Johnny Walker a ride:" "I'd like to hit the switch / and drive in moonlight, but you believe / in deer and cattle-crossing signs . . ." To drive without headlights, essentially to drive "while blind," would vanquish the harsh monotony of the landscape, but as in ZZTop's song, the speaker of the poem cautions that the consequences of such an act are dangerous. In both the song and the poem, there is a sense

that one must not go too far in trying to overcome monotony. Each work warns against the deadliness of separating the painful experience of reality from a stigmatized pleasure in the beautiful: "don't give Johnny Walker a ride / cause Jack Black is right by your side" is essentially the same as saying "you believe / in deer and cattle-crossing signs." Jack Black and cattle-crossing signs represent the restraints, the reminders that reality can be harmful if ignored.

The enticement to "hit the switch," to drive "while blind" and disregard the signs and social stigmas associated with moving out of bounds is great, but the consequences of doing so can be fatal. Living on the edge, on the frontier where the monotony of social restraint can be challenged, McDonald's and ZZTop's characters must constantly guard against going too far, allowing themselves to become vulnerable. Hardness is a necessary attribute if one is to survive. Both McDonald's "Night of the Scorpion" and ZZTop's "Master of Sparks" examine the landscape's absurd and arbitrary threat of annihilation for those who are somehow off their guard. In "Night of the Scorpion" the speaker, who is a young boy, and his father wander too far into the wilderness, drawn in to explore the ruin of an old house and its "tumbling stones / of a chimney fallen to rubble years ago . . . ." The landscape here has reclaimed man's shelter, his necessary enclave against the ravages of time and nature, but the innocence of the young boy prevents him from realizing the potential dangers lurking in what was once a haven against the harshness of the landscape. When the poem opens, the speaker has already been stung by a scorpion and his father is absurdly searching through the rubble, trying to avenge his son's inevitable death. In a sense, he is also trying to kill the landscape, trying to prevent what has already happened, but his actions are futile and meaningless.

As the poem progresses, we see the effect of the scorpion's poison working on the speaker:

In fever I rolled and tossed, saw his shadow  
high in the willows, cast by the car lights,  
broad back and head like a stinger  
lunging from side to side, stones crashing  
like thunder, like ninepins in the mountains.

The allusion to Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" in the final line quoted hints at the speaker's movement deep into a wilderness that actually takes him beyond the natural landscape. As the speaker's condition worsens, the distinction between the real world and a surrealistic, almost supernatural world begins to blur: "steam rising from fissures screened demons / writhing and reaching for me. All night, / spiders died, mice died in their nests, / rocks burst and scattered like wind." In the last stanza, like Rip, the speaker has moved out of the dimensions of time and space which his father still inhabits.

All day the next day my father slept,  
unable to save me, his fingers raw  
to the bone, my whole foot cold, swollen,  
but a foot I could stand on  
down on the same rubbled earth.

Though the speaker has died, he has somehow become invulnerable, has become a part of the landscape, the "same rubbled earth" which has wounded him and still wounds his father whose fingers are "raw / to the bone." The father's futile attempt to kill the scorpion, to give meaning to the event which has taken his son's life, in other words to name what has happened, represents his failure to harden himself, to make himself invulnerable to the pain of reality. The poem itself however transcends the father's despair and vulnerability. Like the speaker's process of hardening, becoming invulnerable in death, which allows him to join with the landscape, the poem itself goes through a process of gardening, grafts the harshness of the young boy's death onto the wondrous, supernatural experience of moving beyond the dimensions of life.

In ZZTop's "Master of Sparks" we see the intrusion of the supernatural into a Saturday night world of celebration where drinking and street racing are the norm. The advent of God/Death comes in the form of a stranger who has brought his car into town to race: "A high class slim came floatin' in down from the county line." The speaker is with his friends "just gettin' right on Saturday night" when he encounters Slim, and from this point he loses control over his own destiny. The first active encounter is a sort of staring match between slim and the speaker and it is during this exchange of looks that the speaker allows himself to become vulnerable. In a sense, he

stares too long: "makin' eyes at me could not see just what was goin' on and then I took my first long look at the master of sparks on high." The last few words are a subtle allusion to Slim's identity as God. The speaker, by staring too long, allows Slim to see into his mind, to understand his weak spot, that is his fondness for fast cars. He is seduced by the stranger's ability to fulfill his fantasy of speed. Slim's machine, his dragster or "hog" as it is called in the song, suggests that dangerous frontier, that region to which both McDonald's and ZZTop's characters are drawn but over which they have no control. The seductive power of Slim's machine, the beauty of its speed, overwhelm the speaker's ability to remain indifferent, to put on the street-hardened facade which would allow him to swagger, shrug, and walk away: "I thought my oh my how the sparks would fly / if that thing ever hit the ground." The result is that the speaker finds himself trapped inside Slim's machine, unable to control his own destiny: "Slim was so pleased when I had eased / into his trap of death / he slammed the door but he said no more / and I thought I'd breathed my last breath." The speaker ends by driving the "hog" out of control, and as he is rolling through a fiery wreck, he experiences an epiphany about Slim: "But through the sparks and the flame / I knew that the claim of the master of sparks was God."

Just as many of the songs of *Tres Hombres* and *Tejas* are about living life on the edge where society's rules are easily skirted, so also McDonald's poetry is physically set on a sort of frontier between the civilized and uncivilized as in "Black Wings Wheeling." Phrases like "out here," "on hardscrabble," "on a range never green enough," are McDonald's designations for the area where social rules become blurred, where "killing's always in season." Although deadly and confusing in its unmarked and unbounded condition, this range is perhaps the place where "a man" can come closest to hitting the switch, to driving while blind. The beauty of this landscape is as extreme as its deadliness: "Skies are blue and vacant, / the earth is white caliche." Indeed, the image of "hawks spiraling, / keeping a delicate balance" suggests the almost absolute freedom and self-reliance of "riding on hardscrabble." The hawk's balance on an updraft of wind represents the lone man's precarious balance between barbarity and civilized behavior. Certain values remain, though pressed to the extreme of meaning. "The way to pray in the saddle / is to ride slumped over, / spine bent like a question, / trusting horse

sense and grace/ to arrive wherever you're going." This balancing point is exactly where one is able to "hit the switch / and drive in moonlight," to experience the particular beauty so deeply interwoven with the harshness of the landscape.

In the song "Jesus Just Left Chicago," ZZTop's Jesus resembles McDonald's lone rider on hardscrabble. He possesses a power which isolates him, places him on a frontier where his own freedom of action is dangerous. "You might not see him in person / but he'll see you just the same / You don't have to worry / cause takin' care of business is his name." The Jesus depicted here is hardly an orthodox portrait of the savior. The last line is especially suggestive of a darker, more ominous person than the traditional Jesus, especially when sung by Dusty Hill's raspy, vibrating, sensuous voice which has its own harsh beauty. The subtle fusion of Christian rhetoric with suggestive street language leaves Jesus teetering between holy savior and illegal street dealer. But he is neither an overt parody of the Christian Jesus nor an ancient legend unrelated to the harsh realities of modern urban existence. The grafting together of the Christian ideal with the street-hardened criminal again demonstrates the inseparability of harsh reality and beauty.

The Jesus of "Jesus Just Left Chicago," is similar to the angel in ZZTop's song "Hot, Blue, and Righteous." This particular song is perhaps the most straightforwardly religious piece of the two albums we are examining, but even here the lyrics hint at much more than the traditional, born-again religious experience, especially given the over all tone of *Tres Hombres*. Placed within the context of "La Grange" and "Precious and Grace" -- both songs about prostitution -- the adjectives "hot" and "blue" take on rather suggestive connotations even when attributed to an angel.

Hot, blue, and righteous  
 an angel pulled me aside,  
 hot, blue, and righteous  
 and said stick by me and I'll be your guide  
 I heard the word as I closed my eyes  
 down on my, down on my bended knee.  
 It felt like a blow and I realized  
 something good happening to me.  
 Hot, blue, and righteous

an angel pulled me aside.

The rhythm and music give the song an almost hymn-like quality, but the phrase "it felt like a blow" is a amazing conflation of meanings suggesting not only religious experience but also violence and sexuality.

The songs on the *Tres Hombres* album fuse Christian imagery with language suggesting drugs, prostitution, and violence to create a hardened, streetwise version of religion. In McDonald's "High Plains Orchards," tornadoes "swirl down out of clouds black as bibles," and the poem "Dust Devils" marries the harsh landscape with "the spirit of peace":

Here is where heaven starts,  
wind like the spirit of peace  
blowing sand in our eyes  
for weeks. Spring on the plains  
is a month of static and storms  
without clouds, the blustery days  
dry as fields fallow all winter,  
the sand like our own souls  
naked, harrowed and seedless,  
waiting to be given wings.

The poem is an extraordinary example of how McDonald grafts together beauty and harshness. McDonald suggests that feeling the plains wind on your face is simultaneously rapturous--the mystery of perceiving "the spirit of peace"--and painful--the stinging, gritty whip of a sandstorm drawing tears. The sand itself is "like our own souls / naked," waiting for the promised day of resurrection. There is bitter irony here, but the harshness of the irony is thoroughly woven into the beautiful fabric of the stark landscape. The sublime and the painfully real are so intertwined that one cannot be experienced without the other. A similar effect is achieved in ZZTop's song "Precious and Grace." Images such as "the lambs," "Precious and Grace," "Good God Almighty," and "supernatural delight" lend the song a certain religious tone, but the lyrics are literally about drugs and prostitution. Once again, the song is more than a simple parody of Christian ideas; it bonds the preciousness and grace of God with the grim picture of urban street life.

Prostitution is a frequent theme in ZZTop's music, but there is little room for sexuality of any kind in the flat, desert-like world of McDonald's poetry. Perhaps one reason is that sexuality implies relationship and relationship means vulnerability, a luxury which is unaffordable out on the hardscrabble. An exception is McDonald's "His Side of It" which bears comparison with ZZTop's "She's a Heartbreaker." Both works are about strong-willed, persevering women who like living unconventionally, even dangerously. McDonald's heroine is always "risking her neck along the edge," while ZZTop's heroine is "a lover 'n fighter, she's a wild bull rider." Sentimental love has no place in either of these works; one must be fist-hard in order to survive the Texas landscape. As a consequence, both women are driven by the pursuit of this hardness. McDonald's heroine is intent on collecting "lava, / petrified stumps, anything hard"; she symbolically gathers hardness about her, steeling herself for survival in a world where she must make love "on a bed of flint chips / ignoring snakes and indifferent trucks / somewhere beyond a blur of thistles, / her skin hammered with sand like gold leaf." McDonald's heroine, by making love on flint, metallizes herself emotionally as well as physically, acquires an armor as protection against the threat of vulnerability. The woman in "She's a Heartbreaker" has an extraordinary ability to avoid involvement, to keep her relationships shallow; she can break a heart and take all the love she needs. She is "tuff as a boot and thin as a rail and she could step to the cotton eyed joe." Being "tuff as a boot" or having skin "like gold leaf" exemplifies the hardness which both McDonald and ZZTop take delight in; such hardness is an attribute of beauty in a world where remaining invulnerable is a necessary virtue.

For characters less heroic, less "tuff," than these two women or Jesus or McDonald's lone rider, the pioneer impulse to move beyond boundaries remains strong. There is still the need to exhibit a certain self-reliance no matter how caught one is in the complex network of human relations. However, existence outside these normal boundaries is often restricted to a sort of temporary recreation, though it still presents danger. In "Avalon Hideaway", for example, the narrator goes to what he calls "these backwoods lone star dregs" to gamble and "hideout where I am my own best friend." The place provides a haven against the monotonous legitimacy of closely regulated society, and supplies a hint of exoticism and danger.

Like I told you, head out FM 92  
roll in slowly, you'll be safer if you do  
if you don't know what I'm talkin' about  
let me ease your worried mind  
it's the place to go without a doubt  
but it's a little bit hard to find  
back in the timber, once you're there you'll  
wanna stay  
get loose and limber anytime night or day  
just remember, ask for the Avalon hideaway.

Likewise in McDonald's *Fishing the Brazos*, the speaker takes a temporary excursion into the hardscrabble to plug for bass in an area full of rattlers and water moccasins. The speaker ventures beyond his experience, as if a child again outside a "holy rollers" tent meeting, "the congregation / speaking in tongues and quaking, some picking up snakes / and writhing, on fire in the spirit, ignoring / us boys outside and laughing." But the speaker as adult desires to move inside where things are strange, different, frightening, and even dangerous. There the fear can make the speaker "rise up and walk on water." The very danger is enough to ignite the speaker's spirit and force him to act beyond the norm, to "hit the switch" so to speak and "drive by moonlight."

Interestingly, the speakers in "Avalon Hideaway" and "Fishing the Brazos" address the audience in an instructional manner, speaking to the "you" as if recommending their experiences. The speaker in ZZTop's "La Grange" uses the same form of address; indeed, he is "the man," the one who can arrange things: "just let me know if ya wanna go." Once again the place spoken of in "La Grange" is a sort of frontier locale, a place balanced between the deadliness of the wilderness and the regimented order of civilization. "Rumor's spreadin' round in that Texas Town / bout the shack outside La Grange." The "home out on the range" is of course the chicken ranch, since made famous--or infamous--by the movie *The Best Little Whorehouse In Texas*. "La Grange" again demonstrates how ZZTop grafts a rather cliched Texas image--the home on the range--onto a hard-core picture of reality to create an ironic balance between the two.

The welding together of such polar opposites creates an ambiguity essential to the work of both McDonald and ZZTop. McDonald seems to be referring to this fusing of antithetical ideas in his poem "The Picker Takes a Cold Ride to Austin." Instead of a lone rider on horseback out in the hardscrabble, the speaker here is a guitar picker riding a Harley, following his band to Austin after a one night stand with a widow in Lubbock. Exhaustion, "greasy chicken and french fries from Abilene," and snow flakes that sting "like the widow's kisses / after last night's gig" threaten to overcome the speaker, but the thought of a new song keeps him going. "Might as well pull over / coil up with a den of rattlers, / but I feel a new song coming / and keep on straddling asphalt, / chasing sad words like snow / swirling into my headlight." The last image – "sad words like snow / swirling into my headlight" – suggests the moment when poetry is achieved both for McDonald and for ZZTop. Cold white snow coming together violently with the bright hot headlight of a speeding motorcycle represents the seemingly impossible fusion of words with images and attitudes which makes the work of McDonald and ZZTop so unique. This almost violent welding together of harshness and beauty is the local, the unique idiom that is Texas in the music of ZZTop and the poetry of Walt McDonald.

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# The Astro-Turf Garden: Pastoralism in the Industrial Age

Tom Hayden (1988, p. xiii) recently observed that "There is an ongoing struggle today to define the sixties. The current wave of nostalgia has many scholars looking back to a time when many people were looking toward the future--the sixties.(1) The events of the sixties are, of course, very well known, but they are still unassimilated--discussions about causality, interrelation, significance, and consequence are beginning anew. The significance of the decade is in the process of being sifted, interpreted, and appropriated. The recent focus of attention on the sixties raises again the issue of the meaning and significance of American politics and culture during that decade.

Interpretations of the sixties have focused on several important themes: social roots and orientations, political positions, strategy and tactics, and significant personalities. One of the striking things about the period that seems to have been forgotten is that most of the major sixties protest movements and social critiques had a significant cultural dimension. One of the questions that is not addressed in these recent works is the relationship of the sixties to American culture. An unfinished task is to derive sociological insight from the sixties.

In politics symbols are substance whenever groups take them seriously--especially when they collide. There was an important difference (Neustadter, 1989) in the political symbols employed by the radicalism of the sixties and an earlier American radicalism. The radicals of the thirties held that technology was a progressive force. They maintained that the advent of technological know-how made possible an ideal society which could be fashioned out of materials already at hand. Socialist theorists such as Lewis Mumford, Erich Fromm, and Michael Harrington looked to machinery properly reemployed as both instrument and embodiment not just of material improvements, but of spiritual uplift.

They used powerful images of machines commanding nature to describe the construction of a new industrial civilization. They found the physical environment to be a submissive medium that could be molded and sculpted to incorporate utopian political designs. Their technological visions included an accommodation to and conquest of the natural world, and eventually the creation of a man-made world as an addition or partial replacement of it.

In his memoirs of the Tennessee Valley Authority, David Lilienthal, invoking (1966, pp. 2-3) a recurring image in the older radical tradition, described how an unsettled organic society could be replaced by a markedly efficient and planned society:

The Tennessee River had always been an idle giant and a destructive one. Today its boundless energy works for the people . . . Today it is builders and technicians that we turn to; men armed not with the ax, rifle, and Bowie knife, but with the diesel engine, the bulldozer, the giant electric shovel, . . . [T]hey can move mountains; . . . they can create new jobs, relieve human drudgery, . . . put yokes upon the streams, and transmute the minerals of the earth and the plants of the field into machines of wizardry to spin out the stuff of a way of life new to this world.

Here the environment becomes substance for functional design; nature is described as a protoplasmic substance to be shaped by a technological nucleus. Technology is an instrument of the transformation and redemption of nature. Powerful images of machines commanding nature are used to describe the construction of a new industrial civilization. The physical environment is seen to be a submissive medium that could be molded and sculpted to accommodate utopian political designs.

The sixties represents a disjuncture from such an optimistic belief in the possibility of pastoralism in an industrial age. This inquiry will examine one of the dominant antimodernist themes of the dissident voices of the sixties--the loss of pastoralism as a viable alternative to industrialism. In an era of increasing power and complexity, the possibility of recovering a simple, more natural way life lost not only its attraction, but its viability.

A pessimistic attitude won favor among many of the politically and culturally disaffected radicals of the sixties. A profoundly negative view of the possibility of nature forms a sharp contrast to earlier artists, writers, and radicals who wholeheartedly affirmed the organic. In his influential book *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), a study of the pastoral myth in American literature, Leo Marx described the significance of pastoralism in American culture. The root of this pastoralism, Marx suggested, was the impulse, in the face of society's increasing complexity and oppressiveness, to withdraw to a simpler environment "closer to nature." It found desirable characteristics and values in simple country pleasures. "Pastoralism," Marx (1980, p. 53) held, had "won the favor--or the serious consideration of Western culture's most gifted artists, writers, and intellectuals." The subjects of Marx's study experienced the freedom to not only reject technology, but to find some hope in the affirmation of the pastoral.

However, for radical dissidents of the sixties the possibility of an escape to nature became increasingly problematic. They rejected both the organic pastoralism of the Old Left and the escapist pastoralism of romantic writers and artists. What is involved is a revision of an attitude that embraced nature in the face of technological advance. The metaphoric conception of the machine as the destroyer of an unspoiled landscape gives way to the fatalistic notion of the landscape as completely defiled. For these dissidents the very idea of nature, and its iconological embodiment, notably "the garden" is transfigured. They describe an inverted, or post-industrial form of the pastoral--an Astro-Turf garden.

For many of the dissident voices of the sixties, the natural, the primitive, and unrefined is held to be overwhelmed by the fraudulent surface of American life. Not only is modernity made to seem antagonistic to the integrity and concerns of the self, it is the embodiment of social forces, which, if unopposed, may be expected to defile and desecrate the natural environment, the ground on which the pastoral hope has always rested. These responses evidence a highly fatalistic conception of the recent past: the alien, abstract, largely external character of the intervening force, the sense of tyrannous circumstances closing in all at once upon a landscape of eroded possibilities.

Many radical voices of the sixties claimed that technological society no longer just threatened nature, it had irretrievably defiled and corrupted it. They were stirred by a critical, disapproving, and hostile view of the effect of the technological on the organic. The sixties saw the publication of a number of books, analytical as well as creative, that were deeply hostile to the spirit of pastoralism. A number of them became canonical works that rationalized discontent and gave it structure. I wish to single out Murray Bookchin, Herbert Marcuse, Ken Kesey, Richard Brautigan, and Norman Mailer as writers whose work had an important impact on the cultural sensibility of the sixties.

In industrial society, Murray Bookchin argued, hierarchic organization replaced a simplified organic environment with a complex inorganic environment. Industrial civilization became increasingly incomprehensible and lent itself to bureaucratic manipulation and ecological destruction. It had filled the atmosphere with destructive pollutants, eroded the soil, and upset the balance of nature. This growing centralization altered the nature of the "social question." If man had to acquire the conditions of survival in order to live, as Marx emphasized, Bookchin (1971, p. 349) contended that prevailing technological society had threatened the environment--"disassembling the biotic pyramid that supported humanity for countless millennia"--so that man must acquire the conditions of life in order to survive. Bookchin found this to be an impossible task in industrial civilization.

Herbert Marcuse is notable for his efforts to balance contrary impulses toward optimism and pessimism. This is particularly evident in his discussion of nature. Marcuse maintained that quantitative changes in industrial society made possible a reality that had heretofore been invoked only in fantasy. Marcuse's Freudian radicalism stressed the repressive character of society, but without Freud's tragic and stoical belief that these repressions could never be transcended, that the realm of necessity could never give away to the realm of freedom. One of the most significant transformations, Marcuse (1962, p. 197) felt, would come in "the basic attitude toward man and nature which has been characteristic of Western civilization." Quoting a passage by Margaret Mead describing Arapesh culture as a vision of the world as a garden, Marcuse (1962, pp. 197-198) affirmed their edenic perception of the

world, a world in which "Nature is taken not as an object of domination and exploitation but as a 'garden' which can grow while making human beings grow. It is the attitude that experiences man and nature joined in a nonrepressive and still functioning order." The garden is, he insisted (1962, p. 198) the foundation not only of the prehistorical and precivilized past, but "of a fully mature civilization."

Marcuse also argued that history is moving towards a dialectical reversal that would shatter the industrial structure, that though things seem to be getting better, they were actually getting worse; modes of negation were succumbing to the process of "technological rationality." A measure of the increasing repression was man's altered relationship to nature. The environment, Marcuse (1964, p. 105) wrote:

from which the individual could obtain pleasure which he could cathect as gratifying almost as an extended zone of the body--has been rigidly reduced. Consequently, the universe of cathexis is likewise reduced. The effect is a localization and contraction of libido, the reduction of erotic and sexual experience and satisfaction.

Civilization, Marcuse argued, has realized some liberation in its gardens, parks, and reservations, "but outside of the small protected areas," he (1964, p. 240) noted, "it has treated Nature as it has treated man--as an instrument of destructive productivity. For Marcuse the technology of modern society appeared not as the foundation of erotic liberation, but rather the principal support of an increasingly irrational and repressive organization of people's lives.

Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is narrated by Chief Bromden, an Indian exiled from his tribal land, who plays at being deaf and dumb in a mental ward to protect himself from the white world. An expatriate from the Indian reservation, he is quite literally a representation of the garden in the machine. Retreating from reality in a mental hospital, Bromden (1964, p. 228) describes the hospital ward under the control of the "Combine", an omnipresent, omnipotent oppression that is the controlling force in society:

The ward is a factory of the Combine. It's for fixing up mistakes made in the neighborhoods in the schools and in the churches, the hospital is. When a completed product goes back out into society, all fixed up good as new better than new sometimes, it brings joy to the Big Nurse's heart; something that came in all twisted different is now a functioning, adjusted component, a credit to the whole outfit and a marvel to behold.

The Big Nurse (1964, p. 181) is the personification of "The Combine" on the ward, and serves as a front for the "the national Combine that's the really big force."

Kesey invests "The Combine" with the self-contained power that makes it in effect the chief agent of control in the world. "The Combine" (1964, p. 209) subtly changed men, including Bromden's father--a man rooted in nature--an Indian chief, mystifying them with a fog machine that made them machine like:

They work on you ways you can't fight. They put things in! They install things. They start as quick as they see you're gonna be big and go to working and installing their filthy machinery when you're little, and keep on and on till your fixed.

Kesey energizes the metaphor of the machine, introducing a literal version of the pastoral antimony. Hence reference to the installation of "filthy machinery" that fixes people so that they are transformed into an "adjusted component" of society.

In *Trout Fishing in America* Richard Brautigan is also concerned with the transformation of pastoralism in industrial society. Brautigan's trout streams flow through the reality of institutionalized campgrounds with flush toilets and other emblematic representation of modern society. In a letter to the narrator signed in a wobbly handwriting *Trout Fishing in America* (1967, pp. 64-65) described the surveillance of a trout stream by two FBI agents:

They watched a path that came down through the trees and then circled a large black stump and led to a deep pool. Trout were rising in the pool. The FBI agent watched the path, the trees, the black stump, the pool and the trout as if they were all holes punched in a card that had just come out of the computer.

The initial sensual perception of the trout rising in the pool is transformed into far different conception of perforated cards spewn from the computer. In another section (1967, p. 87) Brautigan describes a favored location for trout fishing:

It used to take me about an hour to hitchhike to that creek. There was a river nearby. The river wasn't much. The creek was where I punched in. Leaving my card above the clock, I'd punch out again when it was time to go home.

Brautigan is suggesting a temporal invasion of rural life by city life. The clockless freedom of the trout stream is invaded by the life of regimentation in the factory or office, as represented by that symbol of the industrial age, the time clock.

Brautigan associates grotesque events as well as grotesque characters with urban industrialism. In a chapter titled "The Mayor of the Twentieth Century", Brautigan effectively juxtaposes the pastoral ideal with industrial reality, dressing the Mayor in the costume of trout fishing in America. Trout fishing in America personifies the pastoral ideal, the Mayor of the Twentieth Century the domination of time and the oppressive industrial state committing atrocities under a benevolent guise.

Like Kesey and Brautigan, Norman Mailer has taken a fatalistic view of technology and urged resistance to it. In his early work (1959, p. 339) Mailer found a creeping totalitarianism and a "slow death by conformity" in American life, a conformity that stifled every creative and rebellious instinct. Mailer embraced the Nietzschean adventurer, the hipster the outlaw, seeking the experience beyond good and evil to transcend the threat of technological and totalitarian domination. The totalitarian

eschatology of American life can be seen in the way that Mailer describes the landscape.

The features of the totalitarian landscape furnish the form that must be faced up to and changed. The features of this environment were explicitly described in *The Deer Park*. Here Mailer described Desert D'Or, a "valley of ashes," a satellite suburb of Hollywood. In its design Desert D'Or was artificial, all new. Sergious O'Shaughnessy, the novel's (1955, p. 7) hero, comments: "It was a town built out of no other obvious motive than commercial profit and so no sign of commerce was allowed to appear." It was designed to relieve, the artificiality induced a joyless comfort of pastel colors. "I picked the house I was to rent for the rest of my stay in Desert D'Or," O'Shaughnessy (1955, p. 8) observed, "I could describe that house in detail but what would be the use. It was like most of the houses in the resort. Everything in Desert D'Or is arranged and artificial, a barren landscape programmed to the needs of the cinema colony, separated from any need but the need to please. The houses were fenced in, standardized with walls of glass, one reflection like another. The mirrors of Desert D'Or reflected not the anxiety of the citizen, but their compliance.

The landscape doesn't support life. As O'Shaughnessy (1955, p. 8) comments, "It would occur to me at time that Desert D'Or was a place where no trees bear leaves." The Yacht Club, miles from any ocean, is near an artificial creek. Desert D'Or so similar to any other suburb, is a sterile, artificial environment whose landscape numbs its inhabitants with its deadness and monotony. Desert D'Or is an environment which has become the nemesis of self-creation.

To describe modern twentieth century society Mailer employs a contagious metaphor: the plague--a disease of form. Mailer posited that in the twentieth century, there had been no new existential beginning. The search for security resulted in positivistic approaches devoid of risk. Unopposed, the features of the plague (1966, p. 3) slipped over the American landscape:

The plague remains, that mysterious force which erects huge, ugly, and esthetically emaciated buildings as the world ostensibly grows richer, proliferates new diseases, families of viruses, with new names and no particular location. And products

deteriorate in the workmanship as corporations improve their advertising, wars shift from carnage and patriotism to carnage and surrealism, sex shifts from whiskey to drugs. And all the food is poisoned. And the waters of the sea we are told. And there is always the sound of an electric motor in the ear.

American society, Mailer (1963, p. 178) contends, has adopted the contours of the plague, a form of plastic cancer, the common denominator of the disease of form:

Everywhere we are assaulted by the faceless plastic surfaces of everything which has been built in America since the war, that new architecture of giant weeds and giant boxes of children's colors on billboards and jagged electrical signs. . . . It is an architecture with no root in the past and no suggestion of the future, for one cannot conceive of a modern building growing old (does it turn dingy or will the colors stain?) there is no way to age, it can only cease to function.

The modern landscape, Mailer maintains, is becoming increasingly inorganic and artificial, dislocating from instinct and emotion. Infected by the totalitarian nature of society, man fled from the consequences of his life and sought salvation in the institutions outside himself, in a terminal anesthetized cancer war dispensing synthetic drugs and societal cures.(2)

These dissident radical voices of the sixties saw society as a delicate organism whose parts could not be tampered with without grave risks of damaging the whole. Nature, as the organic and the erotic, was envisioned as the touchstone of individual and collective virtue and health. They believed that a relatively homogeneous and placid organic society had, through industrialization, been replaced by a pernicious mechanistic society which was turning men into machines and nature into a wasteland.

A common strand of the pastoral impulse in the radicalism of the sixties has been especially clear in numerous references to the emergence of a plastic society. Unlike earth, water, or air, plastic is

an unnatural material. The term plastic evokes the false, the artificial, the synthetic nature of modern industrial society. The term recurs often enough to constitute a leitmotif in discussions of industrial society. Again and again the term is used to describe a society that is seen as fabricated, ersatz, and false to the genuine needs of people. In seizing upon the image of a plastic society the radical dissidents inverted the metaphor of the garden to describe the conditions of twentieth century American society.

Technology in their view had become a totally pervasive force on life, creating a totally controlled, synthesized, and plasticized environment that had incorporated the natural world. Norman Mailer, as we have seen, pictured American society run by an insidious plastic artificiality. "The country," he (1963, p. 183) noted, "had a collective odor which was reminiscent of a potato left to molder in a plastic box." "The republic" was (1966, p. 160) "managing to convert the citizenry to a plastic mass." Kurt Vonnegut (1971, p. 105) suggested what Horace Greeley would say today, "Go plastic young man. That's what Greeley'd say." The Big Nurse in Ken Kesey's (1964, p. 74) parable of American life sometimes lets "a clear chemical gas in through the vents and the whole ward is set solid when the gas changes to plastic." The Underground Press Syndicate (qtd. in Romm, p. 27) noted that their emergence was "a primary reaction to the plastic computerized society." Chip Bartlet (qtd. in Peck, p. xiv. ) described the underground press as "cultural shock treatment and metaphysical alternative to plasticized consumerist materialism." Abbie Hoffman (1970, p. 84) inveighed that the U.S. was a "plastic land of death." Theodore Roszak ( 1969, p. 250) fretted that:

Perhaps someday we shall inhabit a totally plastic world, clinically immaculate and wholly predictable. To live in such a completely programmed environment becomes more and more our conception of rational order of security. The object almost seems to bear out ideas of Otto Rank's return to the womb psychology, with our goal being a worldwide, lifelong plastic womb.

Charles Reich (1971, p. 246) noted the "plastic artificial quality of everything." In Mike Nichols' film *The Graduate*, Benjamin, a recent college graduate, is given a word of advice by one of his father's fatuous blow-dry friends--"plastic." The line embodied in capsule form the demonology of an artificial industrial society. To the radical consciousness of the sixties that "fresh green breast of the New World" had become an Astro-Turf garden, a plastic "valley of ashes."

As used by radical dissidents in the sixties the image of a plastic society had two distinct but related uses. On one hand it described the soul sickness of a society that was inauthentic. On the other hand it sought to regenerate a lost intensity of feeling, and revive a fascination with the uncivilized, the uncanny and the inexplicable. Although it would be an over-simplification to think of the cultural and political radicalism of the sixties solely as a chapter in American pastoralism, the transfiguration of that world view helps to explain many things about the sixties. A central impulse of these dissidents, in short, was resistance to the dominant culture as artificial.

If there is a central conclusion shared by these dissident voices, it is that the conquest of nature is achieved at a considerable price--an even more thorough conquest of all human, social, and natural possibilities. The technocratic celebration of progress is held to perpetuate a grim determinism and to legitimate historical domination. The conception of society which takes shape under the technological perspective is held to stress the necessity for the institutionalization and extension of science and technology to everything within reach, perpetuating an unsparing determinism. Just as an earlier industrial society was exposed by Marx as an ideological justification of private ownership of the means of production and the subjugation of the worker, so contemporary advanced industrial society is shown to be a justification of the subjugation and defilement of nature.

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Endnotes

1. There is a sixties revival going on. Scholars and journalists attribute momentous significance to the sixties. If these claims are to be believed, the sixties were the most significant decade in American history. A recent *Time* (Jan. 11, 1988) cover story held that the sixties "reverbrates still in the American mind." *Newsweek* (Sept. 5, 1988) also devoted a cover story to the sixties. *Newsweek* described the decade as an "undigested lump in the national experience." The nearly simultaneous publication of several excellent books on the history and development of the sixties raises again the issue of the meaning and significance of American politics and culture during that decade. Of particular interests are Tom Hayden's *Reunion*, Todd Gitlin's, *The Sixties*, and James Miller's *Democracy is in the Streets*.

2. Mailer employs the metaphor of plastic frequently in his work. In *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, Mailer's hero D.J., a scatological theoretician of American Society conceptualizes a society that is governed by the force of sterility—"the Great Plastic Asshole." The corporate system in the novel is used as a paradigm of American life. The corporation manufactures plastic plugs, society produces low and medium grade "plastic assholes."

3. In *The Armies of the Night* and *Of a Fire on the Moon*, Mailer continues to indicate that American society has become the captive of its own engineering, its own sterile unproductive vision. The Pentagon, that (1966, p. 117) "plastic plug" of totalitarianism "spread its technological excrement all over the conduits of nature. "NASA-land" (1970, p. 354) was run by the digital computer, a form of "plastic brainpower" which signaled the final triumph of the square over the hip. In *The Prisoner of Sex* Mailer comments (1971, p. 152) that "more that one piece of engineering would yet take up squatters rights in the ovum." The final mystery is obstructed by the diaphragm in the garden. And worse "that plastic prick, that laboratory dildo, that vibrator." The mysterious actions of nature, the force of fire, the transmission of thought, the mystery of reproduction and sex, Mailer held, had been co-opted by sterile plastic.

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